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Oral history interview with James Lesesne  
Wells, 1989 November 16

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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with James Lesesne Wells on November 16, 1989. The interview took place in Washington, DC, and was conducted by Richard J. Powell and Jock M. Reynolds 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

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: —say that, uh, this is Jock Reynolds and Richard Powell and James Lesesne Wells. We're gathered this morning on November 16, 1989 at Mr. Wells's home at 1333 R Street Northwest in Washington, DC, to reminisce with Mr. Wells about his long career as an artist. And in particular, Rick and I find it a real pleasure to be here with you Mr. Wells having worked together a couple of years ago to produce your retrospective in *James Lesesne Wells: Sixty Years in Art* at the Washington Project for the Arts. And we welcome the opportunity to record this oral interview for the Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian Institution. Good morning, Rick, I maybe put you as the person who wrote the major catalog essay. Perhaps begin with the first question for Mr. Wells, and let's just have a nice conversation together.

RICHARD J. POWELL: Sure. Um, my first question isn't so much a question as it is um—I just want to ask you, Mr. Wells, to think back to some of the early years. We know you were born in Atlanta, Georgia. Um, your father was a student at Gammon Theological Seminary. Your mother was in Atlanta. What are your—what are some of your earliest memories?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Well, I remember to the same extent—my memory, uh, very short now, I'm sorry to say. But I do remember living with my aunt for a while in Atlanta. After my father's death, my mother and my two sisters, twin sisters went to visit my aunt in South Atlanta. [00:02:08] And I was happy to have been there because I had been told that I was born right near my aunt's house, as a matter of fact, it was in a place, a small place they called South Atlanta, which bloomed out from Atlanta, main Atlanta. And I was born, as a matter of fact, on Gammon Theological Seminary campus as my father was studying the ministry at the time. In they uh, the—Clark and Gammon had a campus together, and there, they permitted or had a Quonset to—in order to—uh, for the student's meal—these students of Gammon to use or their family. I remember that. And then going back to Palatka, as a matter of fact, Florida, where my father went later to minister and build a church—well add to the buildings of a church called Mount Tabor Baptist Church, and I remember a number of incidents there. [00:04:06]

RICHARD J. POWELL: Yes, just for the sake of continuity, um, your family moved around 1903 to Palatka, Florida, where your father was pastor of Mount Tabor Baptist Church?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Yes.

RICHARD J. POWELL: So your early remembrances then really come, you know from Palatka —

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Palatka, Florida, yes.

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: I remember earlier you describing to us your work as a young boy in the cigar factories there and also some of the early remembrance you have of having stenciled some of the design work into the church that your father and his congregation had built. Has that remained as some of your earliest memories of actually your first sort of handicraft as a visual artist at that young, young age?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Yes. Well, I had to fortunately assume, to my mind, a lot of responsibility because my mother wasn't in such healthy condition at the time. She fell a little ill, and my sisters were just infants as a matter of fact, and I uh—[dog barks]

[Audio Break.]

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: Okay, we're back on again.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Now, well—

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: You were talking about your sisters and your mother's illness, and how you'd assumed a lot of responsibility in your family at a very young age.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: At that—yes, at that time. But I—uh, [clears throat]—I'm hoarse. That's okay. [00:06:00] I do remember that my mother moved out of the [inaudible] right after my father's death. My father died in 19—when was it?

RICHARD J. POWELL: Around 1912.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Nineteen ten—that's right. Twelve. And we moved to the small house that was our house, but that was on the corner of the church—of the street in the church that he pastored. And she, of course, had to see about the monies to carry on the family. And in doing that, she—her—had her little—what is it called?

RICHARD J. POWELL: Five and dime?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Five and ten cents store. And in the back of the store, she had a small group of children from the neighborhood that she cared for and taught kindergarten.

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: So she had her own set of nursery school, kindergarten in the back of the family store?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: In the family store, and, let's see, that would make me about—what—12 years old?

RICHARD J. POWELL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Yes, around 12 years old. [00:08:00] So in teaching the children, she was—my mother was very, very talented, I thought, and joy in doing that because we later used to kid about it and say she was a dinnertime family. [Laughter.] Because she'd—well to make a short story—a long story short, why, I would help her, uh, with the children. I knew enough about drawing and a little watercolor to help her teach the children. And she soon called me her assistant too. [Laughter.]

RICHARD J. POWELL: That's great. So in some ways your early art training came from your mother?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: That came from my mother. And then my father, though I don't remember him too well and his activities, but I don't think he was artistic, but he had a, say, appreciation enough to want to encourage me, so. Uh, and to a certain extent, I think he did have, enough feeling for design or whatnot because in building, at that time, an addition to the church, why, he somewhat directed the activities of the work. [00:10:08] And in doing that, why, he had a little frieze around the borders of this addition, which was to be turned—the annex was to be turned into a—oh, I've forgotten what. But at any rate, why on—in having this frieze, why, the frieze was stenciled—a stencil was done. Of course, I didn't do the cutting of the stencil or anything, but I was called on to do the printing of the border. And so that's probably one of the inspirations of it that later on then came to me and encouraged—as an encouragement to continue.

RICHARD J. POWELL: Yeah, um, eventually, you went to Florida Normal and Industrial School.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Yes.

RICHARD J. POWELL: But I was wondering before that if you could just comment a little bit about life in Palatka, in Florida, in the black community? Um, we've often read wonderful things by other Floridians like James Weldon Johnson about life in towns like Palatka, Jacksonville etcetera. Zora Neale Hurston talks about the, you know, um—the cigar factories, the turpentine mills, and all that. Do you have any recollections of different things that people did in Palatka related to the church, related to the community that you lived in that just stick out in your mind? [00:12:08]

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Well, I don't know if I can remember too much about it. I remember—I remember the fact—I guess I can think back on it now. And uh, I think of the—type of people that I came in contact with, and although there was a lot of prejudice there, you know, oh, it seems too that—I suppose because of my father's ministering of the church—we were always very cordially invited, you know cordially—

RICHARD J. POWELL: Treated.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: —treated. And I remember some of—some of my friends as a matter of fact, and even the—even those that had authority were very friendly to the family. [00:14:00] That's probably due to the fact my father was a minister, and he seemingly elicited a lot of respect from the outside groups. So there wasn't very much prejudice as I could tell on to us but— and then the community itself seemed to have been or the town itself seem to be a rather liberal town all there. Although, I could sense as a youngster that prejudice existed, why, it didn't seem to come our way. I'm thinking back over that time now myself.

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: What was your sense then coming from the Deep South and your own impression then when you moved to Harlem from, you know, a much more rural situation? In fact, could you share with Rick and I your own sense of how you even came to want to go to New York City in those—the early years of your life and to begin your study of art there, and maybe talk a bit about that as part of the—your youth?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Well, in the first—in the first place, why I, uh—as I recall my memory is kind of breaking down though but as I recall, we moved early—when would have—[00:16:03]

RICHARD J. POWELL: Around 1919?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Yes.

RICHARD J. POWELL: To New York?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: To—no. I'm trying to think in terms of the time the I was in Florida. I—oh, yes. I was at the age of around 15 or 16—to a Baptist school in Jacksonville, Florida.

RICHARD J. POWELL: Normal and Industrial.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Normal and Industrial School on a—what you might call it—a scholarship that's given by the church [inaudible] my father was the minister of the Baptist church and they gave the scholarship. I do remember going to Jacksonville, and there I studied I think for two, three years, and—I was very much interested in drawing at that time. It seemed that I started an interest in art at a very early age. I don't know whether it's because of probably, I don't know, basic talent or the fact that my mother was artistic. [00:18:09] And I remember even before leaving Palatka and going to the school that I would very often go for—uh, with the kindergarten group that she taught—taught in Palatka. I'm wavering a little but at any rate why—oh, when I—then I get this scholarship, of course, I stayed there and did quite a bit of drawing—and even helping some the students in there, yeah. Right. And I entered a contest that was given by—let's see if I can remember—

RICHARD J. POWELL: Is this the Florida State Fair?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Yes, the Florida State Fair, and submitted a little construction of a wood house and drawing of it at the time. But at that time, I remember my great interest in drawing—I wanted, say, at that time, and he—uh, that I wanted to become an artist. [00:20:04] What can I say beyond that?

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: Well, do you remember then when the family moved to New York at that point, which you then came north, and pick up then in Harlem?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Let's see now.

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: That would be about—what—1919—

RICHARD J. POWELL: Around 1919.

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: —or [19]20?

RICHARD J. POWELL: I know when we talked some years ago, you said that you were living with your aunt in Harlem.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: And—oh, I don't remember. Aunt in Atlanta?

RICHARD J. POWELL: Atlanta, yeah.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Atlanta?

RICHARD J. POWELL: Yeah. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: That was, oh, quite a few years after.

RICHARD J. POWELL: Mm-hmm.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Oh, I just—

RICHARD J. POWELL: Yeah, it's all right, yeah. I know that when we talked some time ago—

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: Someone—

RICHARD J. POWELL: —you know, yeah, you talked about you're beginning your studies kind of independently at

the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. And this was before you started any kind of training there.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Yes.

RICHARD J. POWELL: I also remember we talked a little bit about, um, the drawing that you were doing as you worked on the—I guess the boats that go between Upstate—up and down the Hudson River, and what have you.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Wait, what was your question now?

RICHARD J. POWELL: Well, the question, in general, was just that if you could just think back to your first impressions of the North—New York. We often read a lot about people who came from the Deep South, the life and experience that they had there, and then just their first impressions. [00:22:07] Sometimes, it was just what they saw in terms of the architecture, the tall buildings. Sometimes, it was just the whole sea of people that they saw in some of the big cities. Do you have any recollections from that time period when you first arrived in the North?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: In the North?

RICHARD J. POWELL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: In the North? Let me see now. I have to think—

RICHARD J. POWELL: We can actually skip ahead though if you like.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: That's fine.

RICHARD J. POWELL: Yeah.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Okay?

[Audio Break.]

RICHARD J. POWELL: Um, when you first came to New York City around 1919.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: If I could place myself.

RICHARD J. POWELL: Yeah. Um, we don't have to do it really chronologically. That's the other thing. We can— [00:24:00]

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: Should we even jump ahead and talk about Washington for a little bit? Do you remember specifically when you were in Harlem in 1929 and you received a letter and a call from Howard University to come to this city to teach and live?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Yes.

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: Why don't we just talk about that and we can trace back—

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Go back—

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: —in time a little further if need be.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Well, I—right. I went to study at the National Academy of Design for a while, and I didn't—I studied there for just about a year and a half or two years, and oh—

RICHARD J. POWELL: That was with George Laurence Nelson.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: That was with uh—I sure can—with George Laurence Nelson, yes. And, uh, as a matter of fact—oh, boy. I—let's see if I can—hmm, some time. [00:26:00] I can't understand why I can't—

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: That's all right. Let's try—let's try to jump ahead further in time and then—

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Turn that off and—

RICHARD J. POWELL: Oh, it's off—it's off.

[Tape stops, restarts.]

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: —Teachers College.

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: At Columbia?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: At Columbia?

RICHARD J. POWELL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Well, gosh. Yes. Yeah.

[Tape stops, restarts.]

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: So, why don't we try to—let's just try to talk a little bit about, uh—having to try to keep this chronology so rigid. Let's just talk about when you arrived in Washington, and we were just reviewing some of your first work in periodicals and books and publications. What was it like to be a young artist and to be called on by people who were lawyers, people who were philosophers, and others in the community—to be a part of an awareness of the black history and issues of social change at a very young age the way you were?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Oh—I don't know.

RICHARD J. POWELL: It was overwhelming obviously, you know?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: I don't know. I just can't get any thoughts together. Isn't that strange? Gosh.

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: Do you remember any particular pieces? I remember the—when we were downstairs with you and Rick, I'm just opening up the catalog. I can remember that the first time we looked into a box and saw the cover, I remember, for *The Negro Wage Earner* that—one of the first books that came out in the Woodson Press. [00:28:10] just seeing, myself, what a remarkable image that was and have beautifully—integrated visually. You had made a statement that that was obviously in the narrative and the subject contents of the book. I just wondered, you know, what that was like to have someone come over into the house and perhaps ask you if you want to do something for a book.

RICHARD J. POWELL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. This—this brings back memories of—let's see now.

RICHARD J. POWELL: You—

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Oh, yes, I was—I have to go back to early, early works that I did this—this print way back in 1928.

RICHARD J. POWELL: Oh, yeah, we're looking at *Ethiopia at the*—

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: *At the Bar*—

RICHARD J. POWELL: —*Bar of Justice*.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: —*of Justice*. And I do remember that, uh—oh. That I—I—that—[00:30:02]

RICHARD J. POWELL: W.E.B. Du Bois.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Yeah, Du Bois. Du Bois was editor then of the *Crisis*. He, uh—oh, yes, I'd just made a series of block prints, this goes back—way back to my days at Columbia University, and I was studying there. The—I had shown quite a few pieces that I'd really done as a student at Columbia University, one of my—some of my earlier prints. And now, they were used—some of them were used as covers for various magazines, *the Crisis*, *Opportunity* and some very graphic—

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JAMES LESESNE WELLS: —as a cover for *the Crisis*. But it was also used as a backdrop for—for a pageant that was given by Du Bois in Buffalo, New York. And I remember how I—you had to—in order to enlarge it at the scale, I rented a—this might be of interest—I rented a little garage, a space in a garage, and had it projected on a large screen and made a drawing on that projection and brought it in and used it as this backdrop.

RICHARD J. POWELL: What was Du Bois like? We hear so many things about him that he was—he was brilliant, but I've also heard he was a bit—you know he could be difficult at times.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Right. Yes, he—what's the word—acerbic?

RICHARD J. POWELL: Acerbic. [They laugh.]

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: Acerbic, yeah, acerbic, yeah.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Oh! That guy, I mean even in his jokes, why, he'd turn it, and before you know it, he'll have a marked criticism [laughs] that was right to the point, but at the same time it was humorous, a very brilliant man as a matter of fact. [00:02:13] And I—I remember when they used this print and it went—when I went to Buffalo on the—to witness this pageant. Oh, boy—

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: Do you remember how you became involved in also putting some work into other publications such as *New Masses*? Do you remember? People simply started to call you up, or how did some of those early commissions and requests occur?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Oh, yes. Yes, I uh—if I could get my [inaudible] my brain coordinated here. Well—

RICHARD J. POWELL: What about the Vachel Lindsay reproduction—prints, those of "The Congo"? Those are really memorable images.

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: Remember this here from the catalog? Did it go with it the poems?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Yes.

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: Remember this?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Yeah. Right. [00:04:00]

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: Because you did quite a few with that, um, poem. I—there must have been, like, about three or four of them, you know, really.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Six. Mm. I can almost feel the [inaudible].

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: You just remember—

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Yeah, well that—

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: —just physically coming to—

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Isn't this awful?

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: Oh, it's not.

RICHARD J. POWELL: No, it's not.

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: Well, just relax. There's no pressure. Do you remember coming down to—from New York to Washington? Do you remember the invitation to come to teach at Howard, and how you thought about that or whether it's something you thought you'd immediately want to do or not do or—do you remember that point in time?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Oh, yes. Oh, boy. Oh, I can get—just get started.

RICHARD J. POWELL: Yeah.

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: Well, obviously, that was a point in time when everyone was aware of all the economic disruption in the economy and the stock market just falling apart and—[00:06:01]

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Yes.

RICHARD J. POWELL: At the same time, you were doing so many wonderful shows in New York. You had lots of works reproduced all over the place and uh—but then you got a call from Professor Herring, and you seem to have decided at that point to leave New York and go to Washington.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Oh, I wish my memory as good as yours. [They laugh.] Oh, good as yours, I know—[laughs]. Well, let's see if I can get out of this. Yes. Well, let me see where can I go back to start? Maybe I can start—let's see. Maybe I can—by looking at these pictures, I can get a start, yeah. Okay. I have some paintings on the wall that—that is a kind of—kind of a cross section—I can't even find words—cross section of my—my paintings. [00:08:04]

RICHARD J. POWELL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Starting with the still life over in the corner and, uh—which was painted around what

time now?

RICHARD J. POWELL: Maybe in the '40s?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: During the '40s. Yeah, in the '40s then I gradually—well, my work gradually became more symbolic in storytelling. And I remember a lot of work that I wanted to do, not only in oil, but in—as in the prints—that probably might have been inspired by my thinking of my father as a minister, because I was doing my work towards biblical scenes both in painting and in uh—and the graphics. [00:10:05]

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RICHARD J. POWELL: Why do you think that was? You talked about—

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: About?

RICHARD J. POWELL: You talked about the fact that you were thinking about your father's background, his role in the church, and that helping you to come to some terms in terms of symbolism, you know, kind of spiritual images. That's an interesting move from still lives and things.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Yes. Well, I think it's because—because as I [inaudible] my art became more interested in abstraction.

RICHARD J. POWELL: Hmm. This was also the time that you began to do things at Atelier 17 and Stanley William Hayter. Abstract expressionism is beginning to happen at the same time, you know, in terms of a lot of the painters and artists.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Yeah. Well—

RICHARD J. POWELL: But what's interesting about a lot of the pieces is that some of them are interested in the Bible but a lot of them deal with mythology. You do a lot that deal with Greek and Roman mythology and—

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: Yeah, I think particularly the whole *Orpheus* series, which—

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Well, I—

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: —something you've dealt with so many times. [00:12:00]

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: I think—I think that that grew out of an interest, even the mythological pieces grew out of an interest in the Bible—and stories in the Bible because there seemed to have been, as I visualize now, some correlation between even the Greek mythology and the Bible. So many of the stories on the Bible even Adam and Eve, why, was seemingly almost reminiscent of the stories that we found in—in Orpheus and Eurydice, the Greek stories. And without being sacrilegious, [they laugh] I think probably some of the authors, the great authors of that—of the Bible of that period of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, why, had been inspired as writers. [00:14:13] And if you might say, novelists of that period had been inspired by the works of early and Greek mythology, especially the story of Orpheus. I did a series called *Orpheus* as you probably recall?

RICHARD J. POWELL: Yes.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: And I think there were around 10 prints in the series. They were done in color linoleum.

RICHARD J. POWELL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Did you read Greek mythology for those, or are these things that you had read many years ago, and you just kind of brought them back to your—to your imagination?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Well, I had read some Greek mythology, some stories earlier that I recall but I actually read in and studied, or read a number of the stories. I became interested in it, as I think I said, if I'm not mistaken—interested in it because so many of the biblical stories reflect an image that I had read, you know? [00:16:05]

RICHARD J. POWELL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Of works that I had read, so I went back and actually read and studied various—various stories.

RICHARD J. POWELL: In thinking about a lot of your work—I'm thinking about your *Koumba* prints, which deal with African tales. And it seems as though in a lot of your work, you do use stories, the narrative form to, you



know, at least be, the impetus for getting into various ideas.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Yes. Well, of course, I uh—I drew a lot of inspiration from having, well—studied and worked on a sabbatical leave in Africa. It seems that I—I uh—practically most of my color linoleum blocks were done as stories that—and scenes that I had sketched and visualized when I was on leave of absence. And that was around '48, 1948.

RICHARD J. POWELL: Oh, and Africa was about '68 now—

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Yeah or '68.

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: I remember when we talked to you—

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Sixty-eight.

RICHARD J. POWELL: And '69. [00:18:00]

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Yeah.

RICHARD J. POWELL: Both of—

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: Yeah, I remember when we were talking a few years ago how you described also the marketplace. I think it was in the—was it in Dakar or—

RICHARD J. POWELL: Also Ghana.

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: —and Ghana. You described the colors and the sensation of being just overwhelmed with the display of color and materials in the marketplace.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Yes.

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: It's interesting that you're—

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: The costumes, the costumes especially. Yeah, I got quite a bit of inspiration from that. I think one of my first and best prints in linoleum block print, why, was called *Bus Stop, Ghana*. And, oh that's just—that's right. I remember sketching a number of— making a number of drawings, sketches from actually—little, what would you call it? A little— house?

RICHARD J. POWELL: Yeah.

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: Little houses or little stalls in the marketplace and—

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Yeah, stalls, and this was one of them. I could see three inside of the windows of the stall. I could see these people that were waiting for the bus, and from that, I seem to take a fancy to doing other—other things that were connected with that, with—Africa. [00:20:23] This was—the sketches were made then—a number—in watercolor and then also in pen and ink and—

RICHARD J. POWELL: Mm. It must have been an experience going to Africa in '68, '69. But also at the same time having come from Howard where there's always been such a strong emphasis on African sculpture, you know, kind of black history, people like Alain Locke, people like Lois Jones who, of course, your colleague who was in Haiti, and all of these people have been looking at Africa. So in some ways, you going there in '68, '69 culminated a lot of that, you know, I guess, exposure early on.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Yes. Well I think '68—well—I think I became interested. Well, I might gone on with it, interested in—way back when I was in school, as a matter of fact, at Teachers College, Columbia University. I must say that I have to give the school credit even for some of my interest in African art. [00:22:11] Because when I was studying at Teachers College, I had one or two very interesting and talented teachers, professors. They were interested in having the classes visit the Brooklyn Museum where we actually studied African forms, and although the collection at the museum was nothing [inaudible] the large collection rather than fine art, but the fine art students gained a lot of benefit from—from that. So that having studied there, we also were encouraged to study—study the Egyptian hieroglyphics, Egyptian art at the museum, and at the Metropolitan Museum. [00:24:09] And there, I studied—got inspiration, which might—I might attribute even to that—the—of *Ethiopia at the Bar of Justice* that I did, which was really inspired—if you look at it—it was inspired by the fatalities—

RICHARD J. POWELL: Exactly.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: —the fatalities of—of Egyptian.

RICHARD J. POWELL: I was also going to mention the Schomburg where you had your first exhibit had collections of African sculpture and books so that even if you hadn't traveled there, you could open these books—

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: I could have—yes. Got that, of course. I—around that time, I actually met—I met Alain Locke who had recently returned from his Rhodes scholar—from Africa

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: Rhodes scholarship, right?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Yes, Rhodes scholarship. And of course, he was very encouraging and not only in the fact that I did have a slight interest in African art, but I had made some of these prints at the time at Columbia that he presented to Neumann—[00:26:13]

RICHARD J. POWELL: J.B. Neumann.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: J.B. Neumann who was director of the—

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: The New Art Circle gallery.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: —the New Art Circle—

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: —back in those days.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: —gallery, yes. And I think through that, J.B. Neumann and his encouragement, why, I was interested at that time in getting some of my prints in galleries, a few galleries of the period—from that period like the Via Gallery and the—and, oh, Downtown Gallery where Richmond Barthé was connected as one of their main exhibitors. But I remember well Ms. [Edith] Halpert who was the director of the gallery then. And she became interested in some of my things so that I didn't have a one-man show, but I was able to enter some of the group exhibitions. [00:28:04] And she—they handled some of my work and sold some of my [inaudible] as well as Via Gallery

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: Yeah, the Via.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Via—Via Gallery. And there was another gallery at that—I think it was at that time or probably a little later—

RICHARD J. POWELL: Delphic Studios?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Delphic Studios in which I was able to—this was quite a bit later—interested them in a one-man show, having a one-man show.

RICHARD J. POWELL: Yeah, Alma Reed ran Delphic Studios.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: That's right, Alma Reed.

RICHARD J. POWELL: What was she like, do you remember?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Oh, she's a very, very interesting and open-minded person. She and Alma Reed and then—and what's the name Rose?

RICHARD J. POWELL: Ernestine Rose.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Ernestine Rose?

RICHARD J. POWELL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: And Brady were—

RICHARD J. POWELL: And Mrs. Brady.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Mrs. Brady were all very much interested and friendly—uh, in my work. As a matter of fact, it was—it was probably my winning of the Harmon award about that time when—that was in '30s?

RICHARD J. POWELL: About '31.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Thirty-one, '32, or [3]3—

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: It's when you won the—

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: —right there.

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: —gold medal that year for your painting.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: When I—

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: —for your painting.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: —won the gold medal, and incidentally, which was unusual, I remember I won the bronze medal, too, [they laugh] at the same—in 1933, a bronze medal— [00:30:11]

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: And a gold medal.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: —*In Black and White*.

RICHARD J. POWELL: *Black and White*, right.

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: —*In Black and White* and gold medal for in painting for my painting of—oh—what?

RICHARD J. POWELL: In *The Wanderers* or—

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: No, not *The Wanderers*. *Flight into Egypt*.

RICHARD J. POWELL: *Flight into Egypt*, yeah.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: *Flight into Egypt*, which was later given to Spelman Institute.

RICHARD J. POWELL: Hampton.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Hampton.

RICHARD J. POWELL: Hampton, yes.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: I'm sorry that's—

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: Well, that reminds us of the other painting about that period that Duncan Phillips purchased of yours. I believe it was titled *Journey into Egypt*. Wasn't it about the same time?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Yes.

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: Do you have any remembrance of Mr. Phillips and the collection here in Washington at that time?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Oh, yes. Oh that was—well, that was around that time because *Flight into Egypt* that was—*Flight into Egypt* was around the Harmon part, around '33?

RICHARD J. POWELL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Well, I was here at Harvard at the time teaching incidentally why—

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JAMES LESESNE WELLS: —and through the Harmon Foundation that I was able to get the teaching position at Howard University. As a matter of fact, I think it was one of my works in one of the exhibitions that I entered at the time, that uh—

RICHARD J. POWELL: That caught someone's attention?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: —that caught someone's attention. And as I think back that the attention of—

RICHARD J. POWELL: James Herring?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: James Herring. James Herring who came to see my work and said, "Oh, I want to see the work of this young man this—this so-called artist." [Laughs.] Herring was very humorous. Yeah.

RICHARD J. POWELL: Not acerbic like—

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Not—no, not quite.

RICHARD J. POWELL: [Laughs.] Not quite, no. [They laugh.]

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: But that stirred up all this fuss, you know?

RICHARD J. POWELL: Yeah.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: "I want to see some of his work." So, he and Langston Hughes, I can visualize it, came and spent an afternoon with me at a little—in a small studio that I had opened. [00:02:12]

RICHARD J. POWELL: This is in New York?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: This is in New York, right, right. Incidentally, I had gone there to live with my aunt. After going to Columbia University, having studied and gotten my degree, why, it was a time that, uh—it was time that my aunt was—became interested in moving to Boston. And she turned her apartment, which I—over to me on 141st Street. So I had this apartment. Now, let's see now where did—where was I getting my money then? [They laugh.]

RICHARD J. POWELL: Screens, screening—

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: Now, some artists are always worried about where are they getting their money to keep working and continue living.

RICHARD J. POWELL: Weren't you painting screens or something like that?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Right.

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: The—

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Oh, yeah—

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: —some Venetian screen.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Venetian.

RICHARD J. POWELL: Yeah. [Laughs.]

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: That's right. Incidentally during my studies in my years in Columbia, that, uh—the National Academy of Design, why, I was working in various jobs, I worked on the boat. And I got some of my—to show you how I carried a little sketchbook along with—I got some of my inspirations for paintings, I'd go up the Hudson as I went up [inaudible]. [00:04:11] I just sketched especially the—some of the scenery in the school they had there, I can't recall now.

RICHARD J. POWELL: West Point?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: West Point, yes. I made sketches and made a number of paintings. I wasn't doing graphics at that time. Paintings—that I was able to exhibit. Thinking back on that time—I want to digress and go back—I had—it brings to mind my interest in not only being able to get some of my work in the galleries, but to even get a one-man show or show seven or eight of my work at the Brooklyn Museum in the summer show, which was sponsored by a man named Chudi. And they, uh—I—he organized I think four or five one-man shows. [00:06:05] It was in—I don't know whether you mentioned this before.

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: I don't think we got this in the first time around.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Well—

RICHARD J. POWELL: Is that Chudi, t—?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: C—

RICHARD J. POWELL: C-H-U-D -I?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: —U-D-I.

RICHARD J. POWELL: Something like that?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Yeah.

RICHARD J. POWELL: Yeah, I know that name.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: You know that?

RICHARD J. POWELL: Yeah. Involved in the art world in New York in the '20s?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, he saw my work, and I gathered around 10 of them I think, 10 or 12—and as I've said, along with about three or four other shows that came the summer of one-man—they called it one-man shows. So I had my first one-man show—

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: Museum show.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: —museum show then. Now what—what year was that?

RICHARD J. POWELL: Um, that was in the '20s or '30s?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: That's right about—that was early, about early—

RICHARD J. POWELL: Early '30s.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: —thirties.

RICHARD J. POWELL: I think so, yeah. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Right. '31 or almost the same time as the Harmon Foundation.

RICHARD J. POWELL: Exactly, '31, '32—

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Thirty-two—

RICHARD J. POWELL: —something like that?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Yeah.

RICHARD J. POWELL: You mentioned Barthé, and I just wanted to ask you, do you remember some of the black artists from the 1920s?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Yes, a few of them. Now, I must say that I was so busy in trying to make a living, because I was working in the post office in the evening when I was going to Columbia as a matter of fact. And later on when I was painting at the Metropolitan Museum—now I want to tell you about that too. But I met—I met Barthé who was a kind of understudy of Ernestine—not Ernestine—of Halpert. [00:08:14]

RICHARD J. POWELL: Edith Halpert.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Edith Halpert. And was exhibiting well very frequently—with Ms. Halpert—

RICHARD J. POWELL: The Downtown.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: The Downtown Galleries, and that's where I met him—yeah. Now, as far as other artists, I came—I did meet—let's see. Was it, Jacob Lawrence? I think Jacob Lawrence.

RICHARD J. POWELL: That was some time later because he was—you know?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Yeah, that's right.

RICHARD J. POWELL: Yeah, that probably was in the '30s or—

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: I think, yes, it's around that time.

RICHARD J. POWELL: What about Aaron Douglas?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: We were—we talked—we were talking about?

RICHARD J. POWELL: Different artists.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Yeah. In what period?

RICHARD J. POWELL: The '20s.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Twenties, yeah, '20. That must have been '27 or '28—

RICHARD J. POWELL: With Barthé?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Barthé, because I didn't finish Columbia until '27, I think, when I—when I finished Columbia.

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: How do you remember at Howard the influx in the kinds of artists both black and white who came into your life and into the city in the later period of time? I remember WPA we did that wonderful show that Keith Morrison did called *Art in Washington and Its [Afro]-American Presence*. It was to me a great revelation as to the sheer quantity of work that was coming into this community and particularly that was being shown at your university. Do you recall that with—[00:10:00]

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Oh, yes. Oh, yes, I do. I see it—I remember a number of shows at Howard, as a matter of fact. And, oh, J.V. Herring or was it Moore [ph] at the time that these—well, both of them.

RICHARD J. POWELL: Well, they were both there, yeah.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: They were both—both of them were very interested in having shows come to us. I think it was about the time— I'm glad you mentioned—that Barnett-Aden Gallery was—was opened by—

RICHARD J. POWELL: Lonnie?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: —Lonnie Aden and J.V. Herring in Herring's studio.

RICHARD J. POWELL: On Randolph Place.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: On Randolph Place. And there were a number of artists that they brought there. The interesting thing at that time about this was that there was a mixture of artists, white and of color, that were interested in exhibiting there. Now, I say that specifically to say that we—the Negro wasn't accepted by white galleries even the Corcoran or other galleries. And at one time, even, we didn't—we were not allowed to visit—to visit the galleries, Corcoran. [00:12:04] I think as I recall, it was done at Phillips Gallery was more open and more liberal, and that—it was at that time that—that must have been just after I arrived as a matter of fact. I don't know—not that I was a part of it all, but I did exhibit there. But that was the time that Phillips not only allowed visitors, but he became interested in my work.

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: That would've definitely been the early—early to mid-'30s in—

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: The mid-'30s.

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: —period?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Yes. Around mid-'30s, you know, yes, around the time that I first came to Washington. I came to Washington in '29.

RICHARD J. POWELL: Jock mentioned Howard, and I was thinking about you and James Herring and James Porter, and Lois Jones, and there were so many interesting and exciting people at Howard. The other thing I was thinking is that all of you had your own distinct personalities and your own approaches to teaching, and all of you were real strong artists, which can be both exciting and also at some times—sometimes really difficult. [They laugh.]

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Yeah, it was well both exciting [they laugh] and difficult, not only with the different things going on—different interests and different phases, although—but in the establishment of the department itself. [00:14:15] Because we actually grew out of—out of our department, the school of liberal arts where Herring was their first teacher and organizer, as a matter of fact, of the school. And he taught a few classes himself, and they were interested in teaching teachers rather than the fine artists and such. And I remember when I was called to Howard in '29, and I said [inaudible] and—

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: Locke?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: —Locke and others came to visit and they—and I was called—I was called in as a teacher of crafts because I had studied—they needed a crafts teacher, and I had studied the crafts in Teachers College, which was more interested in crafts to a great extent than fine arts per se. And so that I—as a matter of fact, I didn't start teaching printmaking or any phase of printmaking, although I was—yes, I want—I draw that statement back. [00:16:18] I was—I did introduce in my crafts class, which was of course, the crafts were clay modeling and metalwork—make the jewelry and metalwork—that I had acquired while I was at Teachers College. So I took that for about two years, that kind of course collected—in connection with the interest that I was—the

work that I was in, which block printing, you know the block print?

RICHARD J. POWELL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: So, I—I started introducing more of the graphics into block printing and then some etching because I had some work and some lithography because I did some work of that nature at Columbia.

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: And you colleagues were glad to encourage you to do that I imagine?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Yeah, they were offering encouragement. And at the same time, the liberal arts was trying to keep me from getting most of the—our department from getting most of—so much of the appropriation. [00:18:10]

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: It sounds like Locke—a very sophisticated basic university economic politics. They knew the artists they wanted to bring to Howard, and they had to figure how to get you there and then turn you loose.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Get the—

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: Some things never changed. [They laugh.]

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: That's right.

RICHARD J. POWELL: Now, this is under Mordecai Johnson, right?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Yes. He was quite helpful.

RICHARD J. POWELL: Oh, good.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Yes—since you mentioned his name. He—as a matter of fact, he was interested in the arts and as a matter of fact, his daughter or—yes, his daughter majored in art.

RICHARD J. POWELL: Oh, really?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Uh-huh [affirmative.] Yeah, was in the art department, and I taught her in the graphics arts.

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: You know so few young people today, I think know the real origins of Black History Week and the way in which—the attention it came to be focused out of this community. How did you when you first met, not only the people at Howard, but met people like Woodson—can you describe some of the atmosphere amongst the intellectuals, amongst the lawyers, the people in this community who decided that they themselves said, "Let's get together to improve conditions," the public—you know to publish books that would increase this awareness? I mean this was extraordinary—

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Can you hold that a minute? I have to—

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: You need to go to the bathroom a second?

RICHARD J. POWELL: Okay.

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: I'll put that on pause for a minute.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Thank you.

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: Thank you.

[Audio Break.]

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: Okay. We're back now, and we were just talking about that moment in time where you were at Howard and you were amongst all these people, these colleagues at the university but also in the community itself. Your own brother-in-law was very active as an attorney in the NAACP, and you had Woodson very involved with his press—

RICHARD J. POWELL: Right down the street. [00:20:00]

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Right, yes. Well, that's interesting. I do remember those days of—that and especially—especially Woodson involved—I—look, in the first place for—uh, I think I should start with the gallery because I think that it was the instrument of getting of art in the special Negro art to the public, Herring and Aden both.

RICHARD J. POWELL: Barnett-Aden—

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Barnett—

RICHARD J. POWELL: —at Howard.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: At Howard. Both did a very good job in putting on various exhibitions and, uh—which were accepted. Of course, it was very bad, I thought, that the Negro knew at that time very little of the interest in art, in Negro art, and the Negro place in art. And they soon would be able to become aware of it through these exhibitions and especially not only from—in Howard but in Carter Woodson who's president, director of the—what was it called? [00:22:11]

RICHARD J. POWELL: It's the Association

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Negro?

RICHARD J. POWELL: Yeah, it's listed there in the catalog.

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: It's the Association for the Study of—

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Study of Negro—

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: —Negro Life—

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: —Life, right—

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: —and History—

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: —and History.

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: —Incorporated.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Yes. He was a very interesting person, and it was through him that I got a lot of my work to the public as a [inaudible]—

RICHARD J. POWELL: Well, your book jackets—

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Yeah, the jackets.

RICHARD J. POWELL:—were incredible. I mean I can remember when Jock and I were here a couple of years ago. Because I didn't know about those pieces when I was a student at Howard, you know?

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RICHARD J. POWELL: And when we saw them, it just bowled me over. You know, images like *The Negro Wage Earner*, *The Black Farmer*, I mean all of those were just really, really striking.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Well, they—some—

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: Do you remember them coming to you specifically and asking you to do these, or what did he say when he said—

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: No, I actually—I can't recall that incident. But I recall that—I don't know. I think it might have been—I don't know if it was, uh, his book of—really [inaudible] Richardson that brought him to me.

RICHARD J. POWELL: The plays of—on the—plays about Negro life? Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Life, yes. But I think he had one or two covers that he wanted. I can't remember the exact—that he wanted to have—or designed, you know, as an advertising piece. [00:24:10] So I—so I've made these—I used, I think, some of my first, early prints. I brought some of my early prints and used one or two as covers.

RICHARD J. POWELL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. In other words, you would incorporate elements from those early images—

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Image—

RICHARD J. POWELL: —in early—later works?



JAMES LESESNE WELLS: —into the later work.

RICHARD J. POWELL: Did he tell you—you basically—did you have carte blanche to do what you wanted in terms of the cover? Did he make suggestions to you, or basically was it up to you?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: No, I think it was primarily up to because my work has never, never been illustrative to—in that narrow sense of the word.

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: Well, what really strikes me is what Rick was talking about earlier. Your work has never been illustration, but it's always had a remarkable sense of how to accompany or how to hold the sympathy for another kind of narrative. I think of the way in which that worked in this historical sense, and I think it works also in the way you paid attention to the mythological and the biblical narratives in your prints, and how you often worked in series.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Yes.

RICHARD J. POWELL: But they're not illustrative.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: They're not.

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: Yeah, exactly.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: No. One of the—I might say this that one of the things that I said when I was young going to school, when I was taking art or why I've said, "I'm going to teach because I don't want—to be an illustrator." I don't know why, but I never liked the idea of pure illustration for some reason. [00:26:02] I think my probably my reason—interested more in design rather than just descriptive. Yeah.

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: Well, you also have been saying that you wanted to teach rather than illustrate it seems, and again, I think Rick and I have heard this from just countless people that you brought a real love and dedication to your teaching, too, that you didn't somehow see the life you lived as a marriage of teaching and art as a real conflict.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Well that's—

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: Could you please talk about that a bit?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Yeah, well—

RICHARD J. POWELL: Which is an exception because often people find it you know—

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Well that's—

RICHARD J. POWELL: —difficult

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: —the ideal way of thinking about it, as a matter of fact. I don't know—I often—well, coming up as a youngster, I read and studied a lot of—even when I was younger and in high school, I think I did a lot of reading, especially books on art while I could—whenever I feel. And probably I developed a prejudice or bias for certain types of work, you know, that—that was current, that was popular of the day. And I compared them with pure painting or pure design because not very much graphic work is such that you know, I just—so-called fine arts graphics, why, was available at that time. [00:28:03] But I think I became fascinated with what I saw done in—through design, painting compared with what some of the things that were done in illustration that I leaned towards painting and design. I wasn't a purist by any means, but it had some of that purist quality in it.

RICHARD J. POWELL: How did you keep the balance though between art—um, making your own art and then teaching art?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Well, I did it because so much of my own life was done in the classroom, first as examples in illustration really, or in fact especially teaching the various mediums. And mind you, I had to teach all of the graphics mediums.

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: Yeah, you taught lithography, etching—

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Etching—

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: —wood block, linocuts, everything.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Yeah, and even monoprints.

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: And monoprints. [They laugh.]

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: You know [laughs] everything around the end of teaching for it. When I came there, they wanted to broaden to, the school the—and as I said, I started as a teacher of crafts, you know, clay modeling for two years. And I didn't know too much about it myself, [they laugh] but I was able to put it over. But I had difficulty especially with the wheel [ph] because when I went to Columbia and took up that, why, I became more—and immediately for some reason—more interested in—[00:30:15]

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: Printmaking—

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: —printmaking. But going back to what—going back to what were we talking about?

RICHARD J. POWELL: Teaching and making your own art.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: And making—yes. I—as I said, I did a lot of demonstration and then of—I had pretty heavy classes because—because the 15 art classes were no longer in the various media, no longer 15 art [ph]—there were 24 studio classes.

RICHARD J. POWELL: That's a lot.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: A lot of, a lot of. They were different from the literary classes, you know?

RICHARD J. POWELL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: And consequently, I had to put in a lot of hours, but I had time. I got up at five and six o'clock in the morning and did a lot of my own—

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JAMES LESESNE WELLS: —went back in the afternoon, afternoon class. In one or two years, I don't know whether in the summer or what—well, I taught summer school too—

RICHARD J. POWELL: Not all the time.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Not all the time?

RICHARD J. POWELL: Yeah, because you spent some summers at Provincetown.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Yeah, that's right. But what I'm getting at, I had even a few classes in the evening, you know?

RICHARD J. POWELL: So you got a lot of work done, you know, at—

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: In the classroom. I handled classes more as almost self-teaching students. But I—

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: So your students really had an opportunity, I guess from what you're saying, to see you doing your own work in their midst which—

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Oh, yeah, I did a lot—

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: —it must have been inspirational for them.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Oh, yes. Yes, yes.

RICHARD J. POWELL: Well, obviously, one of your finest students is Elizabeth Catlett who was a Washington-born—you know?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Yes. And Stovall.

RICHARD J. POWELL: And Lou Stovall.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: I told them both though, I just introduced the courses to them, the work to them, then they learned on their own. [Laughs.]

RICHARD J. POWELL: Well, I think it's a tribute you, though, to see you working.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: I know.

RICHARD J. POWELL: Really, I mean because—

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: We laugh about the time all the time especially—

RICHARD J. POWELL: Because you teach often by example.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Yeah. Especially Stovall, the way he goes into it, I'd say—

RICHARD J. POWELL: You could—

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: —I'm now even visualizing it. [They laugh.]

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: That's interesting. My favorite teachers in the University of California were people like Wayne Thiebaud and Bob Arneson, William Wiley. All them of them when I think back as teachers didn't necessarily sit around and give you lessons and lessons, and lessons on how to actually paint or sculpt. They were doing their own work in a way that was very committed. [00:02:00] And they had obviously an interest in other young artists. But there's a tremendous amount that came to you by example.

RICHARD J. POWELL: Exactly.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Well, you know, I've admitted several times, I think, that my main teacher was my history teacher—Meiss.

RICHARD J. POWELL: Yeah, Millard Meiss.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Millard, Millard Meiss. He introduced me to Piero della Francesca and taught how he differed from Michelangelo and—

RICHARD J. POWELL: Giotto.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Raphael especially. Raphael especially, and he was my main interest—

RICHARD J. POWELL: And he taught history.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: —and he taught. I mean even to the application of the early block prints. My inspiration came from the Uccello and Esquivel you know and from history and then of course there, and of course I picked up, of course, with what I called great teachers probably not greatly known. Although, Wesley Dow influenced me quite a bit. He was great of that period, and it's his followers that taught me. And that's why I got especially in the block printing, wood engraving, and following the examples of Hiroshige and Hokusai and the Japanese printmakers. All of that came through—

RICHARD J. POWELL: Dow's teachings.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Dow's teaching, yes. So, it's interesting how you—one can get their inspiration. [00:04:07]

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Yes, what you have said? And of course, another thing, I think the way I went in my interest in subject matter in teaching is when it was the period which a lot of abstractionism in vogue and abstract expressionism especially in vogue. But in the first place, I told my students, "First, you've got to get the basics, and we have to go back to realism." That's why I actually in the '40s, after I had been there, went to—

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: Back to the still life yourself?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: —to still life and went to paint in—during the summers in—

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: Provincetown.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: —Provincetown and did some studies under—

RICHARD J. POWELL: Jerry Farnsworth?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: —Jerry Farnsworth because I wanted—although I've been able to draw and paint, you know, all my life to a certain extent—

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: You wanted to hone your own skill—

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Yes, I wanted to hone [inaudible]. So, I went back to [dog barks] and coming back to teaching and how I was able spread my art. [Side Conversation.] [00:06:00] I was able to, uh—I forgot what I was going to say—I was—

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: You're talking about teaching.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: — spreading out—yeah. Oh—

RICHARD J. POWELL: At Provincetown—

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: And you're talking about getting—

RICHARD J. POWELL: — and honing your own skills.

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: —getting students to understand the basics of needing to describe realism—

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: That's right.

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: —and representation.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: So I even scheduled my classes so that I had my evening classes. Many of the teachers, art teachers that would take [inaudible].

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: I see. So they're the people who were teaching in the elementary or junior high school or high schools could come and study with you in the evening?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: And I could expose them to different ways of—what do I want—different methods of printmaking. And rather than the basics, they could go right into experimentation. That's what I wanted. So the evening classes were my experimental classes. My basic and some of my earlier classes were of that nature too.

RICHARD J. POWELL: And as you said, your evening students were more self-motivated?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Self—

RICHARD J. POWELL: They did their own thing?

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: That's right. That's it exactly. Yeah. By the next—if that's sufficient with you?

RICHARD J. POWELL: No, it's fine, yeah.

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: We're just—we were coming back on now. We've had a pause and we're thinking that we might just wrap up today. We've spoken close to two hours with you already and I—both of us are very appreciative of you taking this much time. I hope it hasn't been too much a strain on your voice, but this has been a wonderful period of recollection, and maybe we can do some more? [00:08:02]

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Thank you very much.

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: And I think it's a real pleasure with Jacob Cannon's [ph] 80th birthday coming up that we'll all get together again in two weeks, and want to thank you for doing that wonderful print for him for his birthday party as well.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Thank you. Well, I appreciate it, and I wish I had been able to contribute more as far as my voice is concerned, but I enjoyed what I was doing. I hope that I did contribute something.

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: Oh, you sure did. I want to say also—I mean, I think that just between all of us that—the fact that we—Rick and I came to work together through paying attention to your work and doing this show was, I think, something that really has fostered and created a wonderful friendship between us, and I think in many ways led to other wonderful things happening in this community.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Wonderful. Thank you.

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: It's such joyful occasion for both of us, I think.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Oh, I'm so glad. I'm so glad it developed into this.

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: Yeah. [Laughs.] Oh, we're very grateful.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Huh?

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: Okay.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: I think this probably could stop [they laugh] because my voice as it goes low, it gets a little weaker, you know—

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: Yeah. Well, thank you so much.

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: —as I expand the air. All right, thank you.

JOCK M. REYNOLDS: Thank you.

RICHARD J. POWELL: And thanks [laughs].

JAMES LESESNE WELLS: Okay.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]