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Oral history interview with George D. Yater,
1974 July 18

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview of George D. Yater on July 18, 1974. The interview took place in Truro, MA, and was conducted by Robert F. Brown, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

ROBERT F. BROWN: This is July 18, 1974. Interview with George Yater in Truro, Massachusetts, Robert Brown the interviewer. And perhaps you could begin, saying something about your youth, your childhood, and any strong influences you had then, any ambitions to do certain things.

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, I was born in—I would say I was fortunate to be born in the very beautiful town of Madison, Indiana. It's on the Ohio River in the southern part of the state. And for some reason [inaudible] more beautiful homes there than in any other town of comparable size. It was quite an important town in the early—well, around 1850, sort of a gateway to the west [inaudible].

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Inaudible] on the Ohio River.

GEORGE D. YATER: Yeah, things were transported on the river, and then continued on down the river or by train to other parts of the Middle West. But they had a very good architect there, Costigan, from Baltimore, who designed a lot of the good homes. And people seemed—well, they had the money to build these elaborate homes at that time. I guess they made their money in shipping or in other—mills and things. One of the important industries was the foundry—iron foundry. And they made these castings, iron railings for balconies and so forth. And there are many of them from Madison. And they also shipped them down the river to New Orleans.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So a lot of them originated in this town.

GEORGE D. YATER: Yeah. And they were made right there in Madison.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was your father associated with some of this?

GEORGE D. YATER: No. My father had various jobs. As a young man he worked as an electrician and then later he went into the trucking business. He was one of the first people in the town to have a truck. Did a lot of work for wholesale grocery companies and so forth. And he was in that business for quite a few years. He had—I remember, well, we had a few horses when he first started, and then later he had Model T Ford trucks.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, so he moved from having a dray business to a trucking business. That was pretty common.

GEORGE D. YATER: Yeah [inaudible] called at that time [inaudible] dray or transfer business. And then he bought out another man and then continued on his own. And he had two, three other men working with him on the thing. I remember he used to do his own repair work on his own Ford. And I used to help him. Although I didn't care for it too much. I never was a very good mechanic.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You were there through high school anyway.

GEORGE D. YATER: Yes. I went to grade school and high school in Madison. And it was in high school that the art instructor encouraged me to take a test for a scholarship at John Herron Art School in Indianapolis. And I was successful in that. I might have been the only applicant. I don't know.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you got the scholarship then.

GEORGE D. YATER: Yes, I did. They gave I believe 25 scholarships in different counties in the state and I got one of those.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Indiana.

GEORGE D. YATER: And then each year in art school I was able to renew that scholarship.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you go there wanting to be an artist?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, I had some ideas along that line. I had in mind commercial art. I wanted to make some money. And I thought that was the best way. But when I was in junior high school I'd taken a couple of cartooning courses by mail. And then later in high school I took a commercial art course.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Really. Who sponsored those courses? Do you remember?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, it was a mail order thing. Like I just wrote in to these companies. And I think the commercial art deal, they sent a representative down to interview me. And just to look at some of my work and —

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you doing a lot of drawing and painting?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, yeah, some of the things were quite good, I thought. They had a very good lettering course. And poster and different things of that type, photo retouching, I wasn't very good at that, but—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you [inaudible].

GEORGE D. YATER: Because I did this while I was in high school. But then later I got on some of the athletic teams. Played football, basketball, baseball. I didn't have the time to work on it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you like to draw anyway on your own?

GEORGE D. YATER: I must have. Well, yes, I did from way back, because people used to always—I had a brother just one year older than I was and people would ask us what we wanted to do when we grew up. We always said, "We're going to be artists."

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did your parents encourage you? Were they interested in your being artists?

GEORGE D. YATER: They always did, yes. They encouraged me as much as they could. And when I went through school; I was able to make my own way though. And I was self-supporting from the time I was about 17 on.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was it like at the John Herron School?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, John Herron was a pretty good school then. It's a much larger school now. But it seemed wonderful to me. I mean I really liked it. And—

ROBERT F. BROWN: What'd you like about it mainly?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, I don't know, it was sort of a whole new life for me. Madison was a town of about six or eight thousand people then. And it's a beautiful place, but there just wasn't much going on there. They had a—it was a good place to grow up in, but there wasn't much future there for young people other than bridal registry or—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, when you were at Indianapolis did you sense that there might be a future for you?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, I felt that to get in commercial art, yes. I'd have to go to one of the cities. Now, I had a couple other things in mind besides John Herron. I tried for a scholarship and then I didn't hear from them for several months. So I thought I might go to art school in Cincinnati, Ohio, or possibly Chicago. And then finally at the last minute before schooltime, I heard from John Herron that I'd gotten the scholarship. So that sort of settled that for me.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was the course of study like then?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, it's surprising, but my daughter recently graduated from Rhode Island School of Design, and they use different names now for the courses, but her basic courses for first two years were very similar to what I had in John Herron. We had design and applied design and lettering, poster, and we had sketch classes, drawing from models. And at that time they wouldn't let the freshmen in the life class.

ROBERT F. BROWN: They wouldn't.

GEORGE D. YATER: No. You had to go to school a couple years before.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you had the proper attitude.

GEORGE D. YATER: Let you have that [inaudible] but then eventually I got in the—I sort of switched to fine art and I got in the studios. And we had a lot of studio work. I mean it was all day long. We'd work in the morning, we'd [inaudible] draw in the morning, and then have a portrait class. You could either paint or draw in the

afternoon. And it went on all week long.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you work with a—would you work with the same people for a year or two, same teacher?

GEORGE D. YATER: Yes. But they had [inaudible] freshmen, sophomores, so forth.

ROBERT F. BROWN: No, I mean the same teachers. Did you stick with—

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, no I—the first two years you had the more—you had the teachers who handled just one class. They were more specialized, shorter classes. I had several classes in the forenoon and so forth. But later you had—a class would last for three hours. So you'd have just one or two instructors a day. They would be the same ones right straight through.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What were some of your—the best instructors?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, the best instructor I think was William Forsyth. He was the oldest man there, and had really founded John Herron. And—

ROBERT F. BROWN: What did he teach?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, he was the painting instructor and the drawing, the most advanced life drawing instructor. He studied in—he was quite an elderly man then. He was in his seventies. He'd studied in Munich with Chase and Duveneck and Currier and different artists in that school.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Could you describe his approach to teaching drawing?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, he taught more a flowing line through the figure. You sort of get the movement in the body and then connect the different arms and legs and stuff—with the movement. But he helped me tremendously in drawing because quite early in the day he advised that I draw with lithograph crayon. And this is kind of an exacting thing. I mean I got six sheets of paper. And did the life-size drawings. And he said, "Well, it's a tremendous discipline, but if you can do it for a couple years, why, you might really be able to draw at the end of that time."

ROBERT F. BROWN: Might. Just might.

GEORGE D. YATER: Yeah. So that sort of a challenge kind of appealed to me. And I did that for two years. And I think it did help me a lot because I know I still draw more or less the same fashion. And I look at things that way and—

ROBERT F. BROWN: How did you look at things, would you say?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, I don't know. You just have to—something develops. It's like learning to see color. I mean Hawthorne had that idea. It's sort of a process or method that you use. And if you have a little bit of natural talent that helps too.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you encouraged in these drawings to make them very finished and exact? Or were they sketchy?

GEORGE D. YATER: No. Well, we did all kinds, because we did an awful lot of drawing. As a sophomore student I remember I was interested in Bridgman drawings. And I used to go to the library and look at Bridgman work. Then I'd go back to class. And I didn't think the instructor was so great at that in that class. But I kind of worked on my own, and tried to be more Bridgman style. I don't know if that was such a good idea. But we tried a lot of different things like that. And then I think the early sketch classes helped a lot too. You got to working a little freer. No, our general approach wasn't to do too highly finished a thing. Forsyth, he said to put a little mystery in the thing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Really. Not try to—

GEORGE D. YATER: Yeah, not pin it down too much.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was his instruction?

GEORGE D. YATER: Then another thing, one of his best pupils was then Wayman Adams, portrait painter. Wayman Adams worked with big brushstrokes. They're in a lot of his work. So we used pretty big brushes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: When you went to painting. Was that kind of daunting at first? Kind of to be using such a big

brush?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, no, we sort of liked that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So that was a four-year curriculum.

GEORGE D. YATER: I guess it was. And no, I don't know. I was interested in the thing all the way through. I was anxious to learn, and I found a lot of new things. And we had a congenial bunch of students there. We had—well, the school would have about 250 students I guess. But you get in sort of a little group, eight or ten that you know pretty well. And our classes, they probably averaged 20 to 30 students.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Would Mr. Forsyth—during class was he always in the classroom? In the studio? Did he come around regularly and criticize?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, he only came in about two days a week I think. And then you were on your own the rest of the time. Then we had other things you could take. Watercolor classes if you wanted. I took some of those. And the other instructors weren't important in the same caliber as Forsyth.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was there much contact with the outside community?

GEORGE D. YATER: Not too much, no. We sort of stayed right there at the school. They had a museum right next door, the John Herron Art Institute, or Art Museum. And we could go over there any time we wanted. Wander around the museum. And the grounds were very nice. We stayed pretty much right there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You mentioned you were influenced by Bridgman. Were there things in the museum that particularly attracted you then?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, at that time they'd have interesting exhibits. They had a show of Hawthorne watercolors once that I liked.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was that the first time you'd seen Hawthorne's work?

GEORGE D. YATER: Yeah. The first time we'd seen his watercolors. No, they had other Hawthornes in the exhibit, museum exhibits, had one or two big pieces. And then Hawthorne gave a couple of painting demonstrations at the school. And I was impressed by that. In fact that's one of the reasons I came to Provincetown.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Then following graduation you had these scholarships for travel. Four summers, right?

GEORGE D. YATER: No, just one summer. In fact there wasn't very much money at that time. Though it seemed like a lot more then than it does now, a \$350 scholarship that I was awarded.

ROBERT F. BROWN: This was beginning in 1932, wasn't it?

GEORGE D. YATER: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. So you came to Provincetown. Who did you—you went to the Cape Cod School of Art. Who did you study with then?

GEORGE D. YATER: It was operated by Henry Hensche. And Hensche had been Hawthorne's assistant. And I really wanted to ideally—came up. Like I'd come up the year before that actually, 1931. And I planned to study with Hawthorne, but Hawthorne died that spring. So by the time I got here Hensche was in charge. But he kept me on as a monitor in the class, and I studied three more years after that with him.

ROBERT F. BROWN: How was he as a teacher? Did you have him for a teacher?

GEORGE D. YATER: He was quite close to Hawthorne I think at that time. Probably closer than he is now. And he was a very good teacher I thought. I liked what I was studying and I think I got something out of it. Got a lot out of it. He's had a lot of good students.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was his approach quite different from Forsyth's?

GEORGE D. YATER: You mean different from—

ROBERT F. BROWN: From Forsyth, your teacher.

GEORGE D. YATER: Oh. Yes. Yes. Well, we were not trying to finish anything in Hensche's classes [inaudible] beach. We'd just make these studies. We'd call them mudheads [inaudible] portrait we have a little—

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Inaudible].

GEORGE D. YATER: Bunch of these kids posing on the beach. They'd sit on an orange crate or something. And the idea was to silhouette the figure against the sky or the sea or the water, the beach. And made an interesting study. But we didn't try to put the features in or anything. Just be dark colors against light.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did he explain why you were doing this?

GEORGE D. YATER: What's that?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did he explain why you were doing this?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, that was Hawthorne's method. The idea was you'd learn to see color that way. And I think it really did work, because a lot of people tried it. And they all seemed to like it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What were you doing during the winters these years after you got out of the John Herron School?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, I stayed right in Hensche's studio the first year I was here. I lived with Bruce McKain and another art student, John Pope. They'd both been in Hensche's class. I really should say that Bruce McKain is one of the strongest influences on me coming to Provincetown. He was in the John Herron Art School too. But he was one of the older students and he'd been to Provincetown, studied with Hawthorne. So he spent a lot of time talking about that. And then I was also out there with a rather amazing—a lot of older people connected with the museum have been Hawthorne students.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So there was this attraction, this direct—

GEORGE D. YATER: Yeah. People, I think [inaudible] ladies too. They had all studied with Hawthorne.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, when you and McKain and Pope—you boarded together here then in—

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, we stayed in Hensche's class studio in the winter. It was kind of an old barn up at the end of Pearl Street. And it had been Hawthorne's personal studio. But then Hensche was lucky enough to rent it and use it for his school. It was a very good studio. But it was a barn. It wasn't very warm in the winter.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you painting pretty steadily?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, as much as we could. We spent a lot of time on wood route. We'd go out in the dunes and cut trees down, carry them in. Chop them up. That took a lot of time.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you starting to make other friends here in Provincetown then? Was it a fairly active social life?

GEORGE D. YATER: No, it was pretty limited. But we didn't notice that. We had our regular chores to do. And well, we were just trying to paint. We were still students. No, we found it—the longer that we stayed, why, the more social life we had. We met different people. And we had a lot of fun. There were a lot of young writers in town at that time. And quite a few young painters. And they made a little group.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were there any strong influences on you during these years, in the '30s?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, I don't know.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Working pretty much in isolation as far as your painting goes?

GEORGE D. YATER: Working pretty much alone I think at first. And I met Ed Dickinson. He lived right next door and—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was he pretty helpful to a younger artist?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, I didn't get to talk to him too much. I'd see him once in a while and he'd seem pretty nice. But I didn't talk to him about painting. His style was a little different. Working pretty much in grays. We were aware of it. And I liked his work. But I didn't think about studying with him at that time. And there are other—well, Charlie Heinz was a man I thought was a good painter. He lived right down Pearl Street down at [inaudible] lumber yard and—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you talk about painting with him?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, he didn't talk much, talked just a little bit. But I used to go to the beach club like once in a while.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What went on there? What did you do there?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, it seemed pretty interesting to me then. They had some older painters there. Richard Miller. And of course there weren't so many in the wintertime. But to me they seemed a lot older and wiser. And I'd go down once in a while, hang around.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Would they talk art? Talk about art a lot?

GEORGE D. YATER: A little bit. They'd tell a few stories. They had this kind of thing where different members cooked the meals, you know.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, yeah.

GEORGE D. YATER: And sometimes they're good, sometimes they're bad. But it was more a social club. Artists and writers. And at that time it was much stronger in that regard than it is today I think.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You mean the members were—

GEORGE D. YATER: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: More considerable then.

GEORGE D. YATER: Yeah. More people of reputation.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you have any especially close friends in that group or generally in Provincetown?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, of course Bruce McKain and Phil Malicoat have been my closest friends for a long time. But—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Malicoat you met in the '30s.

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, he had gone to John Herron Art School too for a while. He dropped out. He'd gone for a year or two though when I was first there. He was in Hensche's class; he was one of Hensche's monitors. So I had known him all the time I'd been in Provincetown.

ROBERT F. BROWN: By this time were you thinking you'd stay in Provincetown?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, I wanted to try it that one winter. The winter of 1932 I stayed all year. And I liked it. So I just stayed on.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What did you like about it?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, I don't know. It seemed sort of free and easy. And you didn't have to dress up and all. You spent practically no money on clothes. And just the general atmosphere. Hensche let me stay in his studio there for four winters—four years. I paid no rent. Different things like that influenced me.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, did you have a better idea of what you wanted to do in the future? Or what were you concentrating on?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, I didn't know exactly what I wanted to do. I hadn't worked out my own style at all. And I think when the artist first gets out of art school he doesn't know what he's going to do, what he's going to be able to do. Possibly if I stayed on in Indianapolis I might have gotten into teaching. But they reorganized the whole school shortly after I left, and that maybe wouldn't have happened either. Mr. Forsyth was out and he retired and they got some new young instructor from Yale who—teaching mural painting. During the '30s that was a popular thing. Doing WPA murals and so forth. That's another thing that happened to me. I mean I was able to get on the Art Project.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, you were. About when was that?

GEORGE D. YATER: That was in 1936. So that helped me quite a bit.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What did you do on the Art Project? Was that down here in Provincetown?

GEORGE D. YATER: That was in Provincetown, yeah. Well, I was on—I think I only stayed on about six or eight weeks at first. Because they laid off all the artists who weren't married. I wasn't married at that time. So I didn't stay on. Then later though they relaxed the rules and I was able to get back on for about another year or possibly two years. At first though the pay was much better. We were getting about \$50 a week I think.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Wow, that was great, a lot more than—

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, that was wonderful at that time. But then later they cut it down to about \$17.50 I think. And that still was good.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And what did you have to do to get that money?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, nothing, just show up every week.

ROBERT F. BROWN: To do what?

GEORGE D. YATER: They just mailed the check.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, I see. But did you have to show some official work that you'd done?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, we had a supervisor who would come around about once a month maybe and check on what you're working on. But then the rules were quite relaxed and there was nothing definite that you had to turn in, you'd just do whatever you wanted to.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What were you doing then? What kind of subjects? Or what painting?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, I just turned in my usual work. I mean some oils or watercolors.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yes. What subjects were you working on?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, it would be Provincetown subjects. Landscape. And—well, practically all landscape. Landscape. Maybe some still life.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, at this time you were already—were you already beginning to exhibit? You'd exhibited in Indiana.

GEORGE D. YATER: Yes. Well, I started out about 1930 I guess. And I'd exhibited in the art association first I believe about 1934.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was that an important event for you when you showed at the art association? Was there any—

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, they had a jury and I always found a really strict jury in Provincetown. More so than some other places. But no, I had exhibited quite a few places. In fact I think I got in the National Academy somewhere along that line about that same time.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you?

GEORGE D. YATER: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did these things mean a lot to you when you got in a show at that time?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, they did, yeah. It was quite disappointing being rejected because the effort of getting a picture ready, then framing it, and so forth. Possibly shipping it. But I had pretty good luck exhibiting things.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, you had shows in the '30s at the Babcock Galleries in New York.

GEORGE D. YATER: Yeah, that's right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Now had they sought you out? Or did you go to them?

GEORGE D. YATER: No, I went to New York and took my work to quite a few galleries. I went to the Frank Rehn Gallery and—

ROBERT F. BROWN: What did they say?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, Mr. Rehn was alive then. He said, "Well, a man named Edward Hopper came in here a few years ago with stuff just about like this." And they took him on. So he said he didn't think they could use me.

But he said not to be discouraged. That's the way it worked, that Hopper had just shown up, and they did take him. So I went to other—well, at that time I think Burchfield was having a show at the Rehn Gallery. So I met Burchfield and talked to him [inaudible] but—

ROBERT F. BROWN: What did he have to say? Any advice to you?

GEORGE D. YATER: Not too much. In fact I didn't get to talk to him too much. Some newspapermen were there. And Rehn didn't want to leave Burchfield alone with the critics. So he had to rush out [laughs] and get him so I didn't get too much advice from either one. But they were encouraging. I think Burchfield looked at my paintings and thought they were pretty good. So after that I kept going round to other galleries and finally the Babcock registered in the thing. They said they'd like to give me a show.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Who was there? Who was the man at Babcock?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, Mr. Babcock was there at that time. He died shortly after. But Carmine Dalesio was the director of the gallery.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you happy with having your things with them? Did it work out well?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, I don't know, I was so new at the game. I didn't know anything about it. And they gave me the show. Expenses weren't too much, but for me at the time it seemed quite expensive. I had to get frames and glass. Didn't do too much advertising. But they didn't sell any of my work. So I had a show in 1936 and later in 1939 I had another show. And there were no sales that time either.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Would they keep some of your work on hand at the gallery?

GEORGE D. YATER: They would. And they were very good about keeping it and taking it to shows in the city. If I had some show that I wanted to enter pictures in, I could write them and they would take it over for me. So they were really very helpful. I think it's a mistake that I made to drop out of the Babcock gallery. Since they didn't sell any of that second show I thought well, they didn't see much point in this, I might as well just forget it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: From some of the other exhibitions, were you selling from them?

GEORGE D. YATER: No. I never sold too many things. Very few from exhibits. Later on in the Provincetown gallery when I was director there I usually sold one or two during the summer of my own things. But—

ROBERT F. BROWN: The art association gallery.

GEORGE D. YATER: Yeah, at the art association.

ROBERT F. BROWN: In Provincetown at this time, the '30s, at that time, was there quite a bit of tension between the Modernists and the more traditional painters?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, that was a time when they had a break. The moderns wanted more space and more attention. And of course I didn't take part in any of it. I didn't know too much about it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Who were some of the leaders of the groups?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, Ross Moffett and Fritz Pfeiffer and possibly Karl Knaths, few—and the L'Engles, a few people like that considered themselves modern. And actually I couldn't tell much difference. Sometimes the conservative painters looked more modern to me than the moderns.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What do you think they were trying to say, the modern people?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, they just—something like women's lib. They just felt that they weren't getting a square deal. And they wanted more attention. One year they divided the gallery in a straight line down the middle. They put moderns on one side and the conservatives on the other. That didn't look too good. But they wanted to try it. There's always been a lot of hassles in the art association. There always will be I guess.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you ever get involved very much in them because you've been a director?

GEORGE D. YATER: No, I always tried to take a more neutral position. When I worked as director I tried, thought it was my job to give everybody a fair chance.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You were director from 1947 to '61.

GEORGE D. YATER: Yeah, about 15 years.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And of course you had your own work in there, you mentioned.

GEORGE D. YATER: Yeah, I usually exhibited.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But as director, you think you had something of an ability to mollify? To get people to work together?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, that's what the job should be. I guess. But I did the best I could. I don't know whether I was too successful or not.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Who were some of the major artists that you worked with as director that possibly—well, called a lot of attention to the association?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, yeah, we had a lot. I mean of course Ross Moffett and Dickinson are very good painters. John Whorf and Karl Knaths. Then later Hans Hofmann came along after World War II and his class is very successful. And then there was Morris Davidson.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did Hofmann fit in pretty well here?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, no. He stayed pretty much to himself. Although he had a big class. And many of his students were exhibiting in the art association. But I always liked him. I mean he was—I saw him quite often during the summer. And we always got along very well.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was he a very ebullient man?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, he had a very strong accent. He was a little hard to talk to. But he was quite a vital character I would say. Was a strong man and forceful. And I don't know what his teaching was. But his students seemed to like him. And I later photographed a lot of his work. And he would usually help me himself. These canvases were quite heavy, big. And he was in his 70s, almost 80 then I guess. But he would help me carry these big canvases around. I always got along all right with him.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What about Ross Moffett? What was he like if you can remember?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, yeah. Moffett probably helped me at the job more than anyone else. He was an entirely different character. More reticent. But he was a very intelligent man. And very honest. And I found I could work very well with him. I guess Ross was a little biased. He favored the modern group. Although his work later looked quite conservative.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Do you mean he favored people like Hans Hofmann or Karl Knaths?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, no, it'd be more Fritz Pfeiffer and the L'Engles. Personal friends of his who had been in this modern movement.

ROBERT F. BROWN: The '20s and '30s.

GEORGE D. YATER: Yeah, before.

ROBERT F. BROWN: American, yeah.

GEORGE D. YATER: So we all have our weaknesses.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You began photography professionally since about 1938.

GEORGE D. YATER: Somewhere about—yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: How did you get into that? Had you been taking photographs for some time before that?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, I started around then or 1936 maybe. I got a pretty good camera. The original idea was to photograph my own work. And then I started doing that, and then other people asked me to take their things. And I just gradually got into it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you like it?

GEORGE D. YATER: Pretty well, yeah. Then during World War II I worked in a war plant as a photographer.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Down in Connecticut. So you became pretty expert fairly pretty fast.

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, I don't know. I worked at it five or six years I guess. One time I had a miniature

camera. Contact 35-millimeter. And then I found out there wasn't—the film wasn't so good at that time. And I couldn't get very good results with it. So then I got a Speed Graphic. And my work improved immediately. [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: So most of your work was in copying paintings [inaudible].

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, I took newspaper pictures too. I did some for the Cape papers before I went down to Connecticut. Then in the war plant I worked on a plant newspaper. And also worked for the engineering department, technical photographs.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So in your photography, you've worked very exactly with technical precision.

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, at times. Well, you set up a tripod. You'd take—try to get the thing as sharp as possible. Which is similar to copying a painting. Usually use a tripod.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Have you exhibited your photographs?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, they've been published in some magazines or papers. But no, I haven't been out in a photo gallery.

ROBERT F. BROWN: When did you get this idea in the '50s of photographs of artists and other people in Provincetown?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, that was inspired by Carl Murchison principally. Murchison at the time had just about completed a collection of Provincetown painters.

ROBERT F. BROWN: He lived down here quite a while, Murchison?

GEORGE D. YATER: Yes, he came here and he was a psychiatrist. And he published a different—I don't know what they call them. Quarterlies or reports in his field. He was sort of editor. And I guess a lot of professors have to write stories and have to have them published. And he would do that. And it turned into quite a good business, so he retired to Provincetown. But he'd still conduct his work from there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Where was his practice? In New York?

GEORGE D. YATER: No, he had been a college professor in Worcester, Mass. I believe. And I think he owned part of a printing plant up there too. They printed his things.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So he was well-to-do.

GEORGE D. YATER: Yes. And he came down to Provincetown. And I guess as a psychiatrist or psychologist he became interested in Provincetown artists. And he decided to get this collection together. He didn't pay too much for the pictures either. He was very smart in that way. All the artists wanted to get in the collection so they—

ROBERT F. BROWN: When did he start collecting? Was this in the 1940s?

GEORGE D. YATER: Probably would be, yeah. Because I think by 1955 he'd pretty well finished with what he wanted. Anyway, to get back to the photographs. He suggested that I take photographs of the artists whose paintings he had in his collection. So that seemed like a good idea. And supposedly he intended to write a book on the Provincetown artists. And explained to me that in preparation he was going to read a couple hundred books on art. And then he was going to write this character study of all these Provincetown artists. And the photograph would be used for illustration. So I took most of these during the wintertime. Or a lot of them. And I was glad to do that at that time.

ROBERT F. BROWN: This was when? The middle 1950s?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, I'd say earlier than that. Mostly the 1950s probably. I would take 10 of them, take maybe a dozen or so, each winter.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you trying to express anything through the photographs?

GEORGE D. YATER: No. I was just trying to take a straight photograph. Because I usually got the artist in the studio or with some of their work possibly. And I happened to know most of the artists pretty well anyway. Made it a little bit easier for me, I think.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You were having exhibitions through the '40s and into the '50s. I know that you had several

exhibitions in Boston at the Stuart Galleries, at the Grace Horne Gallery. Were you associated with the Grace Horne Gallery for a time? You had a one-man show there in '41.

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, I just had one show there and then I think they folded after that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you come to the attention of collectors in Boston?

GEORGE D. YATER: No, I don't believe I've sold very many in Boston.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What were you showing by the '40s? What kind of paintings were you doing?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, I never sold anywhere near as many as I wanted to sell.

ROBERT F. BROWN: No, what kind were you showing? What were you painting by the '40s? What subjects?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, I stuck pretty much to the Cape Cod theme. The Provincetown or Cape Cod paintings.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were these mainly oils?

GEORGE D. YATER: Oils and watercolors.

ROBERT F. BROWN: When you're painting are you usually not thinking of style or technique? Are you usually just observing and putting down what you get out of what you look at? Describe what you think goes through you when you're painting.

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, I don't know whether—well, I think you change as you go along. For many years I didn't think my work was good enough and I'd try and improve it. And probably went a little overboard on the technical side.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh. You were trying to refine or perfect the technique—

GEORGE D. YATER: Yeah, I probably worked quite a few years too long on that. But now I try to paint more directly. And I don't try to describe things quite as much. I try to leave a little more to the imagination.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Something of this mystery that Forsyth talked about?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, that's it. I'm trying to go back to some of that earlier stuff. Although that's what I mean, it's hard to say just why or how you do something. Because you do have these influences. And then you're influenced probably by other artists' work. People you admire. I think that my work changed a little when I went to the Virgin Islands though.

ROBERT F. BROWN: When was that?

GEORGE D. YATER: That would be about 1961. I spent the greater part of the next 10 years there. And the color there was very interesting. Bright. And things were—well, sometimes they'd be bright but yet they were weathered too. And well, it's a whole new place for me. New landscape. And I seemed to be a little released a little more there. I don't know. I just started working a little freer. That's more the way I'm working today.

ROBERT F. BROWN: This hadn't occurred earlier. In the '40s you'd been in Florida.

GEORGE D. YATER: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But it wasn't till this that you—

GEORGE D. YATER: I think my work changed when I got to the Virgin Islands.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you more relaxed down there you think?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, I don't know. I worked pretty hard down there. First two years I was there I worked part-time as an architectural draftsman and then I got into the sign business on my own, and I was painting a lot of signs. Painted a lot of pictures too.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you were busy.

GEORGE D. YATER: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you think it was the different light and color?

GEORGE D. YATER: Yeah, the light is very—

ROBERT F. BROWN: You think that made your paintings freer?

GEORGE D. YATER: The light is very clear. Well, I can't say just what it was. Suddenly I didn't try to paint the way I had before. Got off on a little different tangent.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, now where are you at in your painting? Is it still oils and watercolors, right?

GEORGE D. YATER: Yeah. Well, I'm back in the Cape Cod thing here again. But a couple winters ago I went to Key West, and I enjoyed that. I did a little different type of watercolor there. Color there is very bright. Similar to the Virgin Islands. And in a much higher key than on the Cape here. So I don't know. Partly a matter of where I go. Whatever the conditions are.

ROBERT F. BROWN: The galleries, you've hopped around different galleries over the years. And the end of the '50s, '59 you were in an exhibit. The Shore Studios Gallery in Provincetown. Was that an important gallery in its day down in Provincetown?

GEORGE D. YATER: Yes, it was. That was operated by Don Witherstine, who had been a director of the art association. And he was a super salesman. And he did sell a lot of pictures in Provincetown.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What would he do? He was able to collar a person and—

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, I don't know. He got to people just at the right moment. It was right after World War II, 1946. And one summer at the art association he was able to sell \$10,000 worth of paintings. Which was the most they'd ever sold up to that time. And that's why a lot of artists are in Provincetown. They came down specially to get in on the sales.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Get the benefit of his—

GEORGE D. YATER: Yeah. But that's changed a little bit now. I don't know. I don't think the sales are as great.

ROBERT F. BROWN: A lot of artists have outside outlets, don't they? Other outlets.

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, painting is a pretty difficult business. Many artists teach. And most of them I know have to do something else. Other than just painting things.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You do, don't you?

GEORGE D. YATER: Yes. I still do. I still paint a few signs and take photographs.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, you have taught now and again, now and then, haven't you?

GEORGE D. YATER: Some. Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Do you enjoy teaching?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, I think I started too late in life as a teacher. Possibly if I'd gotten into it early I might have liked it better. Places I have taught though, I wasn't fortunate enough to have any young students. They're more middle-aged students, housewives, or people of that type, and—

ROBERT F. BROWN: What's the problem with them?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, it just is not as stimulating to teach [inaudible] as some serious art students might be. It's a way of making a living, but it's not too satisfying to teach [inaudible].

ROBERT F. BROWN: You were married when, in the '30s? You had a family to support.

GEORGE D. YATER: About 1938, yeah. I have a son 32 years old.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yes. To support your family and all would you—you'd rather not have gone into teaching? You chose not to do that [inaudible].

GEORGE D. YATER: I've always worked, anything I could find. And my wife has worked quite a bit too.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was she in art?

GEORGE D. YATER: Yes, she studied in Henry Hensche's class one summer. And I met my wife in Provincetown.

Her family rented a house right next door to my studio. So that made it convenient. And that was in 1932. And we weren't married for several years after that, not till '38.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were her family—thought it was okay for her to marry a painter?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, they didn't approve too much. I guess they didn't object too much either.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you brought up your children, and your family were always then closely associated with the Provincetown artists.

GEORGE D. YATER: Yes. They spent all their early life there. And they went to Provincetown schools. My son graduated from Provincetown High. Our daughter graduated from school down in the Virgin Islands. It was a private Episcopal school. And then she was awarded a scholarship to the Rhode Island School of Design. So they grew up in the studio. In fact when the kids were little we lived in the studio.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, you did.

GEORGE D. YATER: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: That was your house and—

GEORGE D. YATER: Yeah, house and studio.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did that work out pretty well for your working, painting?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, not too well. As they get older. But they were always encouraged to go ahead and do a little work if they wanted to. In fact our son—we thought he was more of an artist than our daughter when he was little. But he suddenly stopped, gave up his career. He still has some art ability. He did some very interesting watercolors as a kid. When I worked in the war plant in Connecticut he used to paint all day long. He'd get up and just paint all day.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, how about you? Are you now painting pretty steadily?

GEORGE D. YATER: No. I paint as much as I can.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You have an exhibition coming up in Wellfleet, right?

GEORGE D. YATER: Yeah, I hope to have a show next month. But I have a few paintings on hand that I haven't sold.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Are you trying—

GEORGE D. YATER: I have some new ones going up in that show.

ROBERT F. BROWN: In the future are you going to be trying to place your paintings in exhibitions?

GEORGE D. YATER: Yes, I suppose I should change my approach a little. But—

ROBERT F. BROWN: What is your approach?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, I mean to exhibiting and sales and so forth. But I probably won't.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You mean you don't go out and search out markets.

GEORGE D. YATER: No, I'm not a very aggressive salesman. So far I haven't been discovered by any other.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What do you think in the future you'll be doing? In terms of what you'll be painting?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, I think each artist hopes that his work will improve. Do something better.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Do you feel satisfied when you've finished a painting now?

GEORGE D. YATER: No, not especially. Because sometimes the ones you think are the best when you finish them later turn out to be real dogs or something. I try. I do the best I can on each painting. But some are better than others. The effort is the same I think. But just once in a while you do something that's a little better.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What shortcomings do you see in some of your paintings now?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, I don't know. It's just more just a general look. I mean it's hard to explain it. I think Hawthorne said it. It's a look that you recognize when you see it, but you don't know exactly what it is.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What do you think on the other hand when you see a painting of yours that you think is good? What do you think there is in it that makes it good as far as you're concerned?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, I never worry about it too much once they're finished. Then you're through with it. You just hope that someone will see it and like it and possibly buy it. Some of the things you'd like to see in a museum.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So it's important to you that other people see them and like them.

GEORGE D. YATER: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. No, I don't think many artists do the work just for themselves alone. Possibly a few. But I think most artists want some recognition.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What do you think—what are you trying to express in your work?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, I don't think about that part too much either. I just see something, I get an idea. And I try to do it, try to carry it out. But I don't have any definite message I try to put across.

ROBERT F. BROWN: If you see something—you were talking about the lilacs down here that you were going to work on again. What are you trying to do with that subject?

GEORGE D. YATER: Well, I usually have seen it in a certain way. A way that I think would make a good picture. And then I try to keep that in mind. And work on that one aspect. Project that thing and refine it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: In the case of the lilacs what is it you're trying—

GEORGE D. YATER: Actually I think you're probably creating something then. You're not just painting lilacs. You see something in it. It's an abstraction.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You're refining—that's right.

GEORGE D. YATER: I think painting is a difficult subject to talk about really. It's maybe more difficult to do a good painting.

[END OF INTERVIEW]