



Smithsonian  
*Archives of American Art*

**Oral history interview with Ramona Solberg,  
2001 March 23**

**Funding for this interview was provided by the Nanette L. Laitman  
Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America.  
Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a  
grant from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National  
Park Service.**

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

# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Ramona Solberg on March 23, 2001. The interview took place in Seattle, Washington, and was conducted by Vicki Halper 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.

Ramona Solberg and Vicki Halper 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

VICKI HALPER: This is Vicki Halper interviewing Ramona Solberg at Ramona's apartment in Seattle, Washington, on March 23, 2001, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is tape one, side one.

And good morning, Ramona.

RAMONA SOLBERG: Good morning, Vicki.

MS. HALPER: We're going to back from the beginning to the beginning, because I want to know about your very early childhood and your family and where and when you were born.

MS. SOLBERG: Well, I was born on May 10, 1921, in Watertown, South Dakota. And my brother and sister were—my brother was 13, my sister was 12. And, so when I arrived my mother said, "Well, now we have this new little baby girl; what shall we name her?" And she said, "Arleigh, you're the oldest, so you get to choose her first name." And, so Arleigh thought about it and he said, "I think she should be called Ramona." Well, with a good Norwegian name like Solberg, you know, that's kind of funny. But, my sister explained to me once that he had a crush on a little girl in his class at school and her name was Ramona. And, so, anyhow, that's how I got the name Ramona.

My sister gave me my second name, Lorraine. And she didn't know anybody named Lorraine, but she thought it was pretty. So, I was Ramona Lorraine. And, well, that's how I got my name. And I will say my brother and sister took a great deal of—not my brother so much; I was, you know—but, my sister was my—the built-in baby-sitter. And they took good care of me when I was little. And I don't think I was much of a problem until I became a teenager, and then my sister and I were at odds at times, until I got so large I couldn't fit into her clothes. You know, when I was in junior high school, I was the same size as my sister. And, she would come home and find that I had spilled something on a blouse or sweater. And, oh, she would be so upset! But other than that, I can't think of any disagreements we had. In fact, my brother was so fond of my sister, he kept looking for a girl like my sister to marry. And, finally, my sister found one for him.

But anyhow, I had a very nice childhood. We didn't have much money, but we had lots of good times. We had a summer place on Lake Washington, and we used to go out there on weekends. And I loved that, because we always had a bonfire and everybody would sit around and sing. And my brother and sister's friends from high school, or when they started the university, came out and everybody went swimming, and at night they would sing and roast wieners and marshmallows, you

know. It was nice.

MS. HALPER: When did you move from South Dakota to Seattle?

MS. SOLBERG: Oh, I was a year and a half. And we moved to Seattle. We lived in the Wallingford District. And I had lots of cousins. I had some cousins who lived in Mt. Baker and some in Tacoma. We would drive to Mt. Baker, or we would drive-that's Mt. Baker District, not real Mt. Baker. We were very close with our relatives. My family-they were all older than me. They were my brother and sister's age. But, you know, I enjoyed the whole thing; it was lots of fun.

MS. HALPER: Tell me about your family's role in your decision to become an artist. How artistic were the people in your family?

MS. SOLBERG: Well, I don't-I think both my mother and father were artistic. My father expressed his artistry in the garden. His yards and flowers were always outstanding.

MS. HALPER: Lots of color.

MS. SOLBERG: Lots of color. He mostly liked dahlias. He was crazy about dahlias. But I didn't like them because they had earwigs in them. But, anyhow, he was a great dahlia man. My mother was-well, she expressed her artistic bent, I guess, in, maybe, sewing. Although, before I was born, she used to paint. When my brother and sister were small, she would paint pictures; she would find something in a magazine and she would make an oil painting of it. And some of them were really quite nice. They're typical of the early part of the century. They're not modern or anything, you know. They were very realistic.

But both my mother and father would-well, we'd bring pictures home-I would bring home something from school-we didn't have a refrigerator, so it couldn't get posted there. But they would admire my work. And, of course, my sister was art editor-no, she was-she used to do programs for her high school when they had plays and things. And I just thought they were wonderful, and I was always striving to do the kind of things she did.

MS. HALPER: Did she do art or any craft when you were young growing up?

MS. SOLBERG: Well, yes. I have to tell you when I went to high school-that was 12 years after my sister and brother had been there-and the art teacher, whose name was Lulu Hotchkiss-I think that's a great name. By the way, she was also Ruth Penington's teacher. But she said to me, "Oh, are you Eveleth Solberg's sister?" And I said yes. Well, I'll tell you, that just made it. From then on I was, you know, an artist, although I wasn't the best in the class. But she was very nice to me and, you know, anyhow-

But when my sister went to the university, she took some craft classes from a woman named Helen Rhodes. And I remember her working on a batik, a really beautiful silk batik scarf. She had it on a frame, and it was on our dining room table and she was painting all of these little wax things. And I thought it was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. Then she took a metal and jewelry class from the same woman. And the thing I remember-she made several copper bowls that were sent off on some kind of a show-but it was a ring she made that impressed me. And I said, well, when I grow up, I'm going to make a ring just like that. Well, the first ring I made in jewelry class was not like that. But it was-I did take jewelry, because my sister had taken it and I loved what she had done.

MS. HALPER: When did you begin to think of yourself as a jeweler?

MS. SOLBERG: Not until-well, I really-I didn't think about myself as a jeweler-not while I was in school. I did when I was a junior-I think first quarter junior. Unfortunately, you couldn't take jewelry until you were several years along.

MS. HALPER: This was in the university.

MS. SOLBERG: At the University of Washington. And I took this jewelry class, and I was scared to death. It was-Ruth Penington was the teacher and she made me very nervous. She would walk around the room and look at things and go, "Hmmm." And, I thought, oh dear, well! We got along well. I don't mean that. But I was just-she intimidated me. She was such a strong woman. And when I got my grade, I couldn't believe it. I had gotten an A. Well, that did it. Then I decided I would have to take another jewelry class, because that was just amazing to get an A.

Anyhow, that's how I started. But, I didn't really think about jewelry as something I could do until I graduated. And, then when I came back to Seattle-oh, when I graduated then-when I went into the army-and, of course, I didn't think about anything like that at that time-but when I came back, I took another jewelry class. I went to school on the GI Bill.

And I took another jewelry class, and when I began to teach in junior high school, I had no place to work. And I guess I didn't have any money to buy tools. Maybe I didn't think about it. So I went down to Edison Vocational School [Seattle School District, est. 1930], and the teacher there, Coralyn Pence, was a very good friend of Ruth's. And she-I had met her through Ruth-and she let me just sort of sit in the corner and do my own thing. I didn't have to do what the rest of the people were doing. And I became very interested in making things to wear, because I was now teaching junior high school and I had to look like an art teacher, you know. So, I made things, and I remember one little boy came up to me and said, "Did you make that?" And they knew that I was taking jewelry classes. I said yes. He said, "Boy, you sure got imagination." [They laugh.]

Anyhow, that was-well, that was-it was just fun to do. And so I made jewelry. And then-when I was still going to school on the GI Bill-besides I did that in the summer-I taught in the winter and then I went to school. And I was in a class with Russell Day. And I had been-part of my year had been spent in Mexico. My mother and I went down to Mexico and I did weaving and jewelry. And when I came back, I would wear some of my jewelry.

And Russell Day said, "You should think about getting your master's degree." And I said, "Well, what would I need a master's degree for?" I mean, I was perfectly happy. He said, "Well, sometime you'll get-you might get an extra raise because you have it." Well, of course, that hit me, you know, in my pocket. I thought, wow, I could use some extra money. So, I decided to work on my master's degree.

In those days, we had to have a pre-candidacy show. And so I brought my weaving I had done in Mexico and my jewelry. And Russell and I had a show in the art department. And dear Mr. [Walter] Isaacs, who is the chairman-who was a little on the befuddled side, perhaps-he thought it was our masters show, which, of course, pleased us a great deal.

All right, so then I decided I would work on my master's in jewelry.

MS. HALPER: Now, you've mentioned two teachers so far. You've mentioned Ruth Penington and Coralyn Pence.

MS. SOLBERG: Yes.

MS. HALPER: Are they basically the people that you worked with?

MS. SOLBERG: Well, yes. I don't classify Coralyn as much of a teacher. I don't mean the way it sounds, but she was very kind to let me work in the workshop. I never participated in a critique or anything like that. Now with Ruth it was different. She very definitely was a strong influence. And, anyhow-

MS. HALPER: How would you characterize Ruth's influence?

MS. SOLBERG: Well, she wore the jewelry she made, and it always looked good on her. Now, in the early days when I first took classes from her, she was quite a large woman. And she made rather impressive pieces, mostly necklaces, although she had a ring that I just-again-I liked. It had a little pre-Colombian carved piece in it. And I thought that was really neat. But I think it was-she just was so self-possessed and, you know, she just-well, I don't really know.

MS. HALPER: I think of her as a modernist jeweler, not that interested in stones, but interested in a very clean line. Is that true?

MS. SOLBERG: Well, I think so, although she did use a lot of-she used quite a few stones. By the way, she was also a textile teacher. I took a textile class-in fact, that's where I met Russell Day in a textile class-summer textile class-that Ruth was teaching.

Yes, I would say that she was-she was very influenced by Scandinavian design, which was all the thing at that time. And of course, being a good Norwegian, I followed right along. I was impressed with that. No, she didn't use as many stones as most of the jewelers then were doing. In fact, my favorite piece-she had two pieces that I just loved. One of them she had done when I was teaching. It was branch coral and it was quite a long necklace. It was very interesting silver elements. And she made a belt-this was after I had left her class, but I saw it-with beach pebbles. It was just beautiful. It was a metal belt-no, the buckle was quite large, and it followed the leather around, and it had beach pebbles that she had picked up on the beach by her summer place. And I think that's why I got into the pebble business, because I love that so much. Also, I liked that ring!

MS. HALPER: Both the ring and the pebble piece are two pieces that have found objects.

MS. SOLBERG: Yes.

MS. HALPER: And the found object is, of course, what you are known for including in your work. Was Ruth's-those pieces-your first introduction to the inclusion of any found objects in work? Or had you come upon that or done that yourself before?

MS. SOLBERG: No, I had never thought of that, because I had never gone anyplace. Now, Coralyn Pence also-this is what I'll say about her. She brought-one night she brought to class a lot of little artifacts that her father, who was a sea captain, had picked up in the South Pacific. And I think she was going to use some of those in jewelry. Now, her jewelry was quite different. Coralyn always prided herself that she used gold. She was a gold lady. But she had these interesting pieces. And I thought to myself, if I ever go someplace, I'm going to look for something to put in jewelry. I think maybe the ring also. Now, I know that Ruth bought that little artifact in San Jose at a museum that had a lot of Egyptian things. She also used some Egyptian beads occasionally, and little things like that. But I think Coralyn, too-I can't give it all to Ruth. Coralyn, when she brought those little artifacts, little pieces of shell and bone and things from the South Pacific, I thought, wow! You know, I really loved them. And so, I've been at it ever since.

MS. HALPER: After you left the army, you studied jewelry in two places. You went to Mexico and

then you went to Norway.

MS. SOLBERG: Yes.

MS. HALPER: What things did you learn in Mexico and Norway? Or what did you pick up from those countries?

MS. SOLBERG: Well, of course, I went to Mexico because it was close. And when I was in the army, I had been stationed in El Paso and San Antonio, Texas. And I loved Mexico. So that's why I went there. I worked in San Miguel. No, I guess it was in-San Miguel-I didn't do jewelry. The jewelry teacher-when I went to school there, the jewelry teacher wasn't there. So I don't remember what I did there. I guess I did some weaving.

Well, then because I was still going on the GI Bill and they were having real problems in San Miguel, I went down to Morelia, and there I worked in a small jewelry shop with a very nice young jeweler. And it was very primitive. The gas-we had, like, a bellows we had to step on to get the gas, you know, the air into the gas and all that. But, it just gave me different experiences.

In Mexico, I did several pieces. I collected some pre-Colombian things. And I did several pieces using pre-Colombian. And I also bought a few opals, Mexican opals. But they cost too much money. So I was, you know, always searching around for funny things that didn't cost much, because there I was, going to school, my mother was with me, I was on the GI Bill, and that wasn't very much for each month.

MS. HALPER: So what you did there wasn't very different than what you had been doing in Ruth's classes.

MS. SOLBERG: Not really, not really. The designs were pretty much the same. I used coins a few times because they were available. Not too much.

Now, in Norway, I mostly used enamels. That was what I was there for. And it was interesting. When I finished my pieces and there would be kind of a, let's say, a critique or something, the professor would say, "Oh, it's very *tipisk amerikansk*." Typically American. And when I came home and people looked at my jewelry, "Oh, we can see the Scandinavian influence."

So it was enameling I did in Norway. And unfortunately, I don't have-oh, you know, we had to break up the enamel from a big hunk, like huge chunk. We'd pound it with hammers and then finally we had to grind it, you know. We started from the very beginning. And it was very time-consuming.

But I enjoyed-I loved looking at the-of course, in Mexico I loved the pre-Colombian things. We didn't have a good museum in Morelia, but in Mexico City we did. And I would look at the pre-Colombian things and think they were just great. And the same in Norway. I would look at the old, kind of, Viking pieces. Well, they were all big, you know, and very bold. And so I became accustomed to that kind of a look.

Now, Ruth didn't make fussy jewelry. Coralyn's was a little on the fussy side. But I preferred the kind that Ruth made, the very straightforward kind of-well, as you said, modernist-type of thing.

MS. HALPER: You've traveled a lot. All over the world.

MS. SOLBERG: Yes.

MS. HALPER: And would you say you traveled in order to find the pieces to put in your jewelry?

MS. SOLBERG: No. No. No.

MS. HALPER: What's the relationship between the travel and the jewelry?

MS. SOLBERG: Not at all. My first-well, of course, I was in Germany during part of my time in the army. And, no, I didn't-when I was there, I didn't-it was hard to buy things and I wasn't really that much into that type of jewelry they had. I remember selling three cartons of cigarettes to buy a pair of diamond earrings, which I later gave away. But, no, but in all of my travel the only travel-now the first trip I took was, first-the first real trip was around the world for \$999 on Pan Am 001. I left Seattle and I flew to Japan. And then I did a 10-day tour of Japan. And then I flew to-I think it was-well, I don't know-Taiwan, and then I went to Hong Kong. But, I had 10 stops. I could stop anywhere and I could, you know-

And it wasn't till that trip-now, before-that I had been asked by Van Nostrand Reinhold to write a book on beads. And I said, "Oh, I don't know enough about it." Well, they had talked to Virginia Harvey, who had written a book on macramé. And she said, "You should get Ramona to write a book on beads." Well, at that time, I probably knew as much about different beads as anyone. Well, now, let's see. Maybe that was before-I guess, I don't remember. Now, now I'm confused.

Anyhow, on this trip around the world I did pick up beads. In fact, by the time I got to Nepal-I had a nice, big purse for travel, you know, with all this stuff in it. The handles broke because I had so many beads in my purse. So, I began to stuff them in the pockets of my coat. I bought beads, beads, beads. I just-I didn't know that much about them at that time. But when I came back, I considered myself a bead expert. And, at the time, I probably was, although compared to almost any bead member these days, I'm not much of an expert because I haven't continued. And I was glad.

By the way, Van Nostrand Reinhold kind of gave up on me because Joan Erickson's book [*The Universal Bead*, New York: WW Norton and Co., 1969] came out, and it was a wonderful book. It was the kind of book I would have written, sort of, not full of scientific information or anything. It was just kind of a general book. However, they became interested in me and what I was doing. And so they asked me to write a book on jewelry. And so I did the inventive jewelry book [*Inventive Jewelry-Making*, New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1972], which I really aimed at junior-senior high school students because that was-I was teaching art education at the time. I had taught junior high school. I had my students in junior high school doing a lot of etching. We made bracelets and pendants and things like that. Anyhow, so I did write a book but it wasn't about beads.

Okay. That first trip was really an eye-opener in many ways. And I not only bought beads, I'd buy funny little things. Okay. Well, then, later I was asked by a craft group in Seattle, the Friends of the Crafts, would I be willing to take them on a trip to look at crafts. And I said, "Oh, well, where do you want to go?" "Well," they said, "it's up to you." Well, I had just been-the summer before, I had just been to Turkey-I was very active in both American craft and world craft-and I had been to a world craft conference in Istanbul. And after that conference, I went to Afghanistan with Jack Lenor Larsen, Sam and Freda Maloof, and a friend of Jack's, an American woman who now lived in Italy who was a sculptor. Well, we went through Afghanistan and-did we go to Lebanon? Oh, dear! Yes! Yes! We went to Lebanon and Israel-not all of us-Jack didn't go, but Sam and Freda and I did Lebanon and Israel. And, at that time I picked up a lot of odds and ends. I loved the bazaars and all that.

So, okay, when Friends of the Crafts said-I said, "Well, where do you want to go?" I thought, I bet

they want to go to Scandinavia. "No, no," I could decide. Well, I had been, as I said, in Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, and, oh yeah, and Lebanon, and in Israel. I said, "Oh, we'll go to Turkey, Iran, Lebanon-" Anyhow, we did, we did. I had 23 people and we went on this wonderful trip. And when I had to go down to the-I didn't even know a travel, a real travel agent at that time. But, one of the fellows in Friends of the Crafts said, "Oh, you should go to-" and he named this place. So, I went there and I talked to this woman who didn't really even know where Afghanistan was. This was Connie Swanson.

MS. HALPER: What year is this about, Ramona?

MS. SOLBERG: Oh, dear, let's see.

MS. HALPER: Is this after you wrote your book?

MS. SOLBERG: Oh, yes, yes.

MS. HALPER: That was '72.

MS. SOLBERG: This was-well it was probably in the late '70s? Yeah. So, anyhow, Connie-you know, I was very smart at that time. I remembered every hotel we stayed in. I remembered the best places. So she made up this itinerary, and everyone loved it. And she thought I was very good. So she said, "Would you like to take another group to Egypt?" And I said, "Well, no-" They wanted me to go in August. I said, "I wouldn't take my worst enemy to Egypt in August; it's too hot." I've never been fond of hot weather. So, someone else did it. But the following winter, I think, she said, "Would you take a group to Indonesia and Thailand?" Oh, sure! So, I did during Christmas vacation, Christmas break. There's two weeks and so off we went. And that was sort of the beginning of that. Well, every time I had a break in my teaching, Connie would get a hold of me and want me to take a group someplace. I went places I'd never been before. I had been to Afghanistan and I had been to Turkey and I had been to Thailand, but she had me taking-I even took one group to Antarctica. That was my first trip there.

MS. HALPER: What did you do with all the things you collected on these trips?

MS. SOLBERG: Well, I put them in my pocket and-

MS. HALPER: But when you got back home-I mean, it must have been filling up here.

MS. SOLBERG: No, no. I just sort of put them in boxes and would drag them out.

[End Tape 1, Side A.]

MS. HALPER: Okay. Ramona Solberg tape one, side B.

MS. SOLBERG: Well, I think the first found object kind of things I used was-I used beads. That got me started, and I used-now, let's see, I started teaching at Central [Central Washington State College, Ellensburg, WA, Associate Professor of Art, 1956-1967] in 19-oh, dear! 1956. Is that right?

MS. HALPER: Well, we'll look it up later.

MS. SOLBERG: And I would go over to the jewelry lab on Saturdays and Sundays and work on jewelry. And I used beads. And then I would start adding a few little ethnic pieces, little artifacts. And that was when I really started using those things. I was teaching my students how to set stones,



but I wasn't using them much myself. Although, some of my early pieces-I was very fond of coral and lapis and turquoise-in fact, there was a rock shop in Ellensburg, and the lady there would tell my students: "Well, if you use turquoise or chrysocolla, she'll give you an A." And I love those colors and I use those stones. Once in a while I would use a carmelian, but that was about it. But I loved the turquoise, the lapis, and coral.

MS. HALPER: Which of your colleagues-not your teachers, but your colleagues-have been important in your work? Like, I'm thinking of Don Tompkins, for example?

MS. SOLBERG: Oh! Well, Don-I'd been teaching at Central for a number of years and I had very big classes, considering it was jewelry. And I'd always admired Don's things. When he was a student at Everett, he did wonderful things. Well, through Russell Day, who was a friend and a former teacher of his, I found out that Don was not very happy back in-I think it was New York. And we really needed another person, and I think I was going to take a sabbatical. That was it. So I was taking a sabbatical. So we had to find someone to teach my classes. So I wrote to Don and said, "Don, we need you." And I told him that I felt that it wouldn't be just a one-year appointment. I said, "I have so many students that I'm sure that you could stay-that we could use another person." And so he came out for my sabbatical year. And, yes, he stayed.

Now, his jewelry was completely different from mine. Oh, his was tongue-in-cheek; really; he was doing a lot of those medals [Tompkin's Commemorative Medal Series] at the time. And the medals, oh, would have a quote from a person. It was-they were just great. And I think that Don, too-I would say I had-Don influenced me with what I was using in my jewelry perhaps more than anyone. I mean, I didn't use the same things he did, but I-it kind of loosened me up, and I could see that I didn't always have to use beads, or I didn't always have to use stones. And I-of course, he would put funny things. I mean-maybe I'd put a watch in mine or a compass because of Don. Ruth never did anything like that. But, he put bits of toys and things like that in his jewelry. And Don and I had a very nice relationship. We got to design the jewelry studio in the new art building at Central. We had a wonderful time. Unfortunately, I left, was never able to teach in it. But Don was a very popular teacher and influenced-well, as you know-influenced many people over there. My nephew took a class from him, and he and Don just really hit it off. Well, of course, there's Merrily [Tompkins] and there's Nancy [Worden] and you know-

MS. HALPER: That was later.

MS. SOLBERG: Yes, that was later.

MS. HALPER: In the early days, were you seeing a lot of jewelry when you traveled, of either ethnic jewelry or modern jewelry, that people were doing at the craft council shows? Were you being exposed to a lot of the work that was being done?

MS. SOLBERG: Well, I certainly saw things at the craft council, but that didn't influence me. It was the ethnic jewelry. As I traveled, I just, you know-when I got to India, it just blew my mind. I saw all this marvelous, marvelous jewelry. Before that, the jewelry that really influenced me, as I said, was the pre-Colombian. And when I was in the army, I was stationed in Arizona-that was New Mexico, rather, well, Arizona and New Mexico-and I saw Indian things, which I loved. Well, but yes. Oh, my goodness! India and Thailand just-it was wonderful. Iran-

MS. HALPER: What appealed to you so much about that jewelry?

MS. SOLBERG: Well, it moved. That's one thing. There were a lot of in it elements that moved-I

always called it shake, rattle, and roll. And so I tried to make some shake-rattle-and-roll jewelry, because I liked hearing the noise, the little tinkles and things. But, oh, I think more than Ruth Penington, more than Don Tompkins, more than Coralyn, the jewelry that I saw while I traveled is what did it. And, you see, I was an escort for these groups. I was the one who said, "All right, everybody, get on the bus!" Or, you know, I was the one who directed the whole thing. I got us through customs and all those things. But, and I tried to take the people to interesting bazaars and museums so they could see things. But I did this for 16, 17 years. And, you know, you take two, three, four trips a year, you're bound to see a lot-not in Antarctica! In fact, everyone said, "Why are you going to Antarctica? There are no bazaars there." But, it was fun.

MS. HALPER: You needed to cool down, I bet.

MS. SOLBERG: Oh, yes. I liked that. It wasn't even that cold.

MS. HALPER: I'd like to talk a little bit about your teaching career. You started off in junior high school [James Monroe Junior High School, Seattle, WA, taught 1951-1956], public school. And then you went to college.

MS. SOLBERG: Yes.

MS. HALPER: How do you think being a teacher has influenced your career?

MS. SOLBERG: Well, I've made a lot of friends. I have-oh, sometimes, not so much now, but years ago, when I would-I was teaching in Ellensburg; I'd come to Seattle to do my shopping, and the salesgirl might say, "Did you used to be my junior high school teacher?" And I'd say, "Well, I could have been."

Well, I don't know how-I also say I used to give away my best ideas. You know, when students would have a problem, want to solve this problem, I would work at it, and in my mind I'd say, "Well, you could do this, this, or this." And sometimes this and this were two of my favorite solutions. But I certainly enjoyed teaching. I didn't know I was going to like it as much as I did. And I also used to say if they knew how much I liked it, they wouldn't pay me very much. Well, they didn't pay me very much. But, you know, it was such fun. I liked the students. Junior high school students at that time were not quite as rambunctious as they are now. I don't know. But I had nephews that same age. And I thought they were funny. You know, I just love that age. I was younger and could manage, you know.

But I was really influenced, I think-well, I don't know. I've had such wonderful students. I don't know how many have gone off to become famous jewelers; not that many. But I had-when I was at Central, I taught in the industrial arts department. And I had a lot of nice young men. And the only trouble was I would talk about jewelry and I would wear my jewelry. And pretty soon they were making better Solbergs than Solberg. I mean, they, you know, were very much influenced by what I wore. So, then, I started wearing ethnic jewelry. And I think that helped them, too. They became interested in that. But I made wonderful connections, and I still hear from a lot of my students.

MS. HALPER: I am interested that you and two of the jewelers that you're most associated with, who studied with you at one time, Ron Ho and Laurie Hall, have all been teachers below the college level. So you don't have that kind of academic side.

MS. SOLBERG: No.

MS. HALPER: And I've often wondered whether your exposure to the liveliness of students and the

need to use cheaper materials and even the writing of your book for teachers and students didn't give you, kind of, a less hierarchical view and a more expansive look at kind of the materials and methods of jewelry making.

MS. SOLBERG: Well, it could very well be. In fact, when I would be teaching-you know, I was raised during the end of the Depression era. And we did a lot of make-do in our family. So when I would sometimes talk about substitutes for more precious things, in later years, I could see some of my students kind of look at each other saying, "What's she talking about?" Because they had the wherewithal to buy these things, and I had all these ideas of how they could-because when I started teaching junior high school, I had rolls of craft paper in my class, and that was about it. And we had to make do. You know, there we were saving old toilet paper rolls. In fact, a friend of mine said not long ago, she said, "When I threw away that toilet paper roll, I knew I was really through teaching." She had been retired for a number of years, but she couldn't stop saving towel tubes and toilet paper tubes because that was, you know-but I've always-I guess I haven't had a great deal of ambition to go into other areas. I like the junior high school; I like their idea of using what's on hand, that kind of thing.

MS. HALPER: After you published your book *Inventive Jewelry-Making*, you were asked to go to workshops all over the country.

MS. SOLBERG: Oh, it was wonderful.

MS. HALPER: What were you teaching in the workshops?

MS. SOLBERG: Oh, I was teaching what it said in the book. You know, how to make jewelry out of found objects. The found objects were not pieces of pre-Colombian jade or wonderful stones, you know. I mean it was bottle tops and-oh! One of my favorites was using sardine cans as the base, sardine cans and anchovy-oh, sometimes my classroom just smelled like a fish market. I really enjoyed that kind of thing, and I knew-I know that a number of jewelers probably look down on the kind of jewelry I make, but I wasn't trying to impress anyone with that. I just like to do what we could afford, you know, what people had on hand, and so forth.

But I did those workshops-oh, my goodness! It was-I didn't make a lot of money on the book, but I did buy a leather coat. But, I did workshops in Honolulu, I did them in Alaska, Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania; it was great, just great.

MS. HALPER: You were teaching at University of Washington by then. Did this kind of populist way of looking at teaching and jewelry-was it at odds with the university atmosphere?

MS. SOLBERG: Well, I think it might have been. Now, Ruth wasn't teaching there anymore. But John Marshall-and, of course, John has different standards. He-mostly he's a metalsmith. He did make jewelry and I think he taught jewelry; I'm sure. But I think-they were not at all impressed with my book and I didn't expect them to be. And I think it was probably looked down on. It wasn't any scientific-it wasn't-it was just for ordinary people. I think probably it was looked down upon, but I didn't care, you know.

MS. HALPER: You mentioned that you had gone to the International Craft Council meetings. What was your role in councils during this period and in other craft organizations?

MS. SOLBERG: Well, we had-at that time we had a-the United States was divided into different sections. Like there was the Northwest. That was Seattle-Tacoma, Alaska-I should say,

Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana, Alaska. Then there was California. Then there was the Central area. All right, each one had a craftsman trustee. And we were to bring the needs of the craftsmen in our area to New York to the American Craft Council so that they would know what was going on.

I will say that in the north-I was craftsman trustee here in the Northwest for a number of years. In fact, I was it twice, once when the one Lin Lipitz [founder of the Factory of Visual Art, Seattle, WA] moved from here to California and couldn't do it anymore. She still had, I think, a year, two years left in her term. And they said, "Well, let's get Ramona; she kind of knows what we're doing." But I will say that the craftsmen here were not as-didn't seem to need the input of the American Craft Council as much as some other areas. We had Northwest Designer Craftsmen [NWDC]. They took care of a number of show and things like that.

We had-the first-well, I was asked when I was teaching at Central to put on a conference. And so we had a big conference in Ellensburg, and people came from all of our states plus-oh, we had a wonderful speaker, a woman who worked in plastics, from California. But we even had some glass-I remember Marvin Lipovsky called and said, "I hear you're having a conference," you know, "could I do a presentation." I said, "Well," I said, "we have no money." I said, "I can give you a place to stay, but," I said, "I can't, we can't give you any money." Oh, he came anyhow. In fact, he sent me some-he found out I liked beads, so he sent me some beads. I wonder where they are. You know, about five little beads that he had made.

And so I became known then to-because it was a very successful conference. We stayed in dormitories at Central. Central was very nice about it. And so, then I became known at the American Craft as somebody who did things and did them all right, so-then, I was appointed-then I moved to Seattle, but I started at the university, I think-was when I was elected as a craftsman trustee. And then somehow I became involved with World Craft [World Crafts Council] and I was the secretary-no, I was the treasurer. Now, that's a big joke because I'm very bad with money. However, no money ever crossed my palm. And they had an official treasurer. And I just really had to look at it and sign it. [They laugh.] That's terrible. But I went to the-I loved the conferences. I had one in Ireland-my favorite, I guess, was, perhaps, the one in Lima, Peru. And that was great. And I went to the one, as I mentioned, in Istanbul, and from there I took off and went to Afghanistan. But, anyhow, I don't know that I accomplished very much, but I was the voice of the Northwest for a few years.

MS. HALPER: Okay. Let's take a short break.

MS. SOLBERG: Yeah. Have a grape.

MS. HALPER: This is the end of tape number one.

[End Tape 1, Side B.]

MS. HALPER: This is Vicki Halper interviewing Ramona Solberg at Ramona's apartment in Seattle, Washington, on Friday, March 30, 2001, for the Archives for American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is tape two, side A.

I'm going to get right into, you know, your work today. I wondered when I was here, as we were chatting, you had just gone and you had bought this gorgeous Alaskan scraper and were making a necklace. Could you go over the process of creating a work? Where do you start to make a work of art?

MS. SOLBERG: Well, I start with the object. I start with the domino or the bead or the scraper or whatever. And this is, I think, why-I think my work, as I look at it-my little table full of odds and ends-they all look quite different. But it's because the object starts me off, and it starts me off in a direction. And, of course, all I want to do is make something to hang around my neck; that's my favorite. It presents sort of-it's like hanging a picture on a wall. But I start with the object. And like the scraper and the bone it's attached to, I think it's so beautiful just the way it is.

Now, I have a tendency to sometimes overdo. I get carried away. Like in my house I have, you know, too many things. But, you know, I love it all and I just want to put it down. Does that tell you what I do?

MS. HALPER: When you're set to make a necklace, do you go into the drawers that you have and hold all the objects? Or, I know you bought this scraper new just yesterday and it's gotten you excited.

MS. SOLBERG: Yeah.

MS. HALPER: At what point do you go back into your drawers to look for more objects?

MS. SOLBERG: Well, if I wanted to put something more with that, I would look in my drawers. Or, if I needed to make some jewelry-like for a show-and I think, oh, well, let's see-then, I would go in my drawer and sort of sift through things and get excited about these, as I was when bought them. Very often it's the last thing I bought, like the scraper now. I mean, I want to do that before I finish some things that are half done, because I just love it so much. But it's the object, and I put the object down on a piece of paper. And I take my little felt pen and, you know, look at it, maybe add something, but mostly I go back into the drawers and I look for something that I think would look well with the piece I've picked out.

MS. HALPER: So I notice for this scraper piece, you have a drawing, which is life-size, it's sort of a tracing of the scraper-

MS. SOLBERG: Well, I just went around it, yes.

MS. HALPER: Yeah, you traced the scraper, and then you have the indication of some other object, another object that you might put with it. You said a pebble, perhaps.

MS. SOLBERG: Yes.

MS. HALPER: How many different sketches did you do? Is this just the only one?

MS. SOLBERG: Oh, I usually only do one, sometimes two. I don't do a whole lot of sketches. My jewelry doesn't demand that. I just, you know-I sometimes when I have pieces, I lay them out and then look at them and shift them around. And then I decide to go ahead. And at the last moment I might change it. My jewelry isn't set. I don't think it's got to have-be like this. When I-maybe I make a mistake in the soldering. Some of my very good things have been because I've sort of screwed up, you know?

MS. HALPER: Do you keep the record, then, of all these drawings?

MS. SOLBERG: No.

MS. HALPER: No, you just throw them out when it's done?

MS. SOLBERG: No, I just-I throw them away. If I have a-there's a good piece of paper at the bottom; if there's a good piece of-you know, I'm so frugal, I'll tear that off and use it either for drawings or writing notes or something. No, I throw them away. I don't save any.

There was a time I made a drawing of each of my pieces. But that kind of organization only lasted me, oh, maybe, a year or two. And I would write who bought it and how much they paid. But, no, I don't do that. Now that I have a good photographer, I don't need to do that.

MS. HALPER: What are the functional considerations that you have in making the pieces?

MS. SOLBERG: Well, of course, you have to be sure you know-you know you're soldering and that's getting it hot. So, you can't-you have to decide about that. There are cold connections-I'm not terribly good on cold connections because I learned how to solder, and you know-but cold connections certainly solve a lot problems. By that, I mean, like, rivets, things like that. But you have to think about the weight; you have to think about the soldering. You have to solder before you can-one part-before you can do another part. You can't set things in, and then solder.

MS. HALPER: When you talk about weight, you mean the weight for the wearer?

MS. SOLBERG: Yes.

MS. HALPER: So what other considerations do you have for the person who's wearing the necklace, who's going to wear it?

MS. SOLBERG: Well, the weight is important, although it is not as important to me. I like the feeling of something around my neck, something substantial. I do think about the fastening. For many years, I would always put my fastenings on the side or the front in kind of a hidden way, because I used to go to concerts and I'd see these ladies in there-you know, they'd have these fancy necklaces on, and they'd always have really dumb fasteners. I mean, they were ugly from the back. And I think it's-you know, people look at you from many different directions. So the way it's fastened-and lately I've been doing, sort of, a front-frontal, side-frontal hook sort of thing. But I incorporate something from the design into that. I make it part of the whole design. I really like it on the side. I like to reach over with my right hand and hook it or do whatever. So I try to-I make-then I put a little piece that is part of the design on the side.

MS. HALPER: You don't generally have much work on the hanging part of the necklace, though?

MS. SOLBERG: No. No.

MS. HALPER: So you think of a necklace sort of as a composition, a painting composition, for example, a sculpture-

MS. SOLBERG: Yes, I guess I do. I don't think of it that way. I was never a great painter, although I one time got so tired of the restraints of jewelry-you know, little-working little and small-that I took a painting class, and I made big splashy paintings. But my paintings were not-well, I guess it is like a painting. I feel I need this over on one side; I need to balance it either with a piece or some space on the other side. I'm sure it's the way many painters feel about their work. They look at it and decide what else should go in it or what should they take out, you know?

MS. HALPER: Why don't you make bracelets or earrings or other kinds of jewelry?

MS. SOLBERG: Well, my interest span is a little short. I don't mind-I used to make earrings, but I had

to make-I couldn't make one earring and then make another one just like it. It was kind of tiresome. So I would make-go halfway through-I managed it that way. But I'm not interested in the earrings that go with my necklaces. I think just a plain little silver pair of earrings, just really quite plain, would go with-I don't want it to have a matched set, that kind of thing.

But as far as bracelets, my hands-I don't make bracelets and rings. I've worked so hard with my hands, and I used to, when I was young, I used to try to-I'd sit with my hands all folded up so people wouldn't see my terrible fingernails, because they were always-you know from working with silk screening, and, I mean, they were always-I always had terrible-my mother said I looked like a lady mechanic. My fingers were-my hands were always sort of tough looking. They weren't beautiful. Maybe they were when I was young, but I worked them into this kind of knotty, veiny mess.

MS. HALPER: So what I hear you saying is that you're making the jewelry always for yourself, in a way.

MS. SOLBERG: Oh, I make everything for myself. I don't like to do commissions. Sometimes someone will give me something, you know, a wonderful-say, "Oh look at this, Ramona. Isn't it wonderful?" "Oh, yes, I love it!" "Would you make me some-" "Oh! Well, yes, I'll try." But, mostly if somebody wants a necklace, I say, well, you just have to find one in a show. I just-I make them all for me. It's very-I'm very selfish. But after I make them, I'm not interested in wearing them. I hardly ever wear my own jewelry.

MS. HALPER: Have you kept some pieces for yourself?

MS. SOLBERG: No, I guess if I kept any, they just didn't sell. I think I'm going to keep one for myself, and then a show comes up, and I have to have something and I think, oh, I don't have time. Well, take this one. Well, it sells. No, I don't-I love it when I see other people wearing my jewelry. I just beam at them. Some of them probably don't know why that funny lady's smiling, but-often I go up and say, "I love your necklace!" [They laugh.] They think, "Oh!"

No, I'm afraid that I make them for me. That's why they're kind of big-or they are big-because I like that kind of thing. I don't like little, diddly pieces.

Oh, the bracelet part-bracelets and rings. I have one bracelet I wear. But, I always felt it called attention to my hands-not that my chest or my neck or my face was so wonderful. But, I didn't-you know, I thought, well, they look at that not-my hands were always a problem.

MS. HALPER: When you put the objects together to make your necklace, do you think about what any of the objects mean? Or are you trying-is there any social commentary that's sort of embedded in your work?

MS. SOLBERG: No, no. If there is, it's almost accidental. No, I don't think about that-I don't think I think about that. Maybe I do, because I do put funny things together. I'm trying to think of an example. Several times I have been asked-mostly by Mobilia [Mobilia Gallery, Cambridge, MA]-they have, kind of, theme shows, and they will ask for something that has to do with time. Or, well, I did some using watches-watch parts. I did things like that. Well, and like the NWDC show that I just talked about. I forget-it has a wonderful title, but it means things that have been worn or used by people-worn by people. And that's why I'm interested in doing this labret one. But it isn't supposed to say anything except that these were worn by people. No, I don't have any great messages. I enjoy message-like Nancy Worden's things-I think they're funny and wonderful. But, I don't do that.

MS. HALPER: When-I'm thinking of a series you did that used rabbits, *Watership Down* [1978, based on the book *Watership Down*, by Richard Adams, published in 1972].

MS. SOLBERG: Oh, yes!

MS. HALPER: So, and it seemed to me many of the pieces in those necklaces were thematically related. The rabbits were in gardens, or there might be a rabbit and a carrot, or-I'm not quite sure about the rabbit in the compass, but-

MS. SOLBERG: Well, of course, I read the book. Reading a charming little book like that-I got it from my friend Hazel-and the head rabbit was called Hazel. But I read the book and one of my students-I think we talked about it in class, or something-and a student-no, I guess, I don't remember. I think I'd already made one, and then this girl came with these plastic rabbits she'd gotten at some store and she had a whole little package of them. And so I made-so I cast them and I made three necklaces. I'm not a big rabbit fan; I love rabbits, they're so cute. [But] I'm more of a cat fan. But I'd never make a piece of jewelry with a cat on it. But the rabbits were-because I made some castings, then I had to use them. I made three necklaces using those cast rabbits. They-[*There's a*] *Rabbit in My Garden* [1990]-oh, yes, I used one on that, didn't I? Well, the same-

MS. HALPER: And then there's *Mr. McGregor's*, [1996] which is-

MS. SOLBERG: Well, that one was-I bought this Chinese bone, or ivory, rabbit-and I have a whole little box now of odds and ends-rabbit odds and ends.

MS. HALPER: You showed me one today.

MS. SOLBERG: Yes. And I have a box, it's a shoe box. I pasted some rabbit paper on it. Somebody gave me as a gift. And it has a lot of little-it has drawings of rabbits, because I want to do more rabbits. It's-I hope they don't become fashionable, like owls, and what else do people collect? Well, because I kind of like when it's not fashionable.

MS. HALPER: This all started because you cast rabbits. There must be something about rabbits that you really love to keep up having-

MS. SOLBERG: Oh, they're so cute. They're so cute. And you know-no, there's nothing-they're so-those long ears and I don't know-they're really, well-

MS. HALPER: How would you differentiate them between the found object jewelry that you make and other found object artists and their work, like Fred Woell or Don Tompkins or Bob Ebendorf?

MS. SOLBERG: Well, I think probably the first found-object artist-jeweler I saw was Fred Woell. And it was the picture-the one that had the American Red Cross button on it. I thought that was wonderful. But he uses more throwaway kind of things than I do. And I was never one to-well, I really like what he does. He has a wonderful sense of humor. And somehow I didn't have a big collection of bottle tops or the kind of things he uses. I had a big collection of things I picked up on my trips that were not American throwaways. They were probably Japanese throwaways or Eskimo throwaways or something. I had that kind of thing. So Bob Ebendorf-when I first met Bob, he certainly wasn't doing that sort of thing. It's just been the last few years. I think he's very brave, you know, using paper, Styrofoam balls, and all that.

MS. HALPER: When was it when you first saw Fred Woell? Do you remember?



MS. SOLBERG: Oh, probably in the, oh, late '50s, early '60s, it was in *Craft Horizons*, and that was where I saw everything. You know, it was the only magazine of that sort, and I started taking it even before I could afford it. I sent money and began to get it when I was teaching junior high school. And that was in-oh, when was that? About '50-1950. '51? [1951.] Something like that. But I saw it in *Craft Horizons*-that was where.

MS. HALPER: So Don Tompkins was really much later than that.

MS. SOLBERG: Oh, yes. No. I didn't, no-I had seen Don's things about the same time, but his-he was doing absolutely wonderful banjos. And I remember he had one that was a watch bracelet. It had a wonderful watch face on it. It worked; it worked. But, he did things-he did all sorts of things when he was going to Everett. I saw his things at the Henry Gallery in the craft show. But I didn't see any real jewelry of his except that watch until he came to teach-well, maybe I did. That's right. Pauline Johnson had a pendant that he did. And I admired that. And it was-did it say anything? I don't know.

He was the first one I ever noticed who put words and quotes and things like that. And I always thought, oh, that's so neat how he got all those letters. He evidently had a stamp set. But he could do them straight. I tried doing it-they were really cattywampus [slang word meaning awry or askew]-they weren't very readable. But, no, I didn't really know much about Don's jewelry until he came to Central. I knew that he was a jeweler and I knew he was good. And I thought he was exactly what we needed over there. And so I was always very proud of myself for writing him and saying, "Come and teach, we need you." You know? But it was thanks, really, to Russell Day that I knew about Don.

MS. HALPER: Were there any people that you knew that were doing ethnic found objects the way you were?

MS. SOLBERG: Well, I don't know. The only one I can think of and remember would be a ring that Ruth Penington had. It had a small bone, very small bone piece in it. I think it was pre-Colombian. She also did a pendant for-what's her name? [Erna Gunther]-with a kap kap on it from the South Pacific [circular-shaped clam shells, often overlaid with delicately carved turtleshell]. I didn't really care much for that. I loved the kap kap. But, it was just a kind of putting it on a piece of metal and putting a thong around it. But, she made that for an anthropology teacher.

MS. HALPER: Juanita? No. Not Juanita Haynes.

MS. SOLBERG: No, she made it for-

MS. HALPER: Gunther? Erna Gunther?

MS. SOLBERG: Erna Gunther. Thank you. No, Erna and Ruth were good friends. We all belonged to a little get-together once-a-month group. And Ruth invited me and I became part of that group.

MS. HALPER: Who else was in that group? Ruth and Erna and you? Do you remember?

MS. SOLBERG: Oh, there was a lady who was an expert on barnacles from-[they laugh]. And there was an English professor. I don't know. They were all professors at the university. And we would get together and laugh and talk and ask somebody about their last trip to the ocean, what kind of seaweed did they find, you know.

Thank you for saying-I was thinking Edwina, and I thought, no, that's not right-Erna.

MS. HALPER: You've long been associated here in the Northwest with a group of jewelers, Ron Ho, Laurie Hall, Nancy Worden, and Kiff Slemmons. How do you think you have influenced their work?

MS. SOLBERG: Well, I don't know that I have influenced Kiff or Nancy. They were both working hard at it long before I ever appeared. I do remember Lambda Ro used to sponsor a show at the Henry Gallery [at the University of Washington in Seattle], a craft show. It only lasted, like, three days. You know, we installed it; it looked wonderful. But, the Henry Gallery wouldn't let us keep it up too long. This was when Gervis [Reed] was the director, assistant director, or maybe also after LaMar [Harrington] got there. But they let us have this little show. It was a selling show. And I was in charge of putting the jewelry in the cases. And we got these-for two years we got necklaces from a girl up in Bellingham with a funny name. I could never remember her name and I didn't write it down. Finally after the second year I did. Well, it was Kiff Slemmons. These were pieces-no solder. They were more like-well they were necklaces. But they were made with no solder and they were absolutely charming. She used a lot of pre-Colombian things. One of them, at least, was pre-Colombian. I thought, oh, now I've written her name down, I could remember. Well, pretty soon I met her. And I like that.

Ron and Laurie were both my students. And I know I influenced them. Both of them have gone long beyond my influence. They're not-I suppose they retain it. But their work is completely different from mine. However, I do remember at the beginning Ron's things-of course the trouble was I would give him objects, you see. He was in a little class I had over at Bellevue. And I stopped at the Goodwill one day and bought some dominoes. And I paid 35 cents apiece, so I had to be careful who I didn't give too many away. Well, I took them to class and I said, "I bought these dominoes; anybody want to use these in their jewelry?" I had already, I think, done some domino jewelry. Well, Ron took a couple. And he added a mahjong piece and he did a very handsome necklace with them. But I think that got him started. Of course, he wasn't a jeweler till I got a hold of him. He was a painter.

Laurie always has her own way of doing things. But I think I-I met Laurie when she entered some macramé with bone attachments into the Bellevue Fair. And we had to write comments on-maybe the ones we rejected, I'm not sure. And I wrote on hers: "Why are you fooling around with macramé? You should be working in silver."

MS. HALPER: My goodness!

MS. SOLBERG: And I just-I thought, well, I wasn't against macramé, but-well, I guess I was. I just got tired of it all, you know. Yeah.

MS. HALPER: Do you think that they've influenced your work at all?

MS. SOLBERG: Oh, of course.

MS. HALPER: And how? How would you say they've influenced you?

MS. SOLBERG: Well, well, let's see. Well, it's hard to say, but I'm sure they have. I can't think how. I've adapted so readily that I don't remember those things.

Oh, I have to tell you something funny about Ron. I was working a lot with beads, and so he started to work with beads. He is so smart. I got tired of stringing those little strings of beads. He would invite people over for dinner and give them a little tray with beads and a needle and thread and they had to string, let's say, a 14- or 15-inch length or maybe a couple before he would feed them. I thought that was so smart. He'd have, you know, five, six people there sitting stringing beads. That

was good.

Ron's things are much more elegant than mine. They're more-he spends a lot of time on thinking and drawing and-oh, another thing about-here I go on about Ron. I told him that he-I said, "I don't know why you don't use-" We were in London. I was teaching, and Ron and Laurie were both in my class. And we would spend a lot of our off school time going to flea markets, and we would go to Bermondsey [Antiques Market, London], and they always had a lot of jade and wonderful things. And I said, "Ron, why don't you make some gorgeous oriental jewelry?" I said, "After all, you have this great heritage." I said, "Just think of all those nice oriental ladies in Seattle who would like to own a piece of really contemporary jewelry."

Well, I told him he'd been drinking too much Coca-Cola. So he-I said, the trouble is-he didn't have anything oriental in his house. The first thing he finally bought was-many years later he bought a Chinese table with six chairs. But now, of course, his house is quite oriental. Anyhow, it wasn't until we saw this little medallion with a wonderful Japanese lady on it. And Laurie said to him, "Well, if you don't buy it, I'm going to." So, he bought it. And he made a beautiful-I think one of my favorite necklaces of his-with-he even used some pearls on it. The photographer-he's a Korean photographer with a Japanese wife-and she bought it.

MS. HALPER: Namkung?

MS. SOLBERG: Namkung. Mrs. [Josef] Namkung owns it. And it is-I think it's a lovely, lovely necklace. So, that's sort of got him going on the oriental things. But, again, using-before that he was using pieces I would bring back from New Guinea, or, you know, they were kind of rough and tumble. He did a wonderful necklace with a piece I had brought from Afghanistan. But, anyhow, he's now become quite Chinese. And Laurie, I don't know how I influenced her, I just laughed at her work. I think it's really fun. It's not very-she doesn't take herself seriously. Now Ron takes himself quite seriously, but Laurie doesn't. She just laughs and uses wood or uses whatever and puts these wild necklaces together-not maybe as wild as Nancy Worden, but anyhow wild.

MS. HALPER: When you started making fibulas, that's a particular kind of pin, a few years ago-

[End Tape 2, Side A.]

MS. HALPER: Tape two, side B. Okay.

MS. SOLBERG: Okay. The bead bazaar was held at the-well, we had a bead bazaar. And I didn't have any beads; I mean, I'd been buying beads, but I didn't want to get rid of any. So I thought, what can I do that would have-it was supposed to be related to beads somehow. We couldn't bring old, you know, old alarm clocks in and sell them or anything. It had to be a bead-oriented thing. So I thought, how can I use beads? Well, I could have made pendants, I guess, but somehow I got involved in this fibula thing. And I made 12 fibulas. They were rather small. I think I made four or five of silver; the others were naval-bronze wire. And so I had 12 fibulas on my-

MS. HALPER: And then you strung beads on the fibulas.

MS. SOLBERG: Oh, yes, yes. I had-oh, I put different kinds of beads on. They had to have a certain size hole. I had beads I would like to use, but the holes weren't big enough. So I put-and also on all of those I also did a little dangle. I took short pieces of wire and pounded them to make a little thing that dangled on each one. And I took these to-oh, and on the dangles had both bronze and silver wire. But some of the-as I said, the whole pin was either silver or bronze, but I put-I wanted it so

people could wear it in case they were-they wanted something kind of gold-colored, you know; some people want gold-colored earrings or gold earrings. Well, of these 12 fibulas that I took, I sold three. But I felt good about it because I sold the three to the three ladies I felt had the best taste in the whole club. I sold one to Flora, Flora Rabinovich, one to Alida Latham, and one to Nancy Hewitt.

And so I had these nine fibulas left. And I was living in Ellensburg at the time, and I took them to the little gallery, and I said, do you think you could sell these? Well, they'd try. So then I was about to go on a trip to Africa, and I had promised the Flying Shuttle [Ragazzi's Flying Shuttle, Seattle, WA] that I would give them, I think, five necklaces. Well, in my usual procrastinating way I didn't get five done; I only got four done. So I thought, well, I'll give them some pins, maybe they'd like that. So I think I gave them five pins or six pins, I don't know. And I took them there, and I was on my way to the airport, and I said, "Well, here it is." I have four necklaces and these pins. And then I ran out the door and went to SeaTac [Seattle-Tacoma International Airport] and got on an airplane.

When I got back a couple weeks later, I had several messages. "We want more pins." They-by this time I think I made them the ones-I got tired of those little dangles. I felt that it kind of-you had to wear it a certain way. I don't know that-I think I just got tired of making them, pounding them, drilling holes in the other end and, you know, it just-I thought, oh, that's a lot of nonsense. So I then also made the size wire a little bigger. I felt the first ones-the pin stem was a little flimsy and it bent too easily. Of course, silver's very soft, so making-and the pin stems-I didn't want them to be so big, although they are and you have to be careful what you put them through. Bits are the best. But, anyhow, I then-here came the Flying Shuttle wanting more pins. Wow, I was quite impressed. So I made some more pins. And, well, that's how I got started. And when I had my first show at Facère [Jewelry Art Gallery, Seattle, WA], I took her a bunch of necklaces. And then she said something about the pins. "Oh!" I said, "Well, I could make more pins."

I dare to tell you a secret. I sit and twist the wire up, you know, get the spiral and everything, get it all done while I'm watching television. I don't usually sit and just look at television. I either am doing that or I'm reading something kind of lightweight, like a mystery book. But it-I can make-sit down and twist up 20 of those during a program. So, then all I have to do is decide on what beads. So, then I get out my beads and put those on. I don't know how I was ever so smart as to think about this, thanks to the Bead Society, because I would never have made a pin like that. I thought you always had to solder things and, you know, do hard things. Well, I don't how many I've made. According to the list I have from Facère-and they give me a number for each piece I bring in-I'm up into the 400s. Now, of course, there were a lot of necklaces in there. I've had a number-I've had one one-person show, plus I bring in other pieces. But, I will take 10, 15-in fact, for Christmas this year she said, "Bring me 20 fibulas." So I did.

MS. HALPER: Is that a major part of your income now? Are the fibulas-

MS. SOLBERG: No.

MS. HALPER: No.

[They laugh.]

MS. SOLBERG: No, it's my fool-around money. I haven't-I think I-the first ones I sold, I think, for \$35 or \$40.

MS. HALPER: Oh, dear!

MS. SOLBERG: And then when Karen [Lorene] from Facère got a hold of me, she said: "That's ridiculous!" She said: "You have to raise your price." So, I said, "Well, I thought maybe \$80." And she finally raised it to \$90. And then-sometimes I put better beads on. Now, when I say "better beads," I mean like amber or some trade beads that are really quite valuable, like chevron. If I get some little chevron beads, I sometimes make one-or Russian blues. Now, they're all more expensive. Now, if I go to buy them, they cost quite a bit. But, if I put just ordinary beads on, then I-she now has raised it to \$95 for that. And I won't let her go above that unless it's better beads. So, sometimes she charges \$110 or \$120. I tell her, I said: "These should be more." So she just looks at them and decides what the price should be. Because I think they're fun. They're not hard to make, you know, and I-but it's awfully nice getting that little check each month, you know; I get 200 and something dollars for three pins or four pins. Well, that's really nice. It's a little pocket money that I can play with. I can go out and buy things, more beads, more beads. Okay.

MS. HALPER: In addition to-oh no, I think first I'm going to ask you to describe your work space.

MS. SOLBERG: Oh, I'm almost ashamed to describe it. I've had much better studios every place I've been. But, after all, when you live in a condominium-I thought about turning my extra bedroom into a shop. And I-but I love company. And I like to have people come and stay with me. I have several people who come a lot, come down and-one from Alaska and one from Bellingham [WA]. They come down and, you know, stay a few days or even a couple weeks. Well, that means I couldn't-I thought, oh no, that would be terrible-because jewelry making is dusty and dirty. Don't ask me why it's next to my kitchen. But I can keep my kitchen pretty clean; all those surfaces are easier.

So I turned the family room into my studio. And luckily the people who lived here before had a big funny, rather heavy kitchen table. It was, you know, metal and was covered with Formica. And it was very sturdy. So I didn't have to have another jeweler's bench. I'd always had something. I started making jewelry on a door, you know, just the door. When I lived over on 17th, I had a real studio. Oh! In Ellensburg I had a real studio, lots of room. Although my studio is never neat, and my mother objected because the studio was in what had been Sarah Spurgeon's painting studio. But it was so large that I only needed a small part. And then we had our television and a settee and a couple of good chairs in there.

Well, she didn't like that my jewelry bench was always full of clutter and everything. So I bought some bookshelves and put that up in between. Well, I had those bookshelves and I lined the walls here with these-they're industrial-type shelving. And I have boxes full of who-knows-what. I haven't looked in some for quite awhile. But I have one box that says "felt," another one that says "thongs." They're leather thongs; there are rubber-the rubber that I'm using now, all kinds of things. In fact, yesterday I was out north; I went into-was Eagle Hardware, it's something else now-and bought a couple plastic boxes. I couldn't find the size I wanted, and I thought, I'm going to go through those boxes when I get through with this show. Go through those boxes and consolidate things so it won't be so messy-looking in there.

Of course, the mess isn't in the shelves; it's on my workbench and around. I sometimes think, you know, if I had a fire, I'd have a terrible time. I do have a fire extinguisher. But anyhow, my workbench is very small. I do all my soldering on a firebrick that is what-eight by four, or something. I have-I work in a very small space; considering the size of my jewelry, it's amazing. I had a small Crock-Pot but I couldn't get all my-sometimes when the piece was all assembled, I couldn't get it in, so I had to get a larger Crock-Pot. I have a gas tank. I worry about the condominium finding out that I'm using gas. I try to be very, very careful; I don't want to burn this building down.

But anyhow, it's a very small space. And I have a polishing wheel. And that's about-oh! I have a big

stump. I have a stump that my nephew gave me, and it has a couple stakes in it. These stakes are the forming-they're steel; they're what you form metal over. I only have two stakes and I have an anvil on there. But, it's very sturdy and it's good-I pound a lot and my neighbors don't mind. I think they think that's how I make my jewelry. I've talked to them and I don't pound in the evening, you know, late, or early because they hear me. I meet them sometimes, and they say, "Oh! We hear you're making jewelry now." [They laugh.] So, I have to be careful.

MS. HALPER: You know, a number of jewelers-Kiff Slemmons is one and Mary Lee Hu is another-have told me that the show that you curated in Bellingham of ethnic jewelry back-I can't remember when [1970, Whatcom Museum of History and Art, Bellingham, WA]-

MS. SOLBERG: A long time ago.

MS. HALPER: Long ago-was one of the most influential and eye-opening events in their career.

MS. SOLBERG: They've told me that, too.

MS. HALPER: Tell me about curating, and how you got into doing that show, plus the two shows you curated for Bellevue [Bellevue Art Museum, Bellevue, WA].

MS. SOLBERG: Well, a friend of mine, a woman I knew really just casually, I must say-I knew her when I was living down in Arizona-was a friend of a friend, and she was a great traveler. And my friend always said she had more taste, oh, more money than taste, that's it. She bought things when she traveled. And she had a brother who lived in Seattle. So I was living in Ellensburg, and she came to visit her brother and came over to see-they all came over-brother-in-law, brother, and sister-in-law-came to see me in Ellensburg. And we exchanged travel information and letters. And one day as she was starting on a trip, she had a massive heart attack in the middle of an airport. And I can't think of a better way to go. I wish she'd waited till she got back because she missed the trip. But anyhow, isn't that great? You know, there she was, doing what she liked.

Anyhow, she had this big jewelry collection. And so her brother went back, and they sent all the jewelry and a lot of artifacts to Seattle. Well, I was-I had just started to teach at the university. I was there for that first year. They invited me. And I was living with my brother and his family out north. And they knew this, and so they called and they said, "Ramona, would you consider house-sitting for us while we're back settling the estate and, you know, doing all these things." This was back in Massachusetts. Well, this was a wonderful opportunity. He lived over in Washington Park in a nice house. And they also said, "By the way, if you could go through the jewelry and tell us where it's from." So, I did that. I had all this wonderful jewelry. Oh, this is from so-and-so. This is, you know-I'd tell them what it was made from if I could. And I mostly could.

So, then-I don't know how the show happened, but-anyhow, I felt that this, the jewelry, should be seen. And I talked to them about giving it to the Burke [Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture, University of Washington, Seattle] or the-somehow I was involved with something up at the Whatcom Museum, and so the lady who was the director there asked if I would do a show. Well, so I borrowed all this jewelry from them, plus my jewelry, plus beads that I had now-because now I was teaching at the university and I was interested in beads-and so I put this show together and it was on display up in Bellingham.

Well, the terrible thing was-the show had been up for, I don't know, let's say a month or however long, and someone broke into the museum through a back window behind-it was-you didn't even know the window was there-but they broke in and they stole a lot of jewelry. Well, that was terrible.

They stole things of mine, but they stole things that I had borrowed from these people. Well, they were quite unhappy. And they decided they would not give their jewelry to the Whatcom Museum; they gave it to the Burke. So the Burke now has their collection.

MS. HALPER: Do you remember the name of the collector? Don't worry about it.

MS. SOLBERG: Husk. Gertrude Husk was the woman's name. I can't remember her brother's name.

MS. HALPER: She's the one who collected it, though?

MS. SOLBERG: She collected it. Gertrude Husk.

MS. SOLBERG: And so it is-I have never seen any at the Burke that I have recognized as hers. But, they have it.

MS. HALPER: And what about the Bellevue? The Bellevue shows? How did they come about? The "Ubiquitous Bead" ["Ubiquitous Bead" (1987) and "Ubiquitous Bead II" (1998), Bellevue Art Museum, Bellevue, WA]?

MS. SOLBERG: Well, well, you see, Hazel and I had done two shows for LaMar [Harrington] at the Henry Gallery. We did one on folk art in Latin America and we did one on the Balkans. And they were very, very popular. And one of them was when the underground garage was being built and there were threats of bombings and things. And people weren't allowed in. But even so, they had record attendance.

So, of course, LaMar then went to Bellevue and was the director over there. And she talked to us about different kinds of shows. And Hazel began to do the installations over there. Well, she said-she knew I was interested in beads and things-she said, "Ramona, we're having a print show." And she said, "It's not big enough to fill the whole gallery, so," she said, "could you perhaps do a small bead show in that little alcove?" I said, "Oh! Sure." Well, pretty soon, I said, "LaMar, I have too much." Well, pretty soon-I don't think the print show was even shown.

MS. HALPER: I don't think it could fit.

MS. SOLBERG: It-because I had beads, beads, beads, beads, and everyone was wonderful about loaning things. I went to the Seattle Art Museum and they loaned me many pieces. The Burke, I think, loaned me about 20 pieces. History and Industry [Museum of History and Industry, Seattle, WA]-marvelous! The costume collection even gave me-they didn't have too much that I wanted. I had better jewelry, beads, than they had. Anyhow, and friends-you know, it just sort of poured in. Well, I was living in Ellensburg. I had retired from the university. And I was living in Ellensburg. And I would drive over in the morning and drive home at night. And I was just over that pass on 99 over, you know-or 99, it's 90, isn't it? Well, whatever it is. Anyhow, all of these-everyone was so helpful. It was marvelous. And also I must say Hazel and Larry [Metcalf]-when I would bring in one more piece, you know, they'd figure out what to do with it. I did drive the woman who was the-

MS. HALPER: Registrar.

MS. SOLBERG: Yes. She got a little wild; especially at the last minute I'd bring something else. But people offered me these great things, you know. So, that's how the first one happened. And it was really funny. Bob Purser's wife, Carolyn, was going to take care of the poster. And I went to her house and at the same time Florence Baker Wood was there. And I think-I don't know what we were all doing together, but I went out into the trunk of my car and brought out pieces for her to

wear while she was being photographed. I think the pieces all came from Ella from Bellingham, from Ella Steffens.

MS. HALPER: So-

MS. SOLBERG: And they took the picture and we had this poster that says you-

MS. HALPER: So Florence was your model?

MS. SOLBERG: She was our model. She was holding an African gourd that was covered with beads. She was wearing a hill tribe beaded thing. I mean, it just happened. We were going to talk about what she was to wear. And I said, "I have it." Well, anyhow, so that made that nice poster.

The second poster we had-by the way, the second-well, I don't know if we had any money the first time. We didn't pay anybody anything. The second one, which was nine years later-oh, and the book! The wonderful book on beads came out, that definitive book by-what's her name?

MS. HALPER: This is the-

MS. SOLBERG: It's *Survey of Beads*; I have it over on the bookshelf.

MS. HALPER: Joan Erickson?

MS. SOLBERG: No, no. That's a little one. No, this is a big one. Well, anyhow, it came out at the same time. I had to really talk the shop into getting 10 of them. And they were gone like nothing. Anyhow, the second one was nine years later and they had absolutely no money for anything. So I got Rod Slemmons to take a picture of this hand, one of Kiff's hands [brooch, by Kiff Slemmons] that had beads on it. It was one she had given me, and she put beads on it because it was called *Ramona*.

MS. HALPER: Yes.

MS. SOLBERG: Okay, so we had a small poster made of that. That was the sort of the logo for that show. We called it "Ubiquitous Bead II."

I went to the Seattle Art Museum and-oh, no, now they were charging \$100 for each piece that you borrowed. I went to the Burke; they, too, were charging \$100 for each piece. I went to the Museum of History and Industry and we could have anything we wanted, didn't cost anything. So, but by this time there were a number of bead collectors in town who had beaded objects. And I was moaning around about this one day, about how the museums were charging \$100 each. And so Dwang Dunning from Island Beads [Mercer Island, WA] said, "How many pieces?" I think I said I wanted four pieces and that would be \$400. She said, "I'll give it to you." So Dwang gave me \$400 to get, I think, two pieces from the Seattle Art Museum and two pieces, two beaded dresses, from the Burke. If it hadn't been for Dwang, it, you know, anyhow. So that's how that show went. We had people giving lectures on beads.

It was a wild show. This one was a little bit different, because that little annex LaMar had offered me at first, that little alcove, now was taken up with contemporary bead things that Leslie Campbell had put together. And there were now so many bead makers in Seattle and-although they came from all over. I had gotten this enormous necklace from Sabrina Knowles. Well, there are two bead ladies who make really interesting-I just had a great card; they were having a show. But, anyhow, they did this necklace that was-oh, I don't know how many feet long-it was like an elephant would wear-



elephant jewelry, sort of. And then a couple young fellows made a beaded curtain, and they couldn't get it in the elevator. They had to walk up the stairs, one carrying each end. And so those were people I had invited. But Kiff-not Kiff-Leslie had put together this kind of wild bead show that was going to travel, and that was part of our show. Anyhow, that's probably more than you ever wanted to know, but that's how those happened.

MS. HALPER: I think you probably influenced countless people through those shows.

MS. SOLBERG: Well, yes. And you know we had a-during a SNAG [Society of North American Goldsmiths] conference we had an ethnic jewelry show at SPU [Seattle Pacific University] in their little gallery. And I-Tim McCreigh, who is a jewelry teacher and he is the author of many good jewelry books-I met him at a conference in Minneapolis a couple of years ago. And he said that was the best-oh, they had shows, jewelry shows, all over town. And he said, "I liked the ethnic one you put together the best." And we were limited only because of the lack of cases. I could have done a much bigger, better show.

And I thought one of the nice things about that show was I asked Rod Slemmons to take-oh, I had some postcards, I had magazine pictures, I had different things. And I said, would you take these and blow them up in black and white, and we can put them on the wall so people can see how these people wore these things, which I think is very important. And so he did-I think I have eight two-by-four pictures from all parts of the world.

MS. HALPER: The last sort of group of questions I have for you is about your, sort of, career in the market of selling your work and exhibiting your work. When did you begin exhibiting and where?

MS. SOLBERG: I think the first place I ever exhibited my work was perhaps at the-I don't know if it was the Henry Gallery or the Bellevue Arts and Crafts. Now, they were both wonderful venues. I think that's such a funny word. But they were wonderful places for people who had not shown before.

MS. HALPER: You're talking about the crafts fair at Bellevue, the annual fair?

MS. SOLBERG: Yes, yes, yes. I don't know which one came first. It may have been the Henry Gallery. And I-because I did-I sent things from Ellensburg over, I remember. And then I-the Bellevue-I also sent jewelry over a few times. And, of course, I was absolutely-Henry must have been first, because I became quite confident and would send things to Bellevue, because I would like to go to the patrons' parties. Ron and I would both make pieces. Sometimes only one of us, but we always-there weren't many jewelers around-one of us usually got the prize, so we could go. And he liked to talk to people and I liked to drink. So, you know, it worked out really well.

One time one of my pieces was stolen during the patrons' party. These were usually outside events. And anyhow it was stolen. So, when Ron went over on a Friday-he was teaching over near there, so he went over during his lunch hour. And he looked at the jewelry, and he said to the woman who was sort of there, he said: "Well, where's Ramona's necklace?" "Oh," she said, "it was stolen at the patrons' party." And he said, "What?!" She said, "Yes! Don't tell her!" And, of course, immediately he called me and told me. And I said, "Oh, well, good! I'll get some insurance money anyhow." Because I was never good at selling my own jewelry-I can sell other people's-if we have a booth someplace, I can sell lots of things. But I don't seem to do well with my own. Anyhow, it turns out that later that day whoever had stolen it-and Bellevue people said, "Oh, it was some fellow who was drunk, one of the patrons." Anyhow, he had picked up this necklace and he probably took it home and his wife said, "I wouldn't wear that." So he put it in a paper sack and-

[Begin Tape 3, Side A.]

MS. HALPER: This is Vicki Halper interviewing Ramona Solberg at Ramona's apartment in Seattle, Washington, on Friday, February 30, 2001, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is tape three, side A.

You mentioned you think that the first sales you made were to friends.

MS. SOLBERG: I think so. I would be-I would make jewelry-I mentioned going to Edison Vocational and to Coralyn Pence letting me sit in the corner and do my own thing. And I would wear my jewelry to school, to my classes and all, and the other teachers, you know, would sometimes look at it and say, "Oh, my, I really like that." And I traded-I remember I traded a piece of jewelry to Chuck Smith at the university for a piece of sculpture. In fact, that's, I guess, how my first things-I would go to the Bellevue Fair and I would come home with candleholders and ceramics, because the crafts people liked my jewelry and they'd like-but they would at the end of the fair, towards the end they'd come around and say, "Would you be willing to trade this?" And it was more fun to have a bowl made by somebody than take home my own dumb jewelry.

MS. HALPER: How did you manage to get into "Objects: USA"?

MS. SOLBERG: I haven't the faintest-oh! I do, too! I do, too! I got in through the back door. I had gone to Peru to the World Craft-by the way that is not mentioned in her letter. She says Lisbon-no, Dublin and Istanbul-but I went to the one in Peru. And I went because I'd always wanted to go to Peru and it was very reasonable. American Craft had, you know, booked a lot seats. Okay, so, I went down there. And in the thing they said we are going to have a show of works, so bring something, you know. So, I brought two necklaces that I had made and took them into the-I don't know if I took both of them in, but I took at least one in. Maybe I wore the other one, I don't know. Like Gervis always used to laugh when crafts people would come to the Henry for the opening of the shows. One night, Anne Gerber and I walked in together-

MS. HALPER: So, Anne Gerber walked in-

MS. SOLBERG: Yes, we walked in the Henry and Gervis greeted us and he said to Anne, he said-or maybe it wasn't Gervis, but someone said: "Oh, Anne, that's a lovely necklace." She said, "This one is a reject; they didn't want it in the show." So she was wearing this one.

So, anyhow, we crafts people liked each other's things. And the jurors sometimes didn't like everything. Where was I?

MS. HALPER: "Objects: USA."

MS. SOLBERG: Oh, "Objects: USA", okay. So, I was down in Peru and I put this piece in the show. And while I was there, this woman from Florida approached me and said, "Would you be willing to sell this certain necklace?" And I said, "No, I don't think I want to sell that."

MS. HALPER: This was *Shaman's Necklace* [1968]?

MS. SOLBERG: Yes. And I said, "But I have another one I would sell." So I showed it to her. Oh, yes, she would like that one. So she, I guess-right then and there I sold it, I guess. Well, then I had a letter from Paul Smith asking about the necklace I had in Peru. Maybe he even talked to me; I don't remember. But he wanted it for something. It turned out he wanted it for "Objects: USA." I didn't know it was going to be such a marvelous show; I loved that show.

MS. HALPER: It was an important show.

MS. SOLBERG: It was important; it was important to me. And then my-it came out in a book. Wow! You know.

MS. HALPER: So, in general, you showed locally, rather than showing internationally.

MS. SOLBERG: Oh, I only-I didn't show very locally; I showed at the Henry Gallery and Bellevue, and that was it. I didn't show anyplace else.

MS. HALPER: And why didn't you submit your work to national shows?

MS. SOLBERG: I didn't think it was good enough. I didn't think it was good enough. It just-it didn't look like the jewelry that other people did, you know, the ones I saw in *Craft Horizons*. And so I just thought it wasn't good enough. I even had questions about being good enough for the Henry Gallery. Now, I did get pieces in, but anyhow.

MS. HALPER: What did you think-what were you seeing in *Craft Horizons* that made you think your work wasn't good enough? What kinds of things were they doing that you weren't or vice versa?

MS. SOLBERG: Well, oh, I saw work-well, Olaf Skoogfors, Irena Brynner-I don't know if I saw Margaret De Patta, but probably did, because I admired the work of those people-that Renk, is it Merilee [Merry] Renk? Oh, well, whatever. But, no, I saw jewelry by those people. I was most attracted to things by people like Sam Kramer. I really-I saw his and I thought it was quite wonderful. But, you know, they all seemed so-it all seemed so refined. And I didn't think my things were very refined. So I guess that's why.

MS. HALPER: When did you first get a dealer?

MS. SOLBERG: Oh, not until, oh, probably, well, the first one was-of course I did sell that one bunch at the Flying Shuttle. I did have that one selling thing there, but I don't think I had sent anything anyplace. I hadn't had anyone come to me until Karen Lorene from Facèré said she would like me to have a show. And I said, oh, I may have a piece here or there.

MS. HALPER: What about at Sylvia Ullman's gallery [Sylvia Ullman American Crafts Gallery, Cleveland, OH]?

MS. SOLBERG: Well, yes, I think maybe that was after-that was after. I also showed at the Hand and Spirit in Scottsdale [AZ]. I was-they had some bead people and I sent some things. But, that was after Karen. So, she's the first one who was, you know, really said, "Oh, I like your jewelry, give me more."

MS. HALPER: And how is it different for you now working with a dealer?

MS. SOLBERG: Well, I'm selling things. I was giving them away before that. I must say she has upped my prices. I would never, never have thought of selling things for the prices she gets. I think, perhaps, I-I was always, I thought-you know, that's terrible. I hear about dealers, you know-you do all this work and you give it to them and they sell it and they take 50 percent. And I thought-used to think-that was terrible. Now, it's fine, because she has made working worthwhile, you know. It was my own fault that I didn't get more. I would tell them that, well, this necklace-you could sell this for \$300. Well, so I'd get \$150, you know. It was just dumb. I was just not very bright, that's all. Yeah. I don't like to have-we get in arguments, Karen and I do, not real arguments, but she says, "Well, I

think this should be such and such." "Oh," I said, "no, Karen, that's too much. You can't make it that much." I just don't like to have my jewelry be so expensive.

MS. HALPER: It's probably a good thing you were a professor.

MS. SOLBERG: Oh, I could-I would-listen, I'd be-I would have starved to death. [They laugh.]

MS. HALPER: If you had to sell your work?

MS. SOLBERG: Oh, no! And that's the terrible thing, you see? I had a job. I had money coming in. So, it was just kind of a hobby, you might say. I didn't-I thought, well, I don't really need it, you know? Well, I realize that this was not fair to other jewelers, but I wasn't, you know-my mind didn't work that way. I figured they had their customers and the people who bought mine were somewhat entirely different. I don't know why, but I had-I know Ron used to say, "You don't charge enough." He said, "That's not right!" Well, it took a long time for it to penetrate, but I was not being fair to other jewelers.

MS. HALPER: When did museums start collecting your work?

MS. SOLBERG: I don't know. I didn't know they were collecting my work. The first one I knew about was-

MS. HALPER: The Renwick?

MS. SOLBERG: Well, it was. But, it wasn't their fault. The first one was, of course, the Seattle Arts Commission, or King County [King County Arts Commission Collection], whoever.

MS. HALPER: King County.

MS. SOLBERG: King County. Yeah. I was contacted, and would I give them-give or sell, I don't know what I did-a necklace. And I said, "You want a necklace?" You know, oh, yes. They were going to display it. It was the first piece of jewelry that they had in their collection [*Mudra*, 1983]. And it hangs in some lawyer's office, I think, now. I was told.

I had no idea about the Jacksonville museum [Jacksonville Museum of Modern Art, Jacksonville, FL] until I was contacted by the director or someone, asking if I knew the woman who bought my necklace in Peru. It took me a long time to figure out who she was. But they said the magic word "domino." I said, "Oh, yes," because one of these docents had seen the article in *Ornament* about me and it showed two or three domino necklaces. And, so, she said, "You know, this might be the person." I didn't-at that time, I didn't put my stamp on the back of my pieces. I didn't have that until I got it once for Christmas.

MS. HALPER: Did someone give you the stamp?

MS. SOLBERG: Ron gave me the stamp. So I gave him one that said "Ron Ho." He just-he could only afford "Ramona." [They laugh.] It's funny to have your first name. Like, Ruth had one that said "Penington." But, I didn't want it to say Solberg. I thought, well, Ramona was better. I don't know that I thought it. Ron thought that. But, so, anyhow. Yes, he had them made someplace downtown. I thought that was neat. But, I never-I almost have to do it on a little piece of silver, pure silver, and solder it on, because I used to-when I'd hit it with a hammer, it would never say the whole name. It just said Ram-and then sort of faded away, or something. I didn't hit it square enough.

Let's see. Oh, the Renwick! Lloyd Herman bought a pin, or I think, maybe, two pins, of mine at Wing Luke Auction [Asian Art Museum, Seattle, WA]. And he sent them back to the Renwick. He thought they should have them in their collection. And then, much later, a year or two later, the girls from Mobilia, I think, gave one to the Renwick. And I was overwhelmed. I wasn't so overwhelmed with the pin business. I thought, well, they'll just put that someplace. But when somebody-and then friends of mine said, "Oh, Ramona! I was in Washington, I went to the Renwick and I saw your necklace." And a former student even wrote me and told me she'd seen it. That was exciting, because I loved the galleries, the Smithsonian.

MS. HALPER: You're not quite 80 years old.

MS. SOLBERG: Well, couple months.

MS. HALPER: Couple months. Has age affected how you make your jewelry or the way you're working?

MS. SOLBERG: Yes. Yes. I'm not-I don't have the energy I once had. I, you know, I work awhile and then I go sit and read a book awhile. I used to be able to work-you know, I just don't have that much energy. I guess that's what it is. It mostly happened-I had a stroke about three years ago now. And after that I just sort of wanted to sit. I didn't want to do anything. I really-I didn't want to make jewelry, I didn't want to do-I didn't want to clean house; I didn't want to, you know. One thing, speaking of cleaning house, it's really not smart to have my studio in my house. I have always done that. But in the middle of something, then I have to run off-and I think, oh, wow, I better dust. Or-I didn't do that very often. But I always had house things that got in the way of making-if I'd had a, you know, studio away from home, if I'd gone there, like work-if it was a job and I had to be there, let's say, nine o'clock, 10 o'clock, then I would work until say four. But, I could always think of, oh, maybe I'll take those letters to the post office. Or, oh, maybe I'll go shopping, you know. It's-anyhow. But, no, I haven't had-

MS. HALPER: But what got you out of your depression? It sounded like you were depressed after your stroke.

MS. SOLBERG: You know, I would say I wasn't depressed, but, you know, when I read about depression, I think, well, maybe I am. I always feel so good, you know. I didn't feel bad. I was jolly. But it was strange. I just-well, maybe I was depressed. I never think of myself that way. But, anyhow, I didn't really think I had a stroke. I think I just tripped on something and fell on my head.

MS. HALPER: When did you start working again then, afterwards? What got you back to your bench?

MS. SOLBERG: Well, I was probably desperate. I'd promised somebody something, or, you know. I'm doing quite well now. The idea, maybe the idea of a retrospective-but certainly because Karen asked me for 10 pieces for a show that she's going to have at the same time. And I thought, I've got to do this. And I'm really enjoying it. I don't-I have all of these ideas, but I-but my social life interferes sometimes. I have to go to lunch with a friend or go shopping for a friend, or, you know, but I'm doing better, much better, much better.

MS. HALPER: Do you see any time that you might just stop making jewelry now? Or, is it back as sort of-

MS. SOLBERG: Well, I always say I can't die until I clean out from under my sink. And that's just using

that. I can't quit making jewelry until I get rid of some of these wonderful things I have. I could have a giant sale, you know, and get rid of them. But I hate-no, I'd like to use them. So it'll be awhile. It'll be awhile.

But other than approaching 80, now I do have little cataracts that will become more pronounced, which will probably bother my seeing what I'm doing to jewelry-although it's so big right now that I see them. I wear my glasses. I buy my glasses at the drugstore. And the doctor said-the optometrist said that was the kind I should be wearing. They're just magnifying glasses.

But I think I can keep going for quite a while.

MS. HALPER: Well, I'm really glad.

MS. SOLBERG: If my social life doesn't get too involved. Yeah.

MS. HALPER: Thank you, Ramona. You've been great.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

Last updated... *January 27, 2006*