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Oral history interview with Val Cushing, 2001
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Val Cushing on April 16, 2001. The interview took place in Alfred Station, New York, and was conducted by Margaret Carney for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America.

Val Cushing and Margaret Carney have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

DR. CARNEY: This is Margaret Carney interviewing Val Cushing at his studio in Alfred Station, New York, on April 16, 2001, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Hello, Val.

MR. CUSHING: Hello, Margaret. It's nice to see you in the studio. And we're all set to go.

DR. CARNEY: Can you tell us when and where you were born?

MR. CUSHING: Well, that's a pretty hard question, but I'll -- [laughs]. I was born in Rochester, New York, January 28, 1931.

DR. CARNEY: And can you describe your childhood and your family background, and perhaps even leading into how you ended up in Alfred, New York, if there's a connection?

MR. CUSHING: There is a little strange connection there. In 1931, some of you who hear this will know that was the Depression. And of course babies don't know about Depressions, but my family was, I guess you'd say, poor, and my father was an Italian immigrant who came to this country when he was about 10 years old. So we lived in a part of Rochester that was a sort of lower middle class, I guess you'd say now, but, you know, kids don't know any of this stuff.

I went to high school in Rochester. My interests in art were totally hidden, other than what most kids do that is, to draw and things like that, which I always did. I wanted to take art in high school, but all they had was commercial art. I took a course in that and I didn't like it, so that was the end of my art training.

So when I came around to applying to Alfred, of course, I had no portfolio. I don't think portfolios were required then. I'm not really sure. I certainly didn't have one.

DR. CARNEY: What year was this, Val, that you were thinking about going to Alfred?

DR. CARNEY: It was 1948, my senior year in high school. At that point -- I've told this story before, but I had what I guess you'd call an athletic scholarship to play football, which was what I mostly did in high school instead of art, was play sports, like a lot of kids at that time, anyhow. And I was going to be a coach. That's all I knew what to do.

In my whole family circle of cousins and uncles, no one had ever gone to college except my oldest cousin, who, as it turns out, went to Alfred University. He came out of World War II as a pilot-navigator and on the GI Bill came to Alfred to study medicine; I mean pre-medical school.

DR. CARNEY: And what was his name?

MR. CUSHING: That was Wilson Cushing. And he graduated from Alfred in 1949, I think it was, which my freshman year was '48-'49. But the whole reason I ended up at Alfred was because my cousin -- I found all this out in retrospect, sort of -- but felt that I had some talent in art. And no one else in my family had any connection with that kind of experience, so nobody could recognize this, including me, except that I liked drawing.

But my cousin, in the summer -- no, let's see, it was in the spring because I remember the football coach here, Alex Yunevich, was on the football field practicing his golf swings, and my cousin brought me to Alfred to see his school. And of course it blew my mind. It never even occurred to me or anybody in my family that you could go to college and study art, first of all. And when I saw people doing things that I could hardly comprehend, I mean standing at an easel painting and looking at still-life objects, stuff like that, I just didn't know anything about

that. It was a lost world as far as I was concerned. And I was very excited and immediately wanted to come to Alfred.

So my cousin brought me down to the football field where Yunevich was practicing golf. And it turned out that Yunevich had heard about me, because I made what used to be called "All City" in Rochester playing football, and he was delighted at the chance of having me come to Alfred. So that's how I came to Alfred.

DR. CARNEY: That's a great story.

I wondered if you could tell me about your initial impression of Alfred once you started school, and who maybe your teachers were, that kind of connection, and who some of your fellow students were.

MR. CUSHING: Well, you know, I feel sorry for people starting college these days, in the sense that I'm not sure how much of the kind of naive excitement that I had still exists. It's probably a good thing it doesn't, but at least for me, everything was so entirely new and exciting that it was just absolutely wonderful. And the teachers at Alfred were all wonderful to me. Katherine Nelson was the painting teacher, Marion Fosdick the sculpture, clay teacher. I'm speaking of my freshman year. And Kurt Ekdahl, a Swedish designer, taught what we would now call Foundation, but it wasn't called that then. And they were all wonderful. And everything was so entirely new to me that I just couldn't get enough of it. And many people in my class felt the same.

My freshman class, I think, had 33 students. That was the entire freshman class in what is now called the Art School. It was then called, I think, the Department of Design. There have been a few changes in the name over the years.

So I'm talking 1948, and half the class were veterans from World War II. I just missed that. I was just young enough to not have been drafted. I just missed that. So half the class, though, were veterans, and we were about half men and half women, roughly speaking, which was a little unusual. It was because of the veterans coming back.

So Herb Cohen was the star in our class. Herb Cohen is now a full-time potter in Blowing Rock, North Carolina. But Herb came from the Music and Art High School in Manhattan, and Herb Cohen was on the potter's wheel when he was nine or ten years old in the Henry Street Settlement in Manhattan, Lower Manhattan.

DR. CARNEY: Oh, I didn't know that. That's fascinating.

MR. CUSHING: Yeah. There was a film done of him throwing. In fact, I'd love to -- I wonder if that's still around somewhere. But what you have to understand is, though, that by the time Herb came to Alfred in our freshman year, technically speaking, he could throw better than anybody in Alfred, including the grad students and so on. So it was a bit intimidating to those of us who began to get interested in ceramics.

But in the freshman year, we didn't touch clay. Well, we had a sculpture class, but there was no pottery in a freshman year here. And even in the sophomore year, we just began again a little more clay work, but not pottery. So my teacher was Dan Rhodes in the junior year. That's when we majored. I mean, it wasn't called a major, because everybody majored. There was only one major then, and that was ceramics, in the art school. So everybody took it in their junior and senior year, and Dan Rhodes was the teacher.

And Dan Rhodes was a magnificent teacher. He gave us everything. I think between Rhodes in clay and Katherine Nelson in painting, by the junior year I had narrowed my work down pretty much to those two areas. You could still do electives, but most of your time was in ceramics. And Dan was an incredible teacher and he gave all his time to teaching. I mean, he was doing his own work always, but teaching was something he gave a lot to.

DR. CARNEY: When did you really narrow down that you were interested in ceramics more than painting or drawing, which you expressed an early interest in?

MR. CUSHING: That was a kind of a tough decision, in a way. I mean, my interest continued in all those areas, but what really nailed it for me was in my junior year, where I first got on the wheel. The wheel was really fascinating to me, and I have talked to other friends since about that. And one of the appeals, I'm almost reluctant to say, was the competitive sense of it and the sort of macho sense of it, I guess I'd have to say. And remember, I came out of a sports background, where practice was something I understood. And I could see -- that if you practiced throwing, you got better.

DR. CARNEY: I never thought of it that way. [Laughs.]

MR. CUSHING: And especially Don Pilcher. I don't know if you know Don, but he and I have talked about this, because he was quite an athlete in his early days, too. And we both had a sort of competitive nature that came

somewhat out of sports and easily transferred, especially to throwing. Of all the various ways to work with clay, throwing represented to us that kind of skill-technique edge that we understood from sports.

And it's interesting because when I got to Alfred, I completely dropped sports. I played freshman football because that's how I got here. My scholarship here consisted of waiting on tables in Bartlett Dormitory, and therefore I got free room and board. But then I dropped that because I was so involved in art, and Yunevich never forgave me for that, as a matter of fact. [Laughs.] We lost our friendship.

But what really convinced me, in a way, was in my senior year, Marguerite Wildenhain came to Alfred for two weeks. Dan Rhodes brought her here, who had known Marguerite from California. And in spite of every teacher at Alfred -- it was a wonderful place, and every teacher gave so much to students. I mean, it was really wonderful. But there was no one here then who was a full-time potter. I mean, I hadn't met anyone like that, and Marguerite was the first one.

And of course Marguerite was of the -- how can I describe her? She had a charisma about her like I imagine Frank Lloyd Wright was, you know, that type of person. She was very authoritative, very dogmatic, very much a person who had all the answers, but backing that up was, again, this incredible skill and technique that she had on the potter's wheel. And if you sat there, as I did, and watched her throw, it was like magic, even though by that time, you know, at least I knew the basics of throwing, which, by the way, when Marguerite came -- Dan Rhodes had prepared us for this -- but when she came and she actually became our teacher for this period, we had to start over, because we were doing everything wrong in her eyes. [Laughs.] There was Dan standing there, of course, who was our teacher, but he understood what this was going to be like. And so we had to learn how to wedge again, how to center, I mean all the steps of throwing. But it gave us a clear view of a system of throwing that she had learned as an apprentice in Germany, going through the whole Bauhaus experience that she went through.

DR. CARNEY: So what year was this, Val, that Marguerite Wildenhain came?

MR. CUSHING: This was 1952. And I was never quite sure of this, but I think she stayed with Bob and Sue Turner, because I don't think there was a motel in Alfred in those days. My memory of things like this gets a little hazy, but I know that the Turners had parties for her during this period in which we were square dancing, I remember. And in fact, it was this association with Marguerite and this absolute conviction she had about her life and the life of a potter that did it for me. I said, oh, wow, I've got to do this.

There was one other experience that I slipped over here that I wanted to tell you. And I tell this story often because it really happened and it really did something for me. In my junior year, the summer between my junior and senior years, Charles Harder got a job for me making pots. In this job, I served not exactly an apprenticeship, but I worked for a week with another potter while he oriented me to this situation. I'm holding back what the situation is because it was the bizarre nature of the situation that makes the story interesting.

I was a potter for that summer at a place in the Adirondack Mountains of New York State called Santa's Workshop. [Laughs.] And in Santa's Workshop, there were various craftsmen making toys that, of course, Santa Claus had made every summer for kids. So there was a woodworker, there was a metal worker, and I was the potter. And I was taking the place of this guy who had run this facility for a couple years before this.

Now, you've got to think about this, because the people who make toys for Santa Claus are elves, right? So we had to wear an elf costume. [Laughs.]

DR. CARNEY: I never heard this.

MR. CUSHING: Oh, yeah. I have pictures of this, Margaret.

DR. CARNEY: You do?

MR. CUSHING: Yeah, I do.

DR. CARNEY: Oh, boy. [Laughs.] I'm sure the Archives will want those pictures, Val.

MR. CUSHING: Okay. Well, you know, the thing is, as funny as the situation was, it was a milestone in my life, absolutely, for two big reasons. One, when I first went -- which was when school ended here sometime in June, then I was up there till September -- when I started -- I have a problem that's been with me on and off all my life, which is overweight. And when I went up to be an elf, I was greatly overweight, so I had this elf costume and all this stuff we had. [Laughs.] And when I came back to school in September, I had lost something like 80 pounds, which I did by putting myself on a self-diet. So that was one of the first evidences of self-control that I realize were crucial.

DR. CARNEY: I have to ask you where Santa's Workshop was in the Adirondacks.

MR. CUSHING: It's still there, by the way. It's still operating under that name. And it's on Whiteface Mountain. And one can go up there, as I have done twice now since then just for the nostalgia of the situation. But it's still there. I don't think they have a potter there anymore. I'm not sure about that.

But really, this sense of self-discipline, which came on the one hand from taking control of my physical health myself and what I learned in throwing, at the end of that summer I was a very skilled thrower. I mean, just that practiced every single day. I worked on the wheel every day.

Of course, half the time there were people watching me work. That was part of the deal. And we had our own little house, and a complete pot shop in one end, which was a wheel, an electric kiln, a spray booth, you know, that kind of thing. And everything I made was then sold on the other side, so I had to make souvenir things frequently. I was allowed to make a few other things, but I made these little bowls that I would slip decorate saying "Santa's Workshop" or something like that, you know. And I had another elf on the other side selling my work. [Laughs.]

This was the first theme park in America, I have found out.

DR. CARNEY: I didn't know that.

MR. CUSHING: Yeah. And it started, I think, in '46, something like that. But anyway, so you've got a picture that I came back feeling extremely confident in my -- you know, I was sort of quietly saying to myself, "Well, wait till they see what I can do."

DR. CARNEY: What summer was this?

MR. CUSHING: This was the summer of '51, and my senior year was 1952. And I was thinking -- as I say, there was a competitive edge to this whole thing --and I'm thinking to myself, well, there's Herb Cohen, who was this great thrower, and, you know, I had progressed the way most people do in a year of throwing, so I could do the basic stuff so that I could do this job, but I was much more skilled when I came back. And I was thinking, oh boy, this is going to be wonderful, you know.

And then I came to the second important discovery in my life, which is that technique is not enough. And it was the most frustrating year of my life because, on the one hand, I could make anything on the wheel -- I mean, I really had the skill -- and I had no ideas, and I didn't know what to make. And all I could do was look at books and try to make something that somebody else made, but it was extremely difficult. And then I got drafted.

DR. CARNEY: Oh. This is a great lead-in to my next question, which is to ask you about your travels, which might have to do with you being drafted, or anything else you'd like to talk about your general travels and how they've impacted your work over the years, whether it's residencies or vacations or the draft.

MR. CUSHING: Well, I have to say again what a relatively sheltered life I led because I grew up in Rochester and never left. Well, we took fishing trips to Canada through my childhood, so I had seen Canada, which, by the way -- and this was partly during World War II -- when you went north of Toronto, which is where we used to go fishing, they were all dirt roads. I mean, if you can picture that in the early '40s, the roads leaving Toronto north were dirt roads in those days.

But anyhow, other than that, I had never left Rochester. So in my experience at Alfred, again it was only back and forth. I would go back to Rochester every summer during college years to earn money to come back the next year, by doing construction jobs and stuff like that.

But in the senior year, after we graduated, Herb Cohen and myself and Marty Chodos -- who was another person in our class, who later taught ceramics in a community college in California for several years, Rio Honda Community College, it was -- so the three of us took a trip. Marty had a car. Marty was a World War II veteran, so he had a car, and the three of us took a trip to Denver, Colorado. And we camped up in the Rocky Mountains there, and this was the first time I had ever seen mountains or been anywhere. We also took a trip to Jones Beach in Long Island, and I saw the ocean for the first time. So you can see, then, how limited my experience was in terms of travel and so on.

Being drafted, we all -- both Herb and I were drafted at the same time. We knew we were going to be. This was the Korean War going on. We graduated in June of '52, and I went in the army in September of '52. And we took this trip in between, knowing that we were going to be drafted and, you know, wanting to have some kind of an experience before that took place.

I went through an infantry basic training, as almost everyone did -- this was the height of the war that year -- not

wanting to go to Korea but expecting to go. And Herb Cohen did go to Korea. But what happened to me was, at the very end of my infantry basic training, which was then 22 weeks or something -- it was a huge, long basic training, for some reasons that I never understood except this is how the army functions -- a group of us were taken out of infantry basic training and interviewed and then put into the Military Police. And this was in Fort Dix, New Jersey, where I was training. We went through another 16 weeks of basic training learning to be a military policeman, which is what I did in the army and stayed at Fort Dix and had this job.

Now, the significance of that was two things. That as time went by, I had enough time off -- you know, with a permanent assignment like that, you got a couple days off a week -- I would go to New York City to the Metropolitan and look at pots. And that got to be something. And I've got sketch books filled with drawings I used to make sitting there looking at these wonderful -- this whole world of especially Islamic pottery. That's what attracted me the most at that time, because I used to do a lot of decorating in those days and I was totally captivated by that. So I went to New York as often as possible. And it was during this period when I met my wife, who was a nurse in New York City, so that being the next most important thing.

DR. CARNEY: So give us the name of your wife, her maiden name and all that.

DR. CUSHING: My wife's name then was Elsie Brown. As a matter of fact, she was a private-duty nurse at that time, and one of the people she worked with was Rita -- I can't remember her maiden name then, but she married a high school classmate of mine, Bob Locke. Bob Locke worked for the Chase Manhattan Bank in Manhattan while I was in the army. But he was about to be drafted, so he wanted some advice about the army and so on, so I went to New York to talk to him. And they had invited Elsie to come to dinner because Elsie and his wife worked together as nurses. So that's how I met Elsie in New York. And we got married.

So my army career had no travel, but it was the opportunity to look seriously, almost week after week, at the collections at the Metropolitan that -- I mean, up until then, I had never seen -- remember now, in Alfred we had no museum. We had nothing. We had a small collection called the Glory Hole that had a few things in it that were certainly fascinating, and there were very few slides in those days. We had some slides, the big glass kind that go in those big old projectors.

DR. CARNEY: The lantern slides.

MR. CUSHING: And Dr. Sutton, who was an engineering professor here at Alfred, had been to China several times working on projects in China. And he was there, I think -- well, no, I'm not sure he was there when the railroads were put in and pottery kept turning up, but he did have some sort of a collection of shards, at least. And he used to show us slides of, I think, Ching-te-chen. Did I give you those big slides?

DR. CARNEY: Haven't seen slides.

MR. CUSHING: I ended up with those slides. And I think I gave them to Carla. They might be over there somewhere.

DR. CARNEY: She might have them.

If we could go back just for a moment. Did you give me the whole list of names of your classmates that were interested in clay besides Herb Cohen and Bob Locke?

MR. CUSHING: Actually, Bob Locke was a high school friend.

So there was Herb Cohen, who was by far the most advanced at that point in terms of his interests and abilities, but also in our class was Luis Mendez. Now, Luis Mendez has had a career in clay ever since then, too. He lives near New York City, and he's been an active exhibiting artist since that time.

I must say, though, the main emphasis in the course in those days was on industrial design, and several of our classmates took that route, which I was very interested in myself. And if I hadn't been drafted, I had a possibility of going to Blenko Glass in West Virginia to be a designer. Now, there was an Alfred tradition going on there. Oh, what was his name, Margaret?

DR. CARNEY: Winslow Anderson.

MR. CUSHING: Winslow Anderson, who we all heard about here when we were students because he had been successful in design. And this Swedish professor, Ekdahl, who ran this course, was very influential, also a very strong personality, and it was very intriguing. And remember, we had a lot of veterans then, and they were more interested in getting into design than they were in being studio potters. So let's see. Herb Cohen, Luis Mendez.

Ed Pettengill became a designer for Thatcher Glass in Elmira and then moved on into other areas. We had Richard Homer in our class, who was a great grandson of Winslow Homer, the painter, and he went into

architecture. Oh, dear, you caught me with this one. I'd have to look at the list now. But next year is our 50th reunion, by the way, Margaret.

DR. CARNEY: Wow.

MR. CUSHING: And I'm going to write to all my former classmates and see if I can get them all to come back. Marty Moskof was another one, who became a graphic designer in Manhattan. And I'm leaving off at the moment. I know there are others, but they're not coming to me right now.

DR. CARNEY: Could you tell me a little bit about Charles Harder as an administrator or teacher? How did you interact with him, and what was his position then?

MR. CUSHING: Yeah, he was another of the wonderful people that were in Alfred, certainly, when I came. Charles Harder was then head of the department. He was an absolutely brilliant man and, I think, one of the people that I regret didn't do more writing and didn't do more to communicate what he was all about to the world of clay. I mean, he certainly had a reputation when he came here and studied with Binns and later came back to teach.

He was a very powerful personality, and extremely -- between he and Dan Rhodes, both of whom had wonderful minds and talked to us in philosophic terms frequently, the whole idea of reading and thinking and going deeper than just the initial physical presence of clay and so on, which is what got us all excited, started to come from those people.

And at the same time, in the liberal arts school here, Mel Bernstein was another person who we had contact with because there at liberal arts college, we had to take their foundation course, which was called "Civilization." And it was a very exciting panel of people like Roland Warren, who taught here then, Elsworth Barnard, who went on to -- oh, dear, he went on to one of the Ivy League schools. I mean, there were some wonderful people teaching in the liberal arts college here as well.

And so back to Harder, he was one of these people who talked about ideas and gave us books to read. And so he began more than anyone, but with Dan Rhodes, too, began us doing more than just thinking about the art we were making, but where it came from and where ideas came from.

DR. CARNEY: You got your undergraduate degree at Alfred. Did you follow up on that later on with anything else?

DR. CUSHING: Yes. When I went in the army, I said I was an MP, which I was, and I ended up the last few months working in the recreational shop at Fort Dix, where I taught ceramics. And, you know, it was a part-time situation.

[TAPE CHANGE.]

DR. CARNEY: This is Margaret Carney, interviewing Val Cushing at his studio in Alfred Station, New York, on April 16, 2001, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is Side B of Tape 1, the master tape.

Val, we were talking about how you transitioned from army life into graduate school.

MR. CUSHING: This whole time I was in the army, I had already decided that, somehow or other, that clay was going to be in my life. That happened in my senior year, as I said before. And yet, you know, I didn't know quite what form that was going to take. And while I was in the army, one of my friends had spent some time in Tasmania, and right at that time, I read Alan Moorehead's book about the Great Barrier Reef in Australia, and I was tremendously excited by both these things. And I actually started the process of applying for a Fulbright to go to Australia. Fulbright grants were in their real prime in those years, and I'm sure everyone knows about the Fulbright as a way to deal with payment of loans to countries during World War II and all that sort of thing. So I began looking into this, and that was one of the options I saw for myself.

In the meantime, though, I also knew about graduate school and getting the MFA degree and that sort of thing, and for me that became more and more attractive as time went by. And when I ran this craft shop thing in the army, I began to get a feeling for teaching for the first time. And this was a very profound thing to me because -- I don't know how many people have this experience; again, it may have been truer for someone in my generation -- but my life was totally transformed by teachers and by Alfred and by the experience here. And I never forgot that, and I always wanted to carry that on in some fashion. I mean, that idea didn't solidify as such -- I'll tell you how that happened in a minute.

So, anyway, I had the GI Bill, which was another wonderful benefit of the army in those days. And I got married in 1953 to Elsie, and we moved to Alfred, and I can tell you that was a shock for Elsie, who having lived and grown up in New York City, coming to Alfred was a real experience in moving to the small rural community. But

we were very happy here and, you know, that went well.

Anyway, I was able to go to graduate school because -- I didn't, we didn't have any money, zero money, but we had the GI Bill, which paid enough per month that with a job working as an assistant at the school in graduate school, we were able to do it. And we had no other income. And we started our family then. Our first child was born immediately, so we had a baby when we started graduate school at Alfred.

And I had an assistantship then, which required 10 hours of teaching a week and doing other chores around the school, so that kept my hand in teaching. But what I really wanted to do then was to be a full-time potter. I still couldn't shake that influence of Marguerite Wildenhain and the inspiration that she communicated and the excitement that she communicated about that kind of life. But there was just no way possible. I mean, you know, we had nothing, so there was no way that I could have a studio or a place, no way that I could see, at any rate.

And so I went in to Charles Harder in my second year of graduate school, when I knew I'd be leaving, and we talked about the future. And he more or less just let me talk and sort of express what I was feeling and what my options were and so on. And then he just sort of looked at me, and he said, "Have you thought about teaching?" And then I said, "Well, no." I was so focused on being a potter that I hadn't thought about teaching that way. And he said, "Well, what are the most important things to you in your experience in college?" And I immediately said, almost without thinking -- which, of course, he knew I would say, in a way -- "Well, it was the people who taught me." And then this led me right into it. It just seemed so natural to me then to consider that career.

DR. CARNEY: Could you clarify what years you were in graduate school in Alfred?

MR. CUSHING: I was in the army for two years, so from 1952 to '54 I was in the army, and then began graduate school in '54 to '56. So it was 1956 when I was looking for a job.

And this very year, the ceramics teacher at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign, Donald Frith, had worked out an arrangement to come to Alfred to study with Charles Harder because his orientation was industry; that is, Donald Frith. He was a potter, but he was very interested in industrial design, which, of course, Charles Harder taught at Alfred. I mean, as graduate students, Charles Harder came in for one week, and this was a traditional project that he always did, and in one week all the graduate students had to make a complete set of molds for a teapot and finish it in this week. And so, you know, we all had that kind of experience.

So because Frith was coming to Alfred, he needed to be replaced at the University of Illinois, and Charles Harder set me up for that job. And I can tell you, when we left Alfred, I had an old 1941 beat-up car that my aunt had given me; I rented a U-Haul trailer, a small one, and everything we owned in this world fit in that little trailer. So I drove to Illinois myself and set up our apartment while Elsie and our then two children stayed with my parents in Rochester, and then she finally came on.

And that feeling when I was driving to Illinois was, you know, I never thought I'd see Alfred again. I mean, I had no plans, obviously. I mean, I would never have dreamed that I would be back here teaching then. So I went to Illinois, and during that year a job came up at Alfred, and I was invited to apply, so I did.

I'll tell you a story about that, too, that's bizarre. It has nothing to do with anything, except it was so weird. At that time the University of Illinois had a tiny, little airport, and the only way you could leave then was you would fly from there to Chicago in these little planes, you know, and then get on another plane. There were no jets then, by the way. These were the other kind. So this field was so small that, you know, I drove in the parking lot, parked my car, got in the airport, got in the airplane, and as we were taking off, I could see that I had left my headlights on. [Laughs.] It was so early in the morning. So when I got back, I had no battery in my car. [Laughs.]

Anyway, much to my amazement -- I mean, when I decided to teach, I applied to something like a hundred -- no, there weren't even that many schools that taught ceramics, but Elsie and I -- and Elsie did all the typing -- we applied to schools just for a shot in the dark, just looking for a job, you know, and we went through that experience. But the possibility of coming back to Alfred was just unbelievable to me, even though by then, even though Frith was coming back, they offered me a job to stay at the University of Illinois.

I can give you a perspective here. In 1948 -- no, this was 1956 -- I came back here to teach at \$4,800 a year, and they had offered me \$5,400 to stay at Illinois. But there was no comparison then. In my mind, the possibility of teaching at Alfred -- as I say, I wouldn't even have dreamed of it. Never thought it would be possible. So I was tremendously excited. And so I came back to Alfred and I began teaching here, would be the fall of 1957. That's why I retired in 1997, to tell you the truth. I wanted to keep it an even figure. [Laughs.]

DR. CARNEY: Let's switch tack for just a moment here. And I wondered if you could tell me whether or not you think of yourself as part of an international tradition, or one that's particularly American.

MR. CUSHING: I would say I feel part of being an American potter, but you can't say that without recognition of

roots, so it is kind of a hard question. And I've already mentioned Marguerite Wildenhain, who, of course, was trained in Germany in a strict German apprenticeship. That's what happened in the Bauhaus in those days. You worked with materials and processes before you worked with theory. So she worked for several years as an apprentice potter in the strictest conceivable apprenticeship you could ever dream of. I won't even go into it, but it was incredible.

So there was an influence there that had to do with -- if you wanted to trace that back, I guess you would go back to Rome and Greece in terms of influence. It was her ways of throwing and her form sense. She was a profile thrower, not at all the Japanese system or the Chinese, the Oriental system of reading the clay. It was shape and profile and form, that kind of thing. So that was an influence, for sure.

But at the same time, in my freshman year at Alfred, Bernard Leach came here, and there was another obvious and big influence. It was an extremely fortunate time for me, all these things, to have in the same four years people like Leach and Wildenhain as influences, not to mention Dan Rhodes, who was already here, of course. He was the main -- Charles Harder in those days wasn't doing his own work. Marion Fosdick, another big influence, was still making pieces during my college years, but her influence, certainly on me, was her personality and her wonderful, supportive character, which was great.

DR. CARNEY: What year did Bernard Leach come to Alfred that you got to see him throw and talk to him?

MR. CUSHING: I can easily get diverted here, Margaret. [Laughs.] You know, dates -- Elsie, my wife, before we started this said to me, "Be sure to get the dates right," because I don't get dates right, frequently. [Laughs.] No, it was my freshman year, so that was school year '48-49. 1948 to 1949. And he came, it would have been actually '49; it would have been the spring of that year.

And, I mean, I didn't know anything about Leach or anybody else. I mean, I was a freshman, as I've said, coming out of a completely naive background as far as art and crafts are concerned. But again, the teachers here had prepared us somewhat for this, and others in my classes, especially Herb Cohen, who did know all about Leach and so on. So we had talked this thing over. And at that time, Susan Peterson was a graduate student here. Let me see, who else. I could recall all these names if I looked at a list, but, you know, as always there were graduates -- I'm sorry.

DR. CARNEY: Was Bill Pitney here as a student then?

MR. CUSHING: Bill Pitney was here. Marv Rickel, by the way, whom I just met in Charlotte at the NCECA conference for the first time since then, who was the ceramics teacher at Ball State College in Indiana and who was the teacher of a lot of very well-known ceramists, by the way, carrying his Alfred tradition there; he was a grad student. Karen Karnes -- no, no, no, Karen came later, she wasn't there then. Anyway, there was this kind of thing at Alfred. I mean, there were some wonderful people here.

DR. CARNEY: Wasn't Bob Turner, and maybe Ted Randall, both graduate students in '49, that time period?

MR. CUSHING: Yes, of course they were. And Bob then -- gee, these dates, we're going to have to look at these carefully, but Ted Randall was a graduate student, because he was the teaching assistant when I was an undergraduate. And he used to -- in fact, we virtually prayed for the opportunity of Ted to come and look at our work because Professor Ekdahl was such a bear, we were all terrified of him. But Ted Randall would come around, and he was supportive and friendly, and we loved having Ted look at our work. So Ted was there.

Bob Turner, by the time -- I think he already had his studio in the East Valley by then, but he must have been a grad student then too. But anyway, they were all there.

DR. CARNEY: This is during your undergraduate days.

MR. CUSHING: That's right. This was when Leach first came. He came to Alfred another time, but this was the first time. And there were famous -- I say "famous" to those of us who were there -- dialogues between Charles Harder and Bernard Leach, some of which are in correspondence in the Archives here at Alfred. Their dialogues had to do with the John Ruskin, the whole thing of -- Leach represented the almost Luddite kind of reaction to the Industrial Revolution.

Leach's position was that handmade things had a presence that couldn't be matched by industry, and industrial production wasn't capable of making beautiful objects. And of course Charles Harder had the opposite point of view; not the opposite point of view, but he felt strongly that industrial design was the thing of the future and that it didn't have to be negative as far as art and form is concerned. So we were aware of these things going on, and that certainly, although it was all new stuff for me, it certainly did impress me.

And so the question we started with was about international or outside, am I an American potter and so on. The

thing that makes me say I'm an American potter in terms of this question was that -- and Ted Randall and Bob Turner were both outstanding examples of this, which was to solve in handmade objects the form process aspect of objects. In other words, design. You know, design was an important word to us, meaning that you would design something to function but make it by hand, rather than design and function and industry, which was the other route one could take.

And remember, these were exciting years in design. This was Charles Eames. I mean, you know, all this happened during this period that I'm talking about. I mean, I'm not suggesting that only American potters have worked this way, but after World War II, when there were no more imports from Scandinavia or Europe, there was an American -- that's when the handcraft movement started in this country. We may get to that question somewhere down the line here. But there emerged people like Ted Randall and Bob Turner, who were among the very first who worked in their studios making handmade things and selling them in interior design stores. Those were the outlets. There were no galleries then. I mean, there were galleries, but they weren't the main vehicle for this kind of life. So I was very taken by that idea.

DR. CARNEY: I'll directly ask you the question here, then: Does the function of objects play a part in the meaning of your work?

MR. CUSHING: Yes, they certainly do, you know. And I think that was something that was, I guess, taken for granted at Alfred, anyway. Not that we didn't study sculpture, but sculpture and pottery were separated. That is to say, when we did sculpture, the objective had to do with form and idea, not with vessel; and when we made pottery, we made functional objects. I mean, that was the pottery world in those days. And this is not to say that there weren't, quote, vessels made where function was not the main objective, you know, just the shapes and the symbols of pottery; that was done. But making functional objects was the goal, and it has never changed for me. I have made other things, of course, in my life, and I still do, but nothing gives me the gratification that a functional object still holds for me, and that's been my focus all the way.

DR. CARNEY: This directly leads into my question about how the market for American craft has changed in your lifetime, and kind of your relationship with dealers along that same line, and even if you want to venture into museums and how that's evolved during your lifetime.

MR. CUSHING: You know, I used to say to students in teaching, and I still feel this way, that I was so fortunate. I mean, I was born at the right time in terms of questions like this because World War II happened, and as I've said, it cut off the influences of Europe for a while, which were so much a part especially of objects, and ceramics in particular. So something new had to take place.

And because industrial design became such a big thing, that affected ceramics too. I mean, this was Eva Zeisel designing dinnerware. I mean, this was the period when there was an American market, and there were designers emerging in all kinds of fields, and I'm sure this historically traces the beginning of what we call the contemporary craft movement in the '40s, the late '40s and early '50s.

So at that time, of course I was a student, but very aware of Ted Randall and Bob Turner, who, by the time I was a graduate student, were both running their own studios. And so we were, of course, aware of what was going on there all the time, and some other Alfred people who were not in Alfred anymore but were also living this way.

And so they were selling. And there used to be in Manhattan and other big cities, of course, interior design stores, and it was the interior designers who were promoting the idea of handmade pottery. I mean, there were, of course, museums and there were some galleries, but to my knowledge, I never heard -- I mean, other than occasional shows, invitational or competitive shows like the Everson Museum, the Syracuse show, and there was one in Wichita that we called the Wichita show, there was the Miami show, there were a few shows taking place in museums concerning ceramics; that was starting to happen; but for the most part, for one making a living or trying to make a living, I think it was the rise of craft stores, and that came later. But as I say, those interior design stores -- I'm trying to think of the name. Terrible. It was a really big one in Manhattan. I can't -- but anyway, they both sold there.

DR. CARNEY: We can come back to it.

MR. CUSHING: Yeah. So we were aware of that going on as students, and -- Bonniers, that was one of the ones in Manhattan, and the American craft -- what was the name? They had a craft store also.

DR. CARNEY: America House?

MR. CUSHING: Yeah, America House. Thank you. That was the one. And I actually sold some things there as soon as I began teaching here.

DR. CARNEY: Didn't you work for Andover China at some point? And when did you do that? And tell us about

where that is and if that fits into this picture at all.

MR. CUSHING: You know, that -- yes. It's amazing how you can gloss over things. That was very important to me because this was actually as an undergraduate in 1952. I had a night job working in Andover, New York, a little town eight miles or so from Alfred, where a Mr. Briggs, was his name, who had been, I think, one of the chief -- my knowledge of his background isn't going to be totally accurate, but essentially, he came from Lennox China in New Jersey, where I think he had been their chief ceramic engineer or something like that. And somehow -- I never heard the story of this myself -- but somehow he decided to open his own pottery in Andover called Andover China.

And by the time of my senior year, 1952, it was already diminishing to a great extent, and he hired students, and myself, at that time, anyway -- I'm not sure who else worked there -- but myself and a classmate of mine who isn't around anymore, who was killed in a car accident, but he and I would go at night and make molds for Mr. Briggs. And we even got to design a couple shapes. I made one shape. I remember Charles Harder designed shapes for Andover China. And I'm not sure whether Glidden did, or I don't know about that.

But you know, there was a connection there because this guy, unfortunately -- I never knew the whole story of this, but technically he produced something that looked very much like Lennox China. In fact, it looked so much like Lennox China -- [laughs] -- that I'm surprised he wasn't sued or whatever was going on in those days. But technically he had the clay body, this beautiful, creamy, translucent china, and it was lovely stuff, but he never was able to work out the wrinkles, the technical wrinkles. I mean, there were huge amounts of seconds.

But we had this funny, and by the way, when I was in the army, this was in Fort Dix, New Jersey, which is right near where Lennox China is in New Jersey, and Lennox China used to give the recreational shop seconds, bisqueware, for the army guys to decorate on. So we had stacks of those. And of course I took a bunch of them and glazed them and just took them home. [Laughs.]

And by the way, Winslow Anderson, who was the designer at Blenko Glass, later became the main designer at Lennox China. You have to realize that all through the '30s, '40s, and certainly, I guess, most of the '50s, in terms of the ceramic industry, the designers were coming from Alfred, or had Alfred connections somewhere along the line, not just the designers, but in the engineers, too, in the big industrial plants.

Charles Harder took us, as students, through a tour down the Ohio River to all the big industrial plants. And unfortunately, it had a reverse reaction to me. That's when I really decided to be a potter -- [laughs] -- because I could see that the industrial designers were not being given an opportunity to really design; they were sort of being told what to design. You know, to some extent that was going on.

And we met Don Schreckengost and people like that, who was a designer at Homer Laughlin, one of the big china places there. Anyway -- God, now I'm all lost here, Margaret.

DR. CARNEY: Let me get you back on a different track. Could you tell me about your relationship with actual dealers and when that became important for ceramics, or whether you were selling at other places that weren't just strictly ceramic dealers?

MR. CUSHING: Yeah. The evolution that happened to me was to begin selling in shops the way Ted Randall and Bob Turner had done. But now remember, I was not a full-time potter, but I was a full-time teacher who never stopped making my own work. But it was a little bit different situation, so I couldn't fulfill big commitments to these stores the way one would do if you were a full-time potter.

And at around this time -- now we're talking the late '50s and early '60s, the beginning of my career in teaching and in selling and showing and so on -- as I've said, there began to be more exhibitions in ceramics. I've mentioned the Miami show and these others. And so I began showing in these shows, and I got some awards in these shows quite early on in my career.

I mean, it was a small ceramic world then. I think I knew the name of probably every potter in the country. That's a huge exaggeration, but not as much as you would think. I mean, we sort of knew who we were. And if you look at the old catalogues -- I have some -- of the Syracuse show and shows like that, you'll see these names. You know, Charlie Lakofsky and so on. I mean, we kind of knew each other in a way. And therefore, having a little success like that early on, I began to be invited to invitational shows, and that led to connections with dealers, and that led to what was beginning to happen now were galleries, who were emphasizing the, quote, art aspect of this whole ceramic world and who were gradually becoming the marketplace.

There were craft stores always through this time and there still are, but I think a lot of the prestige, certainly, and the emphasis kind of shifted to galleries. And there, you know, some of them, anyway, were trying to promote ceramics over what would traditionally have been just painting and sculpture. I don't know if you want to get into this whole question. [Laughs.]

DR. CARNEY: Could you name the first gallery that represented you? Did you have galleries that were showing your work specifically? Or name some of the major ones that you've been in in the last 40 years that you've enjoyed relationships with.

MR. CUSHING: My career got a kind of slow start in relation to that, Margaret. I mean, I've been literally in hundreds of exhibitions, and they have been frequently in different museums and galleries that were group shows of one sort or another. I think the first exclusive gallery connection for me was Helen Drutt in Philadelphia, and that didn't happen until the late '70s or early '80s, somewhere in there, anyway. I had shown in exhibitions in the Everson, in Syracuse, and in Rochester, too. In fact my first, my very first piece in an exhibition was in a show called the "Fingerlakes Show" in the Rochester Museum, which they still have, I think.

DR. CARNEY: Mm-hm.

MR. CUSHING: And I got a prize in that show. In fact, Herb Cohen may have also gotten a prize then, or at least he was in the show. It was the first time.

DR. CARNEY: What year was that?

MR. CUSHING: That was 19 -- I was in graduate school. That was in 1954, I suppose, somewhere in there. This is where my dates get a little -- no, no, it couldn't have been. Fifty-five. Fifty-five, yeah.

[TAPE CHANGE.]

DR. CARNEY: This is Margaret Carney interviewing Val Cushing at his studio in Alfred Station, New York, on April 16, 2001, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is Tape 2, Side A.

Do you want to talk more about dealers that you dealt with?

MR. CUSHING: Yes, I do want to say more there, because I realize I've forgotten one that came before Helen Drutt that I do want to mention. It was quite unique. It was in Georgetown, in Washington, called the American Hand. And it was quite an amazing place. One of the two guys who ran it, Ken Deavers, I think was his name -- I understand, by the way, that that gallery is still there. I haven't looked in on it. But in the time I'm talking about, which, oh dear, must have been sometime in the '70s -- I would have to look this up myself; I just can't remember for sure -- but here's what they did.

They would have a series of artists come in and do -- they had a connection with a community college in Maryland [Montgomery College], which has a history of excellent ceramics, and they have sent students here. This name is also out of my head at the moment. [Richard Mower] But what happened was, if you were going to have a show with the American Hand, the show would open on a Sunday, so they would arrange a workshop at this community college, which would start on Friday. Friday night was a slide lecture, Saturday would be a demonstration, you know, that kind of thing, and then Sunday would be the opening of the show at the American Hand. This was very clever because everybody who was at the slide show and the demonstration for sure came to the opening, plus they had a whole big client list.

And it was quite amazing. This is the first time I had ever had an experience like this. The American Hand is on M Street in Georgetown, and the show opened, let's say, either noon or 1:00, something like that, on Sunday. And we got there a few minutes before that to see a line that went down the block and around the corner literally, like people queued up for -- for something, you know? I mean, I couldn't believe my eyes. I mean, these guys really knew how to promote things.

DR. CARNEY: Wow.

MR. CUSHING: And they had a clientele list. And there was another thing about that show that I hadn't expected. When something sold, it was immediately taken out, rather than given a red dot and you wait till the show's over. And I have to tell you another story that leads up to this.

Just before this is when -- and this will date it for us -- when Joan Mondale was the vice president's wife. And as I think is well known now, she was a greater promoter of crafts, being a potter herself. And this is where we first met, was she had some artists to dinner at the vice president's house if they were people whose works were in the collection they had on loan at the vice president's house, pieces from various museums around the country and so on, and a piece of mine was there that was in the Everson collection.

So as it turned out, there was a horrendous snowstorm the night of this dinner, and a lot of people weren't able to get to Washington. So in terms of invited artists, there was myself and Richard Estes, the painter, and one other person. So we got all the attention. I think Motherwell was to have been there that night and various other people, but they couldn't make it. And Joan Mondale was a wonderful, gracious person. In fact, she sat me right

next to her, you know, and -- you know, putting this potter, you know. I mean, anyway, the room was also filled with wealthy people from Minnesota who were giving money to the Mondales.

But anyway, it was very impressive, the idea that here was somebody in government really seriously interested in crafts. Joan Mondale was just great.

Now the point of this story is that she said to me, if I ever had a show in Washington, to please let her know, you know, that she would definitely go to see it. And you know, even then if someone like a vice president's wife went somewhere, they went with Secret Servicemen and the whole bit. Well, so of course I gave her an announcement about the show at the American Hand. But she couldn't come to the opening, which was on Sunday, right? By the time she got there, the show was completely sold out. It was actually sold out the first day. I mean, it's the way those things went. I mean, there were a few scattered pieces, you know, and she came to see the show with her whole entourage of cars and stuff. She told me about this later. So anyway, that was a funny thing. And Joan Mondale has now been honored by NCECA, among other organizations, for her role in supporting crafts.

I'll just tell you this other quick story. In Philadelphia there was a joint conference between what used to be called Super Mud, which Penn State put on, and NCECA, and we had a joint conference together, and Joan Mondale was to receive honors at that conference. Now I have to tell you that if you've ever been to a potters conference like NCECA, the usual dress are jeans and, you know, whatever potters wear, but it's not like suits and ties, okay? So when Joan Mondale arrived, all of a sudden in the hotel came this circle of guys with suits and ties and raincoats. I mean, it was so classic. These were the Secret Service guys, and she was in the middle, and they were walking this way, up, you know.

And of course I came by at that time, as did hundreds of other people, but we caught each other's eye, and, you know, she gave me a big smile, and so I started in to say hello, right? The circle closed. [Laughs.] And then she said, "No, it's okay," and we said hello. But it was that funny juxtaposition. Nobody could have been more obvious at that conference than this group of Secret Service guys. Anyhow.

DR. CARNEY: I am going to drag you back to another question, even though that was a great story, Val. Are there other dealers that you'd like to mention that have been really influential in your career?

MR. CUSHING: It's a good thing we have Margaret here to keep this going straight here.

So there was a gallery in Atlanta, Georgia, that I had a connection with called the Signature Shop, which was then quite an important gallery for crafts and ceramics. And the owners --

DR. CARNEY: Atlanta, Georgia?

MR. CUSHING: Atlanta, Georgia. The owners have both died and now it's in new hands. Well, I know her name too. But anyway, I've been in a couple shows, but I haven't had a one-person show there, which I did have before.

Then what is now, in fact, my main gallery is the Martha Schneider Gallery in Chicago, used to be in Highland Park, and then she moved to Chicago. And I've had several one-person shows with Martha, and she's been a tremendously supportive and important person for me in terms of getting my work into collectors' hands, that sort of thing.

I did another thing that was interesting in connection with this. When Paul Smith was head of the American Craft Council, or the American Craft Museum, I should say, he had a program going -- dates again, it had to be in the '70s, I guess -- where at least I went as an artist-in-residence to the American Craft Museum and demonstrated in the museum for a weekend. And it was very interesting because I was there throwing and a lot of people were coming in and out, and including a lot of dealers and collectors in New York at that time. And so I made a lot of connections that way, you know, for people like Dan Jacobs and others who had heard about me and seen my work but came and sort of made a personal connection. So that was, you know, one of the little kind of networking things that groups like the ACC or the American Craft Museum could do for people.

DR. CARNEY: How many years have you been working with Martha Schneider? And can you give a more definite date on Paul Smith and American Craft Museum? Was it early '70s?

MR. CUSHING: I can give this to you at another time and you can put it in here, because it's in my big résumé, not my little one, you know. A lot of these dates will be there.

My first show with Martha was in Highland Park, and that would have been pretty close to 1988, I would say. That's going to be quite close, somewhere around there. Then I think she moved to Chicago in the early '90s. I can give you these dates, Margaret.

DR. CARNEY: Okay.

MR. CUSHING: So it was during that period. Of course, I have been in some other galleries. I've shown in the -- used to be called the Hand and the Spirit in Scottsdale, Arizona. I've been in the -- oh, what's the one in Philadelphia, not Helen Drutt but --

DR. CARNEY: Called The Works?

MR. CUSHING: Yes. Yes. I've been there.

DR. CARNEY: Do you want to repeat that, since --

MR. CUSHING: The Works Gallery in Philadelphia. Oh, dear. But anyway --

DR. CARNEY: What about the one on Connecticut Avenue in Washington, D.C.?

MR. CUSHING: Well, thank you. That was called the Farrell Collection. And this was Joan Farrell, who opened up this gallery right across from the Metro stop on Connecticut Avenue, just the one below the zoo in Washington. It was a wonderful location. And Joan had all these years run a craft store in Bethesda called Appalachiana, and that was known by crafts people for years and years as one of the good outlets for basically functional, utilitarian crafts. Furniture, ceramics, glass, that sort of thing. And Joan was well-known in that, but she wanted to try the, quote, gallery scene. And unfortunately, it was bad timing, just the way things worked out. The, quote, craft galleries were kind of beginning to sink right about that time, and glass was starting to take over.

DR. CARNEY: When was this?

MR. CUSHING: [Laughs.] I knew you'd ask me that.

DR. CARNEY: It was in the 1990s, I know that.

MR. CUSHING: The late '80s or -- you're right, it was in the, well, I think the late '80s and early '90s, but right in that period, yeah. And you know, if you talk to people like Mark Lyman, who runs the SOFA in Chicago, but before that was called the Navy Pier show, where galleries brought in their people's work and so on, and I had been featured in a couple of those with Martha Schneider. But in the beginning of those shows, ceramics was the big item, but then glass gradually took over, and ceramics began to diminish and glass objects became the focus. And this began to happen in the galleries, too.

Joan -- I was the first person in Joan's gallery. I think I had the first one-person show with her. But I also was kind of a consultant for her because she was new to -- not new to ceramics, of course, but to people whom she thought of as gallery people rather than the craft store, you know, that kind of thing. And so I helped her with names and people to invite and that kind of thing. And we had a -- you know, it was an excellent place for me. In fact, I had an exhibition there with my son, who was at that time a painter, who is now a potter -- this is Eric Cushing -- and we had a joint show, his paintings and my ceramics, with Joan Farrell. But it didn't last.

DR. CARNEY: I happened to see that show. It was a great show. I remember it.

Could you tell me whether or not you've had involvement with the Penland School of Crafts, Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, Arrowmont, Pilchuck, Archie Bray, or any other educational facilities?

MR. CUSHING: [Laughs.] All of the above, except Pilchuck. Now, the fact is I have taught in all of those places, including Anderson Ranch, which is another one, Peters Valley, another one in Pennsylvania. I've taught twice at Penland and twice at Anderson Ranch and once in the other places. I'm a great supporter of these places. And let me say Archie Bray is in particular significant to me, because in 1968 I had a grant to study at Archie Bray. This was when Dave Shaner was running Archie Bray, and Jim Flaherty, who was his assistant then, who had just gotten his MFA at Alfred. Dave Shaner, of course, had gotten one here earlier.

The Alfred connection at Archie Bray, I think, is well understood. When Ken Ferguson took over the Bray after Pete Voulkos and Rudy Autio left -- Ken wasn't the next one; there were a couple in between, but Ken, I think, made the biggest change at Archie Bray. And then, of course, he was from Alfred, and then Jim McKinnell came; and there were others there. Anyhow, Dave Shaner was sort of groomed by Ken Ferguson to take over when Ken retired, or left and went to Kansas City. So Dave Shaner took over. And Jim Flaherty was another who was to have been the director, although that never did develop.

Anyway, I was there for one summer in 1968, and the whole mystique of Archie Bray hit me. It tends to have that effect on one if you go there. There is something very special there. This is not to say that this doesn't exist in these other places we've mentioned. I mean, Haystack, for instance, is this gloriously beautiful place. And I had this cabin that overlooked the ocean. I mean, I never felt like leaving my cabin, it was so beautiful. [Laughs.]

And Penland, you know, up on the mountain. All these places have a great deal to offer. And I'm going to come back to that in a minute.

But Archie Bray, I was there for eight weeks, and I did a significant body of work there. It was just a wonderful summer. By that time we had four children, and the whole family came, and we stayed in what had been a gold miner's cabin back up in the national forest. We had a glorious summer. So Archie Bray was very special to me and I've been a strong supporter of that ever since, although, like most of us, I've donated a pot for the auction to each of these places we've just mentioned for several years now because we want to support them.

I say "we" meaning the people who have been around as long as I and who are known in the field. We all want to support these places because it represents a way to approach clay not through the university but through another angle. The alternative education offered by places like Penland, Anderson Ranch, Archie Bray, and so on have become a tremendously important part of the field.

DR. CARNEY: As a corollary to that, I know that you've taught summer school at Alfred. And how does that fit in with the picture of or comparison of different programs? How does that relate to the Archie Bray summer programs and your residencies?

MR. CUSHING: I think that's a very important part of the picture. I think we probably should discuss a little bit the relationship of how one gets into ceramics, that is, through the route of the university or through some other route. But in relation to this question, the Alfred summer school has been a very important one through the history of contemporary clay in America. Charles Binns taught summer school in the early 1900s, which brought people like Robineau at Syracuse and a long list of others who became influential themselves in education and ceramics in America. That was carried on by Charles Harder after Binns left, and Dan Rhodes, and then myself. I became the person who directed the Alfred summer school for something like 12 years in a row.

And it was, I have to say, a very influential part of the picture, because it brought people here. And let us say that the main significance, in my mind, at least of the Binns-Harder-Rhodes-Cushing summer school, was an emphasis on technology and the whole question of clay and glazes and how to make them. This has been, of course, an Alfred tradition ever since Binns, and it brought and will always bring people to Alfred who want that kind of information as long as it's still presented here.

And those summers, where I used to give a lecture every day. This was a six-week course initially. Under Kathleen Collins, the dean of what has become the Art School at Alfred, we -- summer school had been dropped for a few years, and under Kathleen it began again, and under my direction again, and became a four-week course. It had been a six-week. So in that six weeks we could cover, we did cover virtually what a semester would be in a normal college year. And I used to give technical exams in the summer school and this hour lecture every day on clay and glazes, and then lab experiments, just as we did in the traditional Alfred technical course. And then, of course, the rest of the time was studio, making things either on or off the wheel.

So the Alfred summer school -- first of all, there are literally hundreds of high school teachers who came for this course and always did, and college teachers. This is still true. The Alfred summer school continues under John Gill now, for the most part, and visiting artists who come here. It is an important thing, and it is different than the courses at Penland and Haystack and Anderson Ranch and these other places, largely in the time commitment, four weeks now and six weeks before, where most of the courses in the other places are two weeks, although they have now fall terms in some. I mean, I won't go into all these.

But it was, in my opinion anyway, it was the opportunity to get into not just studio and the aesthetic aspect of clay, but the technical part. And I think Alfred has both been condemned and praised on this point. That is, in some people's minds, we always used to run into the idea that Alfred was a technical school and nothing else. You know, this gets into the weird kind of elitism and development of American ceramics.

DR. CARNEY: Can you discuss the difference, if any, between a university-trained artist and one who has learned his or her craft outside academia? And then I guess that would lead into what's been your most rewarding educational experience, if you think so? [Laughs.]

MR. CUSHING: Well, yeah. That point, of course, is one that's always been on one's mind the whole time. I mean, I taught for 40 years here at Alfred, and I left it believing as strongly in it as I did when I started, that is, in the value of a university approach to learning ceramics.

And the obvious difference is that in a university setting, for the most part -- you know, I can't speak for every school, but for the most part -- one enters ceramics through art. You learn the vocabulary, the language, the fundamentals, the foundation of art. We don't differentiate whether you're going to be a potter or a painter or a sculptor. You enter through the study of the language of art. And I think this gives one a certain background, at least -- you know, it doesn't for everybody, but it does provide a background. And let us not forget art history in this package, a crucial part because -- obviously you can see what I'm saying -- it's the broad scope of

education; it's not just the specific craft.

Okay. Now what you lose in that system and what one can easily lose is, first of all, the affiliation with the functional aspect of craft. And when you study art and then apply it to ceramics, there's a sort of natural flow there that leads one into sculpture and away from the notion of -- I mean, you know I'm making huge generalities here and there are exceptions on every side of this, but the fact is, I believe, there is a main thrust. And if one were to look at the ceramic programs in America today, I think it would be quite clear that the emphasis will be on the sculptural aspects of clay.

Now, you know there are very clear and obvious exceptions to that, but I'm speaking of main trends that seem clear to me. I mean, I've lectured in schools all over this country, and I see it. I jury shows and I see it. And I seem to be putting this in a somewhat negative light, and that's only because I have such a conviction about the functional object as an object which can be considered an art object as much as anything else. That discussion isn't even important to me anymore; it's so clear to me personally.

So when you approach ceramics through the, quote, other system, meaning either as an apprenticeship experience with another potter or going to these alternative education places like Penland, Haystack, et cetera, you get a focused but shortsighted approach to what you're making, which can have the result of people who are either limited in their imaginative range, shall I say -- that is, what they make might tend to be what their master made, if that was the case of an apprenticeship -- or the difficulty to find ideas. That's what you learn in art school, is how to find ideas, how to develop ideas.

And I think it was clear to me in summer school; this happened time and time again. People would come with various backgrounds, not from art school, and with extreme frustration, somewhat the frustration I expressed earlier on here about having skill but no ideas. The only problem for me was that it just took time for this. Even though I had been through art school, you know, it took time to begin to bring this together. So I would see people who would say to me, "Well, how can I make my forms better?" And I would often say, "Take a drawing course somewhere. Just take a night course. You know, just get into some other way of thinking about art besides clay."

Now, this is not to say that some wonderful potters have not emerged in the history of ceramics, both past and present, who have not been to art school. Creativity is not limited to anything, right? I mean, there are people who were musicians who became potters and who were able to bring that transfer of approach from that field to this field. I mean, you know, there are all kinds of ways to do it. But I still believe that an art school is a very good way to get into it.

DR. CARNEY: Other than your sort of apprenticeship at Santa's Workshop, did you have anyone that you apprenticed with? You mentioned your influences by Marguerite Wildenhain and others, but was there somebody that specifically you apprenticed with and you could use that term?

MR. CUSHING: No, there really wasn't, Margaret, but if we talk about mentor, that's another way to look at it. And you know, my career happened so fast, in that, you know, my four years as an undergraduate, two years in the army, two years in graduate school, and I was teaching. And it was really too soon. And I must say I had to rely in my first teaching experiences completely on how I was taught. So I would present things in ways that Dan Rhodes presented them to me, and Charles Harder and all my Alfred people I would sort of fuse. I mean, when I taught summer school as a graduate student, I taught it with Charles Harder, by the way, and so he was such a mentor for me.

I just have to tell you one story here. This is a quicker one. But Charles Harder used to give technical lectures, the way I did when I taught summer school, and critiques. And I remember this one critique, the table filled with pots of people from summer school. We would have about 50 or 60 people, by the way, in each of these summers, and they were a total mix of ages, of backgrounds, of experience. I mean, you couldn't have found a greater mix of people, which is another way to say that there were very few there who had real understanding of everything that was taking place in the summer school.

And at this critique, Herb Cohen and I, who were both teaching, stood there as graduate students and listened to Harder critique this table of pots -- and we were there a whole morning, probably three hours -- in which he gave the whole history of ceramics. It was the most incredible, brilliant thing I have ever heard anybody do. I mean, and for Herb and I, you know, you always learn more when you know more, and we were just sitting there listening to this stuff and the insights, and it was absolutely brilliant, you know? And it was that kind of thing that made me regret so much that people didn't know Harder this way.

Now I forgot where we were? What was I answering?

DR. CARNEY: We were talking about mentors.

MR. CUSHING: Okay, so I think I made that clear, that while I had not been an apprentice, only in the sense that Marguerite in that short time became our, quote, master, but looking at Bob Turner and Ted Randall, who were both studio potters when I was in school and then who later became my colleagues and my closest friends for most of my career, there is no question that I've been influenced by if not the exact character of their work, by their philosophic position, by their presence as artists. So that was a crucial thing for me.

DR. CARNEY: Let me ask you a slightly different question. The Archives of American Art would like to know about the quality of your workspace, your studio and that kind of thing. And then related to that, can you tell me how your work has changed over the years? And has your studio influenced that?

MR. CUSHING: [Laughs.] Uh-huh. As we sit and I answer that question, Margaret and I are surrounded by glass on east, south, and west sides that are full panels. And I'm looking out into nature in our 60-acre farm here in Alfred, as I have done since 1983, worked in this barn which was a dairy barn converted to a studio. And I must say, Bob Turner when he moved to Alfred did the same thing, converted a barn into a studio. Land was very --

[TAPE CHANGE.]

DR. CARNEY: This is Margaret Carney interviewing Val Cushing at his studio in Alfred Station, New York, on April 16, 2001, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is Tape 2, Side B. And I should mention that there's a master copy and a backup copy. So use whichever one you like.

We were just talking about your studio and the incredible place in nature that this barn has been placed.

MR. CUSHING: Yes. Well, this studio as it now exists has had a big influence on my work. And just let me go back to say that in 1983, I received an NEA grant, the individual artist grant, which made it possible for me to -- it was \$25,000 in those days -- that gave me the opportunity to completely renovate my studio, which up until then, as I said, had been a dairy barn. I had at that time just worked in one small part of it. And I had heat, but it was very primitive. Water used to freeze in my glazes, for example, and I used to throw with hot water to keep my hands from freezing. [Laughs.] I mean, as I said, you know, Elsie and I have four children, and we had a struggle.

So the NEA grant in 1983 allowed me to completely rebuild this barn into this studio as it now exists, with Henry Bauer, who is a local builder in Alfred and who has interests beyond what most local builders had at the time. Anyway, Henry and I fixed this place up so that it's a wonderful environment.

And I have to say that I've never stopped working. That is, in my first few years I had no studio, I worked at school. And the school in those days, Alfred used to close. Students could not work beyond midnight. This was in the late '50s and early '60s. And that included graduate students. And people like Victor Babu, for instance, were graduates then, when I first started teaching here, Ken Ferguson, Norm Schulman, Ken Price, people like that. Now, can you imagine telling them they couldn't work past midnight? It created a lot of problems.

And I, on the other hand, couldn't do much work before midnight because I was never able to say no to people. My studio was a little office off the main throwing room at Alfred at that time, and so I'd be in my studio working at night, but people would be knocking on the door asking me questions, and I'd always answer them. But at midnight, then I could work. And I used to work several hours at night. I don't know, it's only something you can do when you're in your 20s. [Laughs.] But these guys used to knock on the window and I used to let them in so they could work in the studio -- [laughs] -- if they promised not to bother me. So there are a lot of stories about that.

Anyhow, having this studio, as I said, even though I always worked and always managed to work one way or another -- if the drive is there, you will work -- but converting this to a space that really invites me in, that's the difference now. And it isn't just a place to make pots. I draw up here. I sit and think up here. I listen to music up here. I mean, you know, it's an environment that really brings me into my own life and thoughts and that kind of thing.

And we've mentioned nature several times, but there's nothing that has been a greater influence on my work than nature, than a kind of focused look at nature. And I bring it to my work in glazes sometimes, in forms sometimes, but it's always present. So when I sit at my wheel, I'm looking directly at a field of pine trees and grass and a cherry tree and bird feeders, and often see deer walk by and other animals -- some I want, some I don't want. I've had raccoons living in my barn and things like that. But that immediacy to nature has, in terms of influence in my work -- I can only say that having this space and this studio has been a chance to focus more.

DR. CARNEY: Can you describe the equipment, like what kind of kiln you use, pug mill, things like that, because I think for history purposes, it might be useful to even name brands or sizes or something.

MR. CUSHING: Yes. Certainly I would like to do that. I have always thrown on the Randall Wheel. This was a kick wheel designed by Ted Randall, motorized. And until the early '90s, that has been my kick wheel -- my potter's

wheel. I also now have a Soldner Wheel, which is now my favorite wheel. My son Eric, who is in the process of being a potter, likes the Randall Wheel, as I always did, so when he's here, we throw together sometimes, and he uses one and I the other.

I have a Venco Pug Mill, which I use partly because I had a wrist problem in the early '90s, had to have surgery to remove a problem in my wrist, which was brought about, according to the specialist I went to, by wedging. He had me describe various things that potters do. And as a matter of fact, at this time I was making large pots and wedging large pieces of clay, and that combination of wedging and throwing, centering, that kind of thing, kind of wrecked my wrist. So the pug mill, of course, is a de-airing pug mill, so when I put clay through that, I don't have to wedge it. And I wedge small pieces, of course, and so on. So I had the pug mill.

And I have a 70-cubic-foot natural-gas kiln that I fire in. I fire in reduction, although since my experience in England a year ago, I have developed an interest in oxidation now, which I haven't had since I was a graduate student. I have a small electric kiln designed by Dave Fredrickson, who is a kiln-room technician at the College of Ceramics. I expect to get a larger electric kiln soon, but right now I have a small electric kiln and a large gas kiln, which I built out of soft brick, insulating brick. And it's been a wonderful kiln. It's a little large. I would like to have a smaller kiln. I'll probably build one soon.

So otherwise my studio is -- oh dear -- something like, well, I've forgotten the square feet now, but it's an L shape, approximately 25 feet across and 50 feet long. And in the L, in the other side, it's 35 feet. And I work off tables, and I have all the usual things. I glaze mostly by dipping, so I have large trash can containers filled with glaze. And I use something like 25 different glazes in my work. So that's all here.

DR. CARNEY: Although many people love you as a teacher and a million different ways, you're really known as a glaze wizard. And can you speak to that? Is that what you think your greatest contribution has been to the field so far, or is it something else?

MR. CUSHING: It's interesting, Margaret. That question reminds me of something, a very poignant thing that Dan Rhodes said to me once. We were talking about things like what we're doing now, like I'm doing now with Margaret. I didn't ask Dan if he had any regrets about anything, but somehow that tone came into our conversation. And Dan said he felt disappointed in his life that he was known for his books and not for his work. And, you know, I'm not comparing myself to that in any sense at all, but I have done a lot of work with glazes. It's been one of the things I taught during my career, and so when you teach it, you know, you learn it better than anybody else. It's the way teaching goes.

There's Frances. My granddaughter is now outside on the lawn here. Could we stop for just a second?

[Break.]

MR. CUSHING: So the reason I mentioned that little thing about Dan Rhodes is that because it's been my course at Alfred, this clay and glaze course -- and I want to point out that's just one of the courses I taught here. I also taught the studio courses and graduate students and so on. But I did do the technical class, and naturally I've become somewhat known in that field too, certainly not to the degree of Dan Rhodes, because the Rhodes book [Daniel Rhodes and Robin Hopper. *Clay and Glazes for the Potter*. Krause Publications, 2000.] -- which has, incidentally, just been republished and revised by Robin Hopper -- but that book is still looked on by people as one of the basic books that one needs to get into this field, and I believe that's true.

On the other hand, I have, because of my opportunity to teach this class here at Alfred and the students we have here, I've remained interested in glazes, and I've developed a lot glazes. And I've always carried on really what I consider one of the Alfred traditions, which has been that glaze information is public; it's not private. And I've always shared everything that I've developed with students, and students have developed a lot of them for me in the sense that, in giving lab projects, I always formulated certain glazes to illustrate certain things and then had students test them. And, you know, we all gain from that kind of thing.

So after 40 years, practically, of doing that, that has become a big part of my life and my work, and I think I'm somewhat known for that, too. But as with Dan, you know, I feel that's only part of what I am, and I certainly like to communicate my work and what it represents as well as the technical part. But I believe very strongly in the connection between the aesthetic side of art and the technical skill side, the scientific side, if you want to put it that way. I believe in that. That was a concept Binns brought to Alfred, and it was carried here by Harder and Rhodes, and I still -- and I believe in it too.

DR. CARNEY: Val, can I ask you about how you think your work has evolved or changed over the years?

MR. CUSHING: It definitely has evolved and changed, but I think it's the kind of evolution that is measured more in subtleties than in major breakthroughs, if I can put it that way. When I look at my work, I see things in the forms that -- I mean, as we speak, I'm looking at a table full of platters and covered jars and bowls, and I see

things in them that I have thought or that have evolved in my work at an earlier time, and I see things in them that I've never done before.

For instance, I'm working on a lid for these small canister jars that is different than any lid I've ever made before. But the difference is not, as I say, it's not an earthshaking, profound difference, like Picasso going from the blue period to another period, [laughs] you know, but rather it has to do with subtleties for the most part. But my work, I have always felt -- and I want to express this -- that one of my responsibilities as a teacher has been to develop my work and share that with students here and with anybody else.

In other words, the opportunity to experiment is what teaching has given me that full-time potters have a much harder time doing. Not to say that they don't do this, but to be trying out new thoughts and new ideas and new glazes for a person supporting themselves as a potter is difficult, because, you know, that doesn't always work out. When you try something new, it doesn't always work, and if you're selling your work and making your living at it, that puts you in a difficult position. So I think that teachers have the great benefit of time and opportunity to develop their work without such a dire consequence if it doesn't succeed.

So my work, I would say the way I see my work, anyway, is strongly connected to what I love and like about jazz as a medium. And I have a huge jazz collection, I should add here. And the recent Ken Burns series on jazz was a wonderful contribution, I felt, and I have those tapes and so on. What I see about jazz and my own work all rests in the word "improvisation." And I see myself; I've worked this way. I mean, these jars I'm looking at now all were made with the same weight of clay, but I brought to each of them changes in form and direction that come about not from preconceived drawings, although I draw all the time, but I don't draw to make the piece like the drawing; I draw to open up certain areas of thought about form.

But when I get on the wheel and start throwing, with the limitation that these are functional pots, and they all have the same opening at the top so your hand can get in and take out what's inside, and they all are made from the same weight of clay, but they are all different. And the difference is what I see in jazz, where you have a melody and a structure, but improvisation takes it in some personal direction. So that's the way I evaluate my own work. And the developments that come, whether they be in form or decoration -- I'm working with slips right now that I haven't done in a long time. And so I see my work evolving as I get more insight and more feelings about one thing or another.

I mentioned there's a period in my work where my ideas came directly from looking at fruit and squash and nature forms like that. Then I left that and shifted my interest to architectural columns, and my work was based on that. And then I came to a period where I was bringing those two ideas into the same piece, sort of contrast feelings of soft nature forms with rigid architectural forms. And so the conceptual part of my work comes from those kinds of thoughts. But the greatest pleasure for me still today is this idea of sitting down with 20 or 30 pieces of clay, making a particular form and playing with the variations of that form in each piece.

DR. CARNEY: Do you actually listen to jazz while you're throwing?

MR. CUSHING: I do. I do listen to jazz a lot, although I listen to other kinds of music. I have very eclectic taste that way. But I listen to jazz the most. And there are times in my work where I have absolute silence, too. That was one of the things about teaching. It was a constant battle to get students to turn off the music, because there are times when, if it didn't bother them, it was bothering someone else. You know, this is one of these classic things. But I find when I am deeply thinking out a particular direction or something, I don't have anything on. But there are other times when the music definitely brings me into something that I couldn't -- I'm not certain that it transfers directly, this improvisation thing I'm talking about, but I really feel it might, and I use it that way.

DR. CARNEY: It's April 2001, and can you tell me the difference in what you're -- you told us what you made for a living when you were hired at Alfred and your possibility at Illinois. Can you tell us what average pots sell for that -- you know, how that price has changed from 40 years ago or longer, and what you're doing now, just for historical record?

MR. CUSHING: Yes, that's another one of those things that we all think about a lot. I do continually. Just in general, the functional pieces that I make, which I've always made right back to the beginning, things like mugs and bowls and small covered jars, those things that we use in our homes -- well, first of all, when I first began selling, a lot of things were sold on a consignment basis, which meant in those days -- this sounds astounding to me now -- but I had some outlets that were 70 percent to the artist, 30 percent to the store on the consignment. Then it gradually went to 60/40 and then to 50/50. That was even consignment. But a direct selling, wholesale selling, was always for me 50/50 just in terms of the arrangements with either stores or galleries, as far as that goes.

So, you know, I would say that in general, the biggest increase in prices for me came when I had more affiliation with galleries rather than craft stores. And galleries have tended to emphasize more these -- now we get into all

these funny words -- but more one-of-a-kind pieces. I've never made strictly production ware. I do repeat forms sometimes. I might make two or three dozen mugs all the same shape or a few things like that, but generally speaking, my pieces are essentially one-of-a-kind pieces. So I would say that things like these covered jars, which you might call canister jars, that would fit in the kitchen and have sugar or tea or rice or something in, would sell for something like \$20, and I'd be getting half of that.

DR. CARNEY: When was that?

MR. CUSHING: That would have been in the late '50s, or certainly let's say in the '50s. That same jar now, the ones I'm looking at, which I'm getting ready for a show, these will be on sale at the end of April for about \$200 each.

Now, this pricing thing is so difficult because we all know it has to do -- there was a panel at the recent NCECA conference in Charlotte in which Tony Hepburn and Tony Morino and the woman who teaches -- well, I can't remember her name now, but they were all talking about things that came back to this in one way. And Tony Morino made this big point of saying one of the dirty secrets of NCECA -- meaning to potters -- is that there are students out there just coming out of school who can make things as good as, and look exactly like, the pieces that people make who have been making things for 30 or 40 years, and that the difference is that one sells for ten times what the other sells for.

In other words, on the skill level, there are people capable of making anything that any of us can make who have been working at it much longer. And of course that's true. It's always been true. But a student can't sell something for the price that I can sell something for until they develop a reputation. And therefore, a lot of it has to do with one's reputation, and the ability to price things has to do with things like that and with the galleries and the clientele that a gallery has. So a gallery in Manhattan or a gallery in Chicago or in major urban situations where there are competitive galleries can usually charge more for things than galleries elsewhere. I mean, this is all obvious kinds of things.

And the problem for me is that I have never lost my belief in making things accessible to people. Since I make functional pots, I want them, I would like them to be used. I would like to think that people buy them to use them. But I know the reality of that is there's a certain number -- and whatever that might be, I'm not sure -- but there's a certain figure, I think, beyond which people won't use something because they've paid so much for it they don't want to break it.

DR. CARNEY: [Laughs.]

MR. CUSHING: And that's a true conflict for me because -- in fact, I give away a lot of pots. I love giving away pots [laughs], because I don't have to think about anything except the pleasure somebody will get from it. Okay. But, you know, I also want to protect, in a sense, the people who are full-time potters. I mean, anyone who teaches, who has a teaching income, can undersell anybody. I could sell my pots for \$5 apiece and they would sell like crazy. So I feel an obligation, and I've always felt an obligation, to be careful about that in relation to full-time potters, many of whom are former students, many of whom are friends that I know all around the country. So I'm always aware. I sell in places where they sell, and I never sell for less, and even though it sometimes makes a price on my work that I don't like.

I mean, other than Warren MacKenzie and a few other examples who have an amazing tradition of selling very inexpensively, I don't know any full-time potter, for example, who can make a teapot and sell it for less than \$200 to \$250 to \$300, and so that's where I price my teapots, or sometimes more. And yet I wonder how many people really use these teapots when they've spent what their color television costs on a teapot.

DR. CARNEY: If you were to list -- and I don't mean to put you on the spot here too much -- but if you were to list, like, your favorite potters, your contemporaries or people in the past, who would you list just if you were going to list 10, knowing that maybe there's a hundred that you like?

MR. CUSHING: I don't want to put language into this discussion, but unfortunately, I think we have to make this one distinction that is sort of commonly accepted out there now: that is, pottery being the functional, useful things; the vessel being those forms which are pottery shapes but are not meant to be used; and then sculpture. And these categories have already existed in the history of ceramics, I guess, if you look at it a certain way, but there is quite a different emphasis on them now. And I have favorite potters in all those categories, or favorite ceramists, I have to say now. I can't say potters anymore because they're not all potters.

But when it comes to functional pottery, the kind that I'm looking at now on this table of my work, names that leap to my mind immediately are Ellen Shankin, Sylvie Granatelli, Michael Simon. These are three that come to my mind very easily. Jeff Oestreich, another one. These are people who have developed an individual style that is very strong, and they've always kept for the most part to the functional pieces. This is very difficult, you know, because I do have a great many friends and whose work I admire a great deal more, some of the younger

people, I'll put it that way, people like Peter Beseaker, who is out there now, Josh DeWeese, another one. These are people whose work I think has achieved something very special and I think a great deal of them. But truly, this could be a very long list.

When it comes to the more vessel, sculpture things, it gets even more difficult in a way, because one's personal biases come out. I guess I would like to say that I think Bob Arneson is someone I've had tremendous admiration for because I think he, in the various periods of his work, has brought something very special to clay. I feel somewhat that way about Ken Price. The influence and importance of a person like Peter Voukos has been said so many times I don't need to put that in again, but I have tremendous admiration for what he did to this field. And for my personal taste, it has more to do with his influence than with his actual work. I feel the same way about Bernard Leach. It isn't so much his work that I admire as what he did in his thinking and writing and the way he lived his life and encouraged potters. I mean, you know, we all have things like that about other people.

DR. CARNEY: Whose work do you use in the house?

MR. CUSHING: Well, I don't want this to sound bad, but I use Val Cushing's work in the house. [Laughs.]

DR. CARNEY: Good safe answer, Val.

Could you tell me whether or not you've done any commissions?

MR. CUSHING: That's not something I've done a lot of, but I have done an occasional one. I suppose the one that sort of fits best in that category was a building in Dallas, Texas, which is a combination office and living building -- I don't know the name of the building, and I have never yet seen this myself, even though I've been to Dallas -- but nevertheless, I was commissioned to make three vessels for this building. In the lobby of the building -- this was a very ostentatious building; it was filled with marble and all kinds of things, and there was a long corridor in the lobby that led to a fountain and whole marble columns and a whole marble wall, and then they provided three shelves on this wall behind the fountain for three vessels. And I think they came to me on this one because it was this period when I was doing architectural -- that is, pieces that showed an influence to the certain aspects of columns.

DR. CARNEY: When was that?

MR. CUSHING: Well, I'm still doing that a little bit, but that came actually when I stopped making things that I called acorn- or apple-influenced forms --

[TAPE CHANGE.]

DR. CARNEY: This is Margaret Carney interviewing Val Cushing at his studio in Alfred Station, New York, on April 16, 2001, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is Tape 3, Side A.

On the last tape we were just talking about your commission in Dallas, Texas, the three vessels for the lobby. Would you like to continue that?

MR. CUSHING: Yes. Just to finish that story, the architects of that building sent me samples of the various tiles and a little sample of the marble and so on, so that I would have the right color context in mind for the way I did my pieces. And I did these, for me, large pieces -- I guess they were four feet high, something like that -- thrown pieces, which were based on aspects of the column that I had been working on in my work. I think there were two large marble columns on either side of this fountain, and I think they were drawn to my work somehow in relation to that.

Anyway, I had all these samples and everything, and I did the pieces, and I was quite pleased with them, and they went down there and they were installed. And the agent who was the go-between that hired me, so to speak, and worked with the architects sent me photographs of the installation, which was the first time I had seen, and slides of the same.

And it was a bit of nightmare experience for me, because everything was exactly the way they said it would be, except the shelf things in the wall where my pieces were placed were supported by a structure that was covered by tiles; and I had seen the color of the tiles and I knew what they were, but what I didn't know was when they installed the tiles, they had about an inch-thick strip of mortar between each tile which was bright white. So here were these earthen, brownish-colored tiles, and my glazes were all in harmony with that, on these shelves, and from a mile away you could see this gridwork of white mortar holding up these shelves. I mean, it was absolutely horrible. And I tried to do something about it but I couldn't. So that was the end of that commission.

But other than that and a couple of other --

DR. CARNEY: When was that commission?

MR. CUSHING: That again would have been in the '80s. That's as close as I can come to it out of my head.

I have done small commissions like making groups of things for people, but nothing that really has to do with large -- you know, I made a dinnerware set for somebody once; I've made tea sets; I've done things like that, but nothing more.

DR. CARNEY: Val, when we were talking earlier about galleries that were important to you, I think there was one other that you mentioned during one of our breaks that you'd like to talk about.

MR. CUSHING: Yes. The trouble sometimes with speaking sort of spontaneously, the way we're doing this interview, is that one tends to forget certain things. But actually, at the moment right now in 2001, one of my main outlets is a craft store and gallery called the Cedar Creek Gallery in Creedmoor, North Carolina, owned by Sid Oakley. This has been a wonderful coming together between us, and my work is shown there all the time, and it's really a major outlet for me, as it is for several other potters whose work I admire. So I did want to be sure to mention this. And of course I'm sure I will have forgotten some other places. But right now this one is important to me.

DR. CARNEY: Another thing that we were talking about during the break that I think would be really very interesting is about the workshop phenomenon in the United States. Could you talk about that?

MR. CUSHING: I think this is important. To my knowledge, I don't know of anyone who has seriously researched and studied and written about this. I hope someone does someday, because I think it is a phenomenon that we can talk about in, quote, contemporary American ceramics. When I use that term, I'm talking about post-World War II up till the present. That isn't strictly the meaning of contemporary, I guess, but I look at it that way.

Again, I have not researched this, so I'm just going to speak in what I have observed since that time. But for instance, I've already mentioned how Marguerite Wildenhain came to Alfred and worked for two weeks here in this kind of workshop situation. That isn't quite what I'm talking about. What I mean is the phenomenon now of an artist going to usually another college, although it can be a museum; it can be in any number of formats, but usually another university, and presenting in a three-day session. It will always include, or usually includes, a slide show of your personal work, a couple days or three days of demonstrations of how you make things, and then often a critique of the students or with the students of the school where you're presenting this workshop.

And I began doing this myself, actually, even as a graduate student here. There was someone in the summer school that we've talked about earlier who was part of the Long Island Craftsmen Guild -- this was in 1955 or '56, either year -- who asked me to come and demonstrate for that group, which I did. Well, that was for me the first time, but when I came back to Alfred to teach beginning in 1957, partly because of my summer school contacts and people who came here for summer school, I was asked constantly from that point until the day I retired to do these workshops, somewhat with that format I've just described.

And I think it was in the beginning, at least for me, my feeling was -- and this was quite true -- I was going to places, to schools, and doing this kind of thing where there was very little understanding of -- there were students who didn't know the names that I knew; there wasn't the common understanding of who were the artists out in the field. I mean, people knew about Peter Voulkos; they knew about a few other people. But somebody sitting down in some of these small schools that were just developing ceramic programs, throwing various forms, talking about decorating and glazing and all that sort of thing, it was a real educational trip.

And I felt very strongly about that. I mean, I could see what was happening. Summer school was like that, too, for me. I enjoyed it a lot because I felt I was reaching people who were really hungry for something. It wasn't like going into -- which it later became -- going into sophisticated ceramic programs, where there was often that different reaction. You know, there wasn't this thirst for whatever it was you had to offer.

But then what it -- this is typically American, I think -- what it evolved into was a real, quote, performance. And we have people who are really good at that, and I'm not so good at that, in terms of, oh, someone like Don Reitz, who is wonderful in this format. He's funny. He's spectacularly skillful. And he really puts on a performance. And there are legendary stories about this. Of course Pete Voulkos has done the same kind of thing, and there all kinds of people.

And I'm not putting anything negative on this; I'm only describing what I think is an American phenomenon, where the demonstration, the kind of superstar status that is attached with that, and then going and really doing these kinds of presentations that are almost theater pieces -- I think that that really happened in America. It is very like America. I know that these things now happen all over the world, and they perhaps have been even since the time I'm speaking of, which is in the early -- or the mid-'50s, but I think it's true to say that there's something about this. For instance, Super Mud, just the name on that conference, I mean, come on. Where else in the world would a name like that come up? And it was very much the focus on three superstars and all they had to do and say and so on. So I think it's had a lot to do with the tone and presence of American ceramics, just

this workshop phenomenon.

But I want to point out that in the first few years I think its value was, shall I say, spreading the word, that is, bringing to places some of the kind of skills and techniques and general depth of ceramics that were not understood then so much.

DR. CARNEY: That's very interesting.

Some of the questions they have, that the Archives would like answered, include what role the specialized periodicals for our field have played in your development as an artist. Can you address that, and whether or not you feel like you've been critiqued properly by ceramic historians or people who are evaluating exhibitions and that kind of thing?

MR. CUSHING: You know, one realizes in responding to these questions and talking about a life of clay, any one of these topics could go on for a long, long time, this one especially, somehow. But let me say first of all that the first magazine that I was aware of was then called *Craft Horizons*, and later is now called *American Craft*, I think. That's the same magazine. Then along came *Ceramics Monthly*, and they were among the first two that I was aware of. This is the '50s I'm speaking of. Then there was one produced in Australia called -- what was that called? [Laughs.]

DR. CARNEY: Not *Ceramic Art Perceptions*?

MR. CUSHING: No. No, not that one, for sure. No, I take that back, it wasn't Australia. It was the *Pottery Quarterly*, produced in England. That's the one I'm thinking of. One, by the way, in which Ted Randall, Dan Rhodes, Val Cushing, and who else -- and Bob Turner wrote a piece, in a particular article in which the English journal was interested in the ceramic phenomenon going on in America, and we each wrote about the different aspects of that. So that was another one.

And then gradually the other magazines came into the field that we know of. The other British magazine, *Ceramic Review*, came along in the early '60s, I think, somewhere in there. That was a very good one. And my reaction to all these was it was spreading the word. It was making ceramics more understood and seen, and people became more aware of the whole craft movement, certainly, through these magazines, because certainly nothing on this, quote, craft world appeared in the art magazines like *Art in America* or *Art News* or the magazines like that. They didn't, and still don't, essentially deal with ceramics. So, sure, these were the journals that began to mean something to this burgeoning field that was going on in the phenomena of America, I mean, thousands of people studying ceramics one way or another.

And then, of course, *Studio Potter*. Here's what I would say about *Studio Potter*. I feel that Gerry Williams has maintained a kind of integrity about that magazine that I admire greatly. He has tried as much as possible to have the articles in that magazine be as definitive or as accurate as possible, so that the people writing them really knew what they were writing about. This has not been the case in all the other magazines that I've just mentioned occasionally. I think they've all grown up in a certain way. I think they all have a place, and I've never been one to denigrate any of these. They all have a certain place. And I think *American Ceramics* now, that magazine has brought probably the most critical discourse into this field of ceramic journals.

I've written something about this myself in another format, an introduction to a book that came out a couple of years ago [*The Ceramic Design Book: A Gallery of Contemporary Work*. New York: Lark Books, 1998.]. And I did an essay in which I talked about this problem, the problem -- and this I don't think is a question that I'm to respond to, but as long as I'm started this path, I'm going to finish it -- which is that I think there's a conflict among American ceramists between what they make and how it fits into the picture of, quote, art or the art world. And I think that's a problem that will never be resolved to a lot of people's satisfaction.

I don't think it's terribly important -- that's my point of view -- because, quote, the art world as seen in New York and Los Angeles and those major centers of art, is a group concerned mainly with painting and sculpture and concepts and ideas about art that I don't think ceramics will ever fit in in quite the right way. There are some exceptions to that, of course, not very many, I don't think, although in this world of installation art, as a I speak, it is becoming more comfortable for some ceramic artists to be part of this, quote, greater art world.

But I believe that ceramics, as long as it's in any way connected to the word "craft," will never be part of that art world. And I don't see that as any problem. It doesn't bother me in the least. I think the audience for my work is there, and if some of my pieces end up in museums, as occasionally has happened, that's fine and I'm delighted with that, but it's not a main motive for me. And I think I see great frustration among artists in clay who feel left out of that art world, and I think it will always be that way and that's the situation.

And I think, in fact -- I'll throw another thought into this -- I think a great many people in clay began their study in clay as potters. Not everyone basically studies -- again, here's my huge generality -- but the greatest

percentage of people in clay came out of a university system, so they studied art. We talked about this earlier. It isn't just working with a master potter. But they began -- even this is changing now, I realize as I say this -- but let's say in the '60s, '70s, and '80s, and somewhat in the '90s, most people in clay began their study in clay as pottery. They began either throwing or hand-building vessels. And the whole technology, to whatever extent they got it, of glazes and clays and so on had to do mainly with what I call pottery, and it has to do with function.

Now these same people, many of them, realizing that pottery -- I mean the mug and casserole and soup bowl -- don't have many chances of ending up on the cover of a magazine or getting the sort of publicity that's possible in ceramics -- and for a lot of reasons, of course, this is true -- but I think a lot of people who are good potters have switched the emphasis in their work to sculpture, but they're not sculptors. They haven't studied sculpture; they haven't thought about sculpture; they haven't focused on sculpture. And come on, that's another field, you know. So I think a lot of the mediocre work that I see I think results somewhat from the somehow not getting enough satisfaction or fulfillment from making functional pottery and wanting to reach into this other area but not really being prepared for it.

Now again, there are exceptions to this, obviously, people doing some wonderful work, I think. And the role of the critic enters here, because ceramic shows still tend to be written about, if written at all, by another potter or friend or part of the league, shall we say, of support system, so it's very seldom really critical. It's just, you know, either a description of the pieces, and it tends to be always favorable. And I shudder to think what would happen to some of us in this field if they received the kind of critical writing that a painter might receive in a big magazine. I think you see the point here.

So, you know, I think there's a certain growing up that, if ceramics ever did, and I don't believe it will, but if it ever did become a serious part of, quote, the art world, I think a lot of ceramic people would be devastated by this move.

DR. CARNEY: Along that same vein, can you tell us how your own work has been received over time? Has your work been critiqued in journals? And are there people that you respect writing about ceramics, even if they haven't reviewed your own work? Who do you think are the big names in the book business and journal article writers?

MR. CUSHING: I think in terms of critical writing by critics about ceramics, Tony Morino is one who is willing to say certain things are bad, you know, and not an "everything great" kind of attitude about clay. Matthew Kangas in Seattle is another one who seems willing to do that.

Now, I've read things written by both these people that I've liked a great deal and things that I have very strongly disagreed with. But that's what we're talking about. That's the world of criticism, and it doesn't always go your way. You know, those people. Somebody whom I admired, though, who consistently wrote seriously about ceramics was Philip Rawson, who is not alive now. But his book *Ceramics* [Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, reissue 1984.], in fact, was one of the books, and one of the few books still, willing to talk about ceramics in ways other than just technical ways and tried to address some of the bigger issues and implications of ceramics.

And he did review shows. And this, of course, leads me to a story. He reviewed a show of mine. I didn't even know he reviewed it until I read the review in the British magazine, the *Ceramic Review*. The show was at Helen Drutt's. And I was thrilled to death because I had great respect for him and his writing and his books and everything else.

Now, the pieces I was doing at the time this show was on were the pieces I spoke of earlier related to the organic growth of squash and vegetables and fruit and acorns and all that sort of thing. And there's a direct influence. I mean, I sat here where Margaret and I are talking making drawings of squash right in front of me. In fact, there's one right over there as we speak, on that little table.

DR. CARNEY: Oh.

MR. CUSHING: So, you know, this was a focused attempt on my part to get insight from these organic forms and bring it to my work. And the thrust of Philip Rawson's critique of my show, which was very favorable and he liked the pieces, was how my influences were so great from the Buddhist religion and the mosque domes and temples and so on. [Laughs.] It was a stunning revelation to me because while I wasn't unaware of these things, they were in no way part of my own focus. But I immediately went to the library and started looking at as many of these as I could see, and I saw exactly what he was talking about. And that interested me a lot because it brought something to my own thinking that genuinely had not at all been part of my references in this work.

So what that illustrates to me is the potential of a critic or writer who can bring a certain kind of insight that can open up something about work, you know. And I don't think there are many writers of that caliber writing about ceramics, and I certainly don't mean to overlook anybody in this field. There is one person I'll mention, is Ed

LeBow, who has written about ceramics, and he's a writer living in Arizona. I respect his approach. And surely there are others.

But I think it's true to say still that, considering the importance that I believe American ceramics have, I don't think there are enough people of that sort writing and talking and thinking about ceramics.

DR. CARNEY: That leads me into my next question, which has to do with your relationship and perspective on curators and museums that focus on craft.

MR. CUSHING: Some of these questions can be very touchy here. [Laughs.] No, I think museums -- I'm thinking of a place like the Everson, for example, in Syracuse -- I don't know what their point of view is right now, but I know under previous curators there has been a big attempt to develop the ceramic part of the collections, which is really quite wonderful. And certainly going back in this country to the '20s and '30s and then onwards, there is a wonderful collection of work showing how ceramics has evolved during those periods.

And I've spent some time in England on other occasions and have looked at ceramics in England, and, you know, one can see a great deal without leaving London, for example. But in America you can't do that. You know, you have to go from Boston to Philadelphia, to New York, to Kansas City, to Los Angeles, to San Francisco. And you see the point: We have wonderful work all over the country, but nothing that I guess I would say is definitive. I mean, you know, the Freer has some wonderful Japanese ceramics, but so does the Boston Museum. And it's that kind of thing. I think Kansas City, the Nelson Gallery somehow has gotten a monopoly on Staffordshire work, so if you really want to see that, you have to go there. And that seems to be the way it is in America.

But I think from my point view these are very important collections. And I've been fortunate enough to have my work in several museums of that stature, which I appreciate because I think this is one of the few places where people can see -- I mean, galleries don't have permanent collections -- that is, private galleries -- for the most part. They do to some extent, but they don't preserve work, you know, the way the Brooklyn Museum does or the Metropolitan or these other places. So I think the role of the museums -- and the Renwick, let's mention, which as we speak has a wonderful show on that I'm fortunately included in ["USA Clay," March 9 - July 15, 2001] -- that really is very select now.

DR. CARNEY: What's the name of that show?

MR. CUSHING: I don't know. [Laughs.] This is terrible. You know, this is to celebrate an anniversary of the Smithsonian, and the Renwick collection is being shown. And there are a series of lectures going on through the summer. I mean, it's a wonderful focus on ceramics.

So just to close that out, I think that the opportunity for people to see real work as against magazine photos and slides and all that world, I think the museums in this country do a wonderful job. And I think it's -- I'm glad to see. There are some we could mention that have international status, but ceramics is a very small part of their collection. And that makes me sad. I think ceramics is important enough to hold a more important part, not just in the historic galleries but in the contemporary art galleries as well.

DR. CARNEY: What involvement have you had with the national craft organizations, such as NCECA or American Craft Council?

MR. CUSHING: Well, now that's another thing. I would start that by saying that when I was in graduate school, there was an organization called the New York State Craftsman, and I used to demonstrate. They used to have a craft fair every summer in Ithaca. That's where it started. It started in Ithaca and then it moved to Binghamton, to Harper College in Binghamton.

Anyway, in this craft fair they had, I think it was a week-long session of demonstrations by artists, and I was one of them frequently. And then there would be a huge showroom of work for sale, and people would come from all over. And work was juried into this. You didn't automatically just send. So I think they were, quite early on, that notion of the, quote, craft fair, which has been another phenomenon in American ceramics that's still very strong. But this was one of the early ones, I believe. And a whole lot of people that I could name and who are well-known in the field kind of exhibited there and demonstrated there. So that was my first experience. And I became eventually, when I came back to teach at Alfred, I was on the board of that organization, as was Ted Randall at the time. I think Bob Turner showed there. I mean, we all got somewhat involved in that. And of course in those meetings, a lot of issues would come up that are still up: What about standards; what do you accept and how do you accept it; and in terms of craftsmen who would show their work there; and all that sort of thing. Now, this organization eventually moved its office to New York City. And whenever that happens in New York State, when something gets focused in New York City, half the state feels left out -- right? -- because it now becomes New York City. [Laughs.] So that organization dissolved but then came up again with another name. Is it the Empire State Craftsman or --

DR. CARNEY: And that's changed again.

MR. CUSHING: And that's changed again. So anyway, that's evolving. Well, for me, anyway, that was my first experience in being on a board and talking about issues of crafts and so on.

And I've always been a member of the American Craft Council, and I've always supported their function. And I think their function is genuine of, again, helping to spread the word about a movement like American crafts.

But it was NCECA, which is the National Council on Education and the Ceramic Art, that has been of most interest to me. That was an organization -- it's difficult to say something started with one person, but this is a case that's very close to that, and that person is Ted Randall; and William Parry, who was the first president of this organization, was also a faculty member here at Alfred, as I was I; and Bob Turner. We were all teaching here.

And Ted Randall had all kinds of experience. He formed an organization in New York State -- I've forgotten the exact name of it -- that concerned the heads of art departments, of art schools in New York State. And Ted started that, you know. So he was very interested in trying to bring people together to discuss issues concerning all these areas.

And he wanted NCECA to be an organization, as the name suggests, of ceramic teachers, basically, and their common problems and support system. Ted was also in the National Association of Schools of Art and Design. And that organization, which has to do with accreditation of art schools, again brought Ted somewhat to this notion for NCECA. So this organization started as part of the American Ceramic Society, as a branch of the American Ceramic Society called the Education Council. And we went to those meetings. Just a handful of people from around the country -- many of them were Alfred graduates, people like Vivika Heino would be here -- would come to these first meetings, Jim McKinnell, Jim and Nan McKinnell, and others.

Then, without going into this whole thing, that format didn't seem to fit, and so the ceramic teachers and artists broke off from the American Ceramic Society and became an independent organization, and as I said, with Bill Parry as the first president. Then that organization grew. I remember the first meeting of that group as an independent group, and I remember I knew every single person in the room who came to the first conference. So that amounted to probably something like 60 people. And it's grown every year into what is now getting close to 4,000 people at the NCECA conference.

So I think it represents something that I guess you'd say was needed or at least fulfills a function. And it has a format of papers presented on various aspects of the field, of a city transforming itself, to a certain extent, to a world of ceramics in which every gallery puts on a ceramic show. Every major museum in the city, if there happens to be one, does the same thing. So it puts a lot of emphasis on ceramics. And I think this is an organization that I was part of the founding with Ted Randall. I was on the original board, and I've been on the board on and off two or three times and ended up eventually as president in the 1970s sometime. [Laughs.] Here we are with dates again. Can't remember the exact date.

In NCECA, you serve as president-elect and then as president and then as past president. And in order to get in that system, you have to have to have been on the board previously anyway. So it amounts to many years of real commitment to this volunteer organization that has to do with bringing professionals together to talk about common goals.

So I don't know how American that notion is. I suspect that's pretty much an American notion too, when it comes to organizing and getting together as a group. But I think they've helped the scene in this country enormously.

DR. CARNEY: Val, didn't you get an award from NCECA just a few years ago, sometime in the '90s? Can you tell us about that?

MR. CUSHING: Well, I actually got two awards from NCECA. The first one was interesting because for two or three years the American Ceramic Society would sponsor a one-person show for a ceramist who was in NCECA, and I got that award one year. So when I went to the American Ceramic Society convention in Chicago -- again, I can't come up with the year right at this moment, but it was --

DR. CARNEY: What decade was it?

MR. CUSHING: This was in the '60s. And the American Ceramic Society was then a conference of several thousand. I don't know exactly how many, but it was huge compared to NCECA.

And the commercial exhibits of the American Ceramic Society were a fascinating thing to see. And that's where my show was. They had this huge bottom floor of one of the huge hotels in Chicago, and all the commercial shows were there, and that's where my one-person show was. And it was really a fascinating experience

because I was not only surrounded by, you know, companies selling huge ceramic machinery and electronics and everything you can possibly imagine, a fascinating place. The NCECA conference does the same thing.

And it's one of my favorite things at NCECA, too, is to go around the commercial booths. But here, they were all engineers and scientists, many of whom had been to Alfred as engineering and science students. And when they knew that I was from Alfred, and some of them were even here when I was here as a student, so they remembered me, and they would come. And it was fascinating to get the sort of, quote, critique from the science and engineering world in terms of my work than I might have gotten in the context of NCECA. And it was really fascinating to me and I enjoyed it no end. So that was my first award from NCECA.

Then the second one that I think means the most to me was they instigated -- I think they've done for four or five years in a row now -- they instigated a special award to honor people in terms of their teaching careers and excellence in teaching, I guess they call it, something like that. I think Peter Voulkos may have been the first one. Ken Ferguson was one. I think I was the third one in that list. And that continues. But that, of course, you know, having taught for 40 years, that was a nice recognition.

DR. CARNEY: I'll just ask you a couple of what might be quick questions [laughs] and we'll wrap it up.

In what way do political and social commentary figure into your work, if at all? And does that reflect on your choice of materials or anything like that?

MR. CUSHING: No, those are not elements of my work. But I do want to say something about that, because the last year of the Syracuse national show, when it was suspended before it was brought in again, happened when Robert Turner, Jeff Schlanger, and, I think, either Bob Arneson or Peter Voulkos -- I think it was Peter Voulkos, we'll have to look that up -- but the three of them were the jurors for this show. And it was at the height of the Vietnam War protest.

And they actually decided somehow that there was so little work reflecting the social and revolutionary sort of spirit going on in America at that time, there was so little work submitted by ceramists representing that protest period, that they decided, they actually suspended, they decided not to accept pieces -- I can't remember exactly how this went now, but I think they decided to invite some people on the spur of the moment who weren't even -- there never had been an invited section in that show. It was always a juried show.

Let me say that at that time, Jeff Schlanger himself had done an exclusive body of work that he spent years developing concerning political protests in Chile. In fact, that exhibition was held here at Alfred University at one point. So he was very much about social protest in his work. And Pete Voulkos or Bob Arneson, whichever it was, one or the other, but both were rebels in a certain sense of the word. That is, their work presented, especially Arneson, presented aspects of American culture in a satirical sense and so on. So they were both aware of that. Now Bob Turner, that was not a part of his work. But somehow or other that year, because there was not enough interest among American ceramists to pursue those things, created somewhat of a fuss.

Now, my only point in mentioning all that is -- here's my own personal feeling -- is that while I certainly am sympathetic with social protests of various sorts, depending on the issues, as I look at even the history of art, I see very little, although with some wonderful exceptions, I see very little of visual art able to portray the intensity of feeling that social protest often concerns. Now, you know, we can talk about Picasso and *Guernica* and examples like that, and some satirical examples, Daumier, you know. I'm aware of this happening in the history of art.

But my own feeling is that many issues like this are so powerful that visual representations of, except perhaps in photography, don't communicate the power of the event. Sometimes music is a better format. We'll think of Beethoven. Sometimes poetry is better, sometimes novels, just literature. I think sometimes, if I think about people making in clay some sort of objects that represent the protest in the Vietnam War, for example, the example I gave, I don't think it would work.

Now, that isn't why I don't do it. I'm just not motivated that way. My own thoughts, I'm very concerned about social issues, but I don't put it in my work. It's just not something that I see the vehicle for.

DR. CARNEY: I wondered if you had anything else you wanted to talk about. I know you've traveled and done workshops extensively in England and elsewhere. I wondered if you wanted to touch on any of those international connections and any comparisons you want to show between the American scene and, say, Europe or Asia or someplace.

MR. CUSHING: You know, travel is an important thing in one's life, and we spoke about this a little bit earlier. I have taught in Norway at the National School of Art and Design in Oslo. I first went to England on a Fulbright and taught in Manchester at what were then called the Polytechnics. These were the art schools in England. I taught there in the Fulbright exchange thing.

I've been back to England three times and taught on two of those occasions, and last time I was an artist-in-residence at the University of Wolverhampton, where I just was given a studio and four months in which to produce my own work. And I had a show in London, in the Contemporary Craft Gallery in London, and a show in Wolverhampton. I've also given a workshop for a week in Gallica, in Spain, with Adrian Saxe. He and I conducted a kind of hands-on workshop there. I've given workshops in Canada and have juried exhibitions in Canada.

And then I've been to Japan. I was on the second -- I think it was the second biennial in Mino, Japan, an international exhibition. I was on the jury. There were a contingent of ceramists from different countries. Nino Caruso from Italy, for example, was on it, and others from different countries, with some Japanese counterparts, and we juried the Mino exhibition. And on that trip, we were taken around as VIPs to Japan, and we visited the six old kilns area of Japan, where the -- this is the whole district around Mino where all this took place. So that was an eye-opening experience for me. And then last of all -- oh dear, the curator at the Freer, Louise --

DR. CARNEY: Cort.

MR. CUSHING: Cort and myself and Rob Barnard, a potter in Virginia, were asked to speak at the Shigaraki Ceramic Park, which had just opened in Japan. And they had opening ceremonies and they had closing ceremonies, and we were in the closing ceremony. This was an incredible experience for me because, first of all, Louise Cort [Curator of Ceramics, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution], who had written the definitive book about Shigaraki [Shigaraki: Potters' Valley, 1979], who speaks fluent Japanese, was with us, and Rob Barnard, who had studied several years in Japan, whose Japanese was slipping a bit but still, compared to mine, was better, and the three of us spent time together and in different places in Japan and we all gave --

[TAPE CHANGE.]

DR. CARNEY: This is Margaret Carney interviewing Val Cushing at his studio in Alfred Station, New York, on April 16, 2001, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is Tape 3, Side B. And we have two tapes, a backup tape and the master tape.

Val was talking about Shigaraki Cultural Park.

MR. CUSHING: Where I was headed with that is, in mentioning these various countries and places where I've been, is that while each of these places has their own history, clearly and obviously -- Spain, England, Norway, not so much Norway in terms of ceramics, and Japan, of course -- aside from that, though, when it comes to the work being done at the present time, let's call it the contemporary ceramics, there is definitely an international coming together of style and forms and techniques and approaches. I mean, it really amazes me when I think about it.

I have juried several exhibitions over the years, and one of the things that strikes you right away is the history of ceramics. I mean, you go through just about any exhibition, unless it's been specialized in some way, you know, by raku this or wood-fire that, but if it's a general open exhibition, then you will see virtually every style that's ever been done in clay. You'll see majolica, you'll see soft glaze, you'll see wood-fire, you'll see high-fire, low-fire, and so on. And we take that for granted. I mean, even when I began my own work in clay in the '50s, I hadn't ever seen a lot of the kinds of styles I just mentioned. I'd seen them in books and in slides and so on. But I think there is definitely, not an international style, but there is an international sharing of information and approach and idea, and we have access to so many things.

I mean, most schools, including Alfred, somebody or other here would give a project in which students would go to the library, pick a favorite pot from the history of ceramics, and make one like it, try to make one like it, and obviously the point being to just begin to see what's involved in working different ways and so on. So not only does that take place, but there is so much information available that in any country, any particular ceramist can be influenced in so many different directions.

And I'll just speak to myself in closing this. We spoke a little bit about influences and references on this tape, but the very first influence for me in terms of styles of work was the Song Dynasty period in China. We used to call it the Sung Dynasty. I realize that pronunciations are different now. Binns and Harder, and there was a tradition at Alfred already existing, Dan Rhodes, of high-fire reduction and porcelain and all that sort of thing, so there was a natural attraction, I suppose you'd say, here at Alfred for that period. But it certainly influenced me and continues to, Chinese ceramics, in many other respects, not just that period.

But there are influences in my work from medieval Europe; there are influences in my work from Native Americans. I mean, I think we have the freedom, not just we here in America, but we may have been among the first to experience that freedom. I think that's international now as well. But we pick and choose and bring things in our work that come from all over the world and all over time. So I think that is certainly the picture today that I see it.

You're listening to a seventy-year-old man still actively involved in making pots but looking at a long period of time behind me, and I see this. I was in England, as I mentioned, and I saw work all over England again, as I've done in the past, and some of it could have been made in Ohio; it could have been made in Japan. I mean, you just can't nail it down anymore the way you used to be able to.

DR. CARNEY: Val, I want to thank you very much for allowing this interview, which has gone on now for several hours, anyway. [Laughs.] Are there any final words that you'd like to add, or have we said enough for one interview?

I want to thank you very, very much. I'll reiterate, it's April 16, 2001, and I'm very happy to have interviewed Val Cushing in his studio today in Alfred Station, New York.

Thank you very much, Val.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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