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Oral history interview with John Gilmore,  
1991 Sept. 5

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**Contact Information**

Reference Department  
Archives of American Art  
Smithsonian Institution  
Washington, D.C. 20560  
[www.aaa.si.edu/askus](http://www.aaa.si.edu/askus)

# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with John Gilmore on September 5, 1991. The interview took place in Osterville, Massachusetts, and was conducted by Robert 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 BROWN: September 5, 1991, in Osterville, Massachusetts. Interview with John Gilmore. Robert Brown, the interviewer. Let's see—

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT BROWN: Mr. Gilmore, we're talking here in this interview, partly about your sister, Elizabeth Gilmore Holt, but as her younger brother—I think five years younger, you said—

JOHN GILMORE: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: —I want to weave in some of your recollections and comments on your family in general. You were—perhaps you can say a bit about your parents, and their background and their interests, as you remember, the early memories of it.

JOHN GILMORE: Yes. I would like to just say that Elizabeth and I both felt that we had had a very rich and unusual childhood. My father was a professor at the University of Wisconsin, in the College of Law, and in the early days of the university, he was active with the administration. In 1913, he took a sabbatical year, and he and my mother took the three children—my brother, Eugene, and Elizabeth, and myself—to the continent of Europe for one year. This was an exposure to culture and art that I am sure had a bearing in Elizabeth's finally becoming an authority in art history. [00:02:07] She—we lived in Rome for several months, and visited in Paris for several months, Switzerland, and Germany, and in each of those places, my mother would see that due attention was paid to museums, churches, and all the cultural advantages that being there involved. The family had to return hastily to the United States when World War I broke out in late August or early September 1914, and return to Madison. And my father had commissioned Frank Lloyd Wright to build a house on University Heights in 1907, and that house, which was known as the Airplane House, became the scene of many happy family experiences, Christmas celebrations, Christmas parties, and is preserved. That house is preserved to this day by a remarkable family in Madison who have lived there since 1925.

ROBERT BROWN: Those are the Weiss family, right? [00:04:00]

JOHN GILMORE: Yes, the Weiss, W-E-I-S-S. And Mrs. Weiss lived to be 102 years old, and died just in August of 1991. She and her family kept the house beautifully, and it is—well, it is told to me that it needs more than just minor maintenance. That it is—perfectly represents the condition it was—exterior at least, the exterior condition that it had—when we lived in it.

ROBERT BROWN: What was—did your father work closely with Wright on the design of the house, the layout particularly?

JOHN GILMORE: Well, mother and dad went down to Oak Park, Illinois and spent the night at the Wright's office and studio, and went over the plans with him. And Wright himself came up to Madison at least once or twice during the construction. It was a most unusual house for its—for the time, but I can say that it was totally comfortable, and very—it lent itself to family life beautifully. We were—I was sorry when, at the age of 12, my father—when I was 12, my father was appointed vice governor of the Philippines, and we left Madison then. [00:06:07] Although my sister and my brother both graduated from the University of Wisconsin later, I—that was the end of my stay in Madison. We went out to the Philippines, and my father was there eight years, and returned to this country in 1930 as dean of the law school at the University of Iowa. He became—in 1935, he became president of the University of Iowa, and retired in 1940, and then he died in 1953.

ROBERT BROWN: Your father even knew Wright fairly well. Did they become friends?

JOHN GILMORE: No, I wouldn't say that he knew him very well. He knew him as a contract—as an architect and as the builder of his house. I think that, as those who, in Madison, followed Frank Lloyd Wright's career, he was not—can we cut this a second?

[Audio Break.]

JOHN GILMORE: I don't want—I—

ROBERT BROWN: Sure.

JOHN GILMORE: I would say only that Frank Lloyd Wright didn't have much in common, is the way I would put it, with my father's friends, and he did not—my father wouldn't presume to say that he knew Frank Lloyd Wright well. I don't think that—I think their relationship, business-wise, was amicable, and I think there was not a—there were no more disagreement over the house, as I have heard about it, than you would expect from the normal relationship with a builder and a house owner. [00:08:17] There's always something that went wrong, and I don't know what it was, but I understand the plaster gave them a little trouble for several years until—because it's basically stucco, and it took several years to get that straightened out.

ROBERT BROWN: The—now, your father was at the University of Wisconsin from about 1902, apparently, to 1922, when he went to the Philippines.

JOHN GILMORE: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: And this was in the era—I gather—was your father fairly politically active, or do you recall that he was a—I believe what you might call today a progressive Republican?

JOHN GILMORE: Yes. Yes, he was—

ROBERT BROWN: And there was the famous Governor La Follette at that time.

JOHN GILMORE: That's correct. My father was active in assignments that may have—I'm not clear on this, but he would work on legal papers that would be of use and interest to liberal Republican people, and he was highly thought of by the governor and people of that persuasion.

ROBERT BROWN: Was, to you, Madison—you left when you were 12, really, but what was it like to you, except apart from being a—

JOHN GILMORE: The University of Wisconsin was the most marvelous place for a child to grow up that you can imagine. The students were always doing something of interest to us kids, and I can remember all going to as many university events as we could possibly get our family to take us to. [00:10:07] In the summer, there was boating on Lake Mendota, and the students had an occasion called Venetian Night, after the famous Venice gondolas. One year, the barge that was off the lower campus of the university, that contained all the fireworks—we were watching the fireworks go up, and by some mishap, a fuse or something got into the bottom of the barge, and the whole thing blew up with a tremendous blast—force. Blast. Fortunately, no students were injured, but I can remember to this day the two students who were operating the barge diving off into the water—[they laugh]—as fast as they could. And in the winter, the same setting, there were ski—there was an early ski jump that the run was down the steep slope, onto the ice of Lake Mendota, and the young skiers, that were heroes to me—the danger was so terrific, it seemed to me—would ski down the slopes. Everything around the university was interesting to us kids. It was a wonderful place.

ROBERT BROWN: Did your parents have—would they have, many times, people in at home, and would you get to hear them and talk? Were they very broadly interested in intellectual matters?

JOHN GILMORE: Well, I would have to say, to my recollection, mother and dad were not extensive entertainers of people, because, I suppose, with three active children and things like that, that we just simply—we had occasions when the neighbors would come in, but I would not say that they were famous for entertaining. [00:12:27]

ROBERT BROWN: Were your father and mother from that area, or were they from other parts of the country?

JOHN GILMORE: They were from the Middle West. Both my mother and father's families originated in Indiana. My mother was from Rockport, Indiana, and my father's family originated in Greencastle, Indiana, where DePauw University is. Although my father grew up in Nebraska, he went back to college, to Greencastle, because his uncle was there, and that was an attraction, too, to have a member of the family there. He was—his uncle was the head of the local telephone company. Mother came up from Rockport, Indiana. They met at—they were both students at DePauw University, and they met there, and after—became engaged, and after my father left DePauw, they were married, in 1899, I think it was. Anyway, as a young lawyer, he and mother went to Boston, and he practiced—oh, he graduated from Harvard University. He went to Harvard University from DePauw, and went to Harvard Law School. He was secretary—no, I'm getting mixed up. [00:14:00] He was secretary to the president of DePauw University, and then when he went to the law school at Harvard, he also worked—he had to

work his way through. The family was not wealthy. Then he practiced law for three years, I think it was, in Boston, before being interviewed for a job at the University of Wisconsin. He then decided to teach law at Wisconsin.

ROBERT BROWN: He must have been a rather precocious law student and lawyer to be asked to be a professor of the law school.

JOHN GILMORE: I guess he, I guess he was.

ROBERT BROWN: He had a good record.

JOHN GILMORE: He must have—he did have a good record. He was a Phi Beta Kappa student at DePauw, and I'm sure—I don't know what recognition they gave at Harvard, but I'm sure he had a fine record there.

ROBERT BROWN: What about your mother's family? Were they town people, or farming stock, or manufacturers?

JOHN GILMORE: They were retail store operators in the small town of Rockport. The Basie [ph], the Basie Dry Goods, or Drugstore, lasted for many years. And it's been a family tradition—and I think it's true—that during the migration of Abraham Lincoln's family through southern Indiana, that he stopped in the county that Rockport is in, and John Basie, who's my mother's grandfather—or his father, I can't—don't want to get mixed up on the dates—actually saw Lincoln during that period, or his family. [00:16:10] Then they went on, of course, to—migrated on to Illinois. But there was that period when they stopped in—I think it was Spencer County—for a short time, which was a common experience of the migrating families. They would go along for a while, and if things weren't just exactly as—for a number of reasons—they would go on. My mother's family were always in store—were always storekeepers.

ROBERT BROWN: And your father's family, what had they been?

JOHN GILMORE: Well, my father's family also worked as storekeepers, in Auburn, Nebraska. Gilmore Brothers Store was well-known when dad was growing up as a boy, and it went on. Only the Great Depression of 1934 put it under.

ROBERT BROWN: Your father's record at Wisconsin must have been notable as a professor of law.

JOHN GILMORE: Well, he was very well-recognized. He was editor of the book on partnership, and he was active in the publication of the uniform state laws put out by the American Bar Association. His biography is a more accurate source than my memory of all the things that he did in the legal field, but he was active in the Association of American Law Schools and other things like that. [00:18:11]

ROBERT BROWN: The decision, in 1922, to go to the Philippines, do you recall discussions in the family? Of course, you were only 12.

JOHN GILMORE: I was only 12, and I can say to you that I was totally opposed to the whole idea. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: I see.

JOHN GILMORE: I thought that it—I thought the University of Wisconsin was the—was heaven, and this was the center of the universe, and I wanted to stay right there. So it was a sad day for me when we pulled up stakes in the middle of winter, and we went out to California for a month or so, and then on to the Philippines. But that opened a chapter that was so interesting and exciting that I soon forgot—I didn't forget, but I soon—I forgot the pain of separation from my friends and surroundings.

ROBERT BROWN: What was it that began when you got to the Philippines? Can you describe that experience a little bit?

JOHN GILMORE: We first stopped in Japan. Travel, in those days, was more leisurely. Simply, we went by boat, and my father and mother decided that he would—he was already in Manila—mother and the rest of the family, that they would stop over in Japan. So we stopped, in 1922, in Tokyo. [00:20:04] This was a very astonishing coincidence. Frank Lloyd Wright was in the midst of building the new Imperial Hotel, which he had been commissioned to design. The old Imperial Hotel was still standing, and we were staying in the old Imperial Hotel at the time that it burned. This was really a dramatic fire, because it was a perfect tinderbox. A huge, old Victorian structure, maybe four or five stories, and it went up in a huge bonfire. The new Imperial Hotel was serving as an annex to the old hotel, so it was not damaged. I can remember we all gathered in the garden of the American embassy, because we were without a place to stay. We, I think, had been housed in the annex, in the Frank Lloyd Wright part of the thing. Anyway, we—

ROBERT BROWN: You were damn lucky, huh?

JOHN GILMORE: We were damn lucky. The garden party at the American embassy, mother was attending. I was not attending. And when she heard about the fire, she thought I had perished, possibly, and she fainted, and they brought her to. When I got to the embassy, I was a little disappointed, because I wanted to see the fire. [Laughs.] But I had been rounded up and brought over, and our family was reunited. [00:22:04] Later, in the following year, when the Imperial Hotel was completed by Frank Lloyd Wright, the great earthquake in Tokyo, which leveled a tremendous number of buildings, tested the accuracy of his cantilever construction as an engineering protection against earthquake damage. The Imperial Hotel stood through that shock. I haven't seen—I have not seen it since the days of my childhood, but I understand now that it was demolished, oh, maybe 20 or 30 years ago, and replaced. So when we got to the Philippines, I just was happy to see new sights and new sounds, and meet new friends. I went to school up in Baguio, up in the mountains of Luzon, where the American army had a base camp, John Hay, and the missionary groups had rest facilities, and the teachers—the Philippine government had established a teachers' camp, where the teachers who taught in the provinces of the Philippines could come for rest and recreation during the hot season. My father's job was really two-fold. He was secretary of public instruction, and he was secretary of public health. So, during the time we were there, we got to see quite a few schools and hospitals. That was the real nature of his work. He was not a political figure. [00:24:00] He became acting governor general, but never was appointed governor general, because that was a political position, and he had no constituency to which that would follow.

ROBERT BROWN: So you would go on some of his travels with him? The family would accompany him?

JOHN GILMORE: He was very generous in that respect. When he took a trip to the southern archipelago—and in those days, you just simply could not get public transportation for a trip like that. He would take us, and we had a coast guard cutter, and he would make his inspections of hospitals and schools, and we would go along and enjoy the opportunity to meet and see interesting people and interesting places.

ROBERT BROWN: It must have been very exotic, a good deal of it.

JOHN GILMORE: It was. It was very, very—a great experience.

ROBERT BROWN: Was your impression—of course, you were a young person—child, really, or teenager, let's say, by then—was your impression that the Americans were well-received there, or could you tell?

JOHN GILMORE: Very definitely, and I do not think it was because of my father's position that we were treated well. There seemed to be really an eagerness to learn, and an appreciation that efforts along that line were being made by the government. Elizabeth went on a number of these trips, although I'm a little hazy on the times in which my family would send my brother and my sister back to the United States for education. [00:26:03] I cannot remember exactly those dates. But the—

ROBERT BROWN: Well, she finished as an art history major at Wisconsin in 1929, so she must have just gone now and then back, right? She didn't go straight through, maybe.

JOHN GILMORE: Maybe that's right. As I say, I was—I'm hazy on her school attendance in that time.

ROBERT BROWN: These mountain places, these were little enclaves for the Americans, mainly?

JOHN GILMORE: Baguio was a summer capital. When the United States assumed the governance of the Philippines, it became a territory of the United States. Manila, as the capital, had disadvantages in the hot season. They had—and even the Spanish had used the Baguio as a summer capital for weather. You'd go up there to—and so they just moved the government up there, and it wasn't quite moving the government, but there was a lot of use of Baguio as a winter resort, the way the British, I understand, in India, had hill stations to get their people up and give them a cool time for a—

ROBERT BROWN: And it did make a difference? The climate was quite different?

JOHN GILMORE: Oh, Baguio was at elevation of one mile, and the vegetation was pine trees, and strangely enough, tree ferns. I had never seen a tree fern. Well, it was nothing but a huge, huge fern the size of a tree, and there were a lot of those up there, tree ferns and pines. They used to call the Philippines the land of the palm and the pine because of the lowlands and the highlands. [00:28:05] Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: You came back then—your father came back about 1930?

JOHN GILMORE: 1930, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: You came—were you already back here in school?

JOHN GILMORE: Yes. I came back in 1925. And Mother believed that it was important to get me in school, and Eugene, my brother, who's seven years older, was just going into business school in Harvard, and so we—mother and I came back to Cambridge, 1925. I don't know quite why it was thought I should be along, but anyway, I was. We lived in Belmont. We rented a house in Belmont. I went to Belmont High School one year, and I was not—it was not my happiest year, I'll say, frankly. After my brother graduated that year from Harvard, mother went back to the Philippines, and I went to Phillips Academy, Andover, and then from there, I went to Dartmouth College.

ROBERT BROWN: But you felt a little cut-off once your mother went back?

JOHN GILMORE: Well, I was cut-off. [Laughs.] There was no doubt that—I'm sorry again to say that I can't exactly remember where my brother and sister were at that year, but I think my brother was out in Los Angeles after he graduated from—no. [00:30:06] After he graduated from Harvard, he went down to New York. I remember now. He was a banking attorney, if you will, at Irving Trust Company. I remember that because my Christmas holidays from Andover, I went down and stayed with my brother in New York. And Elizabeth was out in Wisconsin in those days. I—you know.

ROBERT BROWN: Finishing up her university?

JOHN GILMORE: Finishing up her—and my mother and father were in Manila. So we were pretty scattered around.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you recall being in a—then you went to Dartmouth, and what did you concentrate in there?

JOHN GILMORE: I majored in English. I really just took the—kind of a routine liberal arts training. But my senior year, I was fortunate enough to stumble into a class given by a very engaging professor in introduction to law. Now, you'd think my father was a law professor and everything, I would have had all the introduction to law that I needed, but I really didn't, and this course was an eye-opener. I told dad I'd like to go to law school, and I did. I went to—I had admission to Harvard, and I had said to my family, "I have knocked around in boarding houses for so long, it seems to me, up at Brent School in the Philippines, and Andover, and everything." [00:32:17] I said, "I just feel—and Dartmouth—I just feel like I would, I would like to live at home a year or two, if it's all right with you." So they said okay, and I don't think it was the easiest thing for my family, because my father was dean of the law school, and to have his son enrolled there was not a choice that I would—I don't know that—he never gave the slightest indication that it was any drawback, and maybe it wasn't. Maybe it was my imagination. But anyhow, I finished law school in 1934.

ROBERT BROWN: This was at Iowa?

JOHN GILMORE: Iowa, University of Iowa.

ROBERT BROWN: Where your father had gone as dean.

JOHN GILMORE: Yes, as dean of the law school. I finished law school in 1934, and then moved to—got a job with a very excellent firm in New York City, Root, Clark, Buckner, and Ballantine. That was a Wall Street law firm, and I was very—

ROBERT BROWN: What was it about the law that—what do you think led you to go into the law?

JOHN GILMORE: Well, it's—

ROBERT BROWN: You mentioned that course at Dartmouth, but what within it is—

JOHN GILMORE: I suppose that, as I told my father, that I think I can handle, uh, legal work, and I didn't really know what else I could handle. [00:34:08] I said, "With your preeminence, if you will, or prominence, or success in this field, I frankly would like to try to follow along in your footsteps as far as I can, and it seems the thing to do." And he, he said, "Well, it's a tough, it's a tough life, if you think you can do it." I said, "Well, I'm going to try," so I did that. That's the reason I went into law. I really—uh. I really enjoyed the law.

ROBERT BROWN: You kept up, of course, with your brother and your sister during this time. I think you mentioned visiting while your sister was at Radcliffe.

JOHN GILMORE: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: That would be, I guess, the early '30s. She got her MA at Radcliffe in 1932.

JOHN GILMORE: Well, this was, this was actually, I think, in the late '20s, maybe '29. She and a dear friend of hers, Edith Kay, had an—they'd taken an apartment on Joy Street, on Beacon Hill, and Elizabeth was kind enough

to invite me to come down when I could—I think it was from Dartmouth—to spend a weekend now and then, and see the big city. [00:36:08] And one time I was down at Christmas season, and we—I can remember going over with her and Edith Kay, her roommate, to Louisburg Square and singing carols and walking around in the snow. It was a beautiful sight, and I always had the fondest memories of the old Beacon Hill area in the winter. She and—Elizabeth and Edith, I believe, kept the apartment only a year or two. They went their separate ways. I didn't come down again.

ROBERT BROWN: I think you said that during that visit with your sister was the first time you talked to her or heard from her about what her plans were and what she was—

JOHN GILMORE: I believe that's right. I would say this is the first time I became conscious of her career ambitions and career direction. She was clearly into art and art history at that time, and that was my first appreciation of the direction she was going in. Other than that, we were just brother and sister, and she was going to school somewhere, and I was going to school somewhere else. I wasn't sure what she was majoring in. But this is the first clear indication to me that she had completed her work at Wisconsin and was in graduate work in art at Radcliffe. [00:38:00]

ROBERT BROWN: Was she pretty outspoken in some of her opinions and ideas, or—?

JOHN GILMORE: Well, if so—

ROBERT BROWN: Or was it mostly small talk to her?

JOHN GILMORE: —if so, as younger brother, I'm not sure—she was very frank with me, but not in the field of art business. I wasn't—I wouldn't say I—we would talk much about that subject.

ROBERT BROWN: [Laughs.] It was more practical.

JOHN GILMORE: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: [Laughs.] You've mentioned that, I guess, in the later '30s, you were still with the Wall Street law firm, and World War II came along. Were you still aware of some of the things that your sister was doing? She married John Holt in 1936. She'd been involved with New Deal art projects in North Carolina before that.

JOHN GILMORE: Yes. Well, I was—your question was, was I—

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, what—were you in touch with her, or did your paths cross? You were a—

JOHN GILMORE: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: —very busy young lawyer in New York.

JOHN GILMORE: Well, as a matter of fact, I went—I left New York at the beginning of 1937, and went to Washington with the government. I was there a total of—from 1937 to 1952. I went down from New York in 1937 to Washington, and Elizabeth—I'm not sure, but I think she was at Duke University then. [00:40:10] I'm not sure the dates. And—no, she—well, she became associated with William and Mary College in—

ROBERT BROWN: [Inaudible.]

JOHN GILMORE: —Virginia. I visited her—she was married in 1936. I remember going to the wedding. That was in Boston. Then—

ROBERT BROWN: Why was it held there? Had she—because your family were in—

JOHN GILMORE: I can't remember the reason why they—to this day, why that was selected. I think the—I just, I just don't know the answer to that. But anyway, she and John were married in Boston in 1936, and I think went right down to Williamsburg, Virginia right after that. That's my impression, anyway.

ROBERT BROWN: And would you visit there, see them occasionally?

JOHN GILMORE: Yes, I would visit them there, come down from Washington and visit them there, and then—

ROBERT BROWN: Were you beginning to specialize in Washington? You were with the Department of the Treasury, is that right, to begin with?

JOHN GILMORE: Yes, I was with the Department of the Treasury. I did, initially, make my Washington contact with the Social Security Board. [00:42:01] Uh, the first year and a half I was in Washington, I was in the general

counsel's office of the Social Security Board. That was a very lively place, as all of Washington was in the New Deal days. Mennen Williams, who became governor of Michigan, was one of my friends and colleagues, and—

ROBERT BROWN: Soapy Williams he was called.

JOHN GILMORE: Soapy Williams, exactly. I have been to their house, and—he and Nancy. There were—I can't recall all of them offhand, but we had a great group there. Then I left the Social Security Board and went to the Treasury Department, then over to the Revenue Service, and I stayed with the Revenue Service until the end.

ROBERT BROWN: But your impression, were there a lot of very bright young lawyers and other people in Washington at that—during that time?

JOHN GILMORE: It was a great time. It was a great time. Let's face it, there—it was hard to get legal jobs in business. The Depression was still overshadowing things, and a lot of people gravitated to Washington in those days, the '30s, '36. Then, of course, when the war struck, I went over then to the National Gallery, as you know.

ROBERT BROWN: Wait, but—so you, rather than you be in the military, you were what is a—what, a legal counsel, to the new National Gallery of Art? [00:44:00]

JOHN GILMORE: Yes, the new National Gallery of Art.

ROBERT BROWN: Which opened in '41.

JOHN GILMORE: Yeah. It was founded by the Mellon grant of the building, and then the pictures, and then the endowment.

ROBERT BROWN: You said that you had to help draw up one of the agreements for Roosevelt to sign.

JOHN GILMORE: Well, it was a letter submitting to the legislative committee that was handling the acceptance of the Mellon endowment. Not the, not the pictures or the building, but it was, I think, the five million endowment, as I remember. The Treasury general counsel's office, where I was located, was told, "Draft a letter for President Roosevelt to sign, transmitting this piece of his request for legislation to accept the gift." So I did that. But, uh—

ROBERT BROWN: You got to know—at the National Gallery, you got—your superior, I believe you said, was—

JOHN GILMORE: David Finley was the director, but my superior was Huntington Cairns. Huntington Cairns was a lawyer, assistant general counsel of Treasury. He was a well-known literary commentator, too. He had a radio program that was very popular, *Invitation to Learning*, and he compiled the transcripts, if you will, of that radio program into a book called *Invitation to Learning*. I've got a copy of it somewhere. Huntington was a true scholar. He'd grown up in Baltimore, a friend of Mencken, and a prodigious reader, and something of a prodigy himself in intellectual pursuits. [00:46:09] He was the general counsel of the Treasury. We got along famously. It was very—I was very fortunate. When he went—when the Treasury engineered—not engineered, but completed the setup of the—

ROBERT BROWN: —National Gallery—

JOHN GILMORE: —National Gallery—because of course Mellon had been secretary of Treasury, so it fell to the Treasury legal department to do the work of the legal buttoning-up of everything—Huntington went over as general counsel, and he asked me if I'd come over when this commission at Pasamewa [ph] was created, if I would come over and be with him, and be assistant. I was actually assistant general counsel of the gallery, as well as secretary of this commission.

ROBERT BROWN: Wait a second.

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ROBERT BROWN: Now, at the National Gallery, you get to know David Finley somewhat? What was he like?

JOHN GILMORE: Well, David Finley was a very thoughtful, and a very precise, man. He—can we break for a second?

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JOHN GILMORE: Yes. Well, David Finley was a real gentleman. He was precise, but he had a high degree of sensitivity. He was very quick in his motions, he was very quick in speech, and he was a generous man. He was,

he was pleasant to be with, and I can say that I had no professional relation with him in the sense that I was not an artist, nor an art historian, nor anyone in that category, in which he was preeminent, but as a staff lawyer, he was entirely considerate and agreeable to work with. That's my recollection of him. He was a—he was slight in build, but very fastidious and distinctive in his speech, his precise way of speaking. I enjoyed working with him.

ROBERT BROWN: Now—and John Walker was there as well, right?

JOHN GILMORE: John Walker was the assistant director of the gallery, and again, he was a great figure. [00:02:07] I would say much more ebullient, and brimming over with comments and ideas, and obviously a preeminent figure in art matters. I would have not much comment with—talk with John Walker, although I saw him frequently all the time, but—unless there was some problem. He, again, was very fair and agreeable to work with.

ROBERT BROWN: What sort of problems arose in the—these were the very early years of the National Gallery. Do you recall any thorny matters you and Mr. Cairns had to work through for the gallery? Or everything went smooth as silk? [Laughs.]

JOHN GILMORE: No, nothing—[laughs]—nothing, nothing went smooth as silk, but my function was primarily the operation of the American Commission for the Protection and Salvage of Artistic and Historic Monuments in War Areas. And—

ROBERT BROWN: Did the National Gallery administer that to a degree?

JOHN GILMORE: The National Gallery administered that.

ROBERT BROWN: And Mr. Cairns was involved with that as well?

JOHN GILMORE: Oh, yes, he was—all the National Gallery staff—David Finley, John Walker, Huntington Cairns—were all active in that, and I was carrying out directives here and there, and communicating with the Treasury Department, War Department, other ones, about interviews for rounding up arts and monuments officers. [00:04:31] The program essentially involved counteracting the German arts and monuments corps. The Allies had not—or the Americans, particularly—had not established, in their table of organization of the army, a group known as arts and monuments officers, and the charge was made that these American and British troops were barbarians. They didn't know art, they didn't care about artistic and historic treasures, and fighting in the Italian peninsula was like fighting in an art museum the whole way up the peninsula. It was time that somebody stationed arts and monuments officers with the troops to help protect these priceless treasures. The British, I believe, did have arts and monuments officers. Not very many. Nobody had very many, even us.

ROBERT BROWN: But the Germans had some, you said.

JOHN GILMORE: The Germans had some, and of course the charge was—and I guess it was true—that they looted a great deal of Europe's art. [00:06:00] The story is well-known of the cache of great art treasures that were in the salt mines in Salzburg, Austria, put there for safekeeping. At the end of the war, they were taken out by the Allied—and one of the functions of this commission was to supervise the protection of that great collection of stolen art. Now, uh, where were we?

ROBERT BROWN: Well, the—what kind of work do you remember doing for this commission?

JOHN GILMORE: My work for the commission was to see that it got through the maze of government budget and other legal red tape to do the things that it was supposed to do. They were trying to get the War Department—the Defense Department, I guess you'd say—to dislodge army, navy, and air force officers who were really art historians, art experts, but who had been drafted into the military and were not being utilized for their professional skills, but were just being utilized as soldiers, or sailors, or whatever. So with the cooperation of the Pentagon, lists of arts and monuments officers were prepared, and our job was a public relations job. Of course, the commission, based in the National Gallery of Art, was really made up of national figures in the art world, headed by Mr. Justice Roberts of the Supreme Court, and Cardinal Spellman was one of our members, and Henry Taylor, the director of the Metropolitan Museum of New York. [00:08:15] There were—Sumner—no, who was—was it Sumner Crosby?

ROBERT BROWN: He was one of the monuments officers.

JOHN GILMORE: He was one of the monuments officers.

ROBERT BROWN: But your commission was people of national fame and renown.

JOHN GILMORE: That's right, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Either in the art world or in respect of other positions, like Justice Roberts, Owen Roberts.

JOHN GILMORE: Yes, because it was, it was a large effort to propagandize our concern for the care of art treasures, and to offset the German claim that we had no—nothing like their corps of arts and monuments officers. So we—it was a real concern, but it was also a propaganda. It was a propaganda purpose to be solved in having such a commission, and to have the concern of the government, with the cooperation of the armed services, to try to save and salvage, against unnecessary loss, looting, and dispersion, valuable collections of art that would otherwise be neglected and destroyed in the operation of the war. I guess fighting the war on the peninsula in Italy was about as hazardous to artworks as you can imagine anything would be.

ROBERT BROWN: Was there much opposition? Did you run into much?

JOHN GILMORE: No, it was—we were received, uh, with acceptance. [00:10:06] I can't remember any opposition, except that we had to be very careful not to be competing over our needs for money. The appropriations were tight, and any appearance before an appropriations committee was historically a hostile—not nasty hostile, but they were interested in cutting you down. You were interested in getting your money. So you had to, you had to make your way uphill on those—

ROBERT BROWN: You had to argue carefully and—

JOHN GILMORE: —and be prepared to argue, and argue for your money.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you testify? Were you involved in some of this?

JOHN GILMORE: I did not. I did a lot of preparation for others. That was where the more notable figures would come into play, well-known figures. I think David Finley testified. I—my recollection is, but I'm not sure. Can we, can we take a break a minute now?

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT BROWN: So we're talking further about the monuments commission. What was its purpose, frankly, you said?

JOHN GILMORE: It had multiple purposes. Its purposes were partly to deal with the restitution of artworks that had been removed and displaced in countries overrun by the Axis armies, and the second phase of it was the possible preservation in—to the extent compatible with military necessity of the destruction of artistic and historic monuments in the combat areas. [00:12:16] And for both purposes, there was an overriding concern to show the American forces were equally concerned about the general value of artistic and historic objects, equal to their European counterparts. The British had arts and monuments officers. The French had arts and monuments officers. The Germans had arts and monuments officers. Our army didn't have any. And one of the purposes of this assemblage of art experts in the United States under the guise of this commission was to identify for the War Department, the navy, and others, the talent that was already in the army, or could be brought in, to serve as arts and monuments officers, and to demonstrate our concern for this type of thing.

ROBERT BROWN: And this hearing, of which you have a copy from the congressional record, of January 1945, was a hearing in which you justified—

JOHN GILMORE: These are—I might just say, these are not from the congressional record, but they are the published budget hearings, and the commission had to appear before a subcommittee of the appropriations committee to justify its request for funds each year. [00:14:13] During the early—the commission was formed in April of 1943, and got underway with a temporary grant from what you might call the president's discretionary fund. He just allocated about \$19,000 to start the ball rolling, but the understanding would be that the commission would ask the appropriations commission for funds to continue this work. This hearing—there are two samples of this. One was the first appearance in June 1944, and then in January 1945. In each instance, the —David Finley, vice chairman of the commission, and Huntington Cairns, the secretary treasurer of the commission, and myself—

ROBERT BROWN: You were then—what was your position?

JOHN GILMORE: Assistant secretary treasurer.

ROBERT BROWN: Of the commission?

JOHN GILMORE: Of the commission. In the earlier one, Sumner Crosby, who—advisor to the commission—prepared a full-fledged statement of the formation of the commission, that this was started through a suggestion by Chief Justice Harlan Stone to the secretary of state—or to the president, I'm sorry. [00:16:14] The commission was formulated then as a government agency, with a very distinguished roster of members. We had—as I say,

David Finley was the assistant and head vice chairman.

ROBERT BROWN: And he was director of the National Gallery?

JOHN GILMORE: He was director of the National Gallery. Other members were Dr. William Dinsmoor, former president of the American Council of American Societies, I believe. And Herbert Lehman, former governor of New York. Uh, Archibald MacLeish, librarian of congress. Dr. Paul Sachs, associate director of the Fogg Museum of Fine Arts. Francis Taylor, director of the Metropolitan Museum in New York. John Walker was an advisor. He was the chief curator of the National Gallery. And Sumner Crosby, associate professor of art at Yale University. Those—and also—also, I don't know why it's not listed—you see these—

ROBERT BROWN: Cardinal Spellman of New York was a member.

JOHN GILMORE: Yes. These men were selected for their widespread representation of various groups and interests. [00:18:04]

ROBERT BROWN: Sure. Excuse me on second.

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah. So they were—the aim of this was to get the most distinguished figures in the fine arts field in the United States, plus—well, like Cardinal Spellman would be a man of immense political importance.

JOHN GILMORE: Yes, and—

ROBERT BROWN: Herbert Lehman.

JOHN GILMORE: And I think, in recognition of how many of the works of art related to religious settings in Europe and in Italy, particularly, so that this was something that you would expect that you would be concerned with. Can we pause—

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT BROWN: Maybe we'll talk—talk a little bit about the people you worked most closely with on the commission.

JOHN GILMORE: Yes. I worked most closely with Huntington Cairns, the general counsel of the National Gallery, who also was the secretary and treasurer of the American commission. He was a former assistant general counsel of the Treasury, and his interest in literary matters stems from his standing as a prominent lawyer in Baltimore who dealt with literary matters. He was a friend of H.L. Mencken, and he himself got out an anthology, *Invitation to Learning*, which was a print-out of his radio program that he conducted. [Phone rings.] I—

ROBERT BROWN: And you got to know him pretty well?

JOHN GILMORE: Huntington was my boss in the Treasury Department, and when he left the Treasury to come to the National Gallery, because of his association with the Mellons and so on, he said—he asked me to come with him and work on this project, which I was glad to do. [00:20:15] I was also appointed by the trustees of the gallery as an assistant general counsel of the National Gallery. And in the early days, and these were early days, the gift from the Mellons that had established the National Gallery were just being completed. The gift was in three parts. The building was first donated, and then the great Widener Collection was donated, which is the core of the fine collection at the National Gallery in those days, and then a \$5 million endowment, which was not to operate the daily functions of the gallery, but was to allow the gallery to operate in the leading manner in which it was expected. So there was still the problem of acceptance of this great gift by the government and by Congress, with the knowledge that they would be coming up for appropriations every year to run this beautiful gallery. Incidentally, despite all of its classical Greek exterior, it is a marvel of 20th century mechanical innovations. Climate control of the most refined order, and all of the security, and all that. But it's a beaut—the gallery is a beautiful thing. Well, to get on with it, [phone rings] in those days, the gallery was far from full of paintings. [00:22:03] It was—there were vast galleries that were absolutely empty, with the knowledge that they would, in time, be completed and filled with art objects as the gallery grew. Those great spaces were sometimes, and properly so, used for recreation. We played badminton occasionally—[they laugh]—in one—you had a ceiling that was 45 feet high. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: It was adequate.

JOHN GILMORE: That was adequate. [They laugh.] The quality of the staff was excellent, and John Walker, a very brilliant and keen student of art history and art, a curator of the gallery. Huntington Cairns, as I say, is a lawyer well-versed with art objects.

ROBERT BROWN: What was he like as a personality?

JOHN GILMORE: He was a, he was a very comfortable person to work with, uh, and I can—I just simply admired his legal ability, but he was, underneath it all, I think, really a lover of literature and art, more, almost, than a lawyer. He fit the—he fit in the job just perfectly.

ROBERT BROWN: Much of the work, you've suggested, of getting the money was—required a lot of politicking, didn't it, to get the congressional—

JOHN GILMORE: Well, it wasn't so much politics—

ROBERT BROWN: —appropriations.

JOHN GILMORE: —it wasn't so much politicking as it, as it was careful preparation for a series of questions which seemed petty, but in view of all the demands for money, the congressional committee was well-versed in asking and expected a clear answer. [00:24:21] So you couldn't go up there and just say, "This is a great idea, and we're not asking for much money. Let's have it." They would just tear you apart. We had to—David Finley was a master at the full, courteous, and precise reply to the extent that he had the information. These hearings were a great lesson to me, that at least the money, if not given outright, was given with a concern for the use of it. It was, it was, it was—I think the Congress shared in the concern—the general feeling.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you work a bit with Finley? You must have worked—

JOHN GILMORE: I would see him in a workplace atmosphere, but I did not work with him directly at that time, in the sense of correspond—preparing correspondence or doing much, except just discuss the daily concerns of the gallery with him. And I did not stay longer than—I stayed 20 months, and then returned to the Treasury Department, where I had come from.

ROBERT BROWN: So you stayed until what, into 19—

JOHN GILMORE: Nineteen—the summer of 1945. By the summer of 1945, I was out. [00:26:01] Charles Sawyer, I believe of Yale, took my place on the commission. I don't believe that it continued more than a couple of years. There's—of course, in the Washington archives, I'm sure that the full repository of all the papers of the commission exist. I'm not able to contribute to—

ROBERT BROWN: So you were mainly with the commission, but you started out with the National Gallery, helping out? And then the commission [inaudible].

JOHN GILMORE: It was simultaneous. When I came with Huntington Cairns, he said, "You're going to have two positions. You're going to be with the commission. You're going to be my assistant for the National Gallery." The work of the commission took most of my time, because, in those days at least, Huntington was handling all the legal work, really, that there was that we needed to do. So.

ROBERT BROWN: Did—you got to know some of the men who went to Europe who were in the field. You mentioned earlier Sumner Crosby of Yale.

JOHN GILMORE: Yes. But you must realize that we saw very few of the arts and monuments officers there. There was—there were two locations outside of Washington where a great deal of this work was done. The map—preparation of maps and the preparation of lists of art that had been displaced or stolen. J. Paul Sachs, in Cambridge, at Harvard, ran the restitution program, and Dinsmoor, at the Frick Art Gallery in New York, was in charge of the map-making. [00:28:09] And so—and then the arts and monuments officers that we hoped would be in the field during the actual combat were already serving at various places. So actually, I saw a few of them, and I had no familiar—I had no acquaintance with them professionally, because I wasn't in the museum or educational art field before the war, and so I had not that personal association with them.

ROBERT BROWN: You mentioned, though, you worked for a bit with Sumner Crosby.

JOHN GILMORE: Yes. Yes, because he was a direct advisor with the Washington—the main commission. And in response to the question asked by one of the appropriations subcommittee members, "Well, why don't the private institutions in the United States, of which there are a great many, do this work instead of having another commission that comes up and asks for money?" the answer given in these hearings was—by David Finley—was very cogent. And that was that these—this wealth of talent, these people, needed a coordinating, central place, a clearinghouse, where they could communicate and get direction, and beside the prestige given by the government's recognition of their concerns and work, served a useful purpose. So that was the theory of the—yes, a great deal of the work was done by volunteer, unpaid experts throughout the museum and educational institutions of the United States, but it was not—it would not have been—they would not have known what was

going on so well had there not been a central place to coordinate. [00:30:23] We felt also that dealing with the War Department was a tremendous difference. I went over to the Pentagon a couple of times, and I was impressed by our acceptance there. It was a huge operation. There was so much going on during the war that I'm sure that the commission was a vital step in this type of effort. It couldn't have been done so well just by separate institutions working at—independently.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, the military did cooperate then.

JOHN GILMORE: They cooperated—

ROBERT BROWN: Map-making and—

JOHN GILMORE: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: —transport.

JOHN GILMORE: They're—in this hearing, there's a very—can you hold it just a sec?

[Audio Break.]

JOHN GILMORE: I wish to say one more thing about the commission personnel. Mr. Justice Owen J. Roberts was the chairman, and if there ever was a gentleman with a broad view of world concerns, it was Mr. Justice Roberts. He was a, he was a great lawyer, a great man, and he was an inspiration to work with. He was invariably knowledgeable, invariably courteous to all who he dealt with. [00:32:04] End of my—

[Audio Break.]

JOHN GILMORE: —Robert's home several times. He was, he was, he was really a big man in every way. He had the concept of one world. I don't know if you remember that.

ROBERT BROWN: No.

JOHN GILMORE: Uh, Wendell Willkie's—and they were the type that, without being a wild-eyed visionary, he believed that there was no hope for the future of everything unless we could somehow get a world—this was, uh, in keeping with the formation of the United Nations, you know, and all that. Isn't it, isn't it odd how those hopes come so strongly after each conflict, and then they blossom, and then they wither? I hope we live long enough to see it—more successful. Well, anyway, this letter from the War Department to Justice Roberts, it says, [Gilmore reads] *The War Department, as you know, is taking all measures possible consistent with the demands of military necessity for the protection and conservation of historic monuments and works of art in the theater of operation. The importance of these measures has been emphasized to all commanders in the field. The status of the American commission and so forth is that of a special advisory body. Thus, we—no, Thus the War Department will depend on the commission for essential information and advice on the following matters: the location and importance of works of art, private and art collections, and the location of types of historic structures within the zone of operation.* [00:34:06] *The means and method of protecting those objects—I'm paraphrasing—the contents of the museums and art galleries, which information may be used in a determination by the field forces of the extent of looting and damage, and the specially qualified personnel, which the War Department can utilize to carry out the work of protecting and salvage of structures, objects of art, and archives in the active theaters.*

ROBERT BROWN: He's referring there to your field officer.

JOHN GILMORE: That's right. This is signed, "Henry Stimson, Secretary of War." I haven't read the whole letter. But I, I—

ROBERT BROWN: It certainly indicates—

JOHN GILMORE: —I refer to the fact that this was a high-level operation in its, in its concept, and understood so by—

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So that gave it what we would call today a good deal of clout?

JOHN GILMORE: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: It had the attention of the president and everyone.

JOHN GILMORE: Yes, that's right. It was—

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, yeah. Well, in the summer of '45, then, you mustered out of the commission and went back to the Treasury.

JOHN GILMORE: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: And you, thereafter, did not do work, uh—

JOHN GILMORE: I did not do work—

ROBERT BROWN: —relating to the, to the fine arts.

JOHN GILMORE: No.

ROBERT BROWN: But you had a sister who was, just then, gathering her forces, Elizabeth Gilmore Holt, for her notable publications, her great anthologies and writings on art.

JOHN GILMORE: Yes, that's right. Her first book came out in 1947, so she was, she was, uh, fully engaged in that at this time.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you—were you in touch with her throughout these years, to some degree? [00:36:05]

JOHN GILMORE: To some degree, but—as I've tried to say, the—her movements, and her husband's—

ROBERT BROWN: He was with the State Department, wasn't he?

JOHN GILMORE: Well, yes, but he was, he was in the auxiliary foreign service at that time. He was an academic man before the war, but he went into the auxiliary foreign service. Let me, let me correct—correct this a second. He was also in the military. Yes, that's right. He was in—he was one of these navy officers who—but the—I can't recall without consulting my records as to just what John did, John Holt did, during the war and right afterwards.

ROBERT BROWN: I know they were in Germany after the war.

JOHN GILMORE: Yes, yes. He and—he was in the State Department. He went—he was in the—

ROBERT BROWN: Would you see them—

JOHN GILMORE: He was in the consular service, as I recall. Economic, economic affairs. They were stationed in Berlin, during the Berlin Airlift, and then he went on and remained in the State Department until his retirement.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, were you in touch with your sister? Did—was she sort of given to writing you or telling you what she was doing by way of her publications, research projects? [00:38:06]

JOHN GILMORE: Our correspondence was more of a familial, family nature than—and not so much professional. So I have to say that I did not know the full extent at that time, or wasn't current with what she was actually doing. So.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]