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Oral history interview with Frances Senska,
2001 April 16

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

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Frances Senska on April 16, 2001. The interview took place in Bozeman, Montana, and was conducted by Donna Forbes 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.

Frances Senska and Donna Forbes 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

MS. FORBES: This is Donna Forbes interviewing Frances Senska at her home and studio in Bozeman, Montana, on April 16, 2001.

Frances, I thought we would start talking about your early years, when and where you were born and so on. That's such an interesting story. Do you want to tell us about it?

MS. SENSKA: It's interesting to me. [Laughs.] I don't know how many other people- well, I was born on March 9, 1914, at Batanga, Kamerun [Cameroon]. My mother was a teacher, and my father, a doctor. But he was also a craftsman. He earned his way through medical school as a cabinetmaker and a construction foreman. And he had all the tools necessary for any of that sort of thing, and he taught me to use them.

MS. FORBES: It seems to me that you had told me that Cameroon was German, that your birth certificate was in German, and then changed hands after World War I?

MS. SENSKA: Yeah. When I was born there, Cameroon was spelled with a K and a u-n. And then after the war, the English and the French divided Cameroon up between them. So the part that was British was spelled C-a-m-e-r-o-o-n, and the part that was French was spelled C-a-m-e-r-o-u-n. And that's what I use.

MS. FORBES: Yes. What were your parents doing there at the time?

MS. SENSKA: Well, as I said, she was a teacher and he was a doctor, and they worked for the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions, who had established a station, as we called them, in the small town of Batanga. It's right on the coast. Beautiful location. And I was there in 1980, and the building in which my father had had the dispensary was still extant.

The house that I was born in had succumbed to the white ants and the weather. But the friend I was traveling with-who was also a "mish kid" and had lived in that area when she was young-and I had a wonderful time. We left the house and looked around. And Eleanor said, "Mother used to say, you can go and play on the beach, but don't go any further than that rock and that rock." And Eleanor looked out there, and she said, "You know, I never realized how close together those rocks were."

MS. FORBES: Well, what would you say, in thinking back on your childhood, what is your strongest memory that perhaps influenced what you did with your life and so on? Would you comment on that? Such as your exposure to African pots and that.

MS. SENSKA: Well, it all works together. My exposure to, as I said, my father and his tools. The people. Everything that was used there was made by the people for the purposes they were going to use it for. I have a nice little black pot sitting up there on the shelf that is the kind of pot that everyone made, and they fired them in a bonfire. It was low-tech. And so I've tried to keep my business here not quite that low-tech, but pretty close to it.

MS. FORBES: Right.

MS. SENSKA: And we even go out and dig our own clay instead of buying it already mined and ground and sifted and bagged.

MS. FORBES: Right. So your childhood had an incredible influence on what has happened to you since, what direction you've taken.

Did you travel much out of Africa when you were a child?

MS. SENSKA: Yes. We left there, actually, during the war. And apparently, I gather that it was a little bit difficult

to get ships going up the coast and across the ocean and things like that then. So when I was about two and a half or three, we came to America. So that made quite a difference in my life.

MS. FORBES: Right. Yeah, it did. Did you go back after that at all?

MS. SENSKA: Yes. After the war, my folks were able to go back. And at that time, we were in a different area of Cameroon, not on the coast but up in the hills. And I loved that country. I still love it. You can give it credit for this house and view that I have here, because this is what I like about a house that sits on a hill and looks out over a nice view of landscape, creeks and rivers, and things like that.

MS. FORBES: Right. How was your schooling? I suppose your mother taught you at home and then-is that right? Or did you go to school, public, any kind of a school, formal?

MS. SENSKA: No, I was homeschooled, like a lot of the kids around here are now; the difference being that my mother was a professional schoolteacher.

MS. FORBES: So you had the best of all worlds.

MS. SENSKA: So I had the best. And my father was a very good teacher, too. But anyway, I was in the States for two or three intervals during the time, because we had a furlough. At that time, people considered the African coast a dangerous country, that people got sick there. They did. But very often, the doctor could cure them. But you said did I go to another school? No, because my father said, "You know, things hit so fast here that I don't want you to be a three days' walk away from us." So they kept me at home and schooled me instead of sending me to the school that the mission had established for their children.

MS. FORBES: And then when it came time for high school, did you stay in school there clear through high school, or did you come back to this country?

MS. SENSKA: By the time I got to high school, we had migrated back to the States and were living here, and I went to the university high school in Iowa City, which was very nice, a very good high school. And it had a sort of an interesting fact that you had to pay tuition there. It wasn't like a public school. But the tuition at the university high school was lower than the tuition at the public school was, and so all of the kids that came from the country schools around came to the university high school. So we had a sort of a mixed crew, all the way from the president of the college's kids to people that were just barely off the farm, which I'm sure made it difficult for the teachers, but, you know, it was fine.

MS. FORBES: Yes. Yes. And here you were, just out of Africa, so you would have been an interesting student.

MS. SENSKA: Oh, it was fun. In fact, there were other "mish kids" there whose parents had been in China or wherever. When my father and mother first applied to the mission for that kind of work, my father thought he wanted to go to China. But at that time, they didn't have an opening in China, but they did have this opening in Cameroon, in Africa. And since then, I've been so tickled that that's what happened, because I enjoyed Africa. And I have a feeling that I would not have enjoyed China as much.

MS. FORBES: Right. Then you went on to the University of Iowa, isn't that right, for your undergraduate and-

MS. SENSKA: All the way.

MS. FORBES: -clear through your graduate degree.

MS. SENSKA: From high school through B.A. and M.A.

MS. FORBES: Yes. Right.

What did you study with your undergraduate degree? What field was that?

MS. SENSKA: It was in art. But in those days, it wasn't separated the way it is now. It was just art. It was mostly the fine arts sort of thing. Drawing, painting, a little bit of sculpture, but not much.

MS. FORBES: And then when did you discover clay, Frances?

MS. SENSKA: That was considerably later. Actually, we had clay which we used, and you know, after I once got to using clay to make some things, I kind of resented the way we had used it in high school, which was just to make forms that we then cast in plaster. And our finished work was in plaster. And I really, after I knew about it, I really resented the fact that we got this beautiful clay to use, and then we made these molds, and then we just cut up the plaster and everything and threw it all together, which would absolutely ruin the clay for any clay purposes.

MS. FORBES: Yes, of course. It was very different. Didn't you make wood sculpture, too, in your undergraduate work?

MS. SENSKA: Yes. I would say that the wood sculpture was much more interesting to me than this plaster business. So I made quite a few pieces in wood. We had very nice wood around there. The Amana Colonies [IA] specialized in making good furniture, and there were always odd-shaped pieces left around, and I used that, which was very nice.

MS. FORBES: And so would you say that you really discovered clay after your graduate years, or was it during your M.A. degree time?

MS. SENSKA: No. Let me go on a little further.

MS. FORBES: All right.

MS. SENSKA: After I got my M.A., I taught at Grinnell College [Grinnell, IA], which is a small college in Iowa, for three years, just the regular art things—drawing, painting, design, and so on. And then the war came along, and Grinnell thought it needed a physicist rather than an art teacher, so I was out. So I joined the navy.

MS. FORBES: Good for you.

MS. SENSKA: And was stationed all over the U.S. but ended up in San Francisco and was there long enough to get acquainted and do things. And there were evening classes. My roommate and I decided that we'd take an evening class in something or the other, and so we checked out all of the evening classes. They had some where it was ceramics, but what you did was you poured white slip into a white plaster mold and made porcelain. It didn't appeal to me at all. But we found a course taught by Edith Heath at the California Labor School, which used, you know, real, usable clay, and she taught throwing on the wheel. And I loved that and I loved the clay, which was not just ultra-refined clay that you used for slip casting.

MS. FORBES: And so you went first of all, is that right, to the San Francisco Art Institute? Were you there?

MS. SENSKA: That wasn't first of all.

MS. FORBES: Oh. Okay.

MS. SENSKA: That was a little later.

MS. FORBES: That was later.

MS. SENSKA: That was after the navy.

MS. FORBES: I see. So at this time, however, you studied with Edith Heath at the California Labor School. And then, going on with your education, because this was after your graduate degree, why don't you talk about the additional studies that you did besides that, studying under Edith Heath, as you expanded your interest into clay.

MS. SENSKA: Well, having discovered clay, I stayed with it, and I took courses, usually summer school courses, in clay at the San Francisco Art Institute, as you mentioned, with Hal Rieger, and at Cranbrook Academy [Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, MI] with Maija Grotell.

MS. FORBES: And then what about Chicago? Didn't you go to the School of Design?

MS. SENSKA: Yeah. Somewhere along the way—I forget just which summer that was—I took a course in design at the School of Design which was taught by Moholy-Nagy. And that was a lot of fun.

MS. FORBES: Oh, that must have been a great experience.

MS. SENSKA: And I got a lot of ideas about how to teach from him, because he was one of these people who—he gave us all his material to work with and tools to learn. I still have a hole in my head here from a block of wood that flew off a lathe—[laughs]—in that class. But his attitude was—you know, somebody would say, "Well, I'd like to do thus and so," and he'd say, "Well, try it and see whether it works. See what you get." He'd never say, "Well, you can't do that." He'd say, "Well, try it." And so I thought that's the way to go. So that's the technique I used on my students, too.

MS. FORBES: That must have been a wonderful experience, because weren't there other Bauhaus people there at that time? I mean, they had a whole aesthetic, a whole philosophy of life, almost, that must have permeated your thinking, that form follows function and so on.

MS. SENSKA: Yeah, that's true. But you know, that is getting a little bit ahead of the story, too, because somewhere along the line, one of those times when we were traveling back and forth from Africa to the United States, we went through France. And France, Paris and so forth, is a good place to see art. And one time when we were going through there-I forget, it was probably when I was 10 or so-they were having this exposition of modern art, "Exposition de l'Art Moderne," and I loved it. I just loved the furniture and everything that they were making at that time, and I think my father did, too. I think it's what they now call the craftsman style. And he had brought the innards from an organ my grandmother had along, and he was going to make a case for it when we got to Africa, and he did. And he made this beautiful case, which was modern art. It was the style that was coming in at that point. I really got interested in art and design and what you might call industrial design and so forth at that exposition. So I sort of headed in that direction when I went on back to-I was going to say regular school. [Laughs.] Wherever.

MS. FORBES: Right. But that was a high point in your young years of what influenced you. Did you ever apprentice with anybody, or was that something that you just didn't believe in?

MS. SENSKA: Well, I never did. I took classes from people. I had very good instructors. You mentioned the Bauhaus. Marguerite Wildenhain was of that period and she knew all the Bauhaus people and she was into it, but she did not like the Bauhaus style. [Laughs.] It was different. Their technique at that time was they'd have these classes, and they had instructors like [Paul] Klee, for instance. Everybody I knew at that time thought, oh, Klee was a darling. He was sweet guy and everybody loved him. But Marguerite didn't really like them, because it was so formal, from her point of view. And the other thing they did was they turned people off to experts in their field. And so her work was done with an expert potter who didn't have any use for the Bauhaus, but he knew how to use clay, taught her how to use clay. And so I had a class from her one summer.

MS. FORBES: And where was that? Do you remember?

MS. SENSKA: That was in San Francisco.

MS. FORBES: Okay.

MS. SENSKA: Well, no, actually it was in Guerneville [at Pond Farm, Wildenhain's studio and farm], which is a town north of San Francisco, on the Russian River. And that was very good because she was, you know, just an expert at handling clay. But it wasn't an apprenticeship; it was a class which she taught. Somehow apprenticeship has never appealed to me, because, as I look at it, what it is is you're doing the master's work rather than your own, which is fine, you know, except I didn't want to do that. So I have never had an apprenticeship and I have never wanted apprentices around here. I want them to do their own work. And, you know, here's the material, here's how you can use it, but you have to do your own thing.

MS. FORBES: What would you say is the university's place in the American craft movement, in other words, their place for artists working in clay at the university level? What is the advantage there?

MS. SENSKA: They've got a lot of space. They have beautiful buildings. They have all the equipment you could hope for. You don't have to do a thing. As some of my students from here have said to me, "We did it all together. We learned together." Pete Voukos and Rudy Autio and I, for instance, worked together.

MS. FORBES: And they were your students and you were the teacher, but you worked as a team.

MS. SENSKA: We did. And we did things which people would never think of doing now. We went out and dug our clay and prepared it and used it, took it all the way from the hillside to the end product. And I think now Pete, for instance, really kind of resents that, although he says, "Well, I learned all about clay" and so on. But then he went on and became the master himself. [Laughs.]

MS. FORBES: Yes. Isn't that wonderful, though. So much pride there on your part.

What would you say is the difference between an artist who trains at the university and one who learns his or her craft outside the university? Is there any difference there?

MS. SENSKA: I don't know. You know, it always depends on the person. But what bothered me about the university setups that I saw was they had everything and it looked like a factory. And there wasn't anything the students did except go and pick up a piece of clay and make something out of it and have it fired by somebody in some kind of a kiln. It was more, to me, like a factory setup. But that isn't quite fair either. I was impressed at Penn State [University Park, PA]. The equipment and the space they had for the students to use is terrific. But I wouldn't have liked it myself, and I really didn't like the pedagogy involved either. [Laughs.]

MS. FORBES: Yes. I think your answer "it depends upon the person" really is a wonderful answer.

MS. SENSKA: Well, that's the important thing, of course. It's what you do or what you want to do is what really counts.

MS. FORBES: Have you had any involvement with any of the educational institutions that are devoted to craft? It seems to me you were very involved with the Archie Bray Foundation [Helena, MT] when it started?

MS. SENSKA: Well, the thing about the Archie Bray is it's not an educational institution. It was started by Archie Bray as a place where people who really were seriously interested in the ceramic arts could come and work. But there wasn't any instruction; it was a place to work. And you can learn a lot there, but most of the people that come there to work as residents at the Archie Bray already are pretty well established in ceramics before they come there, and that's where they come to try themselves out, to get acquainted with other people in the same thing and just move out from what they're doing before.

MS. FORBES: And, of course, you're so proud of Rudy Autio and Pete Voulkos because they were essentially the first directors at the Archie Bray when you were, so-and they were your wonderful students. And so that's-

MS. SENSKA: Yeah, that's a good story. We went up to Helena to visit, actually, Henry Meloy [and Peter, his brother, a lawyer, who had a studio in his back yard for ceramics]. And he was very interested because his friend Archie Bray wanted to build a pottery at the brickyard, and so he introduced the boys to Archie Bray. And they wanted a place to work that summer. They'd been in graduate school, and they came home and needed a studio.

MS. FORBES: This is Rudy and Pete.

MS. SENSKA: Rudy and Pete. So Rudy and Pete went out to the brickyard and started working in the brickyard nipping brick. And Archie gave them a place to work in the drying shed where they could make their own things and put them in the kilns. And those were great big old beehive kilns, and there they'd be, full of brick with a few little pieces of sculpture sitting around here and there. [Laughs.] And that was perfect.

And as soon as they got through with their graduate degrees the next year, they became the resident potters at Archie Bray and built it up from there. But that first year they were helping Archie lay the brick in the pottery and built the little pottery, which is now almost buried in what has happened at the Archie Bray since, all the new buildings that have been going up to house the residents, the people that come there. They aren't all new buildings. Some of them are the old brickyard buildings which have been rejuvenated and turned into galleries and studios.

MS. FORBES: Yes. And the Archie Bray will be 50 years old this summer. Isn't that remarkable? It has been quite a special place for Montana to have, I think.

MS. SENSKA: Yeah, it's wonderful, because people have been coming there since before it got famous. Even in the first two or three years of its life, a group of women came out from Seattle because they'd heard about this place and worked with Pete and Rudy and took the word around, and it spread.

MS. FORBES: Yes. Right. And it's been a remarkable growth for that institution and we're all very proud of it. I know you are.

MS. SENSKA: And it has been so lucky over the years to have had very good directors, because after Pete and Rudy left, they had Ken Ferguson and Dave Shaner, who are famous in the field for what they've done, and others who have-each one, each director that has been there has left something of himself there, because they all had a slightly different style of operation and they had different ideas of what should be done, so things were built up to go with that, and so it just keeps expanding and growing.

And the brickyard folded because Helena was not a market for brick anymore. The earthquake had taken down some of their buildings and they didn't care for brick buildings anymore, so the brickyard went broke. And something had to be done to save the part of it we were interested in, and so I forget whether it was Dave Shaner-it was somebody, Ken Ferguson, persuaded the business administration to divide it up so that the part we used was separate from the rest. And everything was auctioned off, but having separated it like that, Dave Shaner was able to get enough people interested in saving it to get enough money together to bid in the part that we used, the pottery.

MS. FORBES: Well, talking about these different artists, would you say there's been a community that's been important to your development as an artist here in Montana? We've talked about Rudy and Pete. And Montana is such a small state, in a way it's like a family. And I was wondering if you would explore that just a bit, the people you feel around you who have been important.

MS. SENSKA: Well, you know, every school has some of that sort of thing. They have loyal alumni. But because of

Pete and Rudy's excellence and fame and so forth, that has looked like a good thing to do for a lot of people, you know. It has given clay work a cachet which it didn't have before.

MS. FORBES: And, of course, they look back at you, because you were their teacher. You were the one who was the beginning of their involvement in clay. And so this whole family springs from-what do they call you, "the grandmother of pots" or something like that?

MS. SENSKA: Yeah. Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MS. FORBES: And all of these wonderful people who have come out of your teaching has to have been important to you also in your development as an artist, because it all works together.

MS. SENSKA: Well, I hadn't thought of it that way, but I certainly loved my students, you know. We were a family, and we still are. And they still come back. And I'm proud of them, and they're proud of me.

MS. FORBES: Yes. Well, kind of following on in that idea, do you see yourself as part of an international tradition, an American tradition, or just more of a universal tradition?

MS. SENSKA: I would say universal, because clay is such a universal medium. Everybody uses it. Kids start working with clay as soon as they can get some in their hands. It's just such an appealing material to work with. And then if you go on a little further and you make something with it that you like, you can put it in the fire and make it permanent; that's good, too. You don't have to translate it into something else.

You know, as I think I mentioned, I originally thought I wanted to be an industrial designer. I discovered that is not true. I didn't want somebody else to make my designs; I wanted to make them myself. And that's one of the things about clay, and it's important. You carry through the whole process to the end product yourself. At that point, I'd like to turn it over to somebody to take care of the merchandising. [Laughs.] I don't care for marketing.

MS. FORBES: A typical artist. [Laughs.]

Does the function of objects play a part in the meaning of your work?

MS. SENSKA: It certainly does. You see, in Africa, where I came from, all the clay work was done to make things which were going to be used. You know, big vats and jugs to make the beer, and smaller pots to cook the vegetables, and smaller ones to serve the peanuts. You know, it was all clay work. And it was all for a function, a use, a human use. And so that still seems important to me. I'm not the bric-a-brac type.

MS. FORBES: Decorative pieces.

MS. SENSKA: I don't really like to do-well, I mean, everything I make is decorative in its way.

MS. FORBES: But only, I mean, only just decorative pieces. You want function to be so much a part of it.

MS. SENSKA: Mm-hmm. [In agreement.]

MS. FORBES: That refers back, really, to your childhood again, to the missionary background and that influence of what you saw in Africa and learned there.

MS. SENSKA: And one of the good later residents-well, he wasn't, you know, a director or anything, but who was at the Archie Bray-he made all sorts of little cuties, little gimmicks, and he said he thought that came from his childhood, when he lived with his aunt and that's what she had in her house, houses. My grandmother had a lot of, sort of, cute things stuck around her house, too, which never appealed to me very much. You know, we keep coming back to the person. It's what the person wants to do. I do not want to make little figures.

MS. FORBES: So tell me-a basic question-why do you use clay, first of all? What is it about clay?

MS. SENSKA: I think I've already answered that. It's such a primary material. Everybody uses it, in a way. And it's very forgiving and very easy to work with, and you can make anything you want out of it. You can make little figurines or you can make the sort of big "dumb things," as he calls them, Jun Kaneko makes, and Maija Grotell makes these-made these big things which are intended to sit out in the landscape, and their function was to enhance the landscape. It's so versatile. You can do anything with it. And then all you have to do is put it in the fire and it becomes permanent. It doesn't have to go through a factory system to be converted into a metal structure or something like that.

MS. FORBES: It has always been the universal medium, hasn't it. When you think about earliest man and what they dig up, what remains are the pots. And it just has always been with us.

MS. SENSKA: The shards have been very important.

MS. FORBES: Right. Right. Finding them. If you walk through the Southwest, you find shards in hillsides. Yes.

How has your work changed over the years, would you say?

MS. SENSKA: I would say it hasn't changed at all. The intent has always been the same. Materials always been the same. It is true that the tools right now, my hands, are getting a little weaker and not quite as nimble and flexible as they were in the beginning. That isn't the fault of the clay. [Laughs.]

MS. FORBES: That's the human tool, right. And so your ideas, obviously, are essentially the same as they've been.

MS. SENSKA: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. FORBES: That continuing-continuum.

MS. SENSKA: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. FORBES: But would you say, thinking back on your earliest work and your recent work, are there similarities and differences that stand out to you in looking at your work at all? Is there anything there that has developed or changed?

MS. SENSKA: You know, I don't collect my own work. I really don't know because I don't have it around.

MS. FORBES: Right.

MS. SENSKA: But I don't think it has changed very much, because the intent has always been the same. And my skill has changed somewhat, but not-

MS. FORBES: Right.

MS. SENSKA: [Laughs.] I'm looking around here at all those pots. And by the way, those pots up there are all students'.

MS. FORBES: It's a beautiful collection.

When did you begin exhibiting your work? And can you recall the character of those early exhibitions? You know, way back.

MS. SENSKA: Way, way, way back?

MS. FORBES: Yes.

MS. SENSKA: Okay.

[Begin Tape 1, SIDE 2.]

MS. SENSKA: That sort of set my path. I figured, "Hmm, I'm going to be an artist," or, "This is the way to go." And other, you know-the wood that you mentioned, the wood sculptures that I made have always, you know, received good attention from the state fair-[laughs]-or from the college art club's exhibition or things like that, you know. I started, I suppose, what you could call very low on the ladder and have never climbed to the peak.

MS. FORBES: Well, exhibiting probably wasn't that important to you, Frances; your work, was it, as you-

MS. SENSKA: I didn't work for exhibitions, but I've got to give exhibitions credit for getting my work out where people could see it and decide that they wanted it. But I didn't make for show.

MS. FORBES: Yes.

MS. SENSKA: I made for use.

MS. FORBES: Yes. And your work has always been noted for that. I saw your work, you know, in exhibition too, so I know what that's all about.

Rudy said that you have always been very, very thorough, and he talked in a video I saw one time about the fact that your students and you built the kilns and dug the clay and fired it and made your mistakes all together. I thought that was a wonderful statement from one of your students. He talked about the great enthusiasm that

everybody had at that time for the arts, and you feel that, when you visit classes or anything, that camaraderie and that joy.

MS. SENSKA: I know there is still some of that, but you've got to remember that Rudy came here right out of the army or navy, whatever he was in. We were all-we had such a good group of people who had been hung up for four years and wanted to get back into their lives and were very enthusiastic and eager to do something. And I don't think that most instructors-I felt I was so lucky to be a teacher at that time and have all those eager, enthusiastic people around, you know? Rudy and Pete and the other boys who were just back from the service, they set the tone of the school at that time. Even the 17-year-old-high school graduate, you know, had to rise to it. So we had great classes.

And of course, Rudy and Pete were along on a lot of these clay-digging expeditions we had. Like one I remember particularly. I just had gotten my first car, a nice, new car, and we drove up to Lewistown and dug clay. And I had taken the back seat out because I was transferring furniture from Iowa to Montana, and so we filled the whole back end of that little car with clay, which is very heavy stuff. [Laughs.] And boy, we hit bottom on every bump between Lewistown-it took us all night to get from Lewistown back to Bozeman. [Laughs.]

MS. FORBES: [Laughs.] Oh, that's a great memory.

[VOICE IN THE BACKGROUND]: That was very good. I think in about the next five minutes, we should stop.

MS. FORBES: Okay.

[Begin Tape 2, Side A.]

MS. FORBES: This is Donna Forbes interviewing Frances Senska at her home and studio in Bozeman, Montana, on April 16, 2001.

Frances, let's talk a bit about your home and your studio and where it is and when you built it, the design of it and so on. Would you do that?

MS. SENSKA: Sure. And I think you also asked something about why. Well, at the time, we were expanding vigorously at the university and going into places like basement storerooms and so on to get space to do our artwork and have our classes. We got so tired of working in the basement of a big building like that, with not much light and air, and people were mowing the lawn outside and spraying, I don't know, whatever they spray into our ventilators. It was just not a very good situation.

So we decided to build a real studio, real house, for ourselves. And we happened to have a good friend who had a piece of land out overlooking the valley. It was in his pasture. And so he gave us a little chunk out of his pasture to build on, and we decided, you know, the view over the great Gallatin Valley and to the mountains was just ideal. So we decided what we needed-Jessie [Wilber] was a printmaker and I was a potter, and so this lot, which was on a slope, we made the downstairs, the basement, into a daylight studio with light flooding into it, and put a convenient apartment on top of it. And that was great. We enjoyed it very much.

But eventually it became obvious that printmaking and pottery don't really work together very well, because the printer uses all sorts of inks and paints and stuff with solvents that smell, and the potter uses all this clay, which creates dust which flies around and gets on the prints. So we decided we should have another studio. And I wanted by that time to get out of the small electric kiln syndrome, level, and have a gas kiln, a big gas kiln. So we looked around. And a tree blew down on the edge of our property, and we said, "Aha! There's a space there to have a kiln house."

So we got a hold of our architect, who had built our house, and that house started from a little model we made of the space we needed and how we wanted to use it, and he had changed the model into a very nice house. And so we told him what we wanted, and he came and paced off the area, went away, and the next morning Jessie saw him in the bookstore and he hauled a roll of blueprints out from under his arm and handed her and said, "Here's your studio." [Laughs.]

MS. FORBES: What a treat.

MS. SENSKA: He was a very fast worker.

MS. FORBES: Yes.

MS. SENSKA: Got up early in the mornings. And so we now have this nice pottery studio, which is just intended for that. And its design goes with the rest of the house and everything, except it has a stack on it for the kiln.

MS. FORBES: Didn't you have a lot to do, though, with the design of-because you were interested in architecture,

too, and I would imagine-

MS. SENSKA: Oh, I thought I wanted to be an architect, but I gave that up long ago.

MS. FORBES: Why? Why did you give that up?

MS. SENSKA: Well, because I'd found other things that were more interesting. In clay, you work with and you do the whole thing yourself. You have the clay, you make the pot, you decorate it, you fire it, it's all your work. You don't have to hand any of it over to someone else to do for you. Architecture's a little different. You can build your own house-my father built his own house-but basically you have to have a lot of workmen doing a lot of different things to build a house in this country. So.

I wanted this house to be open and views all around, like the house I had lived in in Africa, and this was the perfect place to have it, because it had a view out over the valley, water, trees, everything, and the slope gave a place to have a studio underneath, which was also day-lighted, exposed to the sun, and a comfortable apartment on top of it.

MS. FORBES: I think it's so interesting, Frances. The clay that you use for your pottery is dug up around this area, or it was. I'm not sure you're still doing that. But that so many of your pots reflect the very land that you look out on. And that's all part of this aesthetic that you have.

MS. SENSKA: And you know, there are still some people who believe in that, that you should work with what you have. In one of these ceramics magazines-which I have a lot of them around here, naturally-some young woman, and I guess she was of Japanese extraction, had said to her husband, "No. We must have a place where we can dig our own clay." [Laughs.]

MS. FORBES: And you thought, "That's right," huh?

MS. SENSKA: That's the way I feel. The clay that we used when you were in school, we dug up Bear Canyon [MT].

MS. FORBES: Yes.

MS. SENSKA: And that was a very handsome clay. It's a nice red clay and makes beautiful flower pots. Then we went on from that and wanted to work in higher temperature. And with my new studio which was added after we decided that pottery and printmaking didn't really go together, I got a kiln house built with a big gas kiln in it. That's fine. So the Bear Canyon clay which we had used before wasn't really appropriate for that. In the meantime, one of our students was doing a workshop up in Lewistown, and someone introduced him to a bag of very interesting sort of purplish clay that was exposed just outside of Lewistown, on the east side of Lewistown. And so we went up and got some of that and tried it out, and it turned out to be a very good high-temperature clay, very nice to work with, and you could go up to any temperature you wanted. You made stoneware. And so did I tell you about our trip up there to dig? [Laughs.]

MS. FORBES: You did. Yes, you described your new car.

MS. SENSKA: Well, then after that we started taking college trucks or something like that to do it. And we took all of our classes up there. A wonderful day across the central Montana fields.

MS. FORBES: Beautiful landscape.

MS. SENSKA: Beautiful landscape up there. We dug clay and loaded our trucks and came back. You know, it was a great day excursion for everybody.

MS. FORBES: So that clay you used in the art department, did you also use it here at your studio? Was that clay that you enjoyed working with here at home?

MS. SENSKA: Yes, indeed. It's a very good clay. I still use it. [Laughs.] We're sort of giggling here because we didn't have the equipment to process it, we thought. We thought you had to grind your clay. And so there was the home-ec experiment station, you know, right around the corner in the basement there, and so we'd grind our clay in the cornmeal grinder or whatever. And then we just happened to throw some of that clay into a pot of hot water and it slaked. It just broke up and became plastic clay without having to be ground.

MS. FORBES: [Laughs.] Therefore saving the home-ec department's grinder.

Did any of your students-did anybody ever work here with you, or did you always work alone in your studio?

MS. SENSKA: Well, basically, I work alone, but sometimes other people have worked in the studio, too, but there has never been any, you know, instruction or that sort of thing; it's just been friends.

MS. FORBES: Right. Yes. Well, teaching all day, too, at the university and then coming home, I'm sure that you enjoyed your studio for yourself and to do your own work.

MS. SENSKA: Well, that's what I built it for, was to do my own work and not have to share the studio space at school, where this is a housekeeping sort of thing. I made my students clean out the shop when they got through using it. We got bigger and bigger, and we had more and more instructors and more and more students, and a lot of the instructors, it didn't occur to them to have their students clean out so that it was ready for the next class. So I thought, I'm tired of doing this; I don't really have to do this anymore; I have my own nice place here. So I just quit and came home to do my own work. I only have to clean up after myself and not after a dozen kids.

MS. FORBES: Which was very nice.

I know we touched on this before, but over all these years, have there been any kind of technological developments or improvements that you have seen that affected you in your working studio?

MS. SENSKA: You know, I made a point, I think, that I am a very low-technology person, that I think clay is a very low-technology material. So technology doesn't interest me very much, and I can't think of anything in the way I work that technology could do much for me.

MS. FORBES: I was thinking about watching a video of you one time. Now, this is where you used technology. You were playing African music.

MS. SENSKA: Oh, well.

MS. FORBES: Now, there's technology. [Laughs.]

MS. SENSKA: Okay, but that's different. That isn't-

MS. FORBES: No, that's not working with the clay. But I thought that was so interesting, that you wanted to hear that African music.

MS. SENSKA: You see my studio there, and you know where the wheel is, right facing the view out the window. So I sit at the wheel and have African tapes beside me playing, because that music goes very well with physical activity like throwing pots. One of my friends says, "Oh, I can't believe it. I listen to classical music." I don't listen to classical music because it doesn't have the beat-

MS. FORBES: That's right.

MS. SENSKA: -that I need in my work. That's something else.

MS. FORBES: It suits. It suits you.

You had mentioned, looking around your home here, the periodicals. What periodicals have you enjoyed the most and maybe meant the most to you in your work with clay?

MS. SENSKA: Well, one of the longest-lasting ones has been what started out being called *Craft Horizons*, and it started out [1943] as a mimeographed little paper that Mrs. Webb [Aileen Osborn Webb] had started to help out some of the women in Vermont near Shelburne, where the Webb family was, the family home was at that time, to get markets for the things they made in their homes. That's where the craft started, was mostly homes. And it grew up from *Craft Horizons*. And if you look at that stack right there behind you, I think you can see an early example of the early *Craft Horizons* magazine. And then it evolved. It got bigger, it got fatter, it got glossier. It covered the field very well. And it's now called *American Craft*. It's a very good magazine, covers a lot of territory. So I always get that. The editor is a good friend of mine, too.

MS. FORBES: That makes a difference. So you followed that from the beginning.

MS. SENSKA: Yeah.

MS. FORBES: That's a very interesting story.

What about the *Studio Potter*? Is that something else that you-

MS. SENSKA: The *Studio Potter* is a very good, very interesting thing, and it's an idea for giving the potters a chance to have their own say.

MS. FORBES: Do they write articles? Is this what you're saying? They write articles for the magazines, the potters themselves?

MS. SENSKA: They either write articles or are interviewed.

MS. FORBES: I see.

MS. SENSKA: And it goes around. It has been going around from state to state. And they send out an interviewer who talks to all the potters he can track down or-[laughs]-lasso-in the state. So it gives you a good view of what's going on, what's being done, what people's interests are all over the country. And his intention in starting that magazine was that it would really be an archive of what the ceramists were doing, what was going on in the country. And I think it does pretty well at that. You get the feeling that you know the other people in your field.

You asked if that affected what I did. I'm not sure, but it does give me a chance to sort of stay in touch with what the other people are doing, not because I want to do what they're doing, but, you know, because we're friends. We know each other. We go to the same conventions and look at each other's work.

MS. FORBES: What conventions? What craft or-

MS. SENSKA: NCECA.

MS. FORBES: NCECA. That's National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts.

MS. SENSKA: In the Ceramic Arts.

MS. FORBES: Right. Right.

MS. SENSKA: It's got a long title, but it's called NCECA. [Pronounced "nSEeKa".]

MS. FORBES: Right. Right. I think you received an honor. Didn't you receive an honor from NCECA? An honorary life member?

MS. SENSKA: Yeah. That was fun. That meeting was at Penn State. And I took along a film that some students here in the film/TV department have made of me. Now, I didn't want to give a talk, but I had a film to show, so that was fine. And I was so impressed. Penn State had this new auditorium with new equipment in it. And the film, which had never looked very, you know, bright or clear in the equipment we had around here, looked great on that big screen with that big projector.

MS. FORBES: Much better than a speech, huh?

MS. SENSKA: But the interesting thing to me was, after it was all over, you know, and congratulated, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, one man came up to me and said, "Well, that was great, but you know, who did the music? That music was great, I really enjoyed that." [Laughs.]

MS. FORBES: And that was done by the film department at the university by students and faculty?

MS. SENSKA: Yeah. Another guy came up to me and said, "You know, you hold your hands just the way I hold my hands, and I learned from Peter Voulkos." And I said, "Yeah, and Peter Voulkos learned from me." So this is what education in the ceramic arts is all about. You learn from each other.

MS. FORBES: Great lineage, yes. That's right.

What about the American Craft Council? Is that anything that you've been involved with?

MS. SENSKA: Well, the American Craft Council is what grew out of Mrs. Webb's idea of doing something to kind of help out the women who were doing crafts in their houses and not able to really go on and do anything with it. So she started this American Craft Council, and it has gone on and grown and become very important and all that. It's just been another way that we can keep in contact with each other.

MS. FORBES: You mentioned one time to me about the difference the Second World War made for the American craft movement. Do you want to talk about that?

MS. SENSKA: Yeah. You know, it seems to me that when I was younger, people always wanted to get things-foreign things. Not only-we still go in for Chinese and Japanese, but European or something. They didn't value things which were made in this country. But then along came the war, and the stores weren't able to get all of those things. I remember Gump's in San Francisco, which was a great store for jade, et cetera, et cetera, and all these Chinese things. Couldn't get it at that time. They had to have something on their shelves, and so they got things from the potters in the area, the craftsmen around San Francisco. And I thought that was really great, because it gave a sort of a class to our work for being shown in Gump's, which was a famous store. And so people started looking at the things that were being made around here, and I think it sort of gave a boost to the

business of selling crafts.

MS. FORBES: I think that's a very important point for American craft, the history of American crafts, the boost that came at that time. Very good point.

I know you've had some other honors, which you're always very modest about and you hate to talk about, but I'm going to ask you anyhow. It seems to me that you did receive an honor from the governor of Montana, and that was quite an event, the Montana Governor's Award for the Arts, for distinguished achievement in the arts?

MS. SENSKA: Yeah. That was an honor that both Jessie and I got.

MS. FORBES: This is Jessie Wilber.

MS. SENSKA: Yeah, Jessie Wilber. I don't know who started the idea of the Governor's Award for the Arts, but, you know, it was a good thing. And Pete got it, Rudy got it, you know, a lot of the artists around; Jessie and I got it. And that was a wonderful party.

MS. FORBES: It was a spectacular party, and you need to talk just a bit about that.

MS. SENSKA: Clarice Dreyer, who is a sculptor and a student in our department and, in fact, taught in our department for a while, also came from a family of people who cooked. The refreshments were terrific. The catering on that party was great. Everybody-the fact that a lot was made of this particular honor was not because of us, really; it's what the people did. There was, you know, talks, lectures, et cetera, et cetera, at one of the main movie theaters in town, and it was filled. It was standing room only.

And after the talks were over, everybody got up and somebody handed out masks as people went out the door. So here everybody was all masked for a ball, and the police stopped traffic on Main Street, and the crowd sashayed over to Elks Club, where this terrific feast had been laid out by Clarice Dreyer and her relatives, and had a big party.

They had set up a little gazebo in the center of the room so that Jessie and I were anchored someplace where people could come and talk to us without too much problem. Jessie wasn't very well at that time, and in fact we-you know, it was iffy whether she would even go to it. And the dean of our division kept hanging around saying, "Well, you know, I'll take you home whenever you want, I'll take you home whenever you want." Jessie didn't want.

MS. FORBES: That was a wonderful evening.

MS. SENSKA: She stayed there. [Laughs.]

MS. FORBES: Yes. I remember that.

MS. SENSKA: And the town, afterwards for months people would stop me on the street and say, "That's the best party-[laughs]-I've ever been to.

MS. FORBES: It was splendid.

Montana's a very special place, and I know that you were very involved in starting the Montana Institute of the Arts [MIA]-that was something that you really believed in-quite a long time ago, which has been an interesting organization for-

MS. SENSKA: Did I give the date there anywhere? I don't know. But anyway, that was a wonderful institution.

MS. FORBES: Well, it started in 1948, so that wasn't long after you came to Montana.

MS. SENSKA: It started from very small beginnings. It was started by an English professor in Missoula.

MS. FORBES: H. G. Merriam, right.

MS. SENSKA: H. G. Merriam. And he, sort of, got all the people he could think of around, Cyril Conrad, who was the head of the art department here, and others, and they decided to start this. And it was not intended to be-it was intended to be inclusive, and it covered arts, music, drama, ceramics, everything that he could think of. And it went on for quite a while on that basis. And we had friends all over the state that we had met at MIA meetings and so on. And what I liked about it was the fact that, you know, you weren't segregated over into your little group. You could go around and meet all of the people and listen to what they were talking about or concerned with. It was a-it's a very good idea. As with most things like that, it has had its ups and downs. It didn't stay with the enthusiasm that it had to begin with, but it has done-

[Begin Tape 2, Side B.]

MS. SENSKA: -is the Montana State Fair, because the man who was running the section, which he persuaded them to have, in arts and crafts just really pushed it. He pushed it so hard and he got the premium so high in that division that even our most excellent students thought, well, they had to put things in that, so Rudy and Pete and all of us, faculty, everyone, sent things to that show at the Montana State Fair. That was Branson Stevenson that got that started.

And then the MIA started what is called MAGDA [pronounced "MAGda"], the Montana Art Gallery Directors Association, which has carried on with having shows. I don't think there were any art galleries in Montana before that. Now every old mansion has been turned into an art gallery. One of the most impressive ones is the one in Miles City; is it, that's the old water works?

MS. FORBES: Yes.

MS. SENSKA: Wonderful space.

MS. FORBES: Oh, it is. It is. These are all nonprofits; these are not commercial galleries.

MS. SENSKA: No, these are nonprofit.

MS. FORBES: They're nonprofits in the smaller towns. Yes. And they provided a forum for exhibitions, for clay work and so on. So it was important.

MS. SENSKA: Absolutely. Now you walk down Main Street in Bozeman, and every other store is an art gallery, but a commercial one.

MS. FORBES: Yes, that's an interesting change, isn't it, that's happened in the last 50 years, starting with these organizations that began to show work and open up state fairs to the craft movement. And it's been a splendid growth in the state that way. And you certainly can pat yourself on the back, Frances, for having had something to do with it.

MS. SENSKA: I was there, that's all. [Laughs.]

MS. FORBES: Well, yes, and you had the work.

Is there anything about your teaching, just going back to the university. And when you came, you began teaching design, I believe, interior design and so on, because you had had training in design. But you had also discovered clay when you came, and so do you want to talk just a bit about how you gradually worked into where you were teaching clay full time?

MS. SENSKA: Yeah. This probably goes along with the end of the war, too. While I was in the navy, I learned about how you can manipulate things and get around regulations. So we put that sort of thing into practice. And of course, there weren't any courses in crafts or ceramics or whatnot, but we would change the name of something. Or I was teaching a course which was called Senior Design, which was supposed to be a chance for people to carry out their own designs and so forth, so I would persuade the students who were taking that that they wanted to learn about jewelry. So we would have a jewelry class, and it would go into the schedule of courses. And they still have it. And the same thing with ceramics. You know, "We're going to do ceramics now," and I would coerce them into taking that. And that would build up, and then it would become a part of the offerings of the university. So-

MS. FORBES: It just gradually evolved.

MS. SENSKA: Just gradually, and-

MS. FORBES: Till it became so important.

MS. SENSKA: And now, you know, it's a very good thing in the-just all of those things. I mean, the school and the art department grew just because everything is growing all the time, but that got some things like that into the curriculum that hadn't been there before.

MS. FORBES: And of course your students were also, as you said, veterans, and they were pretty clever about manipulating things, too, so you had good help, didn't you?

MS. SENSKA: Yeah. They really gave us a good chance. But now, now the place has gotten big enough so that there are regular instructors for all of those things.

MS. FORBES: It's been interesting sitting here looking around your home, because you have such a fine collection of your work, or your students' work, so much of your students' work here, which creates a, shall we say, ambience in this lovely living room that you have that overlooks the Gallatin Valley. Is there any work here that you would want to talk about or mention in particular, or is it just it's all meaningful because it's all by people you know?

MS. SENSKA: You know, you've really hit the important thing there, that there are probably a lot of things here which most people would let go. I can't let them go, because I know the people who made them. And I love the people who made them, and I just cannot let their things go. So that's why I have such a big collection of former students' work. And it's all former students' work, most all. Some of the useful things over there are mine. The man who was running the exhibition part of the art department here a couple years ago decided that my collection should be recorded, and he came and he made photographs. He had a student helper, and they photographed every piece of ceramics in the place, I think.

MS. FORBES: And that's very important.

MS. SENSKA: And so I put that all that on cards and everything. And in the meantime, someone from Great Falls had been, you know, coming to look about getting a show or something and said, "Well, you have to have information. You have to have this all recorded." And so now if anybody wants to have a show of student work from Montana State University in ceramics from 1950 to 2000, we have it all recorded. They can go through the cards and pick out what they want. [Laughs.]

MS. FORBES: That's a very important thing to do. I think your collection here and the collection at the Archie Bray, which is such an important collection also, are both well recorded and important to have here in Montana. That's been important to do. Is there anything else, Frances, in all of these areas we've talked about?

MS. SENSKA: Well, there's something you said. You were talking about the honors. And I have to admit that one of the honors that I did not expect was the Honorary Doctor of Fine Arts in 1982 from Montana State University, because I didn't really think-you know, the department has to decide they want someone honored that way, and I didn't think I was in quite a good relationship with the department at that time, and so I was a little surprised when all these young people got together and pushed that.

MS. FORBES: That was very important-

MS. SENSKA: It was.

MS. FORBES: -and that had to tell you a lot about the esteem you're held in by everybody, young and old. That was splendid.

MS. SENSKA: And we've already talked about the Montana Governor's Award for Distinguished Achievement in the Arts. And so, you know, all of these things sort of came together.

MS. FORBES: Well, you received the American Craft Council Fellow, too. You were made a fellow there in 1988.

MS. SENSKA: Oh, yeah. And NCECA made me a permanent honorary member, and a fellow of the UCC (?). Yeah, I was just-you know, somebody said something about my, you know-I felt so burnished, so stroked, so appreciative of all these things.

MS. FORBES: And all of them well earned, every one of them.

In going across Montana visiting different friends and artists and so on, it's always interesting to see how often your work is there, being used every day, and much loved. It's everywhere in the region. So that says a lot.

[Begin Tape 3, Side A.]

MS. FORBES: This is Donna Forbes interviewing Frances Senska at her home and studio in Bozeman, Montana, on April 16, 2001.

Frances, let's go back to your teaching just for a minute. What would you say was your style of teaching? What did you believe in doing and not doing? [Pause.] Criticism? Is that something you believed in?

MS. SENSKA: I just don't know what style is-you know, I taught to enable people to learn, I hoped. I put out all the information I had been able to find out about the things I was talking about and tried to direct them to where they could find out about what they needed to know.

As far as criticism is concerned, I didn't really criticize them very much, because I figured they're doing-I always thought they're doing the best they can with what they have to work with. Of course, I had one student once

who said, "Well! You gave me a D on that," or, "You only gave me a C on that!" I said, "Well, that's all it seemed-" and he said, "I thought you would give me a better grade." And I said, "But you have to earn that."

MS. FORBES: And that was enough said. I suppose that's why criticism, reading criticism in magazines, was not something that particularly interested you.

MS. SENSKA: No, not really, because I just don't think that-I mean, it's not my place to criticize and I'm not sure that it's anybody's place to criticize. Of course, some people want that kind of treatment. They want to be torn down and built up. But I was just never interested in that way of working. I wanted people to work to do what they could as well as they could because that was what they wanted to do.

MS. FORBES: So it was really nurturing, nurturing their growth.

MS. SENSKA: Well, I figure that's what a teacher is for, is to help people grow. I don't like these books of criticism and so forth. I think, well, you know, what does that guy know? You look at the source, and maybe you think highly of it because you know the person's background and what they have to offer, but I don't-I just don't respond to criticism, because I do the best I can and I expect my students to, too. Of course, some of them have called me on that. "You didn't give me a good enough grade on it." "Well, I gave you as good a grade as I thought you should get." So I don't look for significant writers or critical writers or something, because that isn't what I look at a book or a periodical for. I'm not looking for their opinions of things; I'm looking for the things, the information.

MS. FORBES: Why don't we go on from there and, before we end, have you describe your work for us. I know that can be a little difficult, to talk about your own work, but it is unique and it is very definitely your own. How would you describe it to somebody who wasn't looking at it, hadn't seen your work?

MS. SENSKA: I probably wouldn't. I'd probably hand them a piece of the work and they could make up their own mind about it. [Laughs.] But as I've said, it's functional, and I try to make it as functional as it can be. On a cup, I try to put the handles where they will be comfortable to grasp and you will be able to grasp them securely.

MS. FORBES: Do you do any hand-building, or is your work all on the wheel?

MS. SENSKA: Well, I'll admit that that's a place where I have gone to a slightly higher technology. Ordinarily, I'd say I want to be very low-tech, but I don't get as much interest in manipulating things with my hands and doing hand-building. I admit that the wheel makes it much easier to form the sort of things I want to form, and so I use the wheel. Now, hand-building, of course, is essential if you're doing sculpture, but I don't do sculpture; I do pots. You see, my whole career is making pots.

MS. FORBES: Do you make your own glazes?

MS. SENSKA: Yes. That is because I'm very Scotch. I don't waste money on something that I could do as well or better.

MS. FORBES: It's interesting. The colors of all of your pots, as you call them, are all very earthy, very earth-toned.

MS. SENSKA: But I'm working-I'm working with earth.

MS. FORBES: That's right.

MS. SENSKA: The whole thing is based on earth. The material comes from the earth. The pots are going to be used in an earthy surrounding. These wouldn't go at all in one of the mansions on the hill, where everything is very slick and perfect and so on. They need to have porcelain. But porcelain doesn't get very far with me. I don't really like-I don't like its feel or its color, particularly. It just isn't my style. You said style. And so, if my things look earthy, they are. They're made out of earth.

MS. FORBES: Right. What about layering? Do you layer glazes? Do you incise through? What is your favorite thing to do decorating pots?

MS. SENSKA: Oh, everything. I use the glazes-you know, that is so-I don't know how to describe that. But I do often do things which will kind of bring the body of the clay out into the surface, into the finished form, so it isn't completely covered with glaze, or it has designs cut through it or, sort of, carved enough so that the glazes will move on the pot and go into the design. I was going to say, well, I don't just use the glaze all over and that's it. I usually cut into it somehow or put another glaze or something on top of it and cut into that and decorate in that way. I was going to make a generalization here, and then I look around and see that, well, that isn't generally true. [Laughs.]

MS. FORBES: So many of the forms that you use in decorating are so earthy. Simple leaf forms, bird forms, things like that, that are so charming. Not each one, any of them, alike, but that similarity that goes through.

MS. SENSKA: It is true that any decorations I do are based on things that happen around me, nature, the things that are in the surroundings, rather than in something that-some porcelain objects that someone made a hundred years ago when great finish was important. This isn't. These are sort of rough and rugged. And no one should be upset about dropping something or breaking it, because, you know, you can always make another one.

MS. FORBES: Are you still throwing regularly?

MS. SENSKA: Yes.

MS. FORBES: Do you still work every day?

MS. SENSKA: Yeah.

MS. FORBES: Isn't that wonderful that you have that?

MS. SENSKA: Well, not every day. There are so many other things going on. [Laughs.]

MS. FORBES: Yes. Yes.

MS. SENSKA: I work in the pottery whenever I can get there.

MS. FORBES: Yes. Yes. And love it when you're there.

MS. SENSKA: Well, you see, I have such a nice pottery. It sits there looking out over the view, and I can sit there at my wheel and throw and look at the view or watch the birds go by or what have you, and listen to the African tapes, which one of my friends keeps supplying me with because he's an ethno-musicologist in Portland and does a lot of work with-you know, there's a lot of music, African music, Asiatic music, and whatnot coming into Portland. And so every once in a while I get a tape from Jan DeWeese about something he's heard that he thought was great and he sends it to me.

MS. FORBES: Isn't that nice. And so it takes you back to the beginning.

MS. SENSKA: Mm-hmm.

MS. FORBES: And you get that rhythm that's come all the way through your life, going back and forth from Africa and all the patterns and all the things that influenced you there and up to today. It's a great continuum.

MS. SENSKA: Yeah. Well, what else? I mean, you don't just stop and do something else.

MS. FORBES: No. But it's-I think this has been a wonderful experience for me to be able to sit and talk with you, Frances, in your beautiful home and studio and explore this long and very interesting life you've had, full of honors and full of-

MS. SENSKA: I've enjoyed it a lot.

MS. FORBES: -great friends. Yes, I know you have, and are still enjoying it and still enjoying doing what you do best. Yes. Thank you so much for talking with me today. It's been a real treat.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

Last updated... *January 5, 2006*