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Oral history interview with Mervin Jules, 1968
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Mervin Jules on August 27, 1968. The interview took place in Provincetown, and was conducted by Dorothy Seckler for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art Oral History Program.

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

DOROTHY SECKLER: This is Dorothy Seckler interviewing Mervin Jules in Provincetown on August 27, 1968. Mervin, I know you've just returned from a very important trip to Japan and I'd like to have you in your own words put on the record the significance of the trip, how you happened to take it, and something about the experiences there that would affect you as an artist.

MERVIN JULES: I, as you know, have been doing wood blocks for quite some time. Being a woodcut artist one is continually familiar with everything that is done in this medium throughout the world. The one group of artists who I feel has done the most creative work in terms of the techniques they've invented and the concepts that they've dealt with were the Japanese. I wanted to go to Japan to see the artists, interview them, watch them work, things of that kind.

The four colleges—I'm at Smith College—has an Asian/African study program that is financed by the Ford Foundation. They've never given a grant to an artist. Most of the grants are for historical study, economic study, language study, things of that nature. But I thought that if I applied and received a grant I could then afford to go for a long or a protracted amount of time and do the research I was interested in. I applied and received a grant to spend two and a half months in Japan. Most of it was spent in Tokyo because about 80 percent of the artists who are doing graphics really live in Tokyo. They live there either because their outlets are predominantly there or because the cultural life in Japan centers in Tokyo, just the way cultural life in the United States tends to center in New York.

I had a number of letters of introduction to artists and was instrumental last summer in bringing a Japanese woodcut artist to Provincetown to give a lecture demonstration, a man by the name of Yoshida, whose father was a fairly well-known Japanese woodcut artist in the more traditional manner and whose brother runs the workshop for the artists' graphic society. Through his connections and that of a Japanese artist teaching at Sarah Lawrence by the name of Fuchima I had a number of introductions and had access to the studios of a number of artists.

I went there. I'd been invited to stay at the International House of Japan, which is a kind of center for scholars from all over the world: Israel sociologists, musicologists from the United States. Lee. I guess her name is—Sarah knows—Yinglin [ph.] And along with Chinese and Japanese scholars as well. This was a centrally located headquarters and they do a number of services for you, mailing things and making appointments and translating and taking care of all the mechanics that you're unable to take care of yourself. Unfortunately, I did not have the language and had to find an interpreter for most of my visits. Few of the Japanese artists speak English. A number have been to this country. One or two speak French, but the large majority of them only have Japanese. I was fortunate in finding a Chinese girl who was excellent for my purposes and we then proceeded to make appointments, visit artists, talk to them about their attitudes in terms of the woodcut, and in a number of instances actually watched them work. They printed for me and showed me the blocks and explained their technique at that time.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How would you define the principal changes in technique and outlook of the generation today as contrasted with that of the Japanese printmakers that we are most familiar with which had the most dominant influence on Western art?

MERVIN JULES: To begin with, you sense in contemporary Japanese woodcut a continuation of a very rich tradition. They're thoroughly familiar and some of them have been trained in the traditional method of working. The basic difference is that most of these men print their own blocks, where if you remember the traditional work was commissioned and printed by craftsmen who were glorified publishers. The present generation work differently to the extent that they usually cut into plywood and yet their printing technique in terms of using the water-based paint and moistened rice paper—rice paper really is a misnomer; it's made of mulberry, handmade papers—relate to the old tradition. They use similar tools for cutting. They use the same method for registering. And they have elaborated, naturally, in their own experimental way, somewhat influenced mainly by an

experimental approach, I would say, that is consistent with the contemporary attitude towards the exploration and elaboration of technique. But still you sense this traditional attitude.

Some of them do subject matter which is simplification or abstracting but with easily identifiable symbols. Others, of course, have gone completely non-objective. They have exploited embossing techniques which were present during the Edo Period in a very new way. And a few—Yoshida, the brother of the man who was here in Provincetown last summer—has even combined the woodcut with lithography. And some of them are experimenting using intaglio method but applying the color to the wood with a technique.

I did for my own record acquire examples of everybody I met and so that I have a collection maybe around 25, 28 prints. I interviewed or visited about 18 different artists. There were only two who I'd hoped to see who they were out of the country so I was unable to. And, of course, I met a few who I wasn't aware of, mainly younger people who were doing quite exciting work. I'll show some of them to you because I think you'll be interested in seeing them.

The two and a half months went by very rapidly, most of the time spent in Tokyo. But you can't be in Japan without going to Kyoto and Nara and other sites to see architecture, gardens, temples, things of that nature. So I took a few holidays, brief holidays, spent 10 days in Kyoto and just more or less sightseeing, taking photographs, trying to see galleries, et cetera.

The Japanese artists who I was interested in were mainly the woodcut artists. All of them, with the exception of Mitsufune, solely did woodcuts or a few watercolors, frequently sketches which they use as the basis for their graphics. Mitsufune is a sculptor and is known in Japan as much for his sculpture as for his woodcuts, because his sculpture is large. I guess we know his woodcuts only. They're easy to transport.

The artists are all interested, I suspect primarily because there isn't what you might call a native group who collect art in Japan, in getting outside contacts. They're always sending their work to exhibitions or exchanging it with other graphic institutions. And we had an exchange, the American Society of Graphic Artists had an exchange with the equivalent Japanese group. Ours was shown there in a large department store, and department stores all run pretty elaborate art programs. The largest ones may have two or as many as three galleries and there's as much distinction in showing in a department store as there is in a private gallery. Actually there are only two galleries that I know of who handle only graphics in Tokyo and there are two in Kyoto.

The artists there do not have any exclusive arrangements with a particular gallery. Their work is distributed wherever there's a possible outlet. So you find in department stores or in galleries that handle both prints and paintings or in galleries that handle only graphics every artist that you're trying to find, trying to see the work of. The paintings I saw were shows of organizations. The organizations rent, in the case of Tokyo there's a huge exhibition area called Ueno in Ueno Park where almost a thousand paintings can be shown and each artist usually has space for two or sometimes three paintings.

DOROTHY SECKLER: An outdoor show?

MERVIN JULES: No, it's an indoor show and they're hung sometimes one above another and it's a madhouse. And you see reflected in this every style imaginable: traditional, international, the latest thing that comes over in the magazines. I saw exhibitions of Pop, Op, Funk, everything you can imagine. The only thing I didn't see, and I spoke to a sculptor who was interested in doing junk sculpture, was some junk sculpture. Amusingly enough, there isn't any junk in Japan. Everything is used or saved for some occasion. So the only way he acquired or accumulated enough material for him to do pretty small things was by haunting the military camp dump where great waste, of course, occurs, and he was able to find rusty pieces of metal to incorporate it in his own work.

DOROTHY SECKLER: A commentary on the culture.

MERVIN JULES: Japan, we think of Japan as being very Westernized and there are all evidences of it: the traffic, the pollution of the air, the noise, rock and roll, evidences of small hippie groups, things of that nature. But you sense the tradition when you talk to some of the youngsters whom you talk to, people at colleges. Very, very strongly felt no matter where you go. I had two exhibitions there, one in the Franmail [ph.] Gallery and the other in the American Club, and lectured at the Japan University and a couple of other places. So that experience was very rewarding.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What kind of work of yours? Was it recent wood or recent graphic work?

MERVIN JULES: Just the graphic work, things that I was able to roll up and carry under my arm and have mounted there.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What kind of a reaction did you get to it? Kind of was it other than a polite one?

MERVIN JULES: There seemed to be more than just a polite reaction, one of the reasons being that my traditional method of working is to use an oil paint and not as transparently use as the watercolor pigment that is used in Japanese prints. Therefore, the colors are much more brilliant. The pigment rests on top of the paper's surface rather than being absorbed in. And there was great interest in that. My work has a lot of linear quality. Black line is very heavily employed. And although the black line is used in traditional Japanese methods it's a subordinate factor, and that seemed to interest a number of the artists. There always is, of course, that polite quality which every visitor experiences and you never truly know to what extent happens. But there were questions by a number of artists of how I worked and why I worked the way I do.

The other thing that was strange to them is the method of distribution. Very few of them were familiar with the way things are handled by galleries here. No one does an edition for a particular outlet, for instance. And when I proposed it, as I had a commission from the Ferdinand Roten Gallery to buy works of Japanese artists, and approached them with the idea of doing an exclusive edition for the Roten Gallery, this was a completely foreign notion and I had difficulty even getting the idea across.

The other thing they don't do, and this might be illustrated by one instance but it was repeated with almost every artist. As a representative of the Roten Gallery I was commissioned to buy a cross-section of the work of any particular artist I was interested in and thought they might be interested in, the idea being that I would send the work and they in turn might reorder in depth from the cross-section of material I sent and establish a direct contact with the artist so that in the future they'll order directly from him. In the case of a man like Mitsufune I visited him, selected about 40 examples, different examples, and ordered them. Some of them contained maybe as many as 20 colors. They all had to be printed to that order. None of the artists make a complete edition. They'll indicate, and they keep careful records of the size of the edition that they intend printing. But they'll print up maybe two or three, four at the most, and wait until those are disposed of before they'll continue the edition if they want it limited by 50. When you go in what you see is samples, which they will then print to order. So that the delivery of, say, 40 prints as happened in this one instance, sometimes was postponed a month or six weeks by the time they had a chance to print them up.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mervin, now that you've been back and had a little time to digest the experience how would you or is there any way in which the concepts encountered there would affect your own graphic work or your total work?

MERVIN JULES: Well, I suspect that if there are any ideas that percolate through it will be in an influence in the graphic work. I brought back tools, paper, books of instructions, examples to study and things of that kind. Things affect me slowly. So that I've attempted one thing where a great deal of embossing technique was used and I didn't find it particularly satisfactory in terms of my own work but I think it may have been the thing I was doing which didn't lend itself to that particular technique. I would need a great deal of practice to make their printing technique my own and create my own way of thinking in those terms. But I'm sure it will have some long-term effect. It inevitably will. I'm not the kind of artist that makes sketches at the place because I've always felt when I've done that that you respond to pretty superficial things. And even a two and a half month stay doesn't give you the insight, doesn't give me the insight that I feel one should have in order to try to express the qualities that one experiences at all times.

I went from Japan—it was a tremendously rich experience. I had seen a great deal and got to know quite a number of people. And proceeded from there to Hong Kong, to Singapore to visit some friends, and subsequently to India. I spent about five and a half weeks in India. The period in India was just moving from monument to monument. I feel that that's the one place I'd like to go back to. It's such a big place and there's so many things to see. I didn't get to Kashmir or Nepal or other places that intrigue me. There was the pressure of time and I wanted to see some things in [inaudible] and other places. And I hope some day to be able to return.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You did have a very [inaudible] in your work. What affected you directly? I mean, you did tell me a good bit about Indian sculpture and so forth [inaudible] what were the surprises or the things that were most [inaudible]?

MERVIN JULES: One thing about sculpture and architecture in all of these places is the fantastic difference in scale from what you imagine. On my way to India I stopped in Cambodia to see Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom. Everything in Japan is on a pretty modest scale. In Kyoto the temples are relatively small and you don't have the kind of monumentality that you experience in Cambodia in the temples that are sort of found in the jungle, as it were. The monuments in India are also smaller than the Cambodian but they're beautifully preserved, although the present upkeep isn't as lavish as you would expect or would hope for. I think that the thing that really impressed me most about India or was a new discovery were the rich textiles that you see. There is a textile museum in Ahmedabad that's owned, a private museum owned by a man by the name of Sarabhai. The Sarabhai family is a very important family there. They own a large textile mill and they have collected. And his sister is the curator of a fantastically magnificent museum with textiles going back to the 15th century. It becomes a source for their own inventiveness, their own design that they use in their factory. But it's an act of

love, what they have actually done.

In India even the saris, which are the common dress of the Indian women, vary from area to area. As far away as 100 miles you'll find a completely different color, color arrangement, weave, decorative motif, et cetera. And these are all a product of cottage industries where young boys actually do most of the weaving of saris. I visited some of these weaving areas and two would be uniform looms and you might have as many as three looms but not productive activity.

There's a lot of modern building going on in India. In Ahmedabad, for instance, they have the Mill Owners' Association, the Corbusier Building, the museum, Corbusier Building. I stayed in the guest house, which was done by Corbusier. There's a large managerial institute being designed by, being built but designed by Louis Kahn. And Sarabhai is behind all of this. He's a very [inaudible] man, has started a new design center. I'm visiting a friend of mine [inaudible] maybe you'd remember him because of the project at one time, who was responsible for designing, organizing the design center. But there's a design institute. He's behind the school of architecture. He's behind the managerial institute. It's the family that's supporting all of these activities as a result of his interest. And I think he is an architect, was trained as an architect before he was forced to take over his father's business when his father died. And the design institute he has designed; he and his sister have designed. They're marvelous people. And a great deal of activity of that kind occurs in this one area and his influence is felt out and around.

Doshi, I think that's how you pronounce it, is the Indian architect who supervised the building or the construction of the Corbusier Building in Ahmedabad. He himself is doing some remarkable things in reinforced concrete. I saw—it wasn't finished at the time I was there but a large theater that he had constructed with a huge mural being done in the interior, a quite interesting textured mural. The painting in India was the major disappointment. It seemed very dull, very provincial.

DOROTHY SECKLER: The traditional painting?

MERVIN JULES: No, the contemporary painting. You don't see a lot of traditional paintings, a lot of traditional [inaudible] this museum is particularly rich in bronzes. I think it probably has the finest collection of bronzes that I saw. The New Delhi museum, of course, is extraordinary. But you don't see much painting there. The tradition of the miniature painting is very rich and very beautiful, which I don't think is continuing now in any contemporary sense. The few artists that I did meet, I met some artists in Bombay and I saw some of their work, seemed that they were sort of out of the current swing of things to a large extent. They're very deprived in a sense. They aren't, they don't have an opportunity to see very much. There's no Western art in any museums to speak of. This is very different from Japan, where there's a great deal of Western art. There's a lot of commerce in terms of traveling exhibitions and things of that kind. And I think in Japan also many of the artists travel much more than you would find in India.

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Inaudible] I am rather anxious that we should spend part of our time today on getting back to you, so I think I'll settle for that unless there's something further you'd like to say about anything that happened in India as far as it affects your own work or thinking as an artist.

MERVIN JULES: No. I was a typical tourist, just sticking my nose into—

DOROTHY SECKLER: One would expect that on a first acquaintance with a country as vast as India.

MERVIN JULES: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It would be rather pat to come back and say, "Now I have an Indian style." Well, I'd like to then go back to your own beginnings as a, talk to your own childhood, which I believe was in Baltimore, wasn't it?

MERVIN JULES: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: As mine was too. And I think, you know, I think in your case there would be many things that happened when you were a young boy that affected your attitudes that were to become important in your art. I wondered if you'd like to record anything about, you know, the environment, your family, your feeling as a child of certain things you may remember as having perhaps affected your becoming an artist.

MERVIN JULES: Well, I guess just for the document, I was born March 21, 1912 and for a number of periods, I mean a number of years there wasn't much that you remember, obviously. I had polio when I was three and I'm sure that, to a large extent, had a profound effect, although it can't be necessarily traced to a particular thing. But it reduced my activity to a large extent and I had certain difficulties in terms of maneuverability, so that I went to a hospital school as a result of operations that were had, and then eventually to a public school. The first creative experience came with my studying the cello. I studied at the Peabody with Bart Words, who eventually

retired here in Provincetown. I don't know if you knew him.

DOROTHY SECKLER: No.

MERVIN JULES: And developed a great love of music. Part of that, I suspect, as a result of an aunt of mine who I liked very much who sang in the chorus of the Baltimore Opera Company and I was exposed to rehearsals and things of that nature. And played the cello up to the time I must have been around 13 or 14 pretty diligently. Then I became interested in the idea of teaching eventually, and one of the things that intrigued me was the notion of teaching art. I got a scholarship to the Maryland Institute, which is the School of Fine and Applied Arts in Baltimore, for a four-year scholarship, with the idea of training myself to teach. I hadn't done any drawing or painting before that that I can recall. But once you—I'd graduated from Baltimore City College and once I went to the Maryland Institute in order to teach they expose you to some studio work and I became intrigued with the idea. Then after about a year and a half with teaching training courses as well as painting, sculpture and design courses—

DOROTHY SECKLER: From whom did you study painting and sculpting?

MERVIN JULES: Well—

DOROTHY SECKLER: If it wasn't important—

MERVIN JULES: Leon Crowell [ph.] was a visiting critic there. Hans Schuler taught drawing. There was some woman who taught painting. I think that I didn't learn anything from the faculty at all. I learned a great deal, and I'm sure all of us do, from people like, well, Herman Merrill, who was a student there; Eddie Rosenfeld; Morris Lewis; Charles Shucker. A couple of people who were all fellow students and we'd go to museums together, we'd argue about art together. I know that my own education really began at the Phillips, the Phillips Gallery in Washington, because it was the kind of collection that I just fell in love with and practically lived in that little museum and studied all the works I could. And played games with myself about his offering me one painting and I would go and select the one painting in one room and then I'd go to another room and select the one painting. Then I'd go back and forth until I had selected the one work out of the collection that I was going to take home with me.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you finally select one, or just one—

MERVIN JULES: Oh, yes, but each time it was a different one.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What about that Goya of Saint Peter?

MERVIN JULES: I don't think I ever selected that. There were Daumiers, obviously, that intrigued me. There was a very interesting El Greco that intrigued me. And toward the end of my sort of learning process there were Braques that intrigued me. But as you grow different things interest you and other things sort of wander away and they become less and less important. There's a Renoir, a luncheon—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Boating.

MERVIN JULES: *Boating Party*, [1881] which is just exquisite. There were Van Goghs that were just exquisite. You think of all of the separate things. But I think the thing that had its most profound effect at that time, a large collection of Daumiers. He must have had 13 or 14, including one that's called *Revolt* or something of that nature. Very large. (The painting is actually *The Uprising*, painted in 1860.)

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm. A figure running through the streets with its hand upraised.

MERVIN JULES: Yes. And after all, this was a period when the social awareness was part and parcel of all our development and so the artist who seemed to most effectively embody this quality had a particular attraction, not only for myself but for many, many other artists at that time. The Maryland Institute provided an opportunity to work, or a place to meet fellow students, a place to argue about art and to examine one's own ideas. I was subsequently told by a vocational guidance person that they had there that I couldn't be, for the physical reasons I wouldn't be able to get a license to teach in the state or city system, and decided that I was so enamored of painting by then that I would continue my scholarship until the end.

They held a carrot in front of your nose by having a traveling fellowship given to the best student of each class. I remember trying desperately to win that. I came in second. A man by the name of George Pryor won it that year as a painter. I don't think he's ever painted since, but that's beside the point. As a matter of fact, about four years after that experience I determined to go and visit the people who had won that traveling scholarship for the past 10 years in order to find out what had become of them. And only one person is still actively painting. That's Charles Shucker. Bob Iglehart had won it in a different direction. But aside from that, most of them just

for some reason or other never continued their creative activity. They were undertakers, commercial artists, haberdashers, everything under the sun but painters.

Well, from there I went to the Art Students League for a year and studied with Thomas Benton, and in Benton's class also you learned a great deal from the people in the class. There was Pollock; Bruce Mitchell; Charles Pollock, Jack's brother; Emmanuel Kalegen [ph.], who was the monitor of the class; Whitney Darrow Jr.; Axel Horn; oh, a handful of others. And I had exactly the same kind of experience. We yakked art all the time. We worked very hard. Benton demanded that you produce a great deal of work and it's a habit that I was forced into and I'm glad for that.

I also became involved in art organizations at that time. There was considerable activity to form artists' unions to protect those artists who were on the project, the WPA project. The political activity was centered around the American Artists' Congress, which was an anti-war, anti-fascist artist organization. There were a number of exhibitions held at the time to focus on political issues. I remember the American Artists Congress had shows against war and fascism, had shows dealing with poor housing, things of that kind. Practically every respectable artist at that time was involved in one way or another.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Were you too young to have been actively a part of that or were you—

MERVIN JULES: No, I was very much a part of it at that time. I eventually went back to Baltimore. When you study with Benton you acquire a number of mannerisms that are very difficult to shuck, as it were. And it was obvious that to be oneself one had to work these things out, and I returned to Baltimore. I at one time, with a man named Bert Goodman, actually did a lot of preliminary work on Benton's paintings because he had the attitude, which was typical of what he felt the Renaissance artist did, of having apprentices work. He would do sketches and they would scale them up onto the panels and then he would indicate where areas of color were to go and they might paint in flat areas and then he'd work over that and make it his own. Bertram Goodman and I did some of that work in relation to a show that he was having at the Farrow [ph.] Gallery at the time.

Benton was interested in folk music and we frequently played together, he and his son. Tom's son played the guitar and we all played instruments of various kinds. So we saw a great deal of Rita, Benton's wife. Benton at that time, I'm sure you're aware, was kind of helping Pollock out. As a matter of fact, Pollock would stay summers with them in their home on the island. I visited Benton two years ago and in his living room he had about half a dozen of the early Pollocks that were left from the time that Jack was a visitor during the summer period.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That would be interesting to see.

MERVIN JULES: They were interesting to see. They were very Benton-esque, of course, as everybody who worked with Benton either had to be or just—the way you would get something out of the man was trying to follow his ideas. But they were somewhat alien to my way of thinking and therefore I returned to Baltimore with the idea of working out of it, and I spent about a year in Baltimore. Then I had an exhibition at the Municipal Art Society, which was a small organization, I think in 1937. That was my first show. Out of that Duncan Phillips bought a painting. That was the first painting that ever went into a public museum.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What was the name of the painting? What was it like?

MERVIN JULES: It was *Burlesque* [1936] and it was of the Gaiety Burlesque, a balcony scene. I subsequently decided to move to New York because Baltimore didn't seem to offer many opportunities for artists. I'm sorry, that painting was not bought out of that first show. I didn't sell anything out of the first show. That painting was bought out of an exhibition of Baltimore painters held in Washington, but it was bought that year. Duncan Phillips Gallery really is more or less known for its French paintings and some of the avant garde American paintings, but he constantly supported American artists. And during the Second World War he devoted the gallery to his collection of American art and everybody was surprised at the depth of his collection in this particular field. He was practically the sole supporter of Dove and of Carl Canops [ph.] and a couple of others.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Lee Gatch.

MERVIN JULES: Lee Gatch, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: He [inaudible] to him.

MERVIN JULES: Yes. So that it was amazing when we saw that exhibition how rich it was in American art of the turn of the century and the Ashcan School and other movements that we're so familiar with now. I went to New York in '37, had an exhibition at the Hudson Walker Gallery that year, which for me was very wonderful in terms of its reception, critical reception and the fact that he sold enough to support me to my next exhibition. And the friendship with Hudson Walker, of course, I cherish to this day. I see him all the time. I was represented in his gallery until he closed the gallery in 1940, and I've been with the ACA Gallery ever since.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's fine. I wanted to stop, however, and catch up a little bit with what your paintings were like in this period after you had sort of [inaudible] I gather, successfully fought off the Benton-esque rhythm and so on and what paintings did you do in terms of subject and what kind of coloring [inaudible] of the paint and so on.

MERVIN JULES: Well, I would say that I was kind of a social expressionist. I know there is no such school as that. Everybody thinks of these paintings as social realism but realism has a particular connotation. And my color was kind of an emotional color and the forms were exaggerated forms. They departed from reality to a large extent. They were all done from my imagination. I never used models. They were of things of a social content that disturbed me and related to the times. They were things that dealt with anti-war and anti-lynching. I remember there was a large exhibition on a theme of anti-lynching. It showed up at the Maryland Institute, of all places, and I went to see it there because there were a number of painters. Joe Jones. Tom Benton did a large painting. And I had done a painting of a prevented lynching. I think it was the only positive painting from that point of view in the exhibition.

They were figurative. They dealt with hunger, unemployment; they were anti the establishment. They were satirical in nature. I remember a lithograph I did at that time called *The Rugged Individualist* with a man reading a stock market tape. I did a number of graphics. I felt that this was a means of distributing my work to the people because it was an economic means of getting my work around, mainly lithographs. As a result of wanting color I eventually began doing things in silkscreen. And then it wasn't until I went to Smith and invited Seong Moy to teach there that I became familiar with the potential of the woodcut and began experimenting with the woodcut. Now I work primarily in this medium, although occasionally do other graphic black and white. As I said, the subject matter was essentially social. The color was emotional, embodied what I felt was an emotionalism.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I seem to remember one that I think it was from an earlier period that I liked very much. I think the title was *Mine Baseball* [1937].

MERVIN JULES: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And there the color was really somber but the [inaudible] of the paint is really beautiful.

MERVIN JULES: Well, I worked in tempera. This comes, of course, from the Benton influence. He was a tempera painter and we all learned the technique and you studied the artists who were tempera painters essentially. Of course, although then I just thought I was the first man to use oil but basically this painting is a tempera painting. You look at all the miniatures of the medieval period and these were the men who inspired you and excited you and I guess that was reflected in my own work at the time. I would spend time with Axel Horn in the area of East Moshank [ph.], Pennsylvania. That was the bootleg mine area. We went there because we felt that this was a segment of society that were the victim of a certain kind of economic dislodgment that had occurred. The whole landscape there consisted of tremendous shale plateaus, you know. These bootleg miners were men who were just doing surface mining on their own, building small tunnels and getting a meager living out of stealing coal. Everything was owned by companies anyway. And we made many sketches. We lived amongst them, went to the saloons that they occupied. And in the late afternoon they would play baseball on one of these shale plateaus and it was a very lively kind of thing and in the drabest man-made industrial landscape you ever saw. And I did a painting of that which was in one of my shows at the Hudson Walker Gallery. That painting was bought by Stefan C. Clark. I don't know where it is now.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It must be in a museum by now, I should think.

MERVIN JULES: Well, I imagine so. But where, I don't keep track of these.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, in that, of course, the figures we're seeing at a distance, as I recall. But I suppose that in many of your paintings there were much more close-up figures.

MERVIN JULES: Most of them were, where the actual faces and expression of hands were part of what I considered a means of conveying the ideas I had. They were very detailed. There was a certain amount of satirical nature. I remember a painting I did at that period of a, I call it *Birds of a Feather*. They're symbolic figures of a capitalist and religious leaders and various parasites on our society surrounding a tree which was a dead tree. I did many things of that kind. There were floods at that period which devastated large areas and I've done things on that. Some of the material was documented from newspaper accounts but a lot of it was actually seen and experienced, such as the time spent in the bootleg mining areas of Pennsylvania.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Looking back do you feel that there was a difference in the quality of the work that was done like this mining experience where you were really present and it was less ideological than really present in what you were seeing and feeling and the work that was conceived more as a, you know, in a more cerebral way because you had certain, it was in let's say more directly satirical work.

MERVIN JULES: I think it's difficult even with perspective of 20 years to look back on your own work and be that critical or that accurate in terms of—it's like looking at photographs of your children when they were young, never really seeing any fault. It's up to other people to recognize the distinction. I think one thing, though, that the color was pretty limited. I just didn't know as much as I think I know about color now. And the surface painting of tempera was not lush. It's a very lean medium. It requires detailed handling in terms of refinement of brush work, things. The technique itself imposes certain limitations on you. And I gradually began painting in oil and enjoyed the fatty quality of the oil, the ease with which one can manipulate colors and mix colors and blend forms and planes and things of that kind. So that today I work mainly in oil.

DOROTHY SECKLER: When did that change begin?

MERVIN JULES: That change I think began around, oh, in the early '40s. And then there was a period when I worked with encaustic a great deal, which is a rich, pigmented method again.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What prompted the change? Do you remember what you were thinking about or so on?

MERVIN JULES: I think that in, oh, I began teaching around then. I first taught at the Ethical Culture School in Fieldston and then I worked with the Museum of Modern Art under Victor D'Amico, the War Veterans Art Center and children's classes and things like that. And I became much more aware of having to know a great deal more in order to be able to convey this information. And eventually when I went to Smith College I developed courses, introductory courses, design courses that had a great emphasis on color and things like that. And in order to really teach it I experimented with a great deal of these, well, the Bauhaus notions and did a quantity of work to explore these ideas to be a better teacher. And this eventually, of course, influenced me.

And then there was the gradual changing of the total emphasis, if you will. The times changed. There wasn't the kind of depression that I had inherited, in a sense, and you became concerned with other values. I guess I would describe myself as a painter concerned with humanistic values at the present time. I don't see that they're fundamentally different from my early concern. I hope that they're a little bit richer and deeper in terms of the insights that I have. I don't think you can live without bringing some dimension into it. I look back on some of the early work and think that it's fairly, well, it was deeply felt but not as thought through as I would today like to have dealt with it. I thought of symbols at that time in a very different way than I think of symbols today. And I feel that I still would like to communicate directly and I use symbols as a means of communicating, but I use a symbol which may not have the same kind of communitive base, as it were, today as I did at that time.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mervin, in the years around the end of the '30s and particularly I guess through the '40s, after the war there was a sort of cataclysmic change in American painting. Did that affect you directly? Of course, your dependence on Europe to some extent changed and Americans sort of [inaudible] themselves and particularly, I suppose, the school of so-called Abstract Expressionism. I don't recall your having ever particularly identified yourself with that group. Did your withdrawal from it or the whole changing scene affect you very much?

MERVIN JULES: Well, I can't say that it affected me except in a somewhat negative way. I felt very strongly that some of these directions, some of these explorations, some of these highly personal, almost egotistical activities were forms of escape, in a sense. I used to go to the meetings at, I forgot, were they 8th Street?

DOROTHY SECKLER: The 8th Street Club?

MERVIN JULES: The 8th Street Club. I knew Rothko from the time that he showed me ACA many years ago with me. And I was familiar with the other people who went there, drank beer at the White Horse and listened with all my might. And yet there were certain fundamental truths that I felt were important for me, at least, and I just remained with them. The kind of thing that was being done was absolutely inconsistent with the kind of things that interested me and therefore there was relatively no exploration. I'm a deliberate person. That kind of spontaneity that you sense as being part of some of this movement I didn't feel any kinship to at all. The accidental, that kind of approach didn't have too much meaning. Some, like Jim Brooks, who was in the Benton class with me and—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh, really?

MERVIN JULES: Yes. And others I knew very well and watched their development. I don't think it did have that kind of effect.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And how about someone like Stuart Davis, how would you have felt about him?

MERVIN JULES: Well, I worked very closely with Stuart Davis. He at one time was very active in the League for American, oh, I've forgotten the name of the organization. It was against war and fascism. American Artists Congress. Against war and fascism. And I admired Stuart Davis. Of course, he certainly wasn't influenced either

by the Abstract Expressionists, I don't believe.

DOROTHY SECKLER: No. No.

[Audio break.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: With Mervin Jules, in Provincetown, on August 27, 1968. I think at the end of our last tape we were discussing your reaction to various movements and changes in American art during the period of the '40s and into the '50s and your basic feelings were keeping to your own conviction and not being swayed by the work around you that had some interest but which didn't seem to correspond to your convictions. Is there any—our tape had ended in the middle of a sentence there. Is there anything else that you would like to add to that? Did Mondrian or any of the abstract people have any effect on your work as you became involved?

MERVIN JULES: Well, I think that in the process of teaching one re-examines all of one's ideas and re-examines a lot of art that is around. And I became very involved in the study of Cézanne and Cézanne as a great structuralist in a sense. Excuse me.

[Audio break.]

MERVIN JULES: I think the evidence of Cézanne, the experience of Cézanne in terms of the structural factors which led naturally to Seurat and to eventually constructionists just deepened my understanding of certain plastic elements which I trust found reflection in my own productivity in a sense. I became intrigued with Latour, Caravaggio, a whole lot of men who I hadn't really looked at as thoroughly as I had looked at other artists. I know I re-examined Rembrandt again and found that he contained all the things that fascinated me at that moment, as he also contained the things that had fascinated me when I was much younger and was interested in other aspects as such. I became aware of the fact that this structural element was so much a part of the tradition of painting and even though it evolved through from Janto all the way through Picasso, Braque and others, that it was part and parcel of my own ideas or my own feelings about art as such.

There were other problems that presented themselves and I suspect that a lot of it came about as a result of trying just to be a better teacher, understanding more about the things that I was trying to make aware to students and it naturally had an influence. The thing that also I became aware of is that the men I admired always, I believe, stuck to their last in a sense. That a man like Cezanne went through death in his formative period, was influenced by Pissarro and then began developing way beyond Impressionism. And then in spite of the fact that he must have been exposed to many other movements, because he was in France when these other movements came into being, somehow or other developed within his own right, as it were, and continued. The same thing goes for a man like Braque, who I admire immensely, or Ruhl, who I admire immensely. That as students they certainly experimented until they matured as artists, and from that point on they got richer in a sense within the framework of their own personality and their own interests and understanding and development.

Now, I knew friends of mine who were, you might say, insecure or immature or I don't particularly want to call them anything, but who reflected every conceivable change, that they were Abstract Expressionists and they were Pop and they were Op and now they're doing things with shaped canvases and with textures applied and any number of things. These are men who have, you might say, gone through art reflecting every change that came along. These are very good painters. I'm talking about men who know their business thoroughly. And yet you feel that they're like a weathervane. They reflect the particular breeze that happens to be blowing at the time. I'm always puzzled by this, frankly, because I don't understand how they can truly develop in depth having to adjust always almost every 10 years and now almost every five years and maybe in the future almost every two years depending on what really is developing.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, Mervin, as you went to teach at Smith and you were involved in this formal experimentation as a teacher what areas of interesting subject matter were most important for you then?

MERVIN JULES: I still painted people primarily, although within recent years I've found just through my love of gardening and things like that I do a number of flower studies and even have occasionally done a landscape. Living in Provincetown right on the water and feeling the excitement of this bay at all times I've even done one or two things of the bay. But mainly it's people that I still paint. And I paint things that I know, like the poker game that I enjoy and play with a number of other people. And just the things that I do, I play chess and I paint people playing chess. I paint children because I love children. I always have loved children. And I have my own children and I watched them develop and something of that gets through my own attitude, et cetera. And I guess maybe you might say the thing that impels me all the time is the human relationships that excite me. The things that I value are these human relationships. And I find that in the world it is extremely destructive and the world sometimes is extremely frustrating because you really can't do much about it. The things that tend to have meaning or the things that are real, in a sense, are the love I have for people and the beauty that I find. And I'm not afraid of the word "beauty." I think that people are essentially good. I know it sounds like an infernal

optimist but I feel that way, deeply.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Your voice is very strong. I'll attest to that [inaudible] and see how you come across. I may have to [inaudible].

[END TAPE]