



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Seong Moy,
1971 Jan. 18-28

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/services/questions
www.aaa.si.edu/

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Seong Moy on January 18, 1971. The interview was conducted by Paul Cummings for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

PAUL CUMMINGS: Let me say it's January 18, 1971 -- Paul Cummings talking to -- how do you pronounce your first name properly?

SEONG MOY: Se ong. Seong Moy.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Okay. I have very little background material on you other than that you were born in China in 1921.

SEONG MOY: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And came here ten years later. Were you in China all that time?

SEONG MOY: Yes, I was born there and I lived there until I was about ten years old. Then I requested and an arrangement was made by my father for me to come to this country to get an American education and also to have the opportunity to get into a business here so as to, as the oldtimers say, make money to send home to support the family back at home. Those were the conditions under which I came to this country: as sort of next in line to support our family.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What kind of family do you come from? Do you have lots of brothers and sisters?

SEONG MOY: I am the only boy in the family. I had four sisters, three were older than I; one was younger. My second oldest sister and I are the only surviving members of the family. My father died quite a number of years ago. When I first came to this country in 1931, my father came with me. We stayed in a hotel for one week. He had already arranged his itinerary which was to see that I arrived safely and then he returned to China. So I was left with seeing my father for only one week and I was turned over to my relatives who became my guardians. In my father's family there were three sons of which he was the oldest. His two brothers were here in America. They located in the Twin Cities, Minneapolis and St. Paul, in Minnesota. Most of them were in St. Paul. My oldest uncle was in Minneapolis where he had his own business.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did they get there? How did they get to the middle of the country?

SEONG MOY: I really don't know. I never did check but I think it came about . . . I think my grandfather came and settled in Chicago for some unknown reason. I imagine if there was not enough work in Chicago, of course naturally they would expand from that central area. It's a big city where Most Chinese, I think, that settle in the Midwest most likely will be found in Chicago. And then from that point they will expand out to various areas around the Midwest. And my grandfather happened to go to St. Paul. And I think also that, whenever there's any opportunity for a job, whether it be in that area or outside of the Chicago area, there's really no alternative for them but to go there and to accept a job and I guess you would have enough variety of people that go to practically every city around that area, so naturally I think that's how my grandfather happened to settle in St. Paul.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's interesting there's such a long history of Chinese people coming to this country.

SEONG MOY: Yes. Of course it's well known I'm sure that most of the Chinese I would say, since the time of the Chinese being Shanghaied to this country to work as laborers, a majority of the Chinese were Cantonese. Of course, I am Cantonese, my family is. Naturally the male Chinese are the only ones who would actually leave their home to seek their fortune elsewhere, which happened to be in America.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. What was it like growing up in Canton in the 1920's?

SEONG MOY: Actually I come from a small village in the locale which is called Toysan. I would say that's in the neighborhood of -- I'm not sure exactly -- but I would say between 25 and 30 miles outside of the city of Canton. Sometimes it's confusing because the province in which Canton City is located is called Canton, the same as you have New York State and New York City. Usually we say we come from Canton because that specifies and indicates that we are from the southern province of China, which is different from other sections. Most of the Chinese who originally came to this country were from villages from the province of Canton, that surrounding area. Of course I had very little contact with the city of Canton which was a metropolis at that time. All of my ten years were spent in the country in the small village and, of course, actually there really isn't much difference today I would imagine. Politically it's different. But I don't think the village has expanded or has been modernized or has been mechanized to a point where it is like our small towns in this country.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you have correspondence with relatives there still? Do you write to people?

SEONG MOY: Not any more. All my immediate family left Canton during the Communist take-over of China and most of them settled in Hong Kong. My father, because of his education, happened to build a very odd piece of architecture in the native surroundings and he built a house that looked like a mausoleum with pillars and so on; it looked like a Greek house in the midst of mud huts. At the present time, as far as I know, the house was taken over by the local government for one of their headquarters.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was your father an architect? Or builder?

SEONG MOY: No. The only thing that I know about him is that he graduated from the University of Tokyo in the horticultural field. I'm sure that he was one of the few in those days who had the opportunity to study abroad rather than in China, although I think he studied in the university in northern China. But I believe he did his graduate work in Japan. Then when he came over here in his studies I'm sure that he came across many, many world influences and ideas, probably more than he would have gotten in China at that time. So the idea of this house that he built was probably the epitome of the combination of East and West culture -- I don't know. He never spoke about it. In fact, I didn't even know about it until I returned to China many years later to see the house myself. I was completely surprised by what I saw. It's completely out of context with the surroundings.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's incredible!

SEONG MOY: So in a way I know very little about my father. It seems as though everyone who knew him -- the only people I have come across that knew him -- was when I was young so naturally I didn't think about asking them or they never independently volunteered to tell me about my father. So it was sort of a discovery in later life when I was more mature having been back in China. That of course takes me back to right after the Second World War when I got discharged from the service and went back to China to visit the family in the latter part of 1947.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, let me ask you a question: You were ten years old when you came here so you must have had some early education in China? Did you have some schooling before you came?

SEONG MOY: Yes. As I look back and think about it, it's hard in a way to recall by myself that early age. But during my return visit to China in 1947 most of the information that I got about myself of those ten years that I lived in China was expressed to me mostly by my mother and also by our friends in the village. And they gave me a sort of colorful picture of my first ten years of life. The few things that I was able to obtain and probably to believe was that as a child I was very much of an independent kind of individual and one of the outstanding facts was that I was getting into all kinds of trouble all the time. But yet at the same time I was told -- I even had the opportunity of meeting some of the schoolmates of those early years -- and they told me that I was an A student. Maybe they tried to flatter me. And one of the things that I do remember quite vividly is that I was able to read many of the Chinese classics. And of course to be able to read the Chinese classics one has to be fairly bright. So, since I remember reading them, I assume that I was a bright student. But also at the same time, their education has a certain kind of liberalism about it. One of the things

that I enjoyed most was my study in writing Chinese in the calligraphy style and also at the same time within the same class art was taught. Naturally Chinese art is a combination of both the spirit of the calligraphy and the spirit of the image. I would say I had, oh, about three years of that. So we did start very early in learning to write and also to learn to paint pictures, naturally simple things of course. I find even now that I have lost my language -- I'm only able to converse in my own particular dialect -- and I have a very difficult time reading Chinese. But I can write Chinese very well. Of course my writing is purely copying but I do have the feeling for the character which in some ways may be traced back to my original . . . maybe it was the beginning of my art training.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. There is always that relationship between Chinese painting and writing. It's the same tools and materials.

SEONG MOY: Yes, that's very true. It's just a matter of quality.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was it like then when you came to this country? You went right to St. Paul?

SEONG MOY: Yes. It was a very difficult transition.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You didn't speak any English then, did you?

SEONG MOY: No, I did not speak any English. I don't believe I knew one word of English. But I imagine when you're young you can pick up things much more quickly than when you're older. When I first came to St. Paul and got settled and a school was found for me to go to, I still remember today very vividly the first day I went to class. I suddenly found myself in the kindergarten class. Here I was ten years old going on eleven and I found myself playing with blocks. This was very confusing to me. Although in many ways it's sort of like going back to your childhood and sort of doing the things that you missed. Actually we didn't have that kind of opportunity when I was very young and first started to school. We went right into our studies. There was no opportunity for this kind of play and this kind of adjustment. So in a way it was my first exposure to American toys.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you have toys in China and things like that? Or not the same way?

SEONG MOY: We have toys but they're not the same kind of toys that we have here in the sense that we sort of distinguish between the toys for different ages. Whereas the toys that we have in China everybody plays with as youngsters and you learn how to play with these toys when you're old enough to have that interest. I don't ever recall having any special teddy bears or dolls. These things were not available. Those were not the things that we had. We may have had dolls that are more or less home-made but I really don't recall them. I only recall playing with toys such as a Chinese version of a yoyo. Of course a lot of the toys were not so much toys, but when you're old enough to walk and run, you play more of the outdoor type of games, sports, rather than with toys. And I don't even recall girls having any special kind of toys. In fact, I think when they're old enough, let's say, maybe beginning at four or five years old, they're already learning how to sew and knit and doing all kinds of things pertaining to practical household things, getting one prepared for the eventual thing of when you're grown up.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you remember what school you went to in St. Paul?

SEONG MOY: The grade school I went to was the Franklin School. Due to the fact that I was that age and of course the teacher realized how mature I was and yet they didn't want to rush me but I managed to finish grade school in four years simply because I already had many of the subjects they were teaching. So I suppose it was just a question of my learning the English language sufficiently to be able to understand what new things I could learn and so on. So I believe I was able to learn the language sufficiently in a matter of a year or a year and a half to be able to take on the higher grades. So I was able to move to the higher grades. The jump seems to be great but I was more or less happy about it because by the time I was in the seventh or eighth grade, let's say, I was with students of my own age group; I was probably only a year, or a year and a half or two years older than the other students. I felt much more at home and I was able to learn much faster, and feel that I was part of the school, rather than be almost a babysitter, as I was in the beginning.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you get involved with any projects in the school like athletics or extra-curricular things?

SEONG MOY: Yes, when I was a senior I was very much interested in sports and I had the first taste of American sports at that time, baseball and football. At that age physically I was comparatively smaller than most of the other students of my age but even so I managed to play football with them. And I think I sort of developed this kind of challenge because I was playing with boys who were bigger and stronger than I was and yet I was able to be competitive with them. I remember that I probably got my first bloody nose from the game.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you like sports?

SEONG MOY: Yes, I love sports. Now I'm a spectator more than a participant in any sport. One of the things that I enjoy and that I can do myself is ride bicycle. Not to any degree, but whenever I have the opportunity I do that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You went to the Federal Art Project School? How did you get into that?

SEONG MOY: Yes. Well, again this was a turning event in my life which in some way pointed to my final decision as to what I wanted to be. Just to go back and give a little background before I proceed with this: Upon my graduation from grade school my guardians at that particular time told me that I had enough education. I was sufficient language-wise, I could read, I could speak English, and so they thought that that was all that was necessary to function in the business that they had in mind for me. This business of course was to carry on our family business which was a fairly high caliber restaurant. Now of course being exposed to education, one tends to pick up many things which are sometimes contrary to the wishes of, let's say, an, oh, antiquated-thinking family. In many ways I can't blame them. But yet at the same time they were not doing any service to me by trying to prevent me from growing or to have the opportunity to learn more. So I was given the ultimatum after graduation from grade school that I must work, that I must start to earn my pay and to contribute to the welfare of the family. And that was the first time that I rebelled against my guardian. I told him that I could no longer see that is possible. It might also indicate that for the first time I was beginning to exert myself as an individual, which I have been more or less since I was ten years old. So we made a compromise. The compromise was that I was allowed to go to high school, first with the commitment that I could go to high school for the first two years; and at the same time I would start my job with the family in the restaurant. I want to point out here that, even when I was going to grade school, I was learning the trade in my free time from school. So I was already grooming myself to become what they wanted me to be even when I was going to grade school. Now as far as the Federal Art Project School is concerned -- this would be in 1934 or thereabouts.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes, late Thirties.

SEONG MOY: No, I think it was probably 1934 or 1935. In our restaurant there was a man working there whom I became friendly with. He was an older man, a Filipino. He was a bus boy. And we had many things in common. Somehow he took to me as a big brother. One day when he came to work I noticed that he brought with him a wooden box. I asked him what that strange-looking box was. He told me it was a paint box. Of course, being involved with art, we are familiar with these small valise-type containers, which is a wooden box containing paint and art materials. So I said "What do you do with it?" He said, "Every Wednesday night I go to my art class." I said, "Is there such a thing?" He said, "Yes." Then he added, "Would you like to come with me?" I said, "All right." I was free after work and he was off at the same time in the evening. So I accompanied him to this Federal Art Project School. It was my first exposure to an art school. I believe I was, oh, about thirteen years old then. I thought I'd just go there to see what the place was like and what he was doing and so on. I didn't even realize that it was a free school and that anyone who walked in could start working. I went with him to his classroom and he proceeded to give me some drawing materials and he said, "Sit down and do what we all do." And that was to draw a nude model. And of course that was also my first time of seeing somebody completely naked. And so with both things happening at once I was completely flustered and frightened and embarrassed and whatever you can feel in such a situation. But that was my first exposure to an art class. Subsequently I got over the fright and continued going to that school.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did he become a painter, too?

SEONG MOY: No. He just enjoyed it as a hobby. I don't even recall how good his work was at his stage of development. But I do remember vaguely the type of paintings he was doing. They were more or less scenes and subject matter from his native Philippines. Although I do

remember that he was an exceptional draftsman; he drew very well. I was very impressed with his work even then and I used to wonder how could anyone draw more realistically than he could. We were good friends. I continued studying there for the remainder of that year. And then, by a very, very happy surprise, I became friends with the model in the first class that I went to. She became my friend and through her I was able to get a four-year scholarship with the St. Paul School of Art.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Just one thing on the Federal Art Project: Who was Ben Swanson? What did he have to do with it?

SEONG MOY: I believe Ben Swanson was the second teacher that I had. I was actually the youngest individual studying in the Federal Art Project School, particularly in the evening classes. Of course, that was the only time that I could go. I was treated sort of like a mascot since I was small and, at that time, quite fragile. And I think I was doing well enough for them to think of me as a possibility. And so Ben Swanson became my second teacher. I don't know just how long it was after I first arrived, but it wasn't too long after I started at that school. He became my very good friend besides being my teacher. And, in a way, since my father was not here with me, he sort of adopted me. I believe I've learned a great deal from him in initiating me into the study of art.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did your family like this growing activity on your part?

SEONG MOY: Well, at that time my family didn't know anything about it. In some way I felt that they would not be pleased with it so I never told them until later. When I needed more time and I wanted to rearrange my schedule with them, I had to tell them what I was doing. By that time I was in my second or third year of study at the St. Paul School of Art.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really? So you got that far along?

SEONG MOY: Yes, I got that far along. Of course by that time I was older and had become probably a little more withdrawn from them and I had become more of an individual and more aggressive in my dealing with my own problems and so on. So it was about that time that I told them my interest was in the arts and that my responsibility to them Because I learned also that legally they could not hold me after I reached a certain age. I think that age was eighteen in the Midwest at that time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: At the St. Paul School of Art you studied with Cameron Booth at one point?

SEONG MOY: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was he the only instructor? Or were there others?

SEONG MOY: No. Cameron Booth was the director of the St. Paul School of Art in those years. And he was my teacher from the beginning of my scholarship at that school, mostly in painting. We had another teacher there, William Ryan, who was also teaching at the Minneapolis School of Art at the same time. They both were very, very capable and well-trained and talented artists themselves within their period of time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you go to the St. Paul School of Art at night or during the day?

SEONG MOY: I was going to the day classes there. There would be a period that I would be going just in the morning, and then there would be a period when I would go in the afternoon; whatever arrangement I could make with my uncle for the purpose of both continuing my obligations working at the restaurant as a cook. By that time I was given the position of an assistant chef. It sounds awfully young to be that but one has to remember that I started my training when I was eleven years old. So, by the time I got on to fifteen or sixteen, I was fairly well versed in that field.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were there any students at that school that you remember that were good friends, and have remained friends today?

SEONG MOY: Yes. I would say there was one who is still my friend, Gerry Kamrowski. He was there a year or two before I was. At the present time he's teaching and working out in the Middle West. I think most people know him. He was probably one of the first of the group of American Abstract artists. Other students who were there in my day were Aaron Kurzen who is now head of the art department at a small private school in New York, the Dalton School.

Another schoolmate was Jean Follet. I think she has a fair position in the art world today.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh really? I know her well.

SEONG MOY: Do you know her?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes.

SEONG MOY: When did you know her?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Ten or fifteen years ago.

SEONG MOY: Yes. And of course at that time Jean had a friend who was just starting out. That friend happens to be Richard Stankiewicz so in some way we have something connected here.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. It all works together.

SEONG MOY: Yes. As far as I can recall

PAUL CUMMINGS: She is a very extraordinary girl.

SEONG MOY: Yes, she was. She was an exceptional girl. I have recently lost track of her. I don't know exactly where she is now.

PAUL CUMMINGS: She's living in St. Paul.

SEONG MOY: Is she back in St. Paul? With her parents, do you know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. I guess so. It's interesting that young people come out of schools and go back and forth and there's a whole interrelationship.

SEONG MOY: Yes. Yes. In fact, I remember

[INTERRUPTION]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you go to museums in St. Paul and Minneapolis?

SEONG MOY: Yes. I would like to inject at this moment a little bit of background in my training there as an art student, as a scholarship student. And I would just like to make this as a record: The fact that school back in the middle Thirties was basically very conventional and very academic. I think probably the only school that was considered to be advanced or modern would be the Art Students League here in New York. Of course that's always the school that any budding young artist will go to anyway eventually. Because it was the policy of the school to be very academic, my background as an art student was a very rigid academic one.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You did a lot of drawing/plasters?

SEONG MOY: Yes. A lot of drawing/plasters and sometimes just drew a plaster cast and spent five mornings at it and then finally have the teacher come and say, "Start over again." That's the type of training that I had. So one learned to have patience and also to have one's wits about oneself.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you find that this taught you to look in a different way than what you might have learned from your experiences in China with the calligraphy and the drawing?

SEONG MOY: Yes. I think so. Even though at that time I did have that Chinese background, I was probably able to have a little bit of the combination. I was willing and I was accepting the fact I had no other comparison except what I was studying. I hadn't been around; I hadn't visited any other schools except the school I was involved with at that time. If you were able to go through that very, very tedious and sort of boring training, after two years of it we were allowed in the third year to go into the painting class and to paint from the model. Also I would say we were given a very excellent background in what we called a studio course of art history, which was studying the old masters. So in the third year a number of the painting students were given the proper background so that we could go to the Minneapolis Institute and copy from old masters. I spent that third year, off and on,

copying the old masters. I learned a great deal by doing this, mostly the technique of painting. We had a teacher there who knew materials and techniques. We acquired a most useful knowledge. In the fourth year, one of the things that came as a complete surprise . . . Cameron Booth had formerly been a student of Hans Hofmann. In fact, he studied in Munich with Hofmann during the late Twenties. Another well-known artist who teaches and paints here, Vytlačil, was a student of Hofmann's at the same time Cameron Booth was. So naturally Cameron Booth had both the academic background and also the exposure to the modern concept as expounded by Hofmann. And so he was just itching to teach that. But of course he was under the obligation not to teach it but to teach what the trustees wanted him to teach. This was a private school. It was run by people who didn't know anything about art except what they liked realistically. But in our fourth year we had the privilege, which Cameron instituted, to have a private seminar every week. This seminar was given behind locked doors. Only the students who had advanced to that stage that he wished, that he selected, were admitted to the seminar. And in this locked room he would tell us all about his experiences. And so, of course, being young and having a great thirst for knowledge, what he was telling us came like a bombshell. We were just all hepped up about it. He also told us to study works of contemporary people and even at times copy them and to study their work and so on. By the time I finished at the school I had a pretty good background in both the conventional academic and the modern.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's interesting because, as I remember, the Walker Art Center wasn't really open.

SEONG MOY: Yes. the Walker Art Center at that time was just a collection of an eccentric man who collected somewhat but he would like to have something to be remembered by. His business was lumber. This is the Walker family.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I was just trying to think where you could see contemporary paintings there.

SEONG MOY: Well, I recall that at that time, the Minneapolis Art Institute had the first Picasso show in the Midwest. And that created such an uproar. Also I remember, in I think it was my third year at the St. Paul School of Art, the French artist, Ozenfant, came to this country and started his school here; and also we had his first exhibition of his enormous painting of I believe it was The Tree of Life. This is an enormous painting (at that time it was considered enormous). I would imagine it would be about, oh, ten by sixteen feet or something like that. This is a painting in his special style of impasto. It contains probably anywhere between 150 and 260 nudes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I know the painting. It's extraordinary.

SEONG MOY: Yes. And we thought that was really something. It was so new and so fantastic. We did have a minor show of sort of small paintings of the contemporary artists, mostly French artists, Picasso, Matisse, and Miro. But they were small and I thought they were sort of poorly selected. And so I don't think that really

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you lived in the Twin Cities then for almost ten years?

SEONG MOY: Oh. Before I answer that question I just want to add, since we're talking about the Walker Art Center, this is the time the WPA Art Project was in full swing. The Walker Art Center at that time was the center of the WPA Art Project for the Midwest. Although I think there was a larger department in Chicago, I think most of the activity for the Midwest was in Minneapolis at the Walker Art Center. And that was my first exposure to printmaking. By that time I had become friends with practically all the practicing artists in St. Paul and Minneapolis at that time. My friend Ben Swanson (this takes me back to my early days) happened to be a very close friend and buddy of the director of the Art Project in St. Paul and Minneapolis. His name is

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was that Deffenbacher?

SEONG MOY: No, that's not Deffenbacher. It'll come to me in a minute. Clement Haupers. Clement himself is an excellent artist. He follows the school of the Impressionists with a sort of an Americana flair. When he met me (I believe I was about seventeen then) he suggested that I should visit them at the Walker Art Center and see what I wanted to do. In fact he offered me a blank check to do anything I wanted to do. By that time I had developed a certain ability which he recognized. So I was doing graphics there, learning lithography,

etching and silkscreen. The only medium I didn't learn there was woodcuts. They didn't have anyone working on that. But I did woodcuts on my own which was a natural. Since I was curious, I wanted to do all the mediums.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who were some of the printmakers -- teachers you worked with?

SEONG MOY: They were not of any importance. I can't remember their names because they more or less ceased to exist after the Project was over. The ones who were in charge were technicians; they were not artists. They were craftsmen, printers and so on. They really didn't have much to contribute artistically but they had a great deal to contribute technically. So I can't recall any specific artists that we know of today. Although there was one person I remember who did quite a bit of work there. I don't know if he's too well known here on the East Coast. His name is Sid Folsom.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yes.

SEONG MOY: Where was he from originally?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Minnesota.

SEONG MOY: Oh? My God! Well, then . . . I didn't know that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: He's a wild character as I remember.

SEONG MOY: Yes. He's a man with a red beard and red all the way through.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. Absolutely.

SEONG MOY: Yes. But it was because of that opportunity that was offered to me that I became so much interested in the graphics besides painting. Let me see, also at that same time I had the opportunity of meeting the man who inherited the Walker Art Center, Hudson Walker. From that point on we became very close friends and still are today. I might add here that in some ways I happened to be at the right place at the right time at that particular period in my experience and training.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's interesting that the Federal Art Projects of various kinds were very important to your whole education, career, and everything, weren't they?

SEONG MOY: Yes. I think that Project helped many, both the newcomers who were interested in it because of their schools where classes were offered and also for the practicing artists who were not able to make a living and the Federal Art Project gave them reason to continue, gave them financial support and so on. If it weren't for that Project, I can just see what would have happened to all the artists.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How long were you involved with the Walker Art Center Project?

SEONG MOY: Actually it was a whole year. I was given almost a free ticket to the place but yet at the same time I did not receive any compensation for it because I was not of age and they could not possibly have put me on the payroll. Although they have retained some of my work probably as part of the record of the activities of the Project at that time. Though I received no compensation, I was given all the materials I needed. So at least that was a great help.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. Well, you went off to the Hans Hofmann School in 1941.

SEONG MOY: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was that through Cameron Booth? Or had you heard about it otherwise?

SEONG MOY: Yes, that was through Cameron Booth indirectly I would imagine. But before I proceed to the Hofmann School, I have to cover one very important turning point: This would be that at the end of 1940 for the very first time for many years the Minneapolis Art Institute sponsored their first revived show of the Midwest Artists Annual. Cameron Booth encouraged me to submit some of my work to this show. I submitted a painting, a watercolor and a print. Upon the announcement of the awards for the show, I was dumbfounded that I received an award for each item that I submitted.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's pretty good.

SEONG MOY: I believe it was first prize in watercolor, and I think a third prize in oil, and a second prize in prints, for a lithograph that I did. And suddenly sort of all hell broke loose, because of the awards that I received. And all the friends and oldtimers that I knew suddenly stopped speaking to me. I think I understood why. They all knew me; they knew that I was not even eighteen at that time. And that I should walk off with all these prizes which they thought they were entitled to (which I felt that they were) But there was no age limit involved and since there was no stipulation that you had to state your age, they just took me as a newcomer and maybe my work was worth it at that time -- I don't know. It should have been my glorious day but it turned out to be my darkest day. Because I suddenly found that I was being ostracized from the art scene by all the people that I knew. The only men I can recall who praised me were Cameron Booth and my other teacher, William Ryan. All the artists looked down on me. I went to Cameron Booth to get advice. He said to me, "I think it's about time that you leave town." So it was at that point that I started to think seriously about it. He said, "I don't think I can teach you any more; even though you might still learn from me but mentally I don't think you can." He suggested that the best place for me to go if I could take the chance was to New York. And I said, "How can I?" He said, "There has to be a point in one's life that one has to gamble and this is the time you should gamble." He said to write to the Art Students League. They were offering out-of-town scholarships and he said my chances were as good as anyone's, and it's just a matter of whether you or someone else will be picked. He said he would also write a letter of recommendation to Hans Hofmann in New York and to ask him whether he would ever consider taking on someone from out of town and on scholarship. In due time both places answered me and both places accepted me. Things work out that way. This gave me the courage and the reason to leave. But then of course I had a problem: At that point I was not yet of age. So either I tell my guardians what I want to do, in which case they might lock me up, or the only alternative was to do the next best thing. And that was to run away from home. And that's exactly what I did. In 1941 I gathered everything together and just left without any notice and came to New York to study. And that's 1941 to 1942.

PAUL CUMMINGS: There's only a couple of minutes left on the tape. Did you know anybody in New York?

SEONG MOY: No, I didn't know anybody. I was just fortunate to be able to come with someone who also happened to receive a scholarship. It was one of the rare occasions when two students from one school received two separate out-of-town scholarships to the Art Students League. I had the added incentive of having a schoolmate who also was coming to New York. So we joined forces and came to New York.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who was that?

SEONG MOY: His name is Jock Pierenton. You probably haven't run across him. He is the son of the manager of the W.T. Grant store in St. Paul. They were considered a well-to-do middle class family then. They come from an old New England family. At the present time Jock is head of the Playhouse in Honolulu.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

SEONG MOY: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, I think we should stop here.

[END OF SIDE ONE]

[SIDE 2 (OR REEL 2)]

TAPE-RECORDED INTERVIEW WITH SEONG MOY
JANUARY 25, 1971
INTERVIEWER: PAUL CUMMINGS

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's January 25, 1971. This is Reel 2. We finished the other side with you just arriving in New York to go to the Art Students League and Hofmann -- Right?

SEONG MOY: Yes, that's right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You studied with Vytlačil?

SEONG MOY: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you select him?

SEONG MOY: Well, Cameron Booth and Vytlačil were students in the same class under Hans Hofmann in Munich. So I thought it would be sort of an ideal thing. But it didn't prove to be that ideal. It turned out to be a disaster.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh really?

SEONG MOY: Yes. Contrary to what would normally happen in this case, for some unknown reason I probably was put through a period of nine months with the most agonizing relationship with any teacher or teachers that I've ever had. And I imagine I was spoiled by the kind of relationship that I had when I was studying at the St. Paul School of Art with Cameron Booth. There again you go out into the world and you meet new situations, new elements and new reasons. And of course the result of it was that whatever training or learning that I got from these two teachers was actually by osmosis. It wasn't a question of any profound direct criticism that I received from them all the nine months that I was with them.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you work full time with Vytlačil?

SEONG MOY: Yes. Due to the fact that I had a scholarship at the League, Vytlačil was my ideal choice. My class at the League with Vytlačil was in the mornings. Then during the afternoons I studied with Hofmann. He was located downtown on West Eighth Street. The classes I had with Vytlačil and Hofmann were totally contrary to what I had before.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was the difference between the Hofmann and Vytlačil classes?

SEONG MOY: Basically there were two differences. Vytlačil, in my estimation (and this has been confirmed), tends to express himself quite openly and vividly in verbal recitation. Whereas Hofmann, due to the fact that he's limited in his language, especially English, says very few words. Except of course, on occasion there would be a student in the class who happened to speak German, in which case Hofmann would be on his own ground. But when he tried to teach speaking English it was very difficult for him to convey his ideas verbally. So most of his teaching was done in what we call the direct method in that he works on the student's work. On the contrary, Vytlačil I don't ever recall doing that to any degree. I think he tried to keep it down to the minimum. but yet at the same time Vytlačil goes on these long sort of esoteric discussions sometimes on things that have nothing whatsoever to do with art. I think he's a real showman and he can mesmerize the students, especially the younger ones. Whereas the students that go in with some background and with a certain degree of personality oftentimes find it distracting.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you study with anyone else at the League?

SEONG MOY: No, that was it. Although at the Art Students League I took advantage of the graphics setup that we had there. So I continued some of my graphics work in the classes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you work with anybody particularly?

SEONG MOY: I didn't work with anyone due to the fact that I already had the technical background through my involvement at the Walker Art Center. But nevertheless I signed in with a class that was conducted by Will Barnet. But it was just a question of having to sign in the class rather than to study with Will Barnet specifically. Basically, there wasn't much exchange of artistic or technical knowledge because I was already pretty well set and I think that was either Will Barnet's first or second year of teaching the graphics and he was mostly helping the beginners. He treated the advanced students and the beginners pretty much equally and we usually had sort of general discussions rather than any specific discussions.

PAUL CUMMINGS: He was a printer there for a long time.

SEONG MOY: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you like the atmosphere of the League? Because that's a different kind of school.

SEONG MOY: I think the atmosphere of the League at that time was very conducive to work. This may seem contrary to what I said previously that I probably had the hardest time learning there. This was due to the fact that those . . . two teachers who I so highly respected because of their background and because of the recommendation I got of them. It turned out that I thought for quite a number of years that it was sort of a conspiracy because actually I never received any direct criticism from these two men. There were occasions when I believe that a less determined student would have been sunk or destroyed by this kind of indifference. And I do recall very vividly toward the end of my enrollment I got some very, very unexpected contrary marks to my ability and capability of continuing to be an artist. I suppose it was a question of stubbornness or else a strong belief in myself, in a naive way, that I was able to overcome this kind of unexpected . . . I felt it was an abuse. But I did have a clarification a number of years later. Of course the time I studied there was in 1941 and up to the summer of 1942. The following year I enlisted in the service.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But before we get into that, let me ask you a question about school again. Were there any students who you got to know, or whose work influenced you, or you influenced or were involved with?

SEONG MOY: No. In fact, I don't recall that at all. At that time the students seemed to hang together. I think it was a period in which we had a great deal of social life and we enjoyed ourselves to the fullest, as I remember. We did all kinds of crazy things, as young students do. And I think we were more concerned with just entertaining ourselves. Of course, most of us were from out of town. We had very little means, so we more or less sort of lived and functioned collectively. We did have a lot of discussions and many sessions that we sort of combined both social and sort of self-criticism. But I don't recall that I was influenced by any specific student. At that time, each student sort of found his own little idiom and worked in that direction and it was just a matter of every now and then talking about what we aimed to do and hoped to do and so on.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What kind of work were you doing at that point? What were you interested in?

SEONG MOY: At that particular point my strongest influence of course was the contemporary French artists. I think I probably learned a great deal from exposure to these artists which we all know would be in the realm of Matisse, Picasso, Bonnard, and Miro. All these people were very much respected. Most of the artists and teachers that we knew also respected them. So we had a great affinity with them and we tried to emulate them. Personally, probably the artist that I had the strongest feeling for at that time was Miro for, let's say, his imaginative imagery. Then, of course, I greatly loved Matisse's work because of its color; since I always work in color it was natural for me to respond to Matisse. I think probably Picasso was a more controversial kind of artist because of his innovations and his eclecticism and so on. It was always a surprise to us each time to find that he was doing something altogether different from what he did before.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you have a chance to go to the galleries and museums in New York?

SEONG MOY: Yes, I would say I had quite a full education as far as . . . I think more so than students today. In fact most of my school period, class . . . I spent a great deal of time at the Museum of Modern Art, at the Metropolitan, and occasionally at the Whitney Museum, which at that time was located on Eighth Street. Of course there were very few galleries in those days and it didn't take very much time to get around to them. And the shows they had were of a higher caliber and much more thought of as something to show rather than just to have a show for the sake of having a show. In those days when you went to a show, let's say, if you saw five new shows a week, you'd see five different things. That particular year probably was the most important year in my life in many respects; in that I realized that everything is not always what it has been made out to be. So I learned to expect the unexpected.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you work while you were going to school? Because the scholarship didn't give you enough money to live on.

SEONG MOY: I believe I mentioned previously that when I came to New York a friend who

also studied at the League came with me. He happened to have a very liberal allowance so most of the so-called daily necessities were taken care of by him. And also we were very fortunate at that time to find living quarters with a man who befriended me and who later became a very close friend. He gave us living space which we did not have to pay for.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who was that?

SEONG MOY: This was Tuso Tomatsu, a Japanese artist. He was a wonderful man, very sympathetic and very considerate and lovable. Of course I suppose he was limited in his own resources. He was fairly old by then; I would say he was at least close to fifty. He was well-known to the art world back in the '30s and '40s. He was famous for his cat paintings, cats and flowers. Not quite as sophisticated a Foujito; but nevertheless doing that kind of thing. He was highly respected mainly I suppose because of his interest in people, his interest in affairs. He was a very liberal man. He participated in and helped many of the art causes of that time, especially in the more radical changes in art. So exposure to this man was one of the most important things that happened to me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It was a broad cultural experience.

SEONG MOY: Yes. We were just getting into the war then. And naturally it seems kind of strange that a Japanese older artist, an experienced artist, and a young Chinese art student should come together and form this kind of relationship. It was a very beautiful relationship. I would say I learned a great deal from him about life in general. I learned not to take things for granted. I learned that everyone is an individual. At that time it was very difficult to be liberal about these things because you were either for a thing or you took sides against it. So I feel this was a very, very important year for me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you decide to go into the Air Force at that point? Because the war did come along.

SEONG MOY: Yes. When was Pearl Harbor? Was that 1941 or 1942?

PAUL CUMMINGS: December, 1941.

SEONG MOY: Yes. Of course that was the winter that I was a student in New York living with and sharing many things with this Japanese artist. Of course, through him, I had met many, many people of all different nationalities, both whites and blacks and Orientals, even Africans and so on. This man was international. They all came to visit him because he had this magnetic quality to draw people. On one occasion in early 1942, we had a very interesting experience. A Chinese man came to visit him. I call him a countryman because he came from the south of China, from the same area I came from. We had a great deal in common. He knew where I came from and I knew where he was from so we talked about our homes. It turned out that he was working for the Selective Service.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who was he?

SEONG MOY: I can only recall his last name, which was Wong. He was telling me, you know, it's patriotic; this is the time for any respectable citizen not to wait to be drafted (where you wouldn't know where you'd be assigned). He said the best thing for you to do now if you get an opportunity before you're drafted (I was then of draft age) He sold me on the idea of enlisting. So I did enlist. He made the contact and the arrangements. By the fall of 1942 I finally made up my mind to take this plunge and signed up. So then I became an enlisted serviceman. My service, again, was not of any great significance. Being an art student and having reached a certain level in my artistic training, I thought I might have some place in the service where my talent could be utilized, in fact that was one of the reasons I decided to enlist. I thought I would get a sort of soft job. However, it didn't turn out to be the case. I was attached to a quartermaster's unit. This was my first experience in being moved around to different parts of the country. I had my basic training down near Venice, Florida. I was very unhappy with what I was assigned to do. That was just sort of headquarter work. Some of my art duties were to paint signs for latrines and barracks and so on. Finally I managed to get into special training in photography. I was assigned to photography training. So I had my photographic training in the service. It was fairly good training. I learned that aspect of it and was assigned to do photography and continued to do that all through the war.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What kind of things did you do in photography?

SEONG MOY: Mostly technical work. There were two areas that I was more or less trained for. Originally I was trained as a reconnaissance photographer, aerial photographer. Then in addition to that I was assigned to what we call a special service photographer, which was to photograph anything that needed to be photographed. You could be assigned to photograph, say, a visiting general, dignitaries and so on. If there were any special events, I would be called on to do the recording work on the photos and some technical work which dealt with a lot of copying of maps and various kinds of things. It was a sort of hodge-podge.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. Do you think that the experience as a photographer became an influence on your painting and your art?

SEONG MOY: I don't think so. I think it's another area that I have, you know, being a young man, I learned and that always dealt with technical things. To me at that time photography was a technique. I learned it as best I could. I learned it fairly well. And I could do things after a rather short period of training; I think the course at that time was only six months. Having had that training, I think I probably respond to the photographic image in an entirely different way than one who did not have a photographic background would. Even in my own work, a lot of my ideas and search for imagery derive, I would say, indirectly from photography. In other words, you get an accumulation of every possible subject matter.

[INTERRUPTION FOR A PHONE CALL]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Anyway, about photography and photographic images, as related to your work, it did have some effect in the way that you looked at things?

SEONG MOY: Yes, it did have. But I think my main concern, and it's really a question of practicality due to the fact that I myself as an individual dislike very much to travel. I don't have the itching feet of one who likes to travel. So in a sense I sort of travel at my home base. And so what would be better than to go to see travelogues and things of that nature and feel, well, I'm on a trip and this is what I see and someone else has recorded it for me and I have an entertaining image. And of course it doesn't mean that I'm selecting things merely for their local color. I think it's just a question that if one travels a great deal one comes across unusual visions and ideas through exposure to those areas. For instance, I have a friend, an artist, who has a similar kind of searching quality. He was completely fascinated by the wall of a fortress down in Puerto Rico. He went down there and spent two weeks just studying those walls, you know, the corrosion of the wall, the way the thing was made originally and how it has been worn down by time and the coloration and in places there was crumbling here, crumbling there. In a way, this is the sort of thing that might be related to something that Dubuffet might be interested in.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Which artist is that who went to look at the wall?

SEONG MOY: Charlie Austin. I've seen slides that he made. And of course artists do collect things such as that. I'm very much interested in a photographer like Aaron Siskin who goes and finds things and records them according to both his photographic eye and his artistic eye. He picks out images which are abstract and surrealistic. It's these things that I'm aware of and more interested in finding. They come from every possible source. So the source of photographic material is endless.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's really a point where the imagination can start to work.

SEONG MOY: Yes. It's really to sort of trigger the imagination one goes through it. So my favorite pastime is to thumb through photographic journals, magazines like National Geographic, even a periodical like Life and other pictorial magazines; sometimes I'm very astute in searching for what I'm looking for. Sometimes it could be just a fragment of a bad photograph. So it's these things. It's like I'm going on a journey and I have discovered these through my journey. Instead of traveling I travel with photographic pictures.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. Well, could I get some kind of comment on the art school experience? In the sense of, oh, how should I say it?

SEONG MOY: As I relate it today?

PAUL CUMMINGS: How you'd evaluate it in relation to what you're doing now. Would you have changed . . . ?

SEONG MOY: I think in a way the connection is kind of remote at this point. I think what I'm doing now . . . really I can only say that I feel it may not mean the same thing to all the artists or to every artist. But I think there's a great deal to be said that may pertain to many artists, I would say a high percentage of them. You go through, let's say, a technical and rigid training. And you make use of that training to improve and perfect your work. There are too many artists practicing today who do not have the technical background and most of them are very eclectic and they pick up what is considered the art of today and they become followers and they don't have to spend the time and agony searching for their own identity. So, once they finish with the piece of work, then they have to start over again for another. Whereas, if you have the background . . . because after all these artists that young students are copying today have already reached a point of creative expression and energy so that they don't know that background. In other words, the work has reached to a finished point where it doesn't tell at all what raw material went into it. But yet at the same time the young student comes along and says, Wow! This is it! So what they do is they just do a synthetic copy of it with their own little particular and peculiar flair. So what do they learn? They only learn that they're copying somebody.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The surface.

SEONG MOY: Yes. It's really basically very superficial. So in my teaching I always teach students as much of the technical thing, the basic thing, the fundamental things about what goes into art rather than "Look at me, look at what I'm doing; this is what you should be doing," you see. After all, I have now more than thirty years of that searching process and the agony that goes with it, so I can't expect the students -- even if they wanted to -- to absorb that and start where I left off. It is not possible.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. You came out of the Air Force in about 1946 or so?

SEONG MOY: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And you came back to New York?

SEONG MOY: Yes. I came back to New York because at that time the veterans had the GI Bill. There was really no choice for those who came back other than to go to their familiar ground, and for me New York was the familiar ground. It was natural for me to come back to New York. I had become greatly attached to New York in the year I had spent there before enlisting in the Air Force. And in addition to that, I had heard that my former teacher, Cameron Booth, was teaching at the Art Students League at that time, that he was no longer connected with the St. Paul School of Art. So it was an ideal situation to go back to one's first teacher. We suddenly realized in this class that we had . . . more than half of the students were returnees, veterans, from Minnesota.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really? That's funny.

SEONG MOY: So we started a group of Minnesotans which lasted for a few years in New York here. We're more or less disbanded now.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who were some of the other people?

SEONG MOY: There was a painter named Jim Forsberg and there was Aaron Kurzen and Harry Olin. I'm sure you don't know most of these names because they are not really what you'd consider practicing artists today. I would say that, out of the whole group of Minnesota art students, veterans of that time, I don't think there's any particular one who is really in the position I am in now. I think that artistically, probably I have reached a level that none of the others have. Although they're still practicing, evidently they're not as determined or as courageous to take the chance of professional exposure.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You got involved with Atelier 17 at one point there?

SEONG MOY: Yes. This was in 1948. It was a sort of strange kind of contact. I had known of Bill Hayter for many years because of his contribution in setting up graphic shops and the artists that worked with him, especially in this country, were people that I admired. Although my main interest at that time was to further develop my interest in color woodcuts, it was one of the early occasions that I exhibited on a competitive basis. I submitted my work to the Print Club in Philadelphia. It so happened that Bill Hayter was on the jury for that show. He gave me my first award in prints. Subsequently when he returned to New York he called

me and asked if I would like to join his group. I told him that I was not financially fluid at that time, that I wasn't interested in studying. He said, "No, this is not to study; this is to afford you the opportunity to have the facilities to work. I'm able to ask you to come as a member of the group simply because I have just gotten some money from a patron who will pay for your share." In other words, I was being sponsored. I never knew who the sponsor was. I guess as long as Bill Hayter got his money for the operation of the place then I was one of the group. So I went there and I was with him for two years off and on. I did mostly etching and engraving there. Of course, during my stay with him I met many of the artists and printmakers who are practicing today who were more or less of the same group.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you like the whole atelier? Because it was a very different kind of situation.

SEONG MOY: Yes, it was a very different kind of situation. I think it was probably the most ideal situation for any artist who has some background. I think an artist must have some background and be able to feel that he has a certain command of technique. It isn't the kind of place where one teaches the very rudimentary kind of thing. You have to have some kind of background when you go there because what is done there is not teaching; it's an exchange of points of view, exchange of ideas, what one is trying to do and searching for some newness in technical innovations to fit in with a situation.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How much did Hayter have to do with what you were doing there? Did he talk about particular plates and say, you know, why don't you do this, why don't you do that?

SEONG MOY: Not really. He was more or less sort of the operator. Since it was his workshop, his place, he was constantly on the go trying to find ways to support the place. He was constantly trying to raise funds. Of course there were very few in the workshop who could pay. We did pay for our materials. But as far as tuition was concerned, there was no tuition charge. It was more or less open to those who could afford it and we did have some talented people but nevertheless they were dilettantes; they came from well-to-do families. And so they gave certain time on their own whatever they felt it was worth to them.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who were some of the artists you worked with, or who were working there at the time you were there?

SEONG MOY: As I recall there were artists like Lasansky, Peterdi, Karl Schrag, Adolph Gottlieb, Pearl Fine, Worden Day, Peter Grippe. And of course we did have visiting dignitaries at that time. Miro was there working. Chagall was working there. Henri Masson was there. There was quite a number of artists there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you find working in the same space with well-established, mature, international figures?

SEONG MOY: I think we had a sort of common ground. I think in a way we were either naive or we were so sophisticated that we didn't feel that here was a god of some kind that we had to stand in awe of and go ga ga over. Right after they came in and were introduced, we felt much at home because they were doing the same thing we were. In many ways we didn't feel . . . think that . . . They were just doing their things which basically in the technical sense were no different and they were not that versed in it themselves. They do need help at times. I remember at times Joan Miro coming over and saying, "I don't quite know how to get what you got there. Can you tell me?" It was just a question of common interests and so, before you know it, you don't feel that you're competing or that you're such a lowly individual in the group that you're constantly aware of your inadequacies. And of course I think the group who worked in the workshop were mature enough and had enough experience and exposure that we didn't make an ass of ourselves in the light of the situation. And it worked out very well. They came and went as they pleased and we came and went as we pleased. There were no regulations pertaining to scheduling. You go and if the workshop is full you walk out. Then you'd come back at another time and there would be space.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So it was very free.

SEONG MOY: It was very free and flexible and everybody, without being told, more or less felt that that was the way it should be. And everybody actually worked that way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's nice.

SEONG MOY: I would say that in the two years I was there I probably saw Bill Hayter actually in the workshop working and so on probably no more than a dozen times. It was really an experience.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's terrific. In 1950 you got a Whitney Fellowship. How did you come to apply for that?

SEONG MOY: I'm not exactly sure how it came about or who was responsible for informing me of the fact. It was the first offering by the Whitney Foundation. Of course this Fellowship was originally the Rosenwald grant. And that was for the underprivileged of both blacks and whites in the South. Then the Whitney took it over . . . and our first director at that time was Robert Weaver, who was very, very understanding, a great guy, very sympathetic. However, when I was informed about it I immediately went up to inquire about it. It was the very first offering and there hadn't been enough time to get it publicized as much as it should have been, so that first group that applied for it was small. I would say that they had something like four hundred applicants that first year, which is a fairly small number. I think ten percent of the applicants got the award which is a fairly high percentage. They gave something like ten fellowships to artists, the visual artists, music, drama and so on.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was really your first big kind of award, wasn't it?

SEONG MOY: Yes, it was my first big award. And once I received the award things more or less happened. I suddenly was offered a visiting artist position at the University of Minnesota. I guess we talked about that before. That was to replace Meyers on his sabbatical. So I went to teach in an academic institution for the first time. Also, I'd like to set the record straight since in the beginning I spoke about my school education. I had just managed to finish my second year of high school. I never went to college. At that time I did know many of the people involved in education in Minnesota when I was a student there. So having a big institution like that invite me to teach there was additional prestige in addition to receiving the grant. That was my first official teaching job and that was the beginning of my teaching career.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what did your family in St. Paul think of your coming back to teach and having won the grant and all of this?

SEONG MOY: I guess in a way they realized that I wasn't far wrong in what I did. I think in a way maybe underneath they are sort of envious of the fact that I have gone this far. Yet at the same time I think they still can't forget what I did to them; that it was something unforgivable at that time. I don't think we've ever resolved that problem because we never give ourselves a chance to sit down and have a good heart-to-heart talk about it. We always remain more or less aloof about this particular thing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you like the experience of going to a large university with an enormous art department and getting involved with the academic world?

SEONG MOY: Well, of course one of my biggest fears at that time was not a question of whether I was able to teach or not; it was the question of the total academic mechanism that deals with that kind of situation. I didn't even know what credits and points meant or how to grade a paper or how to do a certain kind of formalized thing like writing out requisitions and putting in for various kinds of things. Of course this kind of thing is merely technical and I guess once one is exposed to it one learns by that experience. And I think they helped me a great deal simply because they knew my background; they figured that I had never set my foot in a university before and that I wouldn't know how a lot of things functioned. The people out there were very, very kind. They took the trouble to explain things to me and to tell me about the various things that were required and so on.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, how did you like the experience of teaching? Because you continued. You've taught in many places.

SEONG MOY: Well, I suddenly realized that Of course I never did have Since my basic background is in the restaurant business and my actual so-called professional training in working commercially was as a cook, I had no desire of wanting to go back to be a cook.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you ever work as a cook after you left there?

SEONG MOY: Not after I left there, no. Oh, in the Army for a short period I acted as assistant

cook. But that was just temporary. I never did it professionally, commercially. No. By this time I had already acquired a family. In that year, 1950, our first child was born. When I went out to Minnesota to take on my teaching job, I think she was six or eight months old. After my stay there I gave a great deal of thought to what kind of future teaching would hold for me. After talking to many of my colleagues and a lot of soul-searching on my part, I realized that teaching would be the area -- artists always have problems of making a living anyway -- so I thought, well, this was almost an ideal situation to teach, mostly on a part-time basis as a means of earning one's living. Whatever you do, at least your daily necessities are taken care of by your teaching job. So from that point on I have not stopped teaching. I find it, and I think many other artists find it an ideal arrangement to teach and to continue to work. I think hopefully that anyone who undertakes that kind of position should grow as a teacher and they also should grow as an artist. They shouldn't be set in one and sacrifice the other.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you find a great deal of difference between the schools; I mean the University of Minnesota, or University of Indiana, or Smith, or Vassar, or Columbia, the various places?

SEONG MOY: No. Basically I don't think there's that much difference. Although, for instance, at Indiana, where I was about a year after my job at Minnesota, I found that the students I had were much more advanced. They were all art majors. And included with the art majors were graduate students in the arts. So in that way I would say that would be a challenge because you are dealing with students that can give you competition in the sense of what they are looking for and what they have already learned. In that way, you have to give them more and you have to give them something deeper, rather than just superficially cover it with students that merely take it as an interest or as an elective.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's interesting. Well, in the middle of all this moving from school to school you received a Guggenheim in 1955.

SEONG MOY: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you go anywhere? Or did you do anything particularly with it?

SEONG MOY: No. Of course in the early '50s my work was based on . . . I think every artist was looking for a way to express himself as far as theme and subject matter and concept was concerned. My theme at that particular time was dealing with an Oriental subject that I was trying to express. It was sort of like returning to my native land. And also at the same time learning things that I didn't know about because I didn't have the opportunity in my early life, and that was about Chinese literature and Chinese plays and then it got into Chinese music and Chinese operas. So most of my work pertained to subjects of that nature. At that time a lot of my titles related to various well-known plays and well-known theatrical characters of these plays and deals with writing and poetry and so on. So what happened was that I had a project that I wanted very much to do: it was to do an original portfolio of ten or twelve original color prints that were inspired by the poetry of Li Po; that was my proposed project to the Guggenheim. And I was very fortunate -- in fact shocked -- to find that I was accepted and given the grant the first time I applied, on the first round. Which was a rarity for the Guggenheim in those days. Although the grant was not sufficient for a family to live on. I had to take on teaching jobs so I was moving into the New York area to teach. Actually I have not as yet completed the portfolio due to the fact that it was very difficult to keep body and soul together and yet at the same time try to do creative work. It as a sort of half and half effort.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think it will ever be finished?

SEONG MOY: It may one of these days be finished. But I think it will be quite different from what it started out to be. My style, my concept, my ideas have changed. Even on rereading the poems now I have an entirely different feeling about them. You know, you change as you grow.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Your interest in Chinese literature is interesting. Did you read a great deal before? Or was this something that was a kind of special . . . ?

SEONG MOY: Yes, I think I read a great deal. As I said in the beginning, when I was still in China even as young as I was I was able to read the classics. And I read quite a bit of the classics. And the classics usually pertain to the history of the so-called origin of China and

everything that's involved with it. And of course that goes into literature and poetry. So it's more or less returning to my early years that I had given up more or less when I was ten or eleven years old. And, strangely enough, I do remember many of the characters, the stories; it gradually comes back to me from my early years.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's been an interesting experience to see all this develop again.

SEONG MOY: Yes, it was.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You started teaching at Cooper Union, I guess, and then for a couple of years at Columbia. Are you still at both of those?

SEONG MOY: No. I think the first school in New York that I taught in for any length of time is Cooper Union. This dates back to around 1955 or 1956. For many years I enjoyed it there because of the way the classes were set up. You functioned very independently. And back in those days you still got very good students and very talented students. I stayed on. But last year I resigned from Cooper Union mostly because of the change that took place. Now the whole political picture has taken a different turn and I didn't feel that I would be fitted into this new program that they have.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What happened down there? Because I've heard all kinds of things about this.

SEONG MOY: Well, what's happening of course is that, strange as it may seem, the man who came in as dean and -- without any facetiousness -- I think his aim is to be the president, and then with that position he might get into the presidency of an Ivy League college. So he has an ulterior motive and he's doing everything unilaterally, trying to make the school into an image that he is trying to create. At the same time he's sacrificing the whole structure and history of Cooper Union and destroying it at the same time. There are many, many older and competent teachers who have put in many years of their life and experience there who no longer find that they are receiving their

PAUL CUMMINGS: I know a lot of people have left.

SEONG MOY: Yes. And of course this suits him fine because it means that he can bring in his young buddy buddies, many of whom are not adequate teachers. In fact, in the beginning many that he brought in could not operate as teachers. We oldtimers there saw the handwriting on the wall. Either we are being fired or we just resign. We won't accept a contract. And now at Columbia the same things is happening. So I resigned as of last semester. My present relationship is with City College. The offer has been good. I'm given a title; I'm teaching there full time. As far as money is concerned, it's very good. In fact it's more than I received when I was teaching in all those schools put together -- when I was teaching in five or six schools. In a practical sense my present situation has reached an ideal stage. After all those years I feel that finally I can settle down a little bit now.

[END OF SIDE 2]

[TAPE 2 OR REEL 3]

TAPE-RECORDED INTERVIEW WITH MR. SEONG MOY
JANUARY 28, 1971
INTERVIEWER: MR. PAUL CUMMINGS

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's January 28. This is Reel 3. Well, let's finish the teaching activity and say something about your teaching at the Art Students League. How did you come to teach there, having been a student? Does that make a difference?

SEONG MOY: No. I think of course being a student there Whatever one does I suppose after awhile . . . the League is one of the very few schools that depend so much on their so-called alumni, students who have gone there and have made their way in the profession. So it is to their credit. Also, the individual artist finds himself in the position of having been formerly a student and then becoming a teacher and of course this indicates that the school recognizes your professional level. That you have now become an artist rather than remaining a student. This serves both purposes for the school, and also for the recognition of

the artist being finally accepted in the school.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So you find the atmosphere there very different now from the time you were a student there?

SEONG MOY: Oh, yes, very much.

[INTERRUPTION]

SEONG MOY: What was that again, Paul?

PAUL CUMMINGS: The difference between the . . . when you were a student and the quality of the school now.

SEONG MOY: Yes. I think one of the big factors in the school today as against the way the school was when I was a student (of course this takes us back to 1941), judging from what I'm experiencing now, after having been teaching there for quite a number of years, I would say that on the whole we probably have reached a very important stage of art teaching.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In what way?

SEONG MOY: Of course this means comparing pre-World War II with post-World War II.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes.

SEONG MOY: I would say there was a greater sense of dedication; there was a greater sense of the feeling that students themselves come together. Of course, in the earlier days it was more difficult for students to make the final decision to be an artist, or rather to want to continue independently studying art.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What? Because of economic reasons?

SEONG MOY: For economic reasons mostly. I would say the student has to think it out quite clearly as to whether to commit himself to that study or not. Although there are always elements of the so-called amateurs and dilettantes. But I'm speaking of really serious students. I don't think I find it today. Maybe even having more staff, more teaching staff -- the larger teaching staff has more diversity, diversity in the sense of their individual style and technique. And I think it is quite obvious to me that students now tend more to follow . . . hHre again we're back to the problem that students tend to pick up styles. And, if the teacher's style is contemporary and acceptable, I would say you would probably find that more students relate themselves to those teachers.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I've noticed in looking at some of the exhibitions there that there is a great awareness on the students' part as to what's going on in the galleries around town, too.

SEONG MOY: That's right, yes. And I think probably it may be an easy way of teaching in the sense that back in the Forties we didn't have that many galleries. We only had the local museums; let's say we had a smaller visual area that the students could participate in. Now in a sense the gallery has become the classroom, rather than that the classroom is for the purpose of studying or to train oneself eventually to acquire some independence.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What things do you teach there now?

SEONG MOY: My responsibility there from the beginning is I am in charge of the evening printmaking classes. Printmaking has always been sort of off and on with the Art Students League. And probably the worst time for printmaking is in the evenings. It's very difficult to find enough students to dedicate themselves to the study of printmaking. Of course printmaking is unique in itself in that you have to have that dedication and that willingness to experiment and to learn. It takes a much longer time to produce something tangible; whereas study of painting and drawing and even sculpture I would say tends to produce more immediate results. (I'm not talking now about carving.) A lot of people come to the League oftentimes merely out of curiosity. Usually they are not individuals who have patience. And of course to learn something about woodcuts or etchings or lithography takes quite a bit of time just to familiarize yourself with what you have to work with, and what the capability is, and how it's going to offer you that certain something that you can utilize. It isn't like setting out paints and then if the teacher says "Express yourself" and splash! Bang!

In color, and the teacher says, "That's great." You know, it just isn't that. It's not what we call a direct process. It's an indirect process. You deal with various areas of it. And of course I would even say at this time -- although it really doesn't matter a great deal -- that night students and day students at the League are quite different individuals.

PAUL CUMMINGS: A lot of the night students are people who work and do other things, don't they?

SEONG MOY: Yes. They're mostly people who work during the day. And to come to class at night they're pretty well worn out physically by then, and mentally, and they're not really as fresh. Whereas in the daytime you have young people whose sole aim is to study that particular thing and they're all ready for it. Also another advantage the day class has, at least as far as graphics is concerned at the League, is that we're not allowed to receive very talented young foreign students at night. There seems to be a stipulation that they can only study in the daytime. It's more for full-time students. And also, even if a student wants to study at night, let's say, with a particular teacher, he cannot do so. I think the reason for this mainly is to control the foreign students who are here to study so that they don't get a daytime job and come to night classes. In other words, this is a problem of job searching and I suppose those foreign students who study in the daytime either don't work or they can only get jobs at night or over weekends.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's interesting. How did you happen to open a summer school in Provincetown? How did you get involved with that whole Provincetown world up there?

SEONG MOY: My connection with the summer school in Provincetown is a long and very interesting story. I'll just try to make it as short as I can. Back in 1946 when I was at the League on the GI Bill, Cameron Booth, my former teacher whom I had signed up to study with on the GI Bill, at the end of that academic year at the League, had rented a studio in Provincetown. I guess I was very close to him. Of course, I didn't have any particular commitments for the summer so he asked me to join him there for a very short while as a vacation. He said, "Due to the fact that I'm tied up a little, why don't you go on ahead." Immediately I realized what his intent was. He knew of certain of my capabilities and that I would help him put the studio in order so he could come up nice and fresh to a nice clean studio. Even though I knew what the intent was, nevertheless I accepted the offer and I went up there. Weeks passed and he did not arrive. After a certain length of time he told me that he was being delayed. Why? Because he was on jury duty. That meant that I was left staying at his studio, which is one of the very renowned studios in Provincetown. So I stayed there; in fact it was possible for me to arrange to stay there for the whole summer. He finally did come up to take over his studio about a month or so after I had come. By that time I was greatly attached to Provincetown and also I certainly didn't want to come back to New York in August. So I spent that summer there. This was in 1946. It wasn't until close to ten years later that I returned to Provincetown. And since I remembered Provincetown quite well, I met my colleague at Indiana University, Harry Engel (who died just a few weeks ago). We became very good friends. It was a sort of strange coincidence because the very year I was in Provincetown, 1946, Harry Engel opened his art school. It didn't last too many years. So by the time I got around to it, he had already closed his school. When I was teaching at Indiana University he asked me if I would consider returning to Provincetown with the idea that maybe it was the right time to start an art school. This was in 1955 or 56; I don't remember exactly now. I gave the matter a great deal of thought. At that time I already had a family and so we decided to try it one summer, the following summer. So we rented a place that was adjoining Harry's, a big studio with living quarters, and I started my first class. It was very successful the very first year and so from that point on I've been spending the summers there and conducting a class uninterruptedly since then.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How do you find students for a summer school like that?

SEONG MOY: Well, in the middle Fifties the town itself was very art conscious and a great deal of art activity was flourishing there at that time. And so naturally it was always known up to that time as a summer art school colony. Besides that, of course, that was towards the end of Hans Hofmann's School. And there were many other older schools there, like Morris Davidson's school, and the Cape Cod Art School, which was run by Henry Enchee (?) . . . formerly run by Charles Hawthorne. All these schools were long-established as a tradition. So I'm a newcomer and, as is the way of human nature, people are always looking for something new. So here I come with something different to offer. So you do get students from the town itself, those people that come to Provincetown for no reason except that they

like Provincetown, they like the atmosphere of it. And then also you send out announcements to various schools, various art schools, universities, art associations, art clubs, and so on. You just make the announcement that you are available. And when these people see the ad they contact you. And some of my students in New York who can possibly make it come. Sometimes I offer them scholarships, monitorships, and so on, in order to encourage them to come. But otherwise it's usually sort of a year-by-year kind of digging. I haven't been able to . . . I don't think it's my nature to develop what you call verbal followers because I think if a person has anything at all that after they've spent a certain amount of time, they should have enough background to be on their own. I don't think I have yet the good fortune of having the kind of students that would like to patronize me. So it's a year-to-year struggle, really. You worry about it for the coming year; but the following year comes and it all seems to work out.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And you have a nice summer outside your work.

SEONG MOY: Yes, that's right; it's combined. And it works out fine. But at the present time it's very difficult. Provincetown is losing its sort of art attraction. Things have changed. A sort of commercialized kind of resort thing is coming into the town. It's more difficult to live and to work there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's become more expensive and everything.

SEONG MOY: Yes. And so good people stay away. They go somewhere else. And I don't know what the future holds for Provincetown.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's interesting. I didn't know there was such a real change up there. You've had various commissions for things from International Graphic Art Society and things like that.

SEONG MOY: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Have you had many of those? Commissions, edition commissions?

SEONG MOY: Well, I would say as a whole there are not that many. I'm not sure now whether I have done something like in the neighborhood of six editions for International Graphic Art Society. But of course each time you do an edition these prints are the same prints that I make for myself and I print it myself. The only difference of course is that the general edition is much larger than I would normally make it. I average my editions somewhere in the neighborhood of fifty prints per design. If there is any special reason that I would have to make a rerun or a second edition of it, if I find it's worthwhile, I would do it. But this is on rare occasions. Normally on edition commissions of prints, it ranges anywhere from one hundred to three hundred prints. Of course there's always a different price arrangement. Anything that is of a commission contract like that your prints always break down to almost wholesale price and unless you are in great need of money you would do it. Unless one can find an easier way of doing it, it's a killing proposition to print by hand my technique of relief printing, woodcuts, and so on. It's really a very difficult physical project. But when you know that you'll get paid a couple of thousand dollars, well then, you think twice about it. I think at this moment there's a greater awareness of prints at this moment. There are a lot of people -- you know, again everybody is getting on the bandwagon. How well it's going to prove itself I really don't know. But a lot of places are producers of prints now. In other words, they're contractors of prints and they become the distributors and you, the artist, are the manufacturer. These people sell to different organizations, different stores, different museums on a volume basis or on a low cost basis.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you have a dealer who represents your prints? Or do you really just handle most of it yourself?

SEONG MOY: I handle it mostly myself. The only dealer that, let's say, officially represents me is Associated American Artists. But there again unless one does very popular work, I think it might be better to have a gallery that would exclusively handle your work and they will do all the business end of it. Whereas in my case my work may be liked by a certain number of people yet at the same time it's not something that most people would like. So, due to the fact that I have my teaching jobs, I'm just independent enough so that I don't have to feel that I have to make prints in order to cover a wide range of the buying market. I do what I want and it's my own creation. If it sells, all right; if not, then I wait until later. So this is the reason why I'm not so concerned about getting a gallery or getting an exclusive

dealer to handle my work. They basically can't do any more than I can. They may catch a few stragglers.

PAUL CUMMINGS: American Associated Artists doesn't send your prints out to other dealers or things like that?

SEONG MOY: Yes, they do. They have traveling exhibitions. The gallery is probably about the most well-known graphics gallery in America. So they have many, many arrangements such as that. Of course a lot of places take on shows merely to cover up or justify their exhibition programs. But these places really buy, you know. I think the only time that it's of any value to exhibit is to have a one-man show.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You had one-man shows for a number of years in various galleries. Do you find that they're kind of important experiences for you? Or useful?

SEONG MOY: Yes, they are very important in the sense that I think the most important aspect of exhibitions, especially one-man shows, is to enable you to display your work, especially your new work or current work, at an established time and for you to be able to evaluate what you have done in the sense of a public display rather than confining the work to the studio situation or some private home or apartment.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you find that things look different when they're hung in a gallery? And lined up?

SEONG MOY: Oh, yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you change your mind about various things?

SEONG MOY: Yes, I do. Many times I'll find work that I have done I'm not aware of since I'm too close to it in the studio, or too subjective to the thing that I don't have that sort of second eye or indifferent eye to look at it. So usually when a work is hanging in a gallery or it's displayed officially under a condition, then all of a sudden . . . I always feel, that when I'm viewing my own work, I suddenly realize that it's not my work that I'm viewing. Then all of a sudden I become very objective about what I see there. So in a way because of its being in public I start to think in terms of comparing it with either works that either could be hanging there (if we happen to be in a group show) or if it were a one-man show, then I would hang it as the work that has gone before or the work that's coming up. So I have a little more objective point of view in seeing the work. Of course by that time I think -- well, you know, it's like saying, well, what's done is done. So I sort of say forget it and then continue on with my other work and learn from that experience; any corrections or changes that you're going to make, do it on other things. You don't necessarily have to go back to those.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. You had an exhibition in Japan in 1959?

SEONG MOY: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did that come about?

SEONG MOY: Well, that came about through an old colleague, Ulfert Wilke, Do you know the name?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes, sure.

SEONG MOY: I got to know him when I was teaching at Indiana University. He was teaching down at the University of Louisville. On one of his trips he went to Kyoto and he got acquainted with the Yamada Gallery there. Of course he was telling them about people working in the United States. He told them about me. Immediately I received a letter of invitation possibly to have an exhibition. It didn't materialize right away. It was maybe four or five years after that that I had my first contact. He became what we call my Far East representative. But the only trouble with that arrangement, especially with him (I mean I have no other experience except through him of working in the Far East), especially in Japan, the question of the difference of the value of work equivalent to United States dollars is quite different. And also at the same time what you sell over there, even though you sell for less money, in those days it was very difficult to get money out of Japan. They could sell my whole show out and I wouldn't be able to get my money for various reasons. It didn't amount to that much due to the fact that a print that I could get a hundred dollars for here

the best I could do over there would be half that. And of course my concern was not so much making money there but to have my work exposed to the people and artists of the Far East, and especially of Japan. Through the years I have received quite a few letters, and even artists that are visiting the States call on me because they have seen my work and were very much affected by it. And so I feel that that is more rewarding, that kind of artistic acknowledgement, than to wait for some, oh, newspaper publisher or manufacturing tycoon to buy my work. Which doesn't really mean very much anyway. So it was more for the purpose of my saying, "Here is my work" to the artists and people of Japan and anybody else in that area and, "What do you think?"

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's very interesting.

SEONG MOY: In fact I have one very beautiful brief relationship with one of the very well-known Japanese artists (he is not too well known in this country). His name is Ono. He's quite an elderly man by now but he's one of the unique artists, a very creative individual. He did a series of work dedicated to me. And I did one very large woodcut that I dedicated to him which I call Ono's Rock Garden. This is the kind of thing that's rewarding in the long run.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Let's talk about the work for a while here. I notice that there are relationships between everything but these obviously cover quite a period of time, don't they?

SEONG MOY: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And the other day I noticed that there was a collage that you were using as -- what? The basis or . . . ?

SEONG MOY: Yes, as a basis for a silkscreen.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Is that a normal procedure? Or is that recent? Is that unusual?

SEONG MOY: Well, it's not unusual; it's sort of a normal procedure at the present time. I have been doing a number of these commissions, as we talked about before, except that now it's dealing with new people who come into the art scene, like big printing concerns, and individuals who have never been in the business who suddenly realize that there is money to be made in this area of commissioned prints. Most of them are bad because the prices that they usually try to get are very low and then the markup is so high. So the so-called publisher makes more money than the artist ever will. Although we do have legitimate companies that are operating for many years, such as Lublin's, who publish not only in various kinds of mail order things but also they have a constant stock of well-known American and European and Oriental artists' work. While the commissions are relatively better than most of them, nevertheless, it's still small. But because of my experience and background in silkscreen, I was able at that time to take on a certain limited amount of commissions that I work in the silkscreen medium. The design of these usually has to be approved by the various companies. One of the companies that I have done work for is New York Graphics which is a print publisher mainly and now they are going into fine art. This is the beginning. And so I am doing . . . I don't know whether the . . . one of the first fine art prints. And it isn't bad. I mean you're working with honorable people; you're not working in a sort of fly-by-night kind of deal. This is the reason . . . you saw that particular way I'm doing it. I do make my design at this time in a collage form mostly of pasted up colored paper that I design myself and work over them. And of course it depends . . . at this point I have learned to make them more simply. Before they were very complicated; well, not so much outwardly complicated but, when I started to separate them for making into a silkscreen, I'd find myself bending over fifteen or twenty screens. Which is kind of ridiculous for the kind of money that I'm getting for it. But nevertheless on the other side of the coin at least when I produce a work I can be proud of it and even though I would normally get more for it, yet I feel that here again one sacrifices a bit in order than one can prove that one can do a professional job, a decent job. So there again, you see, you always . . .

PAUL CUMMINGS: When did you start using collages as a study for a screen print.

SEONG MOY: It's only been recently for a screen print because I never did do much with screen prints in my professional work. I have used silkscreen for quite a long time, mostly for all the exhibitions that I had, which amounts to . . . I would say since 1948 I probably have had over fifty one-man shows. And I have produced posters, limited edition posters for these exhibitions. I would say I probably have produced at least in the neighborhood of twenty or

twenty-five posters. So I usually use the silkscreen medium. It's easier to work with. I can work in a larger size and print it quicker and so on. So actually it's a more practical medium for that kind of thing. And when I was doing my design, it was either an abstraction from something else that I have or else work out a sort of simple design. And when I was doing those designs for silkscreen I was doing it almost like collage. So what I'm doing now is just a little more complex collage. But nevertheless it's nothing new. It just so happens that by doing these they become sort of samples for the company to see. I have various people . . . at the moment I have three private individuals that do that type of work. That's their contact.

PAUL CUMMINGS: To sort of get back to the relationship between the prints and the paintings and everything, these are earlier, right?

SEONG MOY: Yes. I would say as far as painting is concerned, I haven't been painting to any degree for about a year, if not a year and a half. In all that time on top of everything else that I do for two-and-a-half or three years, I have work going into this new technique of printmaking, which is a sort of re-design or re-concept of my formal style of color woodcuts. Now it's a combination, which I call "relief print" which is made from cardboard; cardboard and then I work with a modified surface so it becomes like a colorgraph. So with all these various little types of technique I've put them all together and I'm producing a new series of prints with these combinations. I don't know actually as yet what to call them. I still would consider them relief prints because most of the things are of the relief technique. I have finally spent enough time in perfecting it to the degree where I can feel comfortable; I know what I can do with it and what I cannot do with it. So in a way I would say this series of prints is a new direction that I have in printmaking.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Has there been a relationship between the prints, say, the subject of the prints and the subject of the paintings over the years?

SEONG MOY: Yes, there is a sort of interrelationship sometimes as far as the image is concerned and the concept. I can be working on a print and then suddenly I find myself . . . that the theme has so much that still can be said that I would, let's say, try to go into the painting of it. Or it could be vice versa. Sometimes I start painting and I get an idea and as the idea emerges I can say, well, a portion of that can be re-designed into a print. So there's a constant flux between painting and printing. I don't think you can very well separate the two. It's the same creative process. It's just a matter of different materials you're working with, and a different technique.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. Because I know there are some artists who will have a painting and the painting will almost serve as a model for a print.

SEONG MOY: Yes. Sometimes that can happen. It depends.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Does that happen with you?

SEONG MOY: Yes. Sometimes it can. Even to a point where, when I do a painting and I find it intriguing enough, I even challenge myself to see if I can reproduce it in a print. I have done that just to justify to myself how well I can control the technique. And I find at this time this new technique that I'm working on is very appropriate for that. But yet it's something that one doesn't do because it's like repeating oneself all the time. You know, you can do something and just a slight modification can alter the image and concept of the thing. So sometimes it's not an actual reproduction; it's a modified reproduction.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's a version. Right.

SEONG MOY: It's a version.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You had mentioned before your interest in photography and photographs and how they occasionally will serve as little indications of ideas and things. Does this continue? I mean do you still look through a lot of material?

SEONG MOY: Oh, yes, I do. Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What are the qualities do you think that would start, say, a series of prints or something like that?

SEONG MOY: I would say an unusual form, a combination of textures, the relationship between -- if it's naturalistic, if it's a pictorial photographic thing of nature how those shapes relate to something that might be for some reason manmade, created altogether, and what is the relationship, and what is the juxtaposition of these kinds of things involved. Sometimes it may be just a sort of compositional arrangement.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It would be totally abstract and not necessarily related to the figure?

SEONG MOY: Yes. I have something here that I think you might be interested in seeing. In yesterday's New York Times there's a picture on the editorial page on "European National Tackles Rising Problem: the Aged." This shows . . . one of the pictures is of these old people. I found this photograph very intriguing. It shows three women sitting. They are below a portrait of Queen Elizabeth in the Darby and Joan Club. I find the combination, the formal arrangement of this very intriguing in the sense that an accidental photograph like this has a great deal of human interest because it shows these old women sitting there and each one has a very strange sort of expression as though they were cadavers. And yet above there you see this dignified Queen, you know, in full regalia of evening dress. You have this strong contrast here; you have contrast in symbol, contrast in content, contrast in form, and contrast in shape. Look -- very strange.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. The top so stark and then so busy.

SEONG MOY: That's right. You see, I'm not relating myself to merely the realistic presentation of the photograph because that's not my interest. I'm looking beyond that. It doesn't qualify as a photograph any more. It's as though I happened to be present when the photographer was there to take the picture and it just suddenly hit my eye and I marvel at that particular setting. It gave me such ideas for so many things. And all photographs I react to in that indirect way, not in a direct way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Have you ever worked, maybe years ago, doing sketches outside or working from nature? Or things like that? Or not very much?

SEONG MOY: Yes, I have. I did a series of paintings (which also I did some prints of). I called the series the Antigua Gate series. This is a theme which deals with a square box. I think that painting over there is one of them, that particular segment where the orange-yellows are. You see that sort of half diamond from each side and then the rectangle in the center?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

SEONG MOY: That I remember from many years ago when I used to live in a tenement area near Lincoln Center. In fact, this was the backyard of Roosevelt Hospital. There was a gate there which had everything like Graffiti and, oh But the way the gate was designed it had this kind of formal arrangement. Somebody painted something on there to act as a caution, a sign that it is a gate. And all this, combined with the shape of the gate, with the painted surface, with the corrosion, and there were a couple of peepholes in there, viewing windows through the gate, and so on. That image stayed with me for a long time. I even took photographs of it; I was so intrigued by it. In fact, I was more intrigued with the dirty drawings that were on the wall so I combined them with the gate. Subsequently, maybe five or six years ago, in National Geographic there was an article on, I think it was the island of Jamaica. It showed some of the scenes there. All of a sudden I ran across a picture that had an exact picture of a gate in Jamaica that was almost identical to the gate at Roosevelt Hospital. (Of course it was minus the dirty drawings.) And immediately that association brought me to say, well, I'm looking for a new form, new ideas. I had it a long, long time ago; now it's revived by seeing it somewhere all of a sudden. That sort of jelled it and it gave me a reason. So I find myself rediscovering that form. Now I'm using it where I didn't use it before. These are examples of how I respond to photographs, not in the sense that

PAUL CUMMINGS: That it's a picture of a house or tree or a fence or something.

SEONG MOY: That's right. Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's interesting. So that you're really looking for abstract qualities rather than the realistic?

SEONG MOY: Oh, yes, yes. Definitely. Realistically it has no value to me whatsoever. I can always add my realism if I want to. Then what it means is that everything around you has its

basic abstract quality and the beauty of abstraction is everywhere; it's just a matter of coming in contact with it. Sometimes you don't use it. Sometimes you store it in your mind and then when the time comes around it projects itself. Speaking of this particular thing, I would like to just show you one item -- let me get the folder -- and then suddenly you find that it becomes humanized. I have a drawing here -- where did it come from? This is my little notation.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. Just a tiny little sketch.

SEONG MOY: A little notation and then more notations here. What was this? This was a torn subway poster, just the shape itself, the abstract shape. This is all I see after it's torn, certain things remain from the underneath poster and all kinds of deterioration. When I saw that from a distance I thought it was a painting. When I got close to it I suddenly realized what it was. It was really a big announcement of a sort of rock and roll advertisement and then somebody decided to give it a good tear. So it just ended up like that. I mean the germ of the idea came from just having a glance at the abstract quality of the remains of that poster.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. The basic structure is almost in that little thumbnail sketch.

SEONG MOY: That's right. It's all there. I needed to embellish the area, so suddenly what this came out to be As I worked with it, it suddenly came back that years ago when I was studying at the Art Students League in the Forties I spent a great deal of time just back of the League at the south entrance of Central Park. Not too far in from the south entrance there was an enormous boulder. (It will probably be coming out when they start to put that new subway track there.) But that boulder reminds me of that because by seeing it and having spent many times sitting on it, looking towards the south you see the big uprising of the Hotel Essex and the Hampshire Hotel.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yes. Like the top of the print.

SEONG MOY: Yes. And the top is like . . . and then all of a sudden this whole image starts to develop as related to Central Park. In other words, this brought back my memory of Central Park. So the thing just developed and it just ended up with this big black stone and then of course the little red pebble is the symbolic contrast.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Speaking of all those things, have you developed over the years a kind of theory that ties your work together? Or is it really that you're constantly stimulated by various things?

SEONG MOY: I think my concept is more in the latter statement in that I'm constantly searching for things to excite me and to project me into the field of creative work. I may have developed -- but I'm never aware of it -- a specific concept of how to derive these things. It's just that I think, in a way, it's like a happy child who goes around searching for things to do. I always find a great deal around me that I . . . I don't think I ever run out of ideas. Idea is no problem. It's the execution of it, to bring it about, to make it into an artistic statement, that is the hard part. There are artists who just go around and make thumbnail sketches, tons of them, but this is merely a form of exercise; it doesn't really produce anything.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. It never adds up after a while.

SEONG MOY: You can take one thing and If something really excites you and if you stick to it and develop it until finally it blossoms into a mature plant then it means something. And this is how I look upon it in my creative work, in everything that I do. So in a way I find my source of inspiration everywhere.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It can be anything.

SEONG MOY: It can be anything.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It can be newspapers, buildings, shapes, everything.

SEONG MOY: Yes. I even see it in modern machinery, modern design and so on. It's all what you're looking for. It's all within your own creative self that you're searching for these things. It's something that you cannot explain. Or you cannot teach it. And I can only say that the only thing that really I would say that would mean anything at all is that for me to have this

kind of conceptual idea of how to relate myself to my ideas and then how I go about accomplishing it is that the important factor is to have the basic fundamental art knowledge. If you don't have that, then the chances will be lessened. If you have it, if you're master of your craft, then you know what you can do and what you cannot do and you can do it to the best of your ability.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. Do you think that in printmaking having very, very good technical skills is important?

SEONG MOY: It's important to the extent that the work has to have a certain amount of what we call "finished quality," that you can be satisfied with it. It's no good to make a good print if it's filthy; or to paint a great picture but never be able to stretch your canvas right; it will be buckling and creasing and so on. So the technique does help in the sense that it eliminates the thing that will create distraction for the work.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I know so many printmakers who seem to get all involved with the materials and never develop images.

SEONG MOY: Yes. That of course there are some individuals who find it so intriguing to be involved just like Pop artists who just pick up things and put them together and so on. They don't really have the artistic background. It's really a construction kind of a concept. You just bring things together like a printmaker who uses all kinds of material and so on but never ends up with an image that they can really fulfill. It's that they're more concerned with those parts and using those parts than the final statement, which is basically very simple. But it has to be profound and it has to have something to say.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Okay. Well, that's

[END OF SIDE 1, TAPE 2]

[END OF INTERVIEW]

Last updated... *September 26, 2002*