



Smithsonian  
*Archives of American Art*

**Oral history interview with Heikki Seppä, 2001  
May 6**

**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 Heikki Seppä on May 6, 2001. The interview took place on Bainbridge Island, Washington, and was conducted by Lloyd E. Herman 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.

Heikki Seppä and Lloyd E. Herman 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

LLOYD E. HERMAN: This is Lloyd Herman interviewing Heikki Seppä for the Archives of American Art in the artist's studio on Bainbridge Island near Seattle, Washington, on May 6, 2001.

Heikki, I'd like to start by asking you where and when you were born, and if you would take me a little bit through your early childhood.

HEIKKI SEPPÄ: Well, I was born in an area which now belongs to Russia, after the war. It's called Säkkijärvi. Säkkijärvi was one of the very prosperous places in Finland counties. And many of my relatives lived there. As a matter of fact, when I finally got out from there, wherever I found the name Seppä, it turned out that it was a distant relative also from Säkkijärvi. So, Seppä is a very rare name in Finland, although there are many derivatives from that, like Seppäla, Seppänen.

MR. HERMAN: And when was it you were born?

MR. SEPPÄ: I was born March 8, 1927. And very soon thereafter, my family-father and mother-ran into some difficulties with one another, and I was placed in a children's home.

MR. HERMAN: What age were you, then, when you were put in the children's home?

MR. SEPPÄ: I must have been four-and-a-half, five years old. I stayed there until I was 13. And then, of course, the war came and placed the children's home somewhere else in Finland.

MR. HERMAN: But before that, I remember in the Columbia University interview, you were put in the children's home twice, once when your mother came to America. And I was interested in that, too. It seemed very unusual for a wife to go off to another country.

MR. SEPPÄ: Right. Yes, well, they were planning to build a house. And my mother saw a chance to come to Canada, and then sent money to my father to build the house.

MR. HERMAN: How long was she here then?

MR. SEPPÄ: She must have been here about a year and a half or two years-something like that.

MR. HERMAN: So, she came to Canada then. Was that because of relatives that-

MR. SEPPÄ: No, she had some friends who also were going to do that same thing, and she decided

to go along. And so she found a job in Toronto as a maid. She had copious pictures of that experience for me to see when she came back. And that was my entertainment in the morning when I woke up.

MR. HERMAN: Oh, so she was mailing you pictures back. And so how long was she in North America then?

MR. SEPPÄ: She was, maybe, two years.

MR. HERMAN: And she at that time raised enough money that she thought she could-

MR. SEPPÄ: Yeah, the house was then finished when she came back. Then my parents ran into some difficulties in the marital sense. And then I was put back to this children's home again.

MR. HERMAN: But, you had no other siblings?

MR. SEPPÄ: No. No.

MR. HERMAN: Tell me a little bit more about the children's home. Were there a lot of children your age? Or were they of all ages?

MR. SEPPÄ: They were all ages. Actually, when I went there first time, I was in the department where there were just, like, babies.

MR. HERMAN: Because you were only how old? Under five?

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, the first time, maybe three-and-a-half years old, something like that. And then the second time when I went there, I was put in the next department, a little more grown-up-the girls department and then the old boys-everybody was still teenage.

MR. HERMAN: Did your parents keep in touch with you during the time you were in school? Or what was your relationship, then, with your parents?

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, once in a while, she would send me a parcel with candy and stuff like that. But, they didn't come to see me.

MR. HERMAN: They had divorced at that period and were leading their own individual lives.

MR. SEPPÄ: And very, very soon my mother married again, and there was another son from that.

MR. HERMAN: And did your father ever remarry?

MR. SEPPÄ: No. No. My father died rather soon.

MR. HERMAN: And how old were you when he died?

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, must have been about nine years old.

MR. HERMAN: So you missed what we think of as the conventional growing-up things-going fishing with your father, things like that. How did your social development then progress, primarily through the school? And kids not only your own age but younger and older than? Was that how you learned, sort of, social ways and-

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, the social ways were purely within the children's home. I mean, we very seldom saw any other people during that time. And even the place was rather remote place. It was an old, old sort of a mansion-Tsarist Russian-rich people had built, you know, from St. Petersburg. It was only a very, very short distance, 50 kilometers, from St. Petersburg.

MR. HERMAN: Oh, I know how close it is.

MR. SEPPÄ: So there was a lot of this kind of opulent buildings all around. But, they were empty. All the others were empty, but this children's home was occupied by about 100 children.

MR. HERMAN: And was it privately run, or was it, like, government-supported? I'm trying to make a parallel with what we would do here.

MR. SEPPÄ: Save the Children organization.

MR. HERMAN: Oh, really?

MR. SEPPÄ: But, probably. And so those plaques were everywhere. So, that's how they got their money.

MR. HERMAN: What kind of recreational things did you do as a child?

MR. SEPPÄ: Oh, there was a playing field. We played the Finnish form of baseball. There was some gymnastic racks out there that we could use. But mainly our lives were purposive. We did not really have much recreational kind of thing. All the waking hours were used by the institution.

MR. HERMAN: So, did you have chores to do, as well as going to classes and studying?

MR. SEPPÄ: Oh, yes. The school was maintained by the institution, the home. And there was one person that was employed to take care of sports and recreation. But he was just one person; he couldn't be everywhere.

MR. HERMAN: Did you have opportunities to read? Did you read very much when you were a child?

MR. SEPPÄ: No! I was a very poor reader. But I managed to go to the school with my other skills. And one of the skills later on proved to be very important to my career. And that was all the things that needed to be done by hand. I mean, there was a woodworking class. There was a sewing class. There was, you know-

MR. HERMAN: At what age did you start doing those things, then?

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, between age of six-I think that's when I went to school first-and 133.

MR. HERMAN: In addition to those manual skill things you did, were those related to art or were those considered almost a separate-

MR. SEPPÄ: No. No. It was mainly like a hobby kind of thing. Let's make a Christmas tree ornament out of this plywood. Here is the saw, you know?

MR. HERMAN: There was an element of creativity. It was not just manual dexterity where you make the same thing.

MR. SEPPÄ: No. We were not copying the horse that he was doing.

MR. HERMAN: What I am getting to, as you can probably tell, is when did your creativity first manifest itself in your work?

MR. SEPPÄ: Oh, gosh. Well, I did do-perhaps this was the manifestation of the first inkling of the creativity. I made my own toys. And I never played with those toys. I gave them away. Somebody else played with them. Like, I would make a four-wheel cart that nobody at that age would even think of.

MR. HERMAN: Oh, so that was not something that the other kids were making.

MR. SEPPÄ: That's right. I just took pride in being clever and finding materials and finding the place to do it.

MR. HERMAN: And how long, then, were you-well, before we move away from the children's home, were you introduced to art in any way there?

MR. SEPPÄ: No. Only music.

MR. HERMAN: Only music. No. No visual arts education?

MR. SEPPÄ: No. No.

MR. HERMAN: Tell me, then, about how you left that school and went into the goldsmith school.

MR. SEPPÄ: Yeah. The goldsmith school was actually run by a friend of the children's home director. She was a friend with the director of the orphanage school. And at that time all the eligible people, all the eligible youngsters, were drafted in the war. They had an age limit of 16 to enter the goldsmith school. But all those people were drafted.

MR. HERMAN: Already, at age 16?

MR. SEPPÄ: Yes. And so they were short on students. I mean the school was very nice, small, only 20 people.

MR. HERMAN: So that would have been about what time? About 1934?

MR. SEPPÄ: No, not that. No, not that early. I entered the goldsmith school 1940, '41.

MR. HERMAN: And you were how old then? You were born in '27?

MR. SEPPÄ: I was 14 years old.

MR. HERMAN: You were 14.

MR. SEPPÄ: Yeah.

MR. HERMAN: Oh, of course. Yeah. I'm missing 10 years in my addition.

MR. SEPPÄ: That was before your time. [They laugh.]

MR. HERMAN: Well, no it wasn't, but-

[They laugh.]

MR. SEPPÄ: So, that was actually the reason that several of us were underage to go to goldsmith school. And there, of course, we had to perfect our skills, manual skills, and did not get into art until the next semester. And the art school, which was really the only art school in Finland in those days, had the same problem. They did not have too many applicants. So, we were easily or actually adopted by the art school, because they changed the curriculum a little bit to suit us, to suit the goldsmiths and silversmiths, and engravers, you know.

MR. HERMAN: Does that art school still exist, then?

MR. SEPPÄ: It's now a university.

MR. HERMAN: Oh, what is the university?

MR. SEPPÄ: The University of the Arts in Finland.

MR. HERMAN: Is it in Helsinki then?

MR. SEPPÄ: It's in Helsinki, yes.

MR. HERMAN: What about the goldsmith school? Is that continuing?

MR. SEPPÄ: The goldsmith school ran into difficulties shortly after the first batch of soldiers came back and graduated. And the city bought it. The city of Helsinki bought it and ran it for several years. And then they ran into administrative problems and shortage of money. Of course, the money came from the dealers, the manufacturers.

MR. HERMAN: The metal manufacturers.

MR. SEPPÄ: Right. They saw the school as a hotbed to train new workers.

MR. HERMAN: Sure.

MR. SEPPÄ: They were not after artists or anything. They just wanted to have-  
yeah, right. So, they provided the funds for the school to exist. But then they gave up.

MR. HERMAN: Was that because of business declines?

MR. SEPPÄ: I don't know why they gave up, because that was the only place where they could get workers. And then the city of Lahti bought the whole school. They bought the whole school, and it's still in Lahti. But, it's no longer in the hands of the city. And now it's a part of polytechnic school.

MR. HERMAN: So, at the time you went to the goldsmith school and left the children's home, was the goldsmith school, then, pretty much a boarding school? Was it very similar? It wasn't the same kind of communal organization-

MR. SEPPÄ: No, no. Luckily there was a boys home for boys who were actually employed or going to school, and what kept that boys home alive I have no idea really. But during the school time, the four years that I went to school, goldsmith school, I lived there. And they provided food. But whoever was earning money had to pay the home. I forget the percentage now, but it was very, very high percentage of everybody's wages. Now, the school paid us a little bit, too, the students.

MR. HERMAN: You mean based on if you were making something that was bringing in money to the

school?

MR. SEPPÄ: Correct. Yes. All the products that we made as students, they were sold by the school, auctions usually. So, they had a little bit of money to give us so that they could keep us in school.

But, the boys home, I remember, we had to take care of our own grooming. And once a month you need a haircut. And I sometimes didn't have enough money to have a haircut from what was left.

MR. HERMAN: So, were you disciplined if you didn't have haircuts? I mean, how could they if-

MR. SEPPÄ: Oh, no! [They laugh.] They weren't that strict. But, the grooming also took care of something else, or had to take care of something else, not only a haircut, but buy your own soap and pay a little bit when you went to sauna, some community saunas, and cleanse yourself once a week. So that was quite grim.

MR. HERMAN: So, you learned much of what we often learn at home about taking care of our bodies and all of that in the boys school. It was a boys school?

MR. SEPPÄ: Yes. There were no girls at all.

MR. HERMAN: At the goldsmith school, then, was the four-year program the typical program? Or was it dependent on how each student's abilities developed?

MR. SEPPÄ: No. Just about everybody who stayed on board was graduated from one year to another-never mind how bad or how good your performance was-due to outside reasons, because they were short of students and they tried to keep everybody there.

But the school then was only a three-year school. But I opted to have four years, because that was given to the art school. The art school extension made it a four-year school.

MR. HERMAN: So that was an additional year just to study art? Or did you study art simultaneously-

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, there was chasing offered, freehand chasing, and repoussé was taught by the art school, as well.

MR. HERMAN: Oh, so that was really a companion course to what you were taught in the goldsmith school.

MR. SEPPÄ: So, for that reason alone I felt justified to take the fourth year. But, of course, the curriculum went to art history and freehand sketching and design and all kinds of other things. So it was a very, very good year. And it was tough. The art school started at six o'clock at night and ran until nine. And the goldsmith school was in a different place. It started at eight o'clock in the morning and ran until five. So, you were at it all the time, Saturdays included. And we only got one month a year off. That was month of July. The school year ended the last day of June.

MR. HERMAN: The students today think they have it tough. [They laugh.]

MR. SEPPÄ: Oh, yeah, right. You try that for four years and-

MR. HERMAN: At what point did-I'd like you to talk a little bit more about the curriculum, the goldsmith school, and how you came to be attracted to silver as your primary metal.

MR. SEPPÄ: Oh, very good question. Of course, all these disciplines-namely goldsmithing, silversmithing, engraving-those three were the main areas where you could choose to enter the second year. The first year everybody is the same. And the second year you then you begin to focus on this chosen area.

Now, the silversmithing instructor was a very, very charming man, and everybody liked him. He was a gentleman. And I remember him saying one time: "When you become a silversmith, you need to know what metal is about, how metal behaves. If you just stay as a goldsmith, your personal, I mean, human strength will allow you to bend that piece or wire to the size that you want. But if the wire is so thick that you cannot do that physically, you have to know how to do it."

So in that statement there were hidden so many possibilities that you have to learn. It just doesn't come instinctively; you cannot just play with it.

MR. HERMAN: So, what do you learn in working with silver that's more universal to metals, and gold is-no, that's not the way to put it. I'm saying if you studied silversmithing, you would earn a great deal more in terms of forming metal-

MR. SEPPÄ: Right, right. And then he continued. He said, "If you become a good silversmith, you become even better goldsmith, because then you know how metal behaves."

MR. HERMAN: Was the school geared to preparing students to enter the factory situation? Or was there such a thing as individual studios then? How was your choice of engraving, goldsmithing, or silversmithing influenced by what was out there in terms of employment after graduation? Or was it-

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, it was. Even though you chose to become, let's say like I did, a silversmith, you still had to keep your hand in engraving, in goldsmithing, in gemology, and even enameling. So those skills were not getting away from you. You still have to be with them, although less time than those who majored in them. So that general knowledge was very seldom found in the profession.

MR. HERMAN: You mean professionally people would only do one kind of a process.

MR. SEPPÄ: Right, right. So the tradesmen-although the field was very narrow, but they were masters. When you had an engraver who had nothing but engraving, he was doing very well, I mean, much better than our students. But, our students also knew what was involved. So, I mean, the overall value of a trained student was really sought by the industry.

MR. HERMAN: Because you could move in different areas where opportunities existed. Were there a lot of businesses making metal products at that time in the '40s?

MR. SEPPÄ: Right after the war in '45, many of the manufacturers-silver houses, gold houses-they began to bloom again, and because soldiers came back, workmen came back. And then, of course, this new bunch of new workers, we were not very many. I mean, the school was only 20 students, and then it began to grow. Now they have more than 200 students. So, yes, and then there were new businesses that were established.

MR. HERMAN: With 20 students, how would you imagine that the specialization was distributed?

MR. SEPPÄ: In my class, there were five silversmiths and six goldsmiths and three engravers. So engraving was always the baby of the whole group.



MR. HERMAN: Well, that seems to be so specialized.

MR. SEPPÄ: Nowadays it's almost a lost art.

MR. HERMAN: Well, I was going to say, I don't think it's even taught in American schools.

MR. SEPPÄ: I don't know any. But they're still teaching it at the goldsmith school in Lahti now. They have many more offerings, so the student body, incoming body, is divided more ways than three. But engravers still get half a dozen students.

MR. HERMAN: What were your expectations first as a child just in a boys home and then later when you were in goldsmith school, about what your life would be, what you would-what kind of work you would do, or what were your aspirations?

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, the aspirations were very, very mild. Everybody just wanted to get along, you know, in the world and get a job, get a good pay, and finally into manhood and adulthood. And that was also mine. But I was rather fortunate not only to get a job right after school ended, the next day, and worked in industry for five years, but I was also invited to go to Denmark.

MR. HERMAN: How did that come about?

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, the Danes and the Finns, maybe the rest of the Scandinavian countries, sort of agreed to exchange students in various handcraft disciplines. And I never met the people who-the two people-who had chosen two silversmiths to go to Denmark. And we never learned what or who they were from Finland-from Denmark-to come to Finland. So there was an exchange, you know. You send us two and we'll send you two, but not in the same discipline. So I mean that was going on, and so I was chosen to go there.

MR. HERMAN: Was your way paid, then, to go there, or did you have to, you know -

MR. SEPPÄ: Oh, yes. Yes.

MR. HERMAN: So, that was really like a scholarship almost?

MR. SEPPÄ: That's right. That's right.

MR. HERMAN: What do you think today it would be like, a-sort of like an NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] fellowship?

MR. SEPPÄ: Yes. I was very proud that I was chosen to do that. The other fellow was from my class. He was-I always looked up to him; he was a much better silversmith than I was.

MR. HERMAN: Well, up until that point did you think that you would probably go work in one of those factories or-

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, I had worked in a factory right after school.

MR. HERMAN: Oh, yes, you said you went right after.

MR. SEPPÄ: And when I left-

MR. HERMAN: So you were already out of school when you were invited to come to Denmark.

MR. SEPPÄ: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

MR. HERMAN: During this time as a young man were you dating? Were you thinking of getting married, starting a family?

MR. SEPPÄ: Of course, that was in style. There were so many females that were looking for male companions.

MR. HERMAN: After the war-

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, even during the war. [They laugh.] It was like carrying rifles. So that was something that-I guess it happens in everybody's life. But I did not get engaged, make any commitment with anybody when I went to Denmark.

MR. HERMAN: Were you pretty much following your career and preparation for it more than other things? Or what sort of recreational activities did you enjoy?

MR. SEPPÄ: In Denmark?

MR. HERMAN: No, well, in Denmark, but also when you were-after you had gotten out of goldsmith school and were working for-

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, I engaged myself in sports. First, I chose swimming, and the water was-the indoor pools were so chlorinated that when you came out from training, all those streetlights were just having halos around them. So I said, I'm not going to lose my eyes just to win regional kind of little medal. So I quit that and chose kayak sport. And in that I was training pretty hard and even tried for the Olympics in 1952. But at that time the Danish trip and all the other things in my life had made me not want it that badly. But I did get to try for it. And I was a Finnish champion in two years.

MR. HERMAN: For kayaking?

MR. SEPPÄ: For kayaking, yeah.

MR. HERMAN: Any other sports or-

MR. SEPPÄ: No, no. I mean, we would sometimes go to a sports field and run a hundred meters or throw javelin or something like that.

MR. HERMAN: What about the arts? Was there any involvement? Did you go to museums?

MR. SEPPÄ: Oh, yes.

MR. HERMAN: Was there any need to, kind of, nourish your creative side by-

MR. SEPPÄ: Yes, yes. That was-well, there was some petty competitions already in the goldsmith school to design this or that. And they were just almost like jokes, but you got petty little prizes for them that are supposed to lift your spirits.

MR. HERMAN: Was the education in the goldsmith school directed more to making tabletop or serving pieces other than jewelry?

MR. SEPPÄ: Always. The goldsmith was working on jewelry. And the silversmiths were making coffee pots and trays and forging spoons and forks-just run-of-the-mill stuff. And when I look at

some of the pictures from the school times, it just makes me so sick, because I did not realize that silver can do a lot more than that. So a little accusation there-

MR. HERMAN: Well, how were you then exposed to things other than the things that were being made and sold. I mean, that's true of any of us who are-horizons get much broader after we get out usually.

Did religion or spirituality play a role in your life?

MR. SEPPÄ: When I was in the boys home during the school years, goldsmith school years, we had to go to Young Men's Christian Association every Sunday morning.

MR. HERMAN: So that would be church and Sunday school, too, maybe?

MR. SEPPÄ: It was not really a Sunday school. It was just sort of an obligatory way of making us to go to church. And instead of going to church, we just went-they had services there every Sunday morning.

MR. HERMAN: Would those have been Lutheran?

MR. SEPPÄ: Yes, of course.

MR HERMAN: I couldn't remember whether Finland was also strongly Lutheran, as the other Nordic countries are.

MR. SEPPÄ: Finnish church is actually an institution of the government.

MR. HERMAN: Oh, it is?

MR. SEPPÄ: Yes, it's tied to the government. Yeah. They have the right to-

[End Tape 1, Side A.]

MR. SEPPÄ: -be guardian of all of us, because we were in that boys home, everybody either went to school or to work, and we got fed in there. There was no oversight, hardly any. One man lived there as an adult and sort of saw that nobody was really hurting anybody. And so there was no guidance at all other than the Young Men's Christian Association. And the association also provided once in a while some gymnastic possibilities for those to be entertained that way.

MR. HERMAN: What I was partly getting at is, in the absence of a father who exerted a strong influence as a male role model, the kind of moral training that children get would have then come from the instructors at the school and perhaps, then, the Sunday-

MR. SEPPÄ: Sunday experience, yes. But, that was all. It did not take care of, really, the role of a good, stern father who would see to some moral advances in young people. We were all teenagers. We had those tendencies to just be rowdy and-

MR. HERMAN: Were all the instructors male? In the boys school I suppose they would have been. But, or were they?

MR. SEPPÄ: Yes, they were. They were.

MR. HERMAN: Were there any teachers that were particularly influential that either made you

interested in a particular subject or provided a role model in a way that a father would?

MR. SEPPÄ: You mean in the goldsmith school?

MR. HERMAN: Well, in the goldsmith school or in the boys home before that.

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, in the boys home there was no guidance at all. There was this one adult, as I mentioned earlier, and he had his own bedroom. And he just saw to it that there was some order in the house. He did not advise us one way or another.

MR. HERMAN: Just obey the rules.

MR. SEPPÄ: Just obey the rules, right. Be home at a given time.

MR. HERMAN: But, then at the goldsmith school were there role models for you as a budding metalsmith?

MR. SEPPÄ: Not really, except this one fellow who went to Denmark with me. I admired his skills, but I didn't like him as a person. So there was no conveyance of do like I do.

MR. HERMAN: So, was he older or younger?

MR. SEPPÄ: He was older.

MR. HERMAN: Older. Well, you were still quite young at that point, were you? How old were you when you finished the goldsmith school?

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, I started at 14. I was 18 when I finished.

MR. HERMAN: You were 18 when you went to Denmark? Or you worked for-

MR. SEPPÄ: I worked in industry. And then went to Denmark for a scholar year.

MR. HERMAN: So, Denmark would have been about what year?

MR. SEPPÄ: Forty-eight, '47 or '48. Nineteen forty-eight. Then, of course, I also had to join the army for nine months.

MR. HERMAN: This was after you came back from Denmark?

MR. SEPPÄ: No, before.

MR. HERMAN: Before. Oh, tell me about that experience.

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, we were drafted to serve in the army, very much like drafting takes place anywhere else in the world. But the time was after war, and so the time, instead of two years, it was reduced to nine months. And what happened there was that the army did not really have anything to do. It was the wintertime. I went through the basic training for a month or two, and then they learned that I was a silversmith. And they realized that all the army's horns were all dented and needed repair. So there was one man who was a civilian manning the repair station, a very, very clever guy.

MR. HERMAN: Was he part of the army, or was he a contractor?

MR. SEPPÄ: He was just a contractor. But his shop was in the barracks. And so they sent me there. I was very glad to get that assignment, because the alternative would have been to stand guard in the president's palace or something more, do some really dumb stuff. Yeah. And so I was repairing horns the rest of the time-seven months.

MR. HERMAN: Keeping your skill. [They laugh.]

MR. SEPPÄ: Keeping my skill, right. And also having a chance to go into town, through town, walk to town some distance away.

MR. HERMAN: And where was it? Where was your army service? Was that in Helsinki?

MR. SEPPÄ: It was in Helsinki. The basic training was in one of the islands off Helsinki, an archipelago. And then the Helsinki experience was almost like a prize. You didn't have to be pushing that antitank gun up the hill. [They laugh.]

MR. HERMAN: So you went into the army, and then when you got out of that, did you go right to Denmark, or did you go right to the factory?

MR. SEPPÄ: The factory wanted to keep me even after Denmark and even after anything.

MR. HERMAN: What was the name of the factory?

MR. SEPPÄ: It was Hopeatakomo Oy.

MR. HERMAN: I'm going to have to ask you write that down later.

MR. SEPPÄ: I can write it down.

MR. HERMAN: I think that those references are always valuable, should there be other, you know, cross-references, perhaps.

MR. SEPPÄ: It was Hopeatakomo Oy in Helsinki and it was rather old, rather large factory. But soon after I left the factory, it went bankrupt for some odd reasons.

MR. HERMAN: What sort of things did they make there?

MR. SEPPÄ: They made silverware and the medals for army, all that stuff. We made school rings and army medals.

MR. HERMAN: Would these be cast? Or would these be totally fabricated?

MR. SEPPÄ: No. There was no casting at all.

MR. HERMAN: No casting.

MR. SEPPÄ: Casting technique as we know it now was not even known. I mean, they did have a shop where they melted all the silver metal ingots and rolled them out. They had the machinery to roll them out in sheets and bars, and they had very, very good metal spinner. So he was spinning most of the silverware, cups and saucers, and coffee pots.

And they had a spoonsmith who forged spoons. And he was, still is in my mind. Every time when I have a chance to tell this experience, this story about him, I do it to my students. He would take a

long enough bar to make 12 serving spoons, okay? There's a technique how he cuts and so, and so, and so. I don't want to go through that. And in the end of the day, he would have transformed these bars into these-well, you can imagine a big spoon that is used for serving. And he would have those ready for polishing-12 spoons.

MR. HERMAN: That's amazing.

MR. SEPPÄ: Oh, yes. Yes. And I was smart enough to pick up his tricks. And that is involved in my books.

MR. HERMAN: Good, yes, I'm glad you have those.

MR. SEPPÄ: So, especially the Finnish book that I have written recently involves, or includes, the very technique that I learned in Finland. And they are nowhere to be found anymore. This guy came back from the war and still remembered how to do that. And I watched him.

MR. HERMAN: But, the rings and you said the army medals. I was thinking of medalic art, which is often, you know, a low relief on a disc. How are those made, then?

MR. SEPPÄ: They were engraved in-the dies were engraved in steel. And then they were pressed.

MR. HERMAN: And so, then, was there any chasing or refining?

MR. SEPPÄ: No, no. The press actually produced them to such an extent that if there were any holes to be drilled, they were hand-sawed out. So we would have metal, like about an inch in diameter. And it would have the imprint from the pressing. The underside would be flat. We then would have to take the waste parts out by sawing.

MR. HERMAN: Looking back today at the techniques that were taught and those that you used in the factory, other than the spoonmaker and his process, are there others that have been lost? Or are there more techniques that you had yet to learn? Had you learned what you consider all the basic silversmithing skills?

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, I considered myself fairly well trained when I came to North America. One thing was missing. And that was the technique of casting. And that was the very thing that I learned when I went to Cranbrook Academy of Art.

MR. HERMAN: You're going to get to that, right? But, let's go back to Denmark, because you've just arrived in Denmark.

MR. SEPPÄ: Yeah, okay. Well, ask me something about Denmark.

MR. HERMAN: Well, I'd like to know what kind of-was there instruction of any kind while you were at Georg Jensen? It was Georg Jensen you were at? I think-I'm uncertain. I'm not sure you said that. Or were you primarily doing bench work and fabricating things under supervision? Just what was that experience about?

MR. SEPPÄ: Okay. Let me put it this way. There was no instruction. But there was very strict supervision. The foreman who was actually running the whole floor where things were happening, he was a very, very strict man. He would measure, measure everything. They would be exactly like he wanted them to be. There were many pieces that I engaged myself on the bench, assembling them, you know. Parts were made somewhere else; I just had to assemble them. And if they were

not soldered and done right, he would just literally take this piece that would take a week to make and put it on the anvil and whop it, just break it.

MR. HERMAN: Oh, God! That would be heartbreaking.

MR. SEPPÄ: Yeah. My heart broke many times. And so in that sense it was very, very strict. But there were so many good craftsmen around there, older men, that I began to admire. You must have seen some of their products during the '50s and 1940s.

MR. HERMAN: I created an exhibition of 75 years/75 artists of Georg Jensen, so I have a pretty good knowledge of that.

MR. SEPPÄ: You have a good handle on that. And Hans Christensen, who came here-he was one of the designers.

MR. HERMAN: That was very interesting, too.

MR. SEPPÄ: I mean this was just such a fluke. And he once in a while went through the benches, the work benches, and saw that at least his designs that he controlled were made properly and people were happy making them.

MR. HERMAN: Did these older men that you admired give any instruction, or did you simply learn by observation?

MR. SEPPÄ: No, no. Just observation. I didn't even learn Danish to that extent.

MR. HERMAN: So English was spoken enough that you could get by in Denmark with what-did you have very much English?

MR. SEPPÄ: No, not very much. But, I did get that. I forgot to mention that Young Men's Christian Association also ran English classes. So I joined them, and what smattering of English I had, I got by with that in Denmark. So many people in Denmark speak English.

MR. HERMAN: When the experience with Georg Jensen ended, was there an expectation that you might be hired there? Or had you always thought you'd go back to the-

MR. SEPPÄ: No, no, no. That was an agreement right from the start that you just come here for a period. And of course we wanted to, both of us. We wanted to be hired because it was a good place to work.

MR. HERMAN: Was that one of the most, or the most, prestigious smithy in the Scandinavian countries?

MR. SEPPÄ: No, not really. There were a couple of them in Sweden, and of course in Norway there was a good silver house. But Georg Jensen probably was the most prominent. They had 11 branches all over the world at the time.

MR. HERMAN: They were probably the most international. In America we know them because they've been here the longest.

MR. SEPPÄ: Yeah, yeah. I think the whole firm is owned by America, or whatever it is.

MR. HERMAN: I don't know, but-

MR. SEPPÄ: Anyway, that was the period when the best designers were coming out with silver objects that were marvelous combination, this terribly admirable combination of utility and beauty.

MR. HERMAN: In all companies, or Georg Jensen?

MR. SEPPÄ: In Georg Jensen, yeah. I didn't find too exciting things from Sweden or Norway. And of course Finland was still in baby's shoes making 200-year-old models of things.

MR. HERMAN: Though the '50s I think of as such a period of design innovation and freshness in the Nordic countries. And I think the first major exhibition in America-maybe it was just Danish-was in '59 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. But already, you know, we're looking at textile design. I don't know whether Marimekko was already in business.

MR. SEPPÄ: It was.

MR. HERMAN: I think about all of those countries were really focusing on design. But, I don't know anything at all about metal in Finland at that time.

MR. SEPPÄ: No. Finland was coming up from the jewelry end, not from silversmithing end. There was some stainless steel eating utensils that were designed mainly in Denmark. But then the Finns picked up some of those ideas. But it was very, very slow coming. Finland is still not contributing to the silversmithing art. But they are contributing almost everywhere else, their textiles and-

MR. HERMAN: Textiles and glass and other things, too.

MR. SEPPÄ: So, and even jewelry, the Finnish jewelry.

MR. HERMAN: So you finished your stint in Copenhagen and came back to Helsinki? And then what happened?

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, I managed to-while I was in Denmark, I managed to get myself engaged already. And we were really very much preoccupied how our relationship is going to build up. And I went back to same Hopeatakomo Oy that I had worked before and was trying to make money so as to advance our long-term plans to get married and all that. So more than a year later we got married. And then came the bad times.

MR. HERMAN: That would have been what year?

MR. SEPPÄ: That was 1950. Nineteen-fifty in August we got married and took a honeymoon through Sweden in train and ship from Stockholm to Helsinki and realized that we had really made a big, big mistake. Within a week we realized that this is not going to work.

MR. HERMAN: You mean a mistake in your marriage?

MR. SEPPÄ: Yes. Not because of our personal relationships, but because my wife could not find a job. She spoke Danish, not Swedish. She couldn't even buy lamb chops without making sounds.

MR. HERMAN: [They laugh.] So, Helsinki was not a good choice.

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, Finland was not a good choice. And the housing shortage was so severe we could not even find a closet to live together. So she lived in one place and served there as a maid. I went back to the place where I had been living with a bunch of guys, you know. I had left the boys home.



And that was not good.

MR. HERMAN: So she lived with the family that she worked for?

MR. SEPPÄ: Yes.

MR. HERMAN: She was a live-in maid then?

MR. SEPPÄ: Yeah. And she finally got fed up with it. She only lasted about a month or two and went back to Denmark. We had to do something else. This is not going to fly. So, but in the meantime, we had been corresponding with her aunt and uncle in British Columbia. And they happened to be her father's brother and mother's sister.

MR. HERMAN: That's amazing. [They laugh.]

MR. SEPPÄ: So they said, why don't you come over here? We've just grown a son and he's leaving the house, so we have a spare bedroom. You could live here with us and wait until the housing shortage blows over in Finland. Then you can return.

MR. HERMAN: Although that wouldn't have helped you unless your wife learned Finnish or Swedish.

MR. SEPPÄ: Right, right. There was still that problem left. Yes. But, I knew that I would advance in the trade in my own career, that I could maybe afford to have a wife who didn't have a job. Well, that didn't have to come to be proven. We never went back. I stayed in Prince Rupert, British Columbia. Within a year I had bought a piece of land and started to build a house.

MR. HERMAN: Please tell that anecdote about the first day you arrived. I think that's quite a wonderful story. [They laugh.]

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, that guaranteed me a job. That was really great. We arrived at seven o'clock in the morning in the train after being in that train for 13 days and 13 nights.

MR. HERMAN: So you come across Canada by train.

MR. SEPPÄ: Right, from Halifax to Prince Rupert, from Atlantic to Pacific. And it was snowing a little bit. So, of course, aunt and uncle were there at the railway station to welcome us to their home. We ate a little bit and exchanged news. And the son had just bought a new Pontiac, a shiny Pontiac parked right there in the-

MR. HERMAN: This would be now about what?

MR. SEPPÄ: Fifty-one, in February. And he all of a sudden gets maybe fed up with the conversation. He didn't speak Danish at all. Everybody else was speaking Danish except me. So he begged to go back to his workplace.

MR. HERMAN: So he was Canadian then?

MR. SEPPÄ: He was a Canadian, yeah. And he said, "Dad, I'm going to go back to the mill." He called it the mill. It was a pulp mill that was being constructed there.

MR. HERMAN: Oh, it was just being constructed.

MR. SEPPÄ: Yes. It was under construction. So I heard that, and I said, "Can I go along?" He said,

"Yeah, come on." So we drove 11 miles to the mill and tried to converse. And we managed to do it reasonably well. So he takes me through the gates to the mill and meets the foreman. He was an American guy by the name Davis. So Davis asked, "John, what are you doing here? It's Sunday." He said, "Oh, I had to get my screwdriver or pliers or something-my tool chest. Oh, by the way, this is a newcomer to Canada." He didn't know how to pronounce my name. So I pronounced it myself, and Davis, being a smart guy, said, "Surely, you'll be looking for work?" I said, "Yes." And he didn't ask what I can do. "Meet me here tomorrow at 8:00." And so I did.

MR. HERMAN: And you had no idea what your job would be.

MR. SEPPÄ: No. I didn't know anything at that point. But he had pulled from instrumentation department their foreman to interview me. Well, I didn't know much about the instrumentation either. But at least my hands would be capable of handling some of these delicate things. And he interviewed me and that didn't fly at all. But Davis was listening there. "We have refrigeration engineer installing very, very intricate system in the research laboratory. Go over there and introduce yourself and say that you're going to be his helper." So I did. And that's how I got the job. And the way that was proven, there were some copper pipes that had to be soldered very, very tightly in the refrigeration system he was installing. And he was doing this as an engineer, not as a welder or a solderer. And his seams would always leak. So when I saw his seams, I said Oh! Goodness! [They laugh.]

MR. HERMAN: You made him look good. So, how long did you work at that pulp mill?

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, actually I worked all the time that I stayed in Canada. That was short of 10 years. When the pulp mill went into operation, they still needed a man to take care of this system. And I was it, because I had installed it; I knew the system; I had started to correspondence school to learn what refrigeration is and all that. So I got the Canadian certificate on that.

MR. HERMAN: Now, had you become a Canadian citizen?

MR. SEPPÄ: Yes, while I was there, after five years wait. And I stayed Canadian citizen until '75.

MR. HERMAN: Oh, and then you became a U.S. citizen?

MR. SEPPÄ: Correct. I didn't want to join U.S. because-although I knew that this is really the place that I should function and be and so on, that I didn't want to join a nation that was in war. So as soon as the war ended, I pursued the citizenship.

MR. HERMAN: During that time you were working in Prince Rupert, was there-did that job give you satisfaction? Or did you feel the need to do more creative things?

MR. SEPPÄ: Oh, yes, yes. That was actually the reason why I left. I began to teach silversmithing or, you know, metalwork in the local-what did they call it? Community center, yes. They had theater. And they had some sports there. And they introduced crafts. And the fellow who was brought in from the crafts program, he was a potter. And he had had some experience in metal. He was trained in somewhere.

MR. HERMAN: College of Art, probably. No, I don't know.

MR. SEPPÄ: May have very well been that. And so somebody told him that I was in town, that I would know metalsmithing. By that time I had already started to play with boats, and I was ready to go boating that night that he meets me at the yacht club. And are you Heikki Seppä? Yes.

Although I was called Henry those days. Big mistake! Big mistake! [They laugh.] So, he actually invites himself to go boating with me. I didn't know who he was. He just showed up. He said, "What are you doing?" I said, I'm going to push my boat in the water and go boating. "Can I come along?" Who are you? [They laugh.]

So Fred Owen got in the boat.

MR. HERMAN: Fred Owen?

MR. SEPPÄ: That's his name, yeah.

MR. HERMAN: Okay.

MR. SEPPÄ: And so Fred talks me into teaching metalsmithing in this civics center. And I started teaching there three years before I left, in the evenings, no pay.

MR. HERMAN: So in that intervening-what?-six years, were you doing any metalwork at all other than the work at the pulp mill?

MR. SEPPÄ: I started as soon as my house was finished. I built a little shop in the basement. But it was a dismal kind of place to work. And I joined some of the exhibitions, like there was a national exhibition in Toronto, which I also made sculpture pieces. And I won the second prize in sculpture and first two prizes in metalsmithing.

MR. HERMAN: What were those pieces? What kind of sculpture were they? And how were they made? Were they fabricated?

MR. SEPPÄ: Yeah, they were fabricated, yeah. Metal pieces. And the coming year-the following year, I joined that exhibition again and I got a prize. So this sort of a-you must have something here. Canada is a big country, you know?! [They laugh.]

MR. HERMAN: Do you remember what the name of that exhibition was or who the sponsor was?

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, it was a national exhibition.

MR. HERMAN: In Toronto.

MR. SEPPÄ: In Toronto. I mean, I think it's still called National Exhibition. They show everything-

MR. HERMAN: In fact, I've been to the National Exhibition Center in Toronto.

MR. SEPPÄ: Yeah, that's where it-

MR. HERMAN: When you said national exhibition, I was thinking small --

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, you remember the gate. [They laugh.] So, many, many, many years later I ended up in Toronto, and my guide took me there. I thought, oh, that was the place that changed my life actually. So it was so inspiring to have that from big, big Canada. And the fact that I started to teach was missing something very essential. And that was the lingo; that was the language. I did not know the professional language. And-

MR. HERMAN: Is it because you knew only the Finnish words for-

MR. SEPPÄ: Correct. You cannot pick those up from the dictionaries. And the names of the processes and names of the tools and da-da-da-da. And so I decided maybe my days here in Prince Rupert are over. I have to go to school. So, that led me to decide to go school, to Cranbrook Academy of Art.

[End Tape 1, Side B.]

MR. HERMAN: Tape two, side one of the interview with Heikki Seppä on May 6, 2001.

You were talking about deciding that you needed to go to school so you would learn more of the terminology. How did you go about choosing Cranbrook?

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, Cranbrook-I was very scared to go to any school anymore because-

MR. HERMAN: You were what age by then?

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, I was 31, I guess. Well, 10 years from my arrival, '51. Yes, 31, 32. And so at that age I thought, no, you're too adult now to go to school and start learning right from brass tacks. But then the choice of schools presented a choice that I could not refuse. And that was simply because there were some Finnish teachers in Cranbrook. And also the Saarinen connection. I had visited Saarinen's place in Finland and had learned that Eliel Saarinen had designed the school, which would put a little bit friendlier tone into the choosing the school. And Eero Saarinen was living there. And he was building a little hut, a little bungalow, for his mother.

Now all these aspects brought me back to a safe feeling that if I fail, at least there'll be some countrymen that I could, you know, seek some solace and even help. I never needed to do that. I never even met Eero Saarinen, although he lived there. And of course his wife was reading the news for NBC.

MR. HERMAN: This was Aline Saarinen.

MR. SEPPÄ: Aline Saarinen. I met her. And I met-I forget her first name now, but that was Eero Saarinen's mother.

MR. HERMAN: Loja.

MR. SEPPÄ: Loja. Loja, yes. And I did some work for her, because she had brought some of the things from Finland and they were broken, especially one mirror, a triptych mirror that had broken, broken the hinges off. It was pewter framed. And as it turned out, I subsequently visited their Finnish place. And I went to the bathroom and I saw an image of this mirror, because it had just been taken off the wall. And I said, I know where that mirror is. And I know its fate now. [They laugh.] The whole repair thing came back to mind.

MR. HERMAN: Did you meet their daughter, Pipsan?

MR. SEPPÄ: No. She was not there. But Maija Grotell and Marianne Strengell were there. And-no, I guess that was enough. That was enough. I put my application in and sent it and applied for studentship there. And the word came back that I was approved, that school starts then and then and then. And I came in and behaved very much like any student. I lived in Birmingham, and I had car so that I could-

MR. HERMAN: How did your wife feel about this?

MR. SEPPÄ: She had gone to Denmark at the time.

MR. HERMAN: Oh, she did. When did she go to Denmark, then? How soon after you came to Canada?

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, she actually went to Denmark. We both went back to old country, I think, twice before we left Prince Rupert. But she had gone to Denmark that time when I left our house empty in Prince Rupert.

MR. HERMAN: With the expectation of coming back to it?

MR. SEPPÄ: Oh, yes, yes. She just went to visit. And she came back and stopped in Detroit just before Christmas. And we decided that we're going to sell the house. You go back to Prince Rupert and try to sell the house. And when I finish school, I'll look for a job.

MR. HERMAN: Where? I mean, you weren't thinking of whether you would stay in the U.S. or go back to Canada to look for a job?

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, the air that-the feeling at the time was so strong in every graduate from Cranbrook that as soon as school is over, they step into a job. That period when all the schools, all the institutions, all of the craft offerings were so strong-

MR. HERMAN: Because of GI Bill and war and returning veterans going back to school for those options.

MR. SEPPÄ: Right. So there was a lot of work. And a lot of schools were really hard put to find instructors. So I felt confident that I would get a job. And if not, then go back to Canada and do whatever must happen.

MR. HERMAN: Had you been happy in Prince Rupert other than wanting to go back to metalwork? Was that a good place to live and a good experience for you and your wife?

MR. SEPPÄ: It was. I mean, we built a comfortable house with a nice view and nice neighbors. We had nothing really to complain about except the weather. I mean, it rained every day, 144 inches a year. But the job was getting boring, very boring. I mean, I'm such a perfectionist that I made sure that everything that was wrong was correctly repaired. And after a while there was nothing to do, just hang around and see that everything stays well running. So, that actually drove me to seek a little variety in my life, and I started to teach.

MR. HERMAN: When you went to Cranbrook, were you thinking that you might teach? Or were you thinking that you might become a full-time metalsmith, work for a company.

MR. SEPPÄ: No. I never harbored the idea that I would work for someone. I wanted to get this language, and I had started to teach already. I knew I could do it if I knew the language. And my teaching was so silly. I would see somebody doing something that was not correct. I would say, let me show you. And I would show him and then have no words to explain it-what actually goes on. And the last line of that engagement would be: "Like that." That's not teaching. [They laugh.] So, I found big holes in my teaching.

And also I had been a part-teacher in the goldsmith school. When the last instructor was drafted to the war-that was the silversmith-they gave me sort of an offer that I could teach half a day.

MR. HERMAN: Oh, so that was really your first teaching experience.

MR. SEPPÄ: Yeah, yeah. But, in Finnish I knew the language and it went very well. But that blinded me in Canada. Yeah, you can do that, you know, but the laws-

MR. HERMAN: So your wife went back, sold the house.

MR. SEPPÄ: Sold the house, and by that time I had the Cranbrook experience, was over, and I came back to Canada to summer program at Edmonton. And my wife also had a car. So, she drove to Edmonton. And from that we lived there for a little while and waited for winter-I mean the fall-where we had already placed some, not applications, but our names for whatever would be teaching positions in United States.

MR. HERMAN: Resulting from Cranbrook?

MR. SEPPÄ: Right. Right. And the instructor at Cranbrook had sent three people for interview in Louisville, Kentucky.

MR. HERMAN: This would Richard Thomas at that point.

MR. SEPPÄ: Right. Richard had sent three people that he believed could fill the job, not believing that I could. And then finally they didn't pay off. They just didn't like the job or they were not hired or something. So they were friends-the Louisville director of the school was old friend with Richard Thomas-and phoned back and said, "Do you have anybody else?" And Richard thought that I would never be a teacher. "Well, we've got one guy from Finland. But-he's a good smith, but I don't really recommend him." "Send him over. Where is he?" "He's still in Canada." So we got together, phoned, and wrote letters.

MR. HERMAN: But not a person-to-person interview?

MR. SEPPÄ: No. And she said, "Come anyway." I don't have work permit or anything.

MR. HERMAN: How close to the actual teaching year were they getting when you were there?

MR. SEPPÄ: Oh, it was like 12 days.

MR. HERMAN: Oh, so they were desperate. [They laugh.]

MR. SEPPÄ: So we drove to Louisville. And Nellie Peterson-

MR. HERMAN: Nellie Peterson?

MR. SEPPÄ: Nellie Peterson, yeah. Nellie Peterson and her husband were actually running the school.

MR. HERMAN: Do you know whether that's Nellie with I-E? I suppose it is.

MR. SEPPÄ: Yeah, I suppose it is. Yeah.

MR. HERMAN: What was the name of the school?

MR. SEPPÄ: It was-what was the name of it, official name? It changed its name.

MR. HERMAN: What is it now? Do you know?

MR. SEPPÄ: It's not operational anymore at all.

MR. HERMAN: Anyway if it comes to you, we can add that later.

MR. SEPPÄ: Yeah. So, I arrived. I didn't know where the school was. I arrived in Louisville, just the town. And we stopped at a gas station and phoned Nellie. And Nellie said, "Stay right there. I'm going to be right there." And in about five, 10 minutes she was just there. And an introduction took place. And so she said, "Follow me." We went to the school. And she showed me the school. And, "have you got any place to stay?" No, we've just arrived. [They laugh.] She said, "You come with me." So, stayed with her. She had a very nice place, St. James Place in Louisville, one of the courts, opulent. So we stayed there for a month or more and then rented a place for ourselves.

MR. HERMAN: And was this an arts school?

MR. SEPPÄ: This was an arts school, yes.

MR. HERMAN: And did they already have a metalsmithing studio set up? Or did you have to do that?

MR. SEPPÄ: Yes. Yes, they had. It was set up, but it was very, very meager. The former instructor just quit.

MR. HERMAN: Who was that?

MR. SEPPÄ: I think it was Louis Zirkle. Louis Zirkle went back to Iowa. And he was a good smith. I mean, I saw some of his work and it was good. The school could not pay very well. I mean, it was just \$5,000 a year.

MR. HERMAN: Now, were you teaching undergraduates?

MR. SEPPÄ: Undergraduates and graduates.

MR. HERMAN: And were you teaching just silversmithing? Or were you teaching an entire-

MR. SEPPÄ: No, I was teaching the metalsmithing and basic design and creative design.

MR. HERMAN: Well, that's really jumping into a rather full program.

MR. SEPPÄ: Oh, yes! It was. It was. But I didn't mind. There was still some time left for me to do my own work there, too. I didn't have my own private studio, so I used the school studio. So, that worked very well. And Louisville received me so well. I was in the media almost every week, either radio or television or papers, you know. And I felt, this is really the place I'm going to work and die, you know.

MR. HERMAN: Now, what year was that that you started?

MR. SEPPÄ: I started there in 1961 and stayed until 1965, when Washington University-

MR. HERMAN: Did they come to you? Or were you actively looking for a job?

MR. SEPPÄ: I was not-never really looked for a job. I've been always in the right place, the right time.

MR. HERMAN: Yeah. I remember reading that you never had to apply for a job.

MR. SEPPÄ: Yes. The students pestered me and said, how do you go about finding a job? I don't know. I never did it before. So I always celebrate that with a little bravado. [They laugh.]

MR. HERMAN: So, Louisville was really your first real teaching experience where you had to develop the entire program.

MR. SEPPÄ: Correct. Yes.

MR. HERMAN: And by then, I assume, you had refined your teaching process.

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, not really. That was really the test whether I could do it in English. And I immediately began to have very, very successful classes, not only for the regular students, but also evening classes, you know, that are extra, adults and so on. And I worked quite hard on all that and mainly relied on what I had learned in the profession and remembered what my teachers were doing, how they did it. And they were not doing it very well either. I mean, they were just tradesmen.

MR. HERMAN: But that gave you a reference point from which you could develop.

MR. SEPPÄ: And then from there on ideas, of course, begin to develop, what ought to be done in the teaching field, and where to direct these students. How is the field going to, going to-

MR. HERMAN: What was the kind of nature of the students that you had then? Were they mostly young people? Or did you have some in the graduate program, some who had been out of school with their bachelor's degrees who were coming back to get M.F.A.s? Was it an M.F.A. program?

MR. SEPPÄ: No, no. It was not. It was not an academic program at all. It was a private school. The school was located on the campus of the University of Louisville.

MR. HERMAN: Oh, the University of Louisville.

MR. SEPPÄ: Yeah. And so these regular students were just late teens. And the adults were adults. You know, they had already been working. They were pursuing something for their own education or for hobbies or whatever. But they were there. They brought the interest in. And in addition to that, since the University of Louisville did not-they had an art department, but they did not have any craft offerings. We were right on the campus, so we ended up serving them.

MR. HERMAN: What other disciplines did they teach in the arts?

MR. SEPPÄ: Art school, liberal arts school. Still trying to remember the official name of the school. They had painting; they had sculpture; they had ceramics; they had a rather weak department for fibers. I think they were just playing with some paper or something just to say that they had that; and design, three-dimensional design, and metalsmithing.

MR. HERMAN: Now did this school eventually then merge with the University of Louisville, or did it just-

MR. SEPPÄ: No, no. The University of Louisville started to expand in their own building program. And they needed new buildings there. And so the old school, I mean the arts school itself, was occupied in a rather old, turn-of-the-century building that was ready for demolition. And so the university bought that and the adjoining land. And so they had to move. They had to move to some distant



place from Louisville. And that probably was the place called Anchorage. And that probably killed the whole school.

MR. HERMAN: Now, during this time did you wife work at all? Or was she a homemaker? Or-

MR. SEPPÄ: No, she worked. She had a job.

MR. HERMAN: But you didn't have any children.

MR. SEPPÄ: No, we didn't have any children. Not really. I mean that would have really been a big anchor in our comings and goings. But we managed to build-not build-buy a house only about two months before the offer from St. Louis came. And luckily the real estate person who sold us the house wanted to sell it and she got exactly the same fair amount of money as we paid for it, so- [they laugh]. That was even-Steven. That really would have been a bad thing if we had to hang on with that.

MR. HERMAN: How do your students in Louisville-are there any that you're particularly proud of?

MR. SEPPÄ: There are some. There's one girl who graduated in painting. And she's here in Mendocino, California. She keeps in touch with me once in a while.

MR. HERMAN: What's her name?

MR. SEPPÄ: Her name is-I have a letter downstairs.

MR. HERMAN: That's okay if that comes later, too. I know how that is trying to-it'll just pop into my mind later.

MR. SEPPÄ: Right, right. And then there's another fellow who established his own craft business in Louisville. And he's still corresponding once in a while. And then from those adults, one fellow who was running a printing business, Warren Seekamp. He still lives in Louisville.

MR. HERMAN: Just to backtrack for a minute-when we were talking about developing your teaching skills, I know that you had classmates at Cranbrook who also became important metalsmithing teachers.

MR. SEPPÄ: Oh, yes.

MR. HERMAN: Have you thought about-name some of them?

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, of course, my whole class probably ended up as teachers. There's only one guy that I remember who didn't. There was Stanley Lechtzin, who went to Tyler School to teach and became quite famous as a metalsmithing teacher. Brent Kington, who literally established the metalsmithing department-blacksmithing involved-in Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. There was Leslie [Motz]. What's his last name now? He went to teach in northern Illinois-[Illinois State University].

MR. HERMAN: Anyway, that may come back, too.

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, I haven't spoken to him since the school, so-

MR. HERMAN: So, it seems to me that Richard Thomas must have given you a pretty good example of a teaching style.

MR. SEPPÄ: He had his own teaching style, which was almost unbelievable. He always called himself a tool crypt keeper. [They laugh.] He doesn't really teach anything. He got us together once a week and spoke to us and named some aims what to do next. Now you have to make a piece that has two components. And of course he just had a sugar and creamer in mind. [Inaudible] what he would name it. But he never put any names on anything.

MR. HERMAN: It could be salt and pepper-

MR. SEPPÄ: Yeah. Right. Right. That's right, yeah. So, I mean, that was his style. And he never really criticized any craftsmanship or anything. If he saw somebody doing something real dumb, he would start talking about where you could actually learn how to do this, or read some book, or-

MR. HERMAN: So he didn't do any hands-on examples? You didn't see him making things?

MR. SEPPÄ: No, I never saw him making anything. But I saw some work that he had done. You've been to Cranbrook, haven't you?

MR. HERMAN: I have. I met him only once, but it was later. He was no longer at Cranbrook. I was a juror one year for the Sterling Silversmith's Guild Competition with Arline Fisch, and she said, "That's a Cranbrook finish." Richard Thomas is known for his finishes. This is Alma Eicherman style. It's so distinctive.

MR. SEPPÄ: It's very strange how strong Alma was in her teaching there. The best students.

MR. HERMAN: It is kind of the Cranbrook way of providing someone who doesn't really give instruction in the conventional way, but really is there as more of a mentor -

MR. SEPPÄ: That's right. I mean, he keeps the interest alive. And he managed very well. And he was interested in some results of some new tools. Like we had a donation from industry for spraying metal. And the industry actually gave us the equipment to try that. And he was very excited about that. I still have a piece that I made in those days. I mean I used zinc as sort of a relief kind of thing.

MR. HERMAN: Is that a process that's used today by artists?

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, actually it works very well in industry. And the best example of that use is when the shaft is worn, okay? Let's say that you have a steel shaft that's worn. And you put it back in the lathe rather than taking anything off it, and renewing the shaft, you spray new material on it. And then when you lay it back into what it was. So, like stainless steel pieces. Probably most used in that way.

MR. HERMAN: Did the Cranbrook experience introduce you to different techniques other than casting that were coming into the metalsmiths' vocabulary in the '60s?

MR. SEPPÄ: Not really, not really. As a matter of fact, I have to claim that I introduced one new technique to Cranbrook people.

MR. HERMAN: Oh, what was that?

MR. SEPPÄ: That was reticulation.

MR. HERMAN: Oh, yes.

MR. SEPPÄ: Now, reticulation is not my invention at all. And this was the last day at school, and one of the students-his name was Charlie March. He's the only one who didn't start teaching.

MR. HERMAN: How do you spell his last name?

MR. SEPPÄ: March-oh, gosh, I don't know how many Cs there are.

MR. HERMAN: March. I think that may-you may have also mentioned him in the other interview.

MR. SEPPÄ: Yeah. Right. Anyway, he was very interested in this process, and he asked me to demonstrate. Well, I didn't have the reticulation silver at the time. And I sent a letter to a friend of mine in Helsinki. He sent me some reticulation silver, because we cannot get it here.

MR. HERMAN: Was it higher grade, lower grade?

MR. SEPPÄ: Lower. Lower than sterling. So a letter comes the last day of school, a brown envelope. And there was nothing else in that brown envelope except one sheet from corner to corner, just filled it. From the sender's name I realized that's the answer to my request. So, I tore it out and prepared it for reticulation. And this is a fairly big sheet. And Dick Thomas goes by, hears the torch in the arena where I'm doing that. And he goes behind me and says, "What are you doing, Heikki?" And I said, "I don't know what it's called in English, but this is how it goes, watch out." So I just kept on doing it. And he said, "That looks like some kind of reticular growth." "What?!"

MR. HERMAN: Reticular what?

MR. SEPPÄ: Growth.

MR. HERMAN: Growth! Oh, oh, oh. [They laugh.]

MR. SEPPÄ: Reticular growth. So, I said, well I don't know the name for it, but that sounds like a fancy name, let's just work on that. [They laugh.] So reticulation started right there. From here on out, I'm going to call it reticulation.

MR. HERMAN: I would be curious to know whether or not it is still used in Finland and the other Nordic countries. Is it now called reticulation? Or does it still go by its old name?

MR. SEPPÄ: No, it still goes by its old name. But, of course the Finnish name has improved. They have added the two-faced name, because the original name was somewhat, like, borrowed from Swedish. So, they have Finnocized that. So it has another name now. But everybody knows the original-

MR. HERMAN: Maybe you should describe for the record what reticulation is?

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, reticulation actually is a melting of the metal under such circumstances that you don't see the melt. It renders a reticular sort of dendritic growth on the surface of the thin metal. And it was invented in St. Petersburg, Fabergé shops. And they were using the 830-the 820 per ml silver-as their work silver, which then came to Finland, as well. Sterling silver came mainly from England and Germany and so on. And sterling silver does not reticulate as well as these lower silver content.

MR. HERMAN: And does it reticulate with the direct application of heat? What makes the surface reticulate?

MR. SEPPÄ: Okay. The theory is that once you anneal a sheet of metal, you build an oxide layer on it-on both sides a tiny oxide layer. If you anneal it with a flame twice or more times, the thicker the oxide layer grows. Now, the oxide layer does not-

[End Tape 2, Side A.]

It's the metal, and silver oxidizes faster when it's hot. Now, in the meantime, the inner layer-now we have two layers of oxide layers on both sides, and the inner layer still maintains the same melting point as the original metal, whereas the two oxidized layers have higher melting point, if they melt at all.

Now, when the reticulation proper starts on the flame, it can be controlled by angling the flame or lifting the flame up and down. And the difference is so small it could be just sixteenth of an inch difference in the length of the flame. And as soon as the inner layer begins to melt, you can see it. And the dendritic growth begins to travel all along the surface. And you follow that with the torch. Or actually the torch precedes that, because the reticulation itself happens on the heel of the flame contact.

And then you plow this sheet very much like you plow a field, unless you have such a big torch that you can heat a large area, maybe the whole sheet, and then it reticulates. And when it's done, it's crimping, as some people call it. Remove the torch and there you have it.

MR. HERMAN: It's what? You said some people call it?

MR. SEPPÄ: Crimping.

MR. HERMAN: Crimping. Oh, I see. Yeah.

MR. SEPPÄ: So, I mean, I don't want to call it crimping because-

MR. HERMAN: Well, I think of it as a wrinkled surface.

MR. SEPPÄ: It's a very wrinkled surface, yes.

MR. HERMAN: Good. Well, that's a great explanation. Thanks.

So we'll continue with that, about the Cranbrook experience, and besides reticulation were there other processes? We were talking about the diversity of processes that you encountered when you came to teach at Cranbrook and whether those have grown a lot.

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, like the spraying of metal for esthetic purposes. Richard Thomas had done certain things that looked very, very well controlled and well placed. But, somehow the student body did not really get that. They shied away because it's a rather involved thing. It's very much like electroforming. You have to have awfully expensive equipment in order to carry it out. So it may have petered out, just died from the realization that the equipment that you need for it is so involved that it doesn't really pay.

MR. HERMAN: How long did you spend at Cranbrook then?

MR. SEPPÄ: I was there one year.

MR. HERMAN: And you left there with a-is it an M.F.A that they award?

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, they do, yeah. But I was special student. I did not have to have any of the academic-

MR. HERMAN: Oh, because you didn't-since you weren't educated in an undergraduate program in the U.S., you didn't have a conventional bachelor's degree. So you came with a mastery certificate from Finland?

MR. SEPPÄ: Correct. Yes.

MR. HERMAN: And that was then considered the equivalent-

MR. SEPPÄ: Of M.F.A.-

MR. HERMAN: Of-well, yeah.

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, actually, it's more demanding than M.F.A here in America. But, that's a trade award or grade rather than academic work.

MR. HERMAN: When the invitation that came to you when you were in Louisville for Washington University, how did you respond to that? You said you were happy in Louisville. Was St. Louis an appealing place to go? Or why did you decide to take that job?

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, first of all there was job security, which the universities give through tenure system. That was in my mind. And if I would get that, and even the promise, I would take it. And there was no invitation for an interview. But I took it upon myself to answer, because they said in their letter if you're interested in getting in touch with us. So I got in touch with them. And I said, I'll be there next Tuesday. And they took it as a chance to interview me.

So we went to lunch, the dean and the associate dean, and just those two people, and came out. They showed me the quarters. There was just one room for the studio. And I said this is not going to work. My program calls for a lot of noise in one corner, and when somebody is demanding very, very quiet, they cannot work in the same place. So they got a little bit panicky. We only have this kind of facilities. How are we ever going to attract anybody? I just read that from their minds rather than it was voiced. And then they played the game in that right across the hall we have a locker room, about the size of this room. Would that do? How much traffic do we have in this hallway? Not very much, it just ends right here.

So they showed me that locker room. It was full of lockers. And I said, yes, this can be it. This can be our noisy room. And the other one can be our silent room. And they said, we can get these lockers out tomorrow. Well, we still had a few days before the classes started.

MR. HERMAN: So, this was really right before the academic year started, just like Louisville.

MR. SEPPÄ: Much like Louisville. [They laugh.]

And so they drove me back to the airport, said good-bye. And the dean said-Ken Hudson was his name-and he said, "You'll hear from us within a week." And then I said, "Is there a possibility for tenure?" He said, "Ye-e-e-s," hesitatingly, because although the previous instructor lady retired, she had been on tenure. But they were thinking of terminating that tenure. But then because I insisted on it and they saw other possibilities if I don't get excited about this, then they won't get me. So. So, finally, it did come to pass; they put me on tenure.

MR. HERMAN: Who was the woman who had that program before you?

MR. SEPPÄ: Let me see what her name was. Naomi Walsh.

MR. HERMAN: So she must not have had-if she didn't require more space, it must have been a much smaller, a more limited program.

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, she was running sort of a truncated program. And many of the products that they were making under tutelage were really an archaic way of getting silversmithing done. I saw some of the work. It was pitiful.

MR. HERMAN: So did you see the opportunity, then, to build that department into something significant?

MR. SEPPÄ: Oh, yes! Oh, yes.

MR. HERMAN: And that was what year you started there?

MR. SEPPÄ: I started there '65, 1965.

MR. HERMAN: And you retired when?

MR. SEPPÄ: Nineteen ninety-two.

MR. HERMAN: And how would you describe the evolution of that program during the time that you were there?

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, actually, it's a sad thing to say, but I built that program into a very, very viable popular program and introduced the graduate program to it in 1972, I think it was. And so it became a full-fledged academic experience, undergraduate and graduate program. And also I still was running the evening program for the general public that really supported the art school.

MR. HERMAN: How many nights a week would that be?

MR. SEPPÄ: Three nights a week. And that was run by another arm of the university. So-

MR. HERMAN: So, how many hours during the daytime hours during the week were you actually teaching or engaged with the job?

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, an assistant professor was required to teach 25 hours a week. And I was running three nights. That would be nine extra hours a week for the general public that were, you know, sort of-it was an interesting program very much like it was in Louisville, because there were adults to teach. And I didn't have to teach them to be interested in it.

MR. HERMAN: Yeah, it was an elective. Yeah.

MR. SEPPÄ: They came with their own interest, and I had to build on that, whereas in the regular program you always end up getting everybody interested first. Interest is the hardest one to sell.

MR. HERMAN: During that period of time that you taught there, could you see any change in either the kind of students you were getting or their motivation or their ideas of what they were going to do with metalsmithing?

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, the undergraduates, of course, did not have it. There was almost like a service program for them. They just had to have a well-rounded education while they were in undergraduate programs. They would take various subjects, like they were invited electives, as they called them. And when the graduate program started, there was a very one-track program for them. And then, of course, they had also a chance to elect other aspects of the arts school, but I had nothing to do with.

So the interest actually began to build right from the introduction of the new program that I came up with, new forms and new ideology.

MR. HERMAN: Oh, yes, and I do want to get into that, too.

MR. SEPPÄ: That started almost at the same time as the graduate program. You know, I could not in my right mind teach graduate program, graduate students to do 200-year-old designs. And I grappled with what am I going to teach them? I mean, they already know how to use a hammer and a file and other tools. But what are they going to make? What are they going to advance on? And so here again the program started to come to me almost like God's gift. And one of the most telling incidents is that we went back to Kentucky to a sort of outdoor-it was not a festival, but-we were supposed to-under a tent, we were supposed to demonstrate in this park. And then there [were] potters, and then there were, you know, the whole park was full of these little tents. And one of my students wanted to go along. And then the others wanted to go along. So, there were five people that followed me there. You know, they were going to-

MR. HERMAN: -demonstrating or-

MR. SEPPÄ: No, no, no. Just be there.

MR. HERMAN: Oh, just be there.

MR. SEPPÄ: Yeah. And so they did. And the three-day festival started and it started to rain, and nobody came. So we were just hanging around there. So I took that opportunity to tell one of my students who was insisting on how do you make your own tubing. Okay. We do have the old, old tool called draw blade. It's full of holes. You make this blank and then you hammer it into a trough like kind of position. And you put a point in it. It was like a pencil. And you roll this up so that you can get it through the hole. And then you have draw tongs and you pull it through.

MR. HERMAN: Oh, and that forms it as a tube.

MR. SEPPÄ: And that slowly-the whole metal comes through into a tube, and you can keep on drawing it, and it gets smaller and smaller and smaller, longer and longer.

Well, I showed that to him. And then there was some metal left. And I just kept on playing with this metal for a while. And pretty soon it came by just-I didn't have the draw blade with me. It came together and it became a tube and there was a seam in there. So, almost absentmindedly, I just saw that that-

MR. HERMAN: You mean, what would be a seam where it came together.

MR. SEPPÄ: Yeah, where it comes together. So, absentmindedly, I just decided to solder it together. And so metal was about a foot long and tapered in both ends. And so what resulted now was a hollow body that had a seam in it, but it had a varying diameter. It was not a pipe; it was not a tube. Now, it's something else. And there, again, absentmindedly, I just said, that's kind of neat. I started

to bend it. And it managed to bend without collapsing. I said, hey, we have something here now. And I kept bending it and finally-it was so long that I could actually bend a six-inch circle out of it.

MR. HERMAN: Without its creasing?

MR. SEPPÄ: Yes.

MR. HERMAN: Oh!

MR. SEPPÄ: I said, what's happening here? And we didn't have a name for it. But, because it looked very much like a spike at both ends, we grappled with a variety of names. There was a word acicular form, there was a spiculum, and all that. And so finally we settled for spiculum. And this now has changed a lot of people's ideas about how to make a neckpiece or a bracelet. And I see spiculum in many people's work nowadays. I have included spiculum demonstration in every workshop I gave since that time. That was 1972.

MR. HERMAN: But that was not the beginning of your vocabulary of forms and shell forms?

MR. SEPPÄ: Yes, it was.

MR. HERMAN: It was.

MR. SEPPÄ: It was actually one of the very, very first, because the students took that name immediately. First week they made fun of it. I said, that's good. Every fun that you could think of. [They laugh.]

MR. HERMAN: And get over it.

MR. SEPPÄ: Yeah. And once you've come to the last one, you still will have spiculum. So, that's how it started. And then other forms were added as the time went on. You know, we have more than 50 new forms that we have generic names for. And they are not suggesting what they will become like.

MR. HERMAN: Talk about how you developed all those-did you draw them first, all those different forms that you began to-because it turned out to be more than 50.

MR. SEPPÄ: Oh, we recorded more than 100.

MR. HERMAN: More than a hundred?

MR. SEPPÄ: Like there's a cumuli form, which is the form of clouds. We cannot make it out of metal.

MR. HERMAN: So you started doing these as drawn shapes, too, with names. And then did you start trying to develop those using sheet silver or sheet metal?

MR. SEPPÄ: Yes.

MR. HERMAN: Because certainly I think if there was one thing to me that identifies you very specifically in contemporary metalsmithing, it is the shell form.

MR. SEPPÄ: Yes, well, the shell form is again, divides itself into basically three classifications. The form that I just told you how it's made, the spiculum, is a mono-shell. It comes from one piece. So, it's called a mono-shell. Then when you have a bi-shell, it is a meeting of two shells. And then a multi-shell, or tri-shell, if you want to go beyond that.



So all that had to be developed into a form of teachable material and vocabulary. Otherwise, it would just get to be notion rather than an actuality. So, with those things I have then written a book, a very bad book, but the better one is the one I wrote in Finnish. [They laugh.]

MR. HERMAN: Oh, this was the first one then? *Form Emphasis for Metalsmiths* [Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1978]?

MR. SEPPÄ: That's right.

MR. HERMAN: When was that published?

MR. SEPPÄ: That was '78, I think.

MR. HERMAN: Nineteen seventy-eight by the Kent State University Press.

MR. SEPPÄ: Yes. It's amazing that it's still in print, 2001.

MR. HERMAN: And the successor is -

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, that's not really a successor. It almost talks about the same thing, but in a little bit more academic way.

MR. HERMAN: This has not been translated, though, into English?

MR. SEPPÄ: No. It has not.

MR. HERMAN: Do you expect you will?

MR. SEPPÄ: This is Ministry of Education of Finland project. And they paid me to do this.

MR. HERMAN: Oh, so they own the rights to it.

MR. SEPPÄ: So they have the rights to it. And the agreement states that they can translate it into foreign languages. But they don't name the foreign languages. I hear now that it is being translated into Estonian. But I'm just hoping that some day it'll be translated into Russian or Chinese. There's a big sales market. [They laugh.]

MR. HERMAN: Yes. Yes. I'd get on them about that, because I think something like that in translation would be valuable to every metalsmithing student.

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, I hope so. I hope that it brings something new.

MR. HERMAN: How does that title translate?

MR. SEPPÄ: This merely says: *From Silversmith's Workshop*.

MR. HERMAN: And that was published when?

MR. SEPPÄ: Nineteen ninety-six or '98.

MR. HERMAN: I can't tell. It's not on the-

MR. SEPPÄ: It's not there?

MR. HERMAN: It's got an ISBN number-[ISBN: 087338-212-9; *Hopeasepän Pajasta*, Heikki Seppä and Opetushallitus of Finland, 1998 ISBN: 952-13-0221-6].

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, it's a very new one.

MR. HERMAN: Both of those would be very valuable as an accompaniment to this tape and other papers that you have done.

MR. SEPPÄ: I hope so, because the silversmithing role calls for a whole lot of new look. I mean, I divorced myself of making any utilitarian objects already in the early 1970s when this program began to show that silver can be used for expression rather than make a utilitarian role for it.

MR. HERMAN: Because I identify your work with sculptural forms, not jewelry, not coffee services-

MR. SEPPÄ: That's right.

MR. HERMAN: So I'm very interested in how your own personal work has evolved, too, from the time that you came to the U.S. to study at Cranbrook. And then as you were teaching, did you move away from functional objects like serving pieces and that kind of thing toward sculptural forms before you developed the shell form?

MR. SEPPÄ: No. That happened in conjunction with the realization that silver can be used differently and can be used in an expressive way rather than turn it into a serving piece. And, of course, I never shied away from teaching the traditional silversmithing for my students. If they wanted to make a flower vase or a teapot, they could do that. But, at the same time, emphasize at least my own work that I would not go back to it unless it is something like ecclesiastical.

MR. HERMAN: During the time that you were teaching in Louisville, about how many pieces of your own could you make in a year?

MR. SEPPÄ: That's very difficult to say.

MR. HERMAN: Did you make, not could you make. Or how would you characterize your personal production during that time?

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, I was very, very busy almost all the time, because wherever the customers came from, they just took it away from my hands when the piece was still warm. So, I never developed very much experience in trying to sell my work. It just went. There were a lot of people interested in my work and I kept on-

MR. HERMAN: So, was that sort of word of mouth?

MR. SEPPÄ: Yeah. Yeah. I'd never taken an ad in order to-

MR. HERMAN: Have you had work in galleries?

MR. SEPPÄ: I was very, very busy those days, especially in Louisville and early St. Louis. I took part in any exhibition possibility. But what happened psychologically, I start to shy away from them, because often the judges in those shows were the next generation. You know, they could have been my students.

MR. HERMAN: The judges?

MR. SEPPÄ: Yes, the judges, you know. They were not my current students but best students. I mean, he wasn't such a hot thing when he was in my class. Now he's going to judge my work. [They laugh.] Oh, well. There were other problems, too, with the shows. I didn't have to do them.

MR. HERMAN: But those were primarily either juried or invitational exhibitions, not gallery, not for-sale exhibitions? There were some of them.

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, almost all exhibitions were open for sales. I mean, you always expected that, you know; you sell your six pieces and hope a few would come back.

Often people's preferences to art and what they like, what they identify as important in their acquisitions, there is so much without any reason. And the artist himself/herself does not get any feedback at all. And the reasoning often asked from artists is also so wild attack on a person, because I, for instance, have many times defended myself. And I don't know what it means myself. And let the questioner then must proceed from there. That's a very, very difficult step for him or her, too.

So, but I do usually have a genesis for my work. And it's sometimes so private I don't even want to reveal it to anybody. So if the work speaks to the observer, let it happen rather than my preferences, my observations and reasons go into it.

MR. HERMAN: Thinking about the genesis of work, can you describe how ideas may come to you and how you develop them before they become three-dimensional silver? Do you do sketches; do you have a visual idea that you then sketch? Or how does it often come about?

MR. SEPPÄ: I am a rebel here again in terms of how to bring an idea, a creativity as its freshest into the work. I used to sketch, and I draw rather well. I can draw three-dimensionally, and I can present my ideas that way. But I always find shortcomings in those things, in that I only see the front. I don't see the back. So what do I have to do? I have to draw another picture from the back, and then from the underside, and from the topside.

I'd rather spend that time taking the risk on metal directly. I also have been sort of credited that I work rather fast. And so I work fast, and if it's a mistake, I'll do the number that was done to my work in Georg Jensen. I break it and start all over again. That's faster for me than drawing it endlessly and endlessly. And the drawing always-

MR. HERMAN: Well, do you draw, then, only if you have a commission, when it's, perhaps, necessary to show a client?

MR. SEPPÄ: When it's necessary, yes, then I draw it, but with proviso that it may change.

MR. HERMAN: Sure.

MR. SEPPÄ: This is not really the final thing.

MR. HERMAN: Have you ever made maquettes in brass or something first?

MR. SEPPÄ: Oh, some of the major pieces I have made small maquettes, and they are still not the final thing. They are miniatures. But they still don't speak the whole impact of the final thing. One good example that Morton May of May Company from St. Louis commissioned me to make a statue or a sculptural piece that simply speaks of what university is.

MR. HERMAN: University?

MR. SEPPÄ: What university is.

[End Tape 2, Side B.]

MR. HERMAN: This is tape three of the interview with Heikki Seppä on May 6, 2001. We were talking about Morton May's asking you to develop a piece that represented university.

MR. SEPPÄ: Right, in other words, he was going to donate a piece that was going to be mounted in the middle of the campus. And he ran a little bit of a competition on it for the faculty of the School of Fine Arts. And so several us took place in that. And for that I needed to make a small maquette. I made it out of copper, just about four inches high. But it was very, very clear what it was. And the explanation was also very, very simple. And I think that was why I won that competition. There was no money or anything in the competition. Those who were willing to do it just took part without any other expectations.

And I made a piece in this copper maquette that, to me, was very much an epitome of what university is. And that is search of truth and wisdom and knowledge, and it actually is a piece, an endless piece, that starts from one end and meanders through and returns back to the same place. And that creates a globe and explanation goes on. So, you can go from the one end of the world to the other searching for that belief, that truth, that wisdom. And by the time you return back to your starting point, you have learned it.

MR. HERMAN: Was that piece then realized in silver?

MR. SEPPÄ: No, that was realized as eight-foot-tall piece of stainless steel.

MR. HERMAN: Oh, my.

MR. SEPPÄ: You didn't fabricate that yourself did you?

MR. SEPPÄ: I did.

MR. HERMAN: You did. My goodness!

MR. SEPPÄ: It's hollow piece and-

MR. HERMAN: That must have represented new challenges, working with metal on that, particularly steel, on that scale, didn't it?

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, it did. But, many other pieces came from that experience of working with stainless steel. And my repertoire of work from that moment on includes a lot of pieces made of stainless steel.

MR. HERMAN: Oh, the sculpture, like that?

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, no, not so big. But, like, for instance, Episcopal Church commissioned for 14 pieces, to which we can talk about that later, included at least four pieces made of stainless steel. So it led to that belief that you can with human strength work in stainless steel without having to have powerful machines to help you and so on.

MR. HERMAN: Did you make maquettes of those, too? Or was the Morton May commission the only

one that-

MR. SEPPÄ: That was the most memorable one, because the copper maquette was kept not only in the school's hidden place. I think it was in the office for many years. And then somebody noticed that it actually is mine and gave it back to me. And I had it in my studio for 20 years or so. I don't know if I still have it. I think I do. I don't know where it is right now. I'd be glad to show it to you.

MR. HERMAN: What role did commissions play in your overall work in metal?

MR. SEPPÄ: Very great role. As I said earlier, I have never advertised for my work. I have never looked for customers in a written form or a picture's form. I have given a lot of workshops where I have shown my work. That may be considered as advertising. But that essentially always had educational reason to do that. So, but I got commissions. I fulfilled the commissions. And people came over the threshold of my studio to do that. And I phoned them when the piece was ready. I very seldom delivered any of my pieces. So they came and picked them up.

MR. HERMAN: So you never submitted to those public art, to percent-for-art commissions? These were mostly invitational, were all invitational commissions?

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, in the recent years, in these past-since '75, 1975, I have not entered any competitive exhibitions at all where there's prize money and, you know.

MR. HERMAN: No, I wasn't thinking about those for prize money, but, you know, in Seattle there are so many public art projects, that some artists move here simply because they expected to be able to be awarded contracts to create some art.

MR. SEPPÄ: Oh, I see what you mean. I have not really entered that kind, because it ultimately is a competition. So I have shied away from the competitive kind of endeavor and wait for somebody to come and commission me, just very much like the Jewish temples in St. Louis, where I have lots of work, because it's wonderful to work with them, because they selected an artist rather than ran a competition. And I was very glad to be a part of that.

MR. HERMAN: Were these the sculptures or menorahs, Torah pointers, things of that sort?

MR. SEPPÄ: Yes.

MR. HERMAN: Things in which there would be some formal requirements for the piece, rather than a sculpture that you might totally devise without any-

MR. SEPPÄ: Correct, yes. Well, there's ultimate purposes in those pieces. And hopefully I met those. Of course, none of the pieces are being sent back. [They laugh.]

MR. HERMAN: Well, it does seem to me that ecclesiastical commissions are the mainstay of silversmiths particularly.

MR. SEPPÄ: For silversmiths, correct, yes.

MR. HERMAN: And you might want to comment on whether-you haven't made silver coffee services, which in the past have been a major source of commissions. But, today, where are the opportunities for silversmiths who make objects and not jewelry?

MR. SEPPÄ: There's none! There's none. That's why we have to change the role of a silversmith

not to make utilitarian objects, but simply use the material as an expressive means, and expressive medium.

MR. HERMAN: Do you think, then, that working silver should be incorporated in the sculpture departments?

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, it could be. It could be. I have seen quite a lot of sculptors who don't have silversmith skills make silver sculptures. And this is only because-

MR. HERMAN: Make them themselves or have someone make them?

MR. SEPPÄ: Make-yeah, mostly make it themselves. And they don't know how silver behaves. I have had at least half a dozen occasions where I have repaired their work, you know, and begged the customer never to reveal the fact that I turned myself into repairman.

MR. HERMAN: It may not be practical to think in terms of teaching silversmithing in sculpture classes, but that makes me wonder how you would feel about having more formal sculptural training for silversmiths.

MR. SEPPÄ: That would be useful, all right. But sculpture nowadays deals very, very poorly with the best of materials. I mean, you just revealed-you spoke of found objects and all that stuff. But true silversmiths, who believe that the metal can yield almost anything that your mind can produce, it's almost an insult to have the industrial detritus take place in his work. That is just my take on that. A lot of people-a lot of art instruction nowadays just pooh-poohs this kind of deep belief that you go and find your own clay and refine it. And you turn it into pottery and ba-ba-ba-ba-or that you go and mine your own silver and go all the way that way. So I still believe that true craftsman needs to know his medium.

MR. HERMAN: Do you think that, both in your own teaching programs and in others that you know in the United States, that because of changing clientele, changing taste, other things, that there has been slight or profound change in the acceptance of precious metals or the audience for them, the clientele that will buy them-consequently, then, the teaching of what students can expect?

MR. SEPPÄ: Yes, yes. I think there has been a shortage of understanding clients for silversmithing art, including mine. I made a lot of pieces without the function, and they sat on my shelves for a long time. And I had a very, very important ancillary reason to make them. And that is to do research on processes that which I then show to my students. So they were sort of experimental pieces. But at the same time they were my pieces and my way of expression, what I can do through sheet metal and especially silver. I did put them for sale. And I have so low prices that I wondered why are they not moving. And it's only in the recent times that people are coming to my barrel, and I had to scrape the barrel and whatever there is left, you know-because I have not really, really worked with any intention at all during the past almost 10 years. When I retired, I just-this is it, I-

MR. HERMAN: But you're setting up a new studio.

MR. SEPPÄ: I am, I am.

MR. HERMAN: So I'm very interested in what you're going to pursue when you're all ready to work again.

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, there are three things that probably will happen. One of them probably will be just a therapeutic participation in something I know what to do. And the other one is possibly adding to

that collection I still have-

MR. HERMAN: Will you still accept commissions?

MR. SEPPÄ: I would. But the third reason is to test my own skills, whether they are still there, whether I still have physical strength to do that, whether I still enjoy it. And if I don't, if all those fail, I'll sell my bench.

MR. HERMAN: Well, in those 10 years-because you had such a teaching schedule and if you were making work at the same time, what has occupied your energies in the last 10 years, or since you retired?

MR. SEPPÄ: Since I retired, I first of all gave myself an extended idle time, because all my life has been purposive, productive, involved with something. I wondered what it would be to be idle. I wanted to experience that. I could not find peace in that. But I got into a habit of being retired. And I began to think, what if I get involved with something and I could not deliver? I'm in fear. And that kept me really from looking any involvement. I thought maybe there would be something light and cheerful that I can do. But also physically I have developed terrible back pain that manifests itself. Sometimes in the morning I can hardly walk. But, that should not really be any reason to stop pursuing silversmithing. Once I sit down, I'm all right.

MR. HERMAN: It's maybe a question of what kind of place you have to sit and what kind of posture you're forced to take.

MR. SEPPÄ: Right, right. So, I mean, there's myriads of problems that could very easily be used as sort of an excuse not. And then, of course, now the move here has taken three years, more than three years.

MR. HERMAN: Well, tell me, when did you move to Bainbridge? When did you move to this area?

MR. SEPPÄ: I moved to Bainbridge directly '98. But I had visited Bainbridge a couple of times before that. Of course the courtship and my wife's passing away all -

MR. HERMAN: I was going to ask you, because I know in the earlier interview your wife was with you in St. Louis. And I didn't know whether she had died or divorced or-

MR. SEPPÄ: Yes. She passed away in 1993 after suffering from illness of 18 years. She was not happy. So, finally, that turned my life into sort of a monastic existence that was not all together pleasant, but I did not have anybody else to worry about but myself. I learned to cook a little bit. That kept me alive.

MR. HERMAN: That was a very severe change to what I remember from a work schedule like yours-retiring having that-to go through your wife's passing, too-profound change in your life, I would think.

MR. SEPPÄ: Oh, yes. It was, it was. It was just like when I retired, another bad thing happened. I thought when I retired and I would be just like the white God coming back to visit sometimes, show my successor how I did it or whatever. But that didn't happen, because they terminated the department.

MR. HERMAN: Oh, that's what I was going to ask you.

MR. SEPPÄ: And so they terminated my department in '92, and in '93 my wife died. I thought, where

am I going? Double whammy, both really, really hitting me hard. And so I went for a little loop. I didn't know what to do. I just hung on.

MR. HERMAN: Did you have any commissions or anything that kept you working in metal at that time?

MR. SEPPÄ: I could have had, but I shied away from it.

MR. HERMAN: You really wanted a break then from that.

MR. SEPPÄ: Yes.

MR. HERMAN: And when did you meet Laurie Lyall?

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, actually, I met her in one of the workshops in North Carolina at Penland. I've been to Penland 13 times. So, it's one of those regulars, just like Haystack. I'm going to go to Haystack this coming summer for my fourteenth time, you know. She came to my class, and that's how we made acquaintance. But I had forgotten about her completely. When she phoned me up on her way from Florida to Bainbridge Island-

MR. HERMAN: When she was moving out here?

MR. SEPPÄ: Yes. The last trip-she was driving all the way through because she had a car. And she came through St. Louis and phoned me a day before. You have lunch together? You remember me? I began to remember. I can't put a face on you because I have so many students. [They laugh.] So when she drove in my driveway, I heard the car and I came out. I wonder who it is. [They laugh.] And then when she came out of the car, I said, oh, it's you. [They laugh.] And lunch went a little bit longer than just a lunch. So here we are.

MR. HERMAN: How did this courtship work then, when her coming out here-you coming here then to visit her?

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, yes. I mean, she still had several days to reach Bainbridge Island from St. Louis. So every day when she stopped, she called, because I asked her to. She stayed for three days, you know, on that lunch break. [They laugh.] So there's a budding belief that maybe there's something for us, you know. But then it had to be reinforced, of course. In subsequent times it was reinforced.

MR. HERMAN: Rain forest?

MR. SEPPÄ: Reinforced. You know, strengthened.

MR. HERMAN: Oh, oh. Reinforced. I thought you were saying rain forest. Well, it does rain here all the time.

MR. SEPPÄ: It's my Finlandian accent. That betrays everybody sometime.

MR. HERMAN: I'm still counting, 140-how many inches of rain.

MR. SEPPÄ: So.

MR. HERMAN: So how long have you been together then? Since '98 did you say?

MR. SEPPÄ: Seven.



MR. HERMAN: Ninety-seven.

MR. SEPPÄ: Ninety-seven. She came for lunch.

MR. HERMAN: Well, I would say that was a fortuitous meeting. What would have-where would your life have taken you, do you think, had you not had that lunch? You said you were leading a monastic existence.

MR. SEPPÄ: Yes, I was totally alone. I had not developed friendships at all, because I believed that the faculty that retires also becomes my friend, would be working with them for 20 more years. Why wouldn't we be friends? They all disappeared. Not one ever came to my house or I was invited to their house afterwards. So at that point-

MR. HERMAN: How disappointing.

MR. SEPPÄ: It is a phenomenon that probably happens to a lot of people's disappointment many, many times. You work with some people the better part of your life and hope that when you retire-you all retire sometime-that you will stay friends.

MR. HERMAN: Well, in a sense because you and your wife had no children, they were your family in that situation.

MR. SEPPÄ: Right. Right. Yes, there was a lot of interchange of ideas, meetings and all that, with the faculty while we were working together. We shared one another's parties and that's how it goes. But once it was over, it was over.

MR. HERMAN: So, in a sense, that really was your community, the faculty members. You weren't involved with other clubs or other organizations.

MR. SEPPÄ: No, no. I mean you can understand this, that I hardly had any time to do that kind of socializing.

MR. HERMAN: Well, I was very interested in something that you said in the earlier interview about you got the greatest satisfaction from work and didn't have these sort of outside hobbies and things. And I thought, well then, that particularly makes retirement a very severe change, when your entire identity, the way you think of yourself, is tied up with your creative work.

MR. SEPPÄ: Correct.

MR. HERMAN: Have you found, then, I assume through Laurie and through a move, have you found a new supportive and friendly community in Bainbridge, in the Seattle area?

MR. SEPPÄ: Oh, yes. Yes, this is entirely different experience from St. Louis. I don't have the work yet to take my time right now. Of course, we are in the transition from one house to another. So that takes a lot of effort. But as far as the camaraderie with other people on the island, it has developed wonderfully. Laurie is a much more gregarious person than I am. But I have gone along with her. And those people seem to have accepted me as her companion. And I enjoy that.

MR. HERMAN: In a sense, it's probably such a different way of being accepted, because probably to your neighbors, they probably know nothing at all about your prominence in metalsmithing and you're just Laurie's partner.

MR. SEPPÄ: That's right. And I enjoy that better than being elevated to some kind of prominence or importance in any field.

MR. HERMAN: Have you been active in SNAG [Society of North American Goldsmiths] or in other kind of metalsmithing in that loosely formed idea of community?

MR. SEPPÄ: Not since my major contribution to SNAG, which happened 1975.

MR. HERMAN: And that was pretty much the beginning of SNAG then, wasn't it?

MR. SEPPÄ: No, SNAG was actually started in '69.

MR. HERMAN: Oh, it was? Oh.

MR. SEPPÄ: Yeah. I think that the charter was granted in '69. And then it was legitimized shortly after as a tax-free organization and whatever goes with organizational creations. But, nothing happened. Now, I'm not now old enough really to really tell this-because I don't think anybody has told you this thing. SNAG went into dormancy because there were two members, founding members, very instrumental in getting the whole organization together. And then they argued about ideology.

Now, the president then chose not to do anything, but not to resign either.

MR. HERMAN: Will you name names?

MR. SEPPÄ: If you want me to.

MR. HERMAN: Yes. I think for historical interest it would be good to have them.

MR. SEPPÄ: It might sound like an accusation. And I don't want it to be an accusation. They had their own reasons. And I appreciate those reasons. But the fault was that they did leave the rest of the membership at risk. And for five years nothing happened. New members would not be recognized. There was no communication with the president and officials to the rest of the membership. Literally SNAG died.

MR. HERMAN: Yeah, sounds like it. I didn't know that.

MR. SEPPÄ: Okay. All right. I got very, very angry about this thing. The membership was very small. But there were still some members there whose opinions I appreciated who were vocal about what was happening, and I suspected they wanted to do something about it. I sent an invitation to about two dozen people to join me in St. Louis. Washington University had, probably still has, a place called Bromwood. And it's in the middle of nowhere. The nearest place is 11 miles away. It's very much like a motel, you know, various houses.

MR. HERMAN: Is it sort of a retreat center?

MR. SEPPÄ: Right. And these people came to St. Louis. I put them in the bus and drove 60 miles away from St. Louis to Bromwood. And we were there for three days. And because I was a faculty member, it didn't cost us anything except we had to pay for our sustenance. And we were there for three days and we recreated SNAG. And that was the time when *Gold Dust*, the information paper, started to come. But Mark Baldrige took that on his shoulders, and Bob Ebendorf was a candidate for president, and we phoned Brent Kington, who was not invited to that. And the sense was-I can't

really remember what the words were. But he was fired.

MR. HERMAN: Brent was?

MR. SEPPÄ: He was fired from Bromwood.

MR. HERMAN: So he was one of the combatants over-

MR. SEPPÄ: He was the one who just left the whole-he and Stanley Lechtzin were at odds. They couldn't see eye-to-eye. And that's why the SNAG, first five years, was just dormant.

MR. HERMAN: I wonder if either of them became active again after you had revitalized this. Were they-

MR. SEPPÄ: No, no. We have seen-I think I have seen Stanley in one of the conferences. And Brent Kington came to St. Louis, not the last, but-last year. And that was the first time that I had seen Brent for years and years and years.

MR. HERMAN: That's so interesting that both of them were your former classmates.

MR. SEPPÄ: That's why I could be so bold. Otherwise, in my shyness and with my accent, I would be very reticent to attack anybody. But because I knew them before, I knew what they were made of.

MR. HERMAN: Well, that was a very important thing to have done. I'm glad that you told me that anecdote, because I feel that SNAG is a very strong organization today.

MR. SEPPÄ: It is now. In those days, we were still very much in the grips of the initial idea of merely selecting the elite in the field, keeping them as members. And then those people who thought they are not elite, they managed to change the whole thing, the whole idea of the organization. And now anybody can join without any-

MR. HERMAN: I remember when there was that two-level system of membership.

MR. SEPPÄ: Yes. Pro members and-

MR. HERMAN: Have you been involved with any other craft or metal organizations other than SNAG?

MR. SEPPÄ: Not really involved-but Midwest Society for Metalsmiths-or what it is? They have a funny name-in St. Louis. And that was started namely by my former students and others. And they made me honorary member.

MR. HERMAN: You didn't go to meetings, because I think sometimes-

[End Tape 3, Side A.]

MR. HERMAN: -whether you have then been influenced either through foreign travel or what you might cite as your influences?

MR. SEPPÄ: Influences, I have result with, because it seems to be everybody's bag of worms. And I have decided that those influences that I had very early in my life are the only one that I'm going to respect and keep in my mind. If I'm influenced by anybody in America, I have hard time finding them.

MR. HERMAN: I wasn't thinking of specific individuals necessarily, but-

MR. SEPPÄ: Moments and-

MR. HERMAN: Well, I think of your work as being more related to the whole, kind of, modernist attitude of sculpture and architecture coming from the '50s onward.

MR. SEPPÄ: I hope so.

MR. HERMAN: Your work is not figurative. I don't know that it ever has been or whether there have been direct references to known objects. I don't know that in your work. So, that really brings the question whether or not you consider yourself part of a particular movement or style. I'll ask it this way, are there artists or designers, creative people, in other media that you admire?

MR. SEPPÄ: Oh, yes. Yes. There are some sculptural woodworkers that I have admired a lot without even knowing them. And some people who are committed to say something through form rather than two-dimensional imagery. I try to keep myself very, very much away from anybody else's influences, because I think that what art is is a very, very individual kind of thing. And, of course, everything is derivative. Every bit of art is derivative.

So my overall answer has to be that I'm not impressed by anybody else. If I started to name anybody, then I would have to name everybody. Yes. And I'm not saying this with any bravery. It just happens to be so.

MR. HERMAN: That makes me wonder whether as a teacher you would-how you would respond to students who perhaps followed your style rather than trying to find their own.

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, there are some who immediately saw my teachings, workshops, and so on as a means of doing their own thing. And immediately they fell into the trap of people saying, oh that's Heikki Seppä's style; where's yours? But when they told me that, I said, "You have not really developed the technique, the ideology, far enough to call it yourself. You're still following some of the forms and the processes that I told you about. But they were just examples of what can be done. Just keep on working. Work produces work. And sooner or later you will have your style that is entirely different from mine. And you still will be using the technique and the skills that I told you on your own behalf."

MR. HERMAN: And did that usually happen?

MR. SEPPÄ: That has now happened. I mean, many, many years later, I can name some people who are exactly in that boat that I predicted for them to be.

MR. HERMAN: You mean who would go beyond copying you.

MR. SEPPÄ: Right. And developing their-like Michael Good, for instance, has gone way beyond what-

MR. HERMAN: I didn't realize he was one of your students. He does wonderful work.

MR. SEPPÄ: Oh, yes.

MR. HERMAN: I'd be interested in names of others that you feel particularly pleased by.

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, there's Nancy Linkin, who has been doing what she ought to be doing and developing her own style. And the technique is still from what I suggested. And Travis Ogden in Colorado. He's doing-although he's shying away from metalsmithing now. But, his work was very, very much in keeping with the technique that I actually called shell structures technique. [Names of students and followers on the shell structures program: Nancy Linkin, Michal Good, David Jaworski, Jon Havener, Julia Woodman, Liz Tyler (London), Yosuke Inoue (Japan), Joe Apodaca, Tim Grannis, Betty Longhi, Joe Munch, Kevin O'Dyer (Ireland), Martti Vaha (Finland), Matti Quick (Finland).]

MR. HERMAN: Not shell forming, as I was saying.

MR. SEPPÄ: Yes. Gosh, I was just trying to remember her name earlier today and I did. Now, I can't remember her name. Betty Longhi.

MR. HERMAN: Oh, yes, of course!

MR. SEPPÄ: Betty Longhi was the-

MR. HERMAN: I should have known she was your student, because I do see your influence on her work.

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, that's just the technical influence. But her style and her approach to it is very much Betty.

MR. HERMAN: Use of color and other things, too.

MR. SEPPÄ: Right. Correct. And so I'm very, very glad for those contributions to my program directly. And I no longer have to be ashamed to say that I'm teaching some people to be like Heikki Seppä. I am merely teaching them a new way of handling metal. And they can find in that their own, less derivative way of saying what they want to say than following the traditional way.

MR. HERMAN: You didn't answer my question whether you had traveled very much and whether that had any impact.

MR. SEPPÄ: Oh, well, I have traveled a lot. But I have not traveled for the reasons of being impressed by other people's work. I probably would be very much impressed if I saw a comprehensive work of Georg Jensen's really creative era. But I have seen it in pictures and illustrations. So I probably would not be surprised at all. I mean, that period was very, very fine thing for silversmiths.

MR. HERMAN: Well, I'm thinking of one of his primary designers that I think you would be very attuned to esthetically, Henning Koppel.

MR. SEPPÄ: Oh, Henning Koppel, of course, I mean, oh, yeah. Nanna Ditzel and -

MR. HERMAN: I met Nanna Ditzel just three years ago. This isn't about me. I shouldn't keep talking about-I have still friends at the Decorative Arts Museum in Copenhagen. And I'd gone to have coffee with Vibeke Woldbye, who has been there for years. And there was a Nanna Ditzel exhibition, and Nanna Ditzel happened to be there.

MR. SEPPÄ: I have never met her, but I have always admired her approach. So, I mean, many others. Henning Koppel was a real fine one. Hans Christensen was in the design department. I don't know any of his work at that time. But, of course, since he came to North America, there's been a lot.

MR. HERMAN: When you travel, I wasn't thinking necessarily that you would be looking for other metalsmiths, but what sort of things do you look at when you travel?

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, I don't travel for travel's sake. I go to workshop. I have left home 250 times in my career. And you don't really get impressed when you go and give a workshop.

MR. HERMAN: You don't have any time to go look at anything.

MR. SEPPÄ: Right. Usually they are just a one-week workshop. You arrive there at the start of the day. And when it's over, you go back home. So, in many ways, they have not really rounded me up in terms of understanding what other people are doing. Once in a while I do run into an impressive kind of situation. And I can't get over it for a while.

MR. HERMAN: Can you give me an example?

MR. SEPPÄ: Like I went to see Jack da Silva. Jack married a teacher here. And he had just finished a playground piece.

MR. HERMAN: Playground?

MR. SEPPÄ: Yes, for children. I was so taken by that piece. It had everything that I would clearly want to have from anybody else. And that's one example. Very, very seldom I run into pieces that I really admire.

MR. HERMAN: Something you wish you had made?

MR. SEPPÄ: Correct. Yeah. Indeed. Indeed.

MR. HERMAN: I would say that's high praise for Jack da Silva.

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, I have told him so.

MR. HERMAN: I was really thinking more in terms of travel, you know, whether African sculpture or something in another culture has interested you in that it responds to your esthetic sensibility.

MR. SEPPÄ: No, I have not gone into the ethnic kind of search. Of course, there are many, many instances where I've seen pictures and wondered. The world is full of good examples. But if they don't really come from your own soul, I feel like you're borrowing something.

MR. HERMAN: Like you wouldn't see something and say, well, that's an idea I can use.

MR. SEPPÄ: Yes, that's a very, very low-level kind of participation. And pretty soon you find yourself borrowing from somebody, stealing some ideas.

MR. HERMAN: Do you think of yourself being more European, versus American? What do you think your point of view-how do you fit in internationally with metalsmithing, through your point of view, if that's something that you can even address.

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, I can address it in exactly the way where I am. Immediately after my retirement, I was invited to go to teach in Finland. I taught there for a whole semester. And I put my best foot forward, although my Finnish is 50 years old. So, it's a little rusty. But, people did understand me, and I had to teach design in English in that school.

MR. HERMAN: But, then, of course, young Finns who learn English may not have too much occasion to use it from a fairly early age these days, do they?

MR. SEPPÄ: Right, right. I was reinforcing to them especially identifying tools and processes, which then, perhaps, we spent a little bit too much time in that rather than delving into design that would have its roots in America. I mean, that's the reason they called me. There are a lot of good designers in Finland. And, you know, so they were seeking the American influence. And I just waded through these classes with the best I could.

I don't think I really improved their design ability. But the working classes, the actually hands-on classes, it was almost like a sort of obligatory participation. They were not interested in it at all. I didn't get my message through in my utterances, saying that through form you can say eternally a whole lot more than with graffiti. I didn't get that message through to them. And maybe the reason for that is that they do get three-dimensional design influence from their own teachers so much. But it's not like graffiti in America.

MR. HERMAN: But do you think, too, that the ready availability now through magazines, television, movies, the Internet, that we are all exposed to so many object and design ideas from all over that we're bombarded by them?

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, this is one of the curses for the whole world that all arts, because of the media, is getting so homogenized. You pick anything from Tibet; it's not Japanese, it's universal. And there's hardly any difference between European designs and American designs.

MR. HERMAN: You know, I still think, though, that-well, I have to think about this in metal. I do feel-you know, thinking more because I've been working in curating glass exhibitions-that I see European work in glass as dealing more with optical purity and simplicity of form. Particularly, I think of Dutch design almost-not only in glass but in other fields, except perhaps Gjis Bakker-who is often doing more pop things-really dealing with a clarity of form. And I think of Nordic design being occupied with a lot of the same thing. It's not fussy detail. It's looking at-still looking at clean shapes. So I still think there is a difference. But maybe it is all becoming more one than it has been.

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, very strangely I have not really been impressed by the European magazines, other than architecture, as far as form is concerned. The nomenclature that I embarked on in my books about the generic nomenclature in forms has not really sunk in too much. I mean, when you say sheaf of wheat, that already ties-that term ties it to something else. But when you say a faggot, which is the generic name for that form, or catenary term-

MR. HERMAN: Which is a name of a form rather than a reference object.

MR. SEPPÄ: Correct. Correct. Yes. In other words, does not have anything to do with pieces or-

MR. HERMAN: I don't know whether there's an answer to this next topic. I'd asked you earlier whether or not you had had dealings with galleries. But it sounds to me like you have-though you have worked in shows, you really have not had a conventional retail experience. You haven't had your work for sale. This was the course of things. Or have you had any solo shows in commercial art galleries? Has it always been in museum or nonprofit exhibitions where things maybe were for sale, but it wasn't the primary focus of selling?

MR. SEPPÄ: I have, but that's in the past. I have not really exhibited my work seriously for a long, long time.

MR. HERMAN: So you probably wouldn't have an idea, then, about how the market has changed for metalwork or crafts.

MR. SEPPÄ: No.

MR. HERMAN: Do you see differences in university-educated artists opposed to those who may come from another field and learn jewelrymaking or metalsmithing?

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, there's great differences, of course, in the attitude. The term, which surfaced about 30 years ago in art schools, was that now you are in the art school, we're going to make you an artist prompted me to face that statement and say, You cannot claim to be an artist. The world will claim you to be an artist. So, no mind what schools you go into, the result is not a guaranteed artist. So understand this and don't call yourself an artist ever. I have never.

MR. HERMAN: You call yourself a metalsmith or a painter or-

MR. SEPPÄ: Correct. Correct. Yeah.

MR. HERMAN: No, I agree. I think artist is an honorific that is given by others.

MR. SEPPÄ: Yes. It's an accolade given by somebody else than yourself.

MR. HERMAN: But is it still a difference in attitude about the approach to making what we hope will be known as art if you come from a university background as opposed to a vocational school or from another discipline in which you find yourself attracted to a medium and maybe take evening classes, or something, to learn it?

MR. SEPPÄ: I see what you're asking. I'm sorry I didn't answer it the first time. But, those people who get it from other places than academia are not likely to call themselves artists, because they have never even heard the word. Some customer might say, oh, but you are an artist; this is art. But it does not sink as deeply into the mind of the student as it does in the academia. It's almost taken for granted. I'm in art school! I'm an artist! And the one, sort of, layman kind of way of going into it doesn't hear that. He's not brainwashed to believe that he's an artist. He's just making things and being prominent by the customers.

MR. HERMAN: I guess I'm thinking partly about the people. You know, since the advent of the large juried craft fairs, you know, like the American Craft Council sponsors. I don't know if it's true that it's attracted people who make things on their own to submitting work to those shows and coming up with a product or a product line, who then become-because they are now crafts people, then become known as artists, because they have created something, whether it's strings of beads that somebody else has made, or whatever it may be-arts. But I think that this is not my original question. But the idea is, is there a difference in attitude about making something that you get from a university education that you don't get from saying, oh, hey, I can make something out of those tin can lids and sell it.

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, this used to be an old, old argument. And your question the difference between craft and art. And then, you know, once we embark on that, answering that, or taking part in that argument, we would be here for four years and still not solve it.

I have my own opinions about what art is. And if I ever answer it right, then I also will know what God is. Once I know what God is, then I will also know what love is. And none of those three questions I have never answered.



MR. HERMAN: That's a very good answer indeed. Thank you.

Has art criticism been important to you in your work?

MR. SEPPÄ: Only to that extent that I got my name in the paper. I don't pay much attention to what the criticism is. And often, most often, I'm not criticized in any of the media that usually does-

MR. HERMAN: That's something that seems to come often, though, in craft organizations because crafts people, for the most part, want to be taken seriously as artists, and one of the-the evidence that they are artists is critical writing about their work. And there's a dearth of that, as you know. That's the reason I think that this question is asked. And then it gets down to, well, if you believe that critical writing is important, are there really writers that are knowledgeable enough about your field that they can write critically about it?

MR. SEPPÄ: To my observations, there are none. Even some participants who write well and express themselves well verbally, they still don't get the idea of what is inspiring, what is real criticism, what is constructive criticism. *Metalsmith* magazine has a section of people's shows. And often those are written by fans.

MR. HERMAN: It's not truly criticism.

MR. SEPPÄ: Yeah. It's just an announcement that such an event took place, and it does not advance anybody. It's just a person whose work is being sold, criticized or announced, gets his or her name in the paper and whatever that brings.

MR. HERMAN: The one person who does dare at least occasionally to step on toes in his writing is Bruce Metcalf.

MR. SEPPÄ: Oh, yes. He is so far afield.

MR. HERMAN: I can't read what he writes.

MR. SEPPÄ: I cannot comprehend where he's at. And that also does not really advance the field at all.

MR. HERMAN: Well, I do feel that a lot of critical writing, particularly in the popular press, is still more to impress colleagues than it is to engage the readership in looking at art and trying to figure out what it is.

MR. SEPPÄ: That's right. There's a great big problem between media and performances or makers.

MR. HERMAN: When you first started exhibiting in the U.S., were they particularly metal shows? Or were they all craft shows? Or were they general art exhibitions?

MR. SEPPÄ: It was a mixture. Sometimes it was the traditional crafts, you know, the fibers, the clay-glass was not even existing-and metal. Then wood came in, then glass came in, more complex. And then I stepped out because-

MR. HERMAN: You mean you stopped participating?

MR. SEPPÄ: I stopped participating.

MR. HERMAN: For what reason?

MR. SEPPÄ: First of all, I was so busy with commission work; I didn't have anything in the barrel to send to them. And secondly, I did not want to be judged by younger people who did not know my thought.

MR. HERMAN: Whose opinion you didn't respect.

MR. SEPPÄ: That's right. Bruce Metcalf, whom I know relatively well, was one of the judges. I would not take part in that.

MR. HERMAN: Was he a former student of yours?

MR. SEPPÄ: No, no. He went to Tyler.

MR. HERMAN: With Stanley [Lechtzin]?

MR. SEPPÄ: Stanley, yes. He was Stanley's-

MR. HERMAN: Do you have any comment on your relationship with curators in museums other than one who went too quickly through your slides?

MR. SEPPÄ: Very, very, very little. There was a curator in St. Louis Art Museum that I had a little bit of a relationship, in terms of she stepped on my side because St. Louis Museum has a very good silver collection. And I would have her to pull it out for my students and we would spend a few hours there looking at it and so on. And so did Brent Kington from Carbondale.

MR. HERMAN: One of his students there.

MR. SEPPÄ: Yes, right. I think I got the idea from him anyway. There's a good collection, go and take a look at it. Take your students with you. But that was just, sort of, a friendly kind of thing. That was not judgmental in any way.

MR. HERMAN: And it wasn't dealing with your work at all, other than bringing the students in to see the collection.

MR. SEPPÄ: Right. It was a service. And all those areas where I had my work in permanent collection, I never met the curators at all.

MR. HERMAN: Oh, really? You must know Paul Smith during the time he was curating-

MR. SEPPÄ: Oh, yes. But I've never had a show -

MR. HERMAN: Were you not in "Objects: USA" [1970]?

MR. SEPPÄ: No.

MR. HERMAN: You weren't? Oh. And were you never in any exhibitions at the American Craft Museum, or the Museum of Contemporary Crafts as it used to be?

MR. SEPPÄ: No.

MR. HERMAN: Well, I'm truly amazed. Your work was exhibited at the Renwick Gallery when I was there, wasn't it?

MR. SEPPÄ: No. Oh, well, yes, when there was a group show. Yes.

MR. HERMAN: In that goldsmiths show that we-

MR. SEPPÄ: Yes, I think I had two pieces there. Yes.

MR. HERMAN: Whew. [They laugh.] I'm embarrassed.

MR. SEPPÄ: No! I mean, why should you be? These are the facts, Mr. Friday.

MR. HERMAN: Did you ever make jewelry, other than maybe in the very early years?

MR. SEPPÄ: I made jewelry more than silversmithing throughout my career.

MR. HERMAN: Because you know I was thinking when you were talking about Betty Longhi, that she has used the shell structures in making jewelry. And I couldn't remember if I'd ever seen any of your jewelry.

MR. SEPPÄ: I have made more jewelry than silversmithing. While I was in St. Louis and while I was in Louisville, mainly jewelry moved.

MR. HERMAN: But you continued to make and sell work during the time that you were teaching in both of those cities.

MR. SEPPÄ: Yes, yes.

MR. HERMAN: Was that because -

MR. SEPPÄ: Not in Louisville, because the idea had not really grown to its fruition yet.

MR. HERMAN: But that was simply because you personally needed to make work, and selling it was, then, a consequence of that? Or did you need to make work and sell it to augment your income as a teacher?

MR. SEPPÄ: Oh, yes, very much, in Louisville especially. And it was very easy to do it. As I said earlier, I all of a sudden became very popular. People wanted my pieces.

[End Tape 3, Side B.]

MR. HERMAN: Heikki Seppä on May 6, 2001. Side one.

Well, I'm very interested in your insights into the field and your own work and the kind of, I guess, a sense of positioning within your field, because you really have two fields. You're a sculptor. And, as you just said, you've made a lot of jewelry, too.

MR. SEPPÄ: Yes, I have. And perhaps the nicest thing that happened to me in terms of silver experience is the ecclesiastical input that I managed to do. It was, perhaps, the last St. Louis commission to me from the Episcopalian church. They had just built a new chapel to their huge old church. And they wanted to refurbish it with the ecclesiastical ware. So, there were 14 pieces to be made. And I got to design all of them.

MR. HERMAN: Now, can you tell me what those would be?

MR. SEPPÄ: Okay. Well, they needed to have two chalices. This was my biggest contribution to church ware. You may not believe that, but that's it. And ciboria.

MR. HERMAN: What is that?

MR. SEPPÄ: Ciborium is where the wafers are kept. And they are consecrated vessels.

MR. HERMAN: You can tell I'm not a churchgoer. [They laugh.]

MR. SEPPÄ: And then there were flower keepers on the altar, and the big cross, and two candleholders. Those were all made of stainless steel. And there was the lavabo.

MR. HERMAN: Do they have holy water in the Episcopal church?

MR. SEPPÄ: The lavabo is where you wash your fingers. And it's tied to a piscine, you know, that drains the water out. And the two candlesticks were five feet tall.

MR. HERMAN: I can see why they would be made of stainless steel, then.

MR. SEPPÄ: Yes, I mean, this was the bi-shell structures that really gave them a lot of presence. And all those 14 pieces included the chalices, which I mentioned awhile ago. And I decided that if I break ground here of getting away from the central stem and the node, I would have contributed to anybody who henceforth has to design chalices, if I make it asymmetrical.

You know the Catholics believe the central stem with the node is really where all the blessings are radiated.

MR. HERMAN: I didn't know that.

MR. SEPPÄ: And I decided to forgo that belief, and I would make the stem to the side and take the cross and put it even further aside and leave the bowl not round but triangular, reminding the Trinity in Christianity.

MR. HERMAN: What was the response to this?

MR. SEPPÄ: They were delighted. And they accepted. I made two of them.

MR. HERMAN: Because you had thought it through. You had a philosophy for the design.

MR. SEPPÄ: Sure. But I've never had to explain it. But, the committee just accepted it. And for that I drew the pictures, sent it to them. So, I was not there when they were deliberating over it. And they accepted the whole thing, and in my own soul I thought if they would ever consecrate this chalice, I would be in the history books. Because that's the first asymmetrical chalice in the history of Christianity.

MR. HERMAN: And what year was that?

MR. SEPPÄ: It was '86-'87.

MR. HERMAN: Say the name of the church so that I'll have that on record.

MR. SEPPÄ: It was St. George and St. -there were two saints. Why can't I remember it? Why can't I remember the other one?

MR. HERMAN: John? Peter?

MR. SEPPÄ: There never was any St. George. There's no George.

MR. HERMAN: Oh, you mean the dragon slayer or the-

MR. SEPPÄ: [They laugh.] And it was an Episcopalian church in St. Louis, Missouri.

MR. HERMAN: Okay. Well, I'll leave the historians to figure out what it is for sure.

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, that's not too hard to find that.

MR. HERMAN: Would you consider that your most important commission, then?

MR. SEPPÄ: No. I had been preparing myself to do ecclesiastical work, knowing that I had the skills to do it. And there was only one time that Lutheran church-St. Louis is also center of Lutheran beliefs.

MR. HERMAN: Is there a large Nordic population in St. Louis?

MR. SEPPÄ: No, no. That's not it. It's just Concordia [Concordia Seminary, Missouri Synod] is there. And they asked me to make a chalice. And I made the design and they would not accept it. One of the disappointing things. And there I'm just honing my skills. Come on, churches, you know. I have it; nobody else has it. And they never came until the Episcopalians came. But, before that the Jewish people came. And I made perhaps my main contribution in the Jewish temples.

MR. HERMAN: How many different temples did you make commissioned pieces for?

MR. SEPPÄ: Five.

MR. HERMAN: Were all the commissions in St. Louis? Or did you have some in other cities?

MR. SEPPÄ: No. They were all St. Louis. I mean, I had a show in Harvard Square one time, you know, in Boston, or Cambridge. I forget the name of the gallery. It may not be there anymore.

MR. HERMAN: I bet I know which one it was. Ten Arrow?

MR. SEPPÄ: Ten Arrow. Correct. Yes. I had a show there, and I had made an absolutely wonderful chain that I thought, some day this will serve as a source for jewelry. But it was just over-long, maybe three feet or something. And I used that as a prop from one piece leading onto the next piece. And that was the only piece that was sold.

MR. HERMAN: Did you make any more of those chains?

MR. SEPPÄ: Oh, yes, I did. Oh, yes, I did. That was really the start of-

MR. HERMAN: Did it ever interest you to make replicas, you know, really what we would think now of multiples, or production design, of any piece? Or did you ever do that?

MR. SEPPÄ: There was one time Swarovski of Austria ran a competition. And I submitted to that just a design, a sketch. And they gave me \$100 for it. But, they never made it. They never made it.

MR. HERMAN: There hasn't been so much of a relationship between metalsmiths and companies

as there has been between glass artists and glass companies in designing products that they could then continue to make. I guess only Stieff is one that I know did it, and Rhode Island, where I think Arline Fisch and Mary Ann Scherr and others were part of the design series for-I can't remember the name of the company now. Have there been opportunities at all like that for you?

MR. SEPPÄ: No, none at all. I remember the Dane-what was his name now? He was teaching in New England.

MR. HERMAN: Jack Prip.

MR. SEPPÄ: Jack Prip was involved with-what was it?

MR. HERMAN: Reed & Barton. That was it. That was where Arline and Mary Ann-

MR. SEPPÄ: They did try to use the new breed designers, but not very much changed in their production. And one of those silver houses-was it Oneida or Reed & Barton or Towle? The director there was going to get, sort of, a museum going just a few years ago. And I wrote a letter to him saying that this will never fly because-

MR. HERMAN: Well, I'm beginning to run out of questions. One of them is whether there have been any periodicals that you have found important in addressing your field, whether it's been *Metalsmith* or *American Craft* or any others that have helped at all to bringing public acceptance, respect, interest?

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, I have had a lot of ink, and much of it is just to go into box, like this I have with me, and sort of been forgotten.

MR. HERMAN: Publicity, rather than critical?

MR. SEPPÄ: Right, right.

MR. HERMAN: So we're at the point that I think I've covered most of the topics that, you know-I'm still interested if there are any, kind of, philosophical points you want to make. And I did want to ask you, because we kind of glossed over your education in Finland that was so much involved with the Fabergé-trained metalsmiths that you studied under in in Finland. So I'd like it if you could talk a little bit more about that close relationship between the Fabergé studio and metalsmithing in Finland at the time that you were studying.

MR. SEPPÄ: It was just good luck on my part that I was born at the time and got involved in this field, because there were still some people in the industry that had been working in St. Petersburg for Carl Fabergé.

MR. HERMAN: Did the Fabergé studio close at the time of the revolution?

MR. SEPPÄ: Nineteen-seventeen, yes. That's when numerous Finnish people who had worked for him came back home to Finland. And they brought in a new wave of what's now called Finnish jewelry. The Finns were not really creating that, other than what's called Kalevala.

MR. HERMAN: And I know the Kalevala Koru organization, which is really Lappish jewelry, isn't it, for the most part?

MR. SEPPÄ: Not really, not really. Kalevala is the name of the Finnish national epos, the epic poem.

And that actually deals with the Karelian input to Finnish culture. I'm a Karelian myself.

MR. HERMAN: I'm not sure what that means.

MR. SEPPÄ: Karelia is the name of an area which actually overlaps the border to Russia.

MR. HERMAN: So, it's a cultural area rather than a political area.

MR. SEPPÄ: Also an ethnic area. The Karelians have made a great contribution to Finnish culture. Sibelius was not really Karelian at all. So, there is an influence there that maybe even Carl Fabergé was influenced-the Karelian influence. Although I doubt it very much that Karelian ethnicity had anything to do with the creation of Fabergé art, Fabergé's input into the world's jewelry and world's metalsmithing. But he was in St. Petersburg. And St. Petersburg actually, historically, is in Karelia.

MR. HERMAN: Oh, really?

MR. SEPPÄ: Yes. In the Karelian Isthmus, which is in between Lake Ladoga and the Gulf of Finland. It is a rather narrow area, and from the early border of Finland and Russia there was only 20 miles to St. Petersburg.

MR. HERMAN: I went by bus from Helsinki to St. Petersburg.

MR. SEPPÄ: You did?!

MR. HERMAN: I did.

MR. SEPPÄ: Good thing that robbers didn't get you.

MR. HERMAN: No, it was a tour bus. That's interesting because that suggests that St. Petersburg was this 18th-century French city imposed on Karelia.

MR. SEPPÄ: Not French. Italian.

MR. HERMAN: Oh, Italian? Because I always thought that certainly Catherine the Great was very enamored of French design.

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, she was. But, the architects that actually built St. Petersburg were from Italy. And the bridges over Neva River and the proportions are so absolutely beautiful. Did you ever-

MR. HERMAN: Oh, yes. I spent three days there, which is not enough time.

MR. SEPPÄ: No, not really.

MR. HERMAN: I did get an overview.

MR. SEPPÄ: Yeah. And you know it's absolutely beautiful city, the old one. Since the communists took over, they built these high-rises.

MR. HERMAN: They didn't tear down the beautiful 18th-century buildings.

MR. SEPPÄ: Luckily they didn't, yes. Right, so, I mean, the area where the children's home was, I mentioned earlier, was right in the middle of the Karelian Peninsula, I mean Isthmus.

MR. HERMAN: So, were you between Helsinki and St. Petersburg then?

MR. SEPPÄ: Oh, very much in between, but there's a major city called Viipuri/Nyburg.

MR. HERMAN: Vyborg, yes, okay.

MR. SEPPÄ: In the northern end of Karelian Isthmus. And from Vyborg, St. Petersburg is less than-

MR. HERMAN: We went through Vyborg on the way.

MR. SEPPÄ: Yes, you must have because-

MR. HERMAN: I remember the boats in Vyborg. I took pictures of them.

MR. SEPPÄ: The medieval castle, too. And between Vyborg and St. Petersburg was the place where the children's home was. So I actually grew up-

MR. HERMAN: That makes particular-well, now where was the goldsmith's school? That was back in Helsinki?

MR. SEPPÄ: Right.

MR. HERMAN: But, still they're so close St. Petersburg and Helsinki. It makes sense that the people from the Fabergé workshop would be unemployed by the time that-well, long before you went to school

MR. SEPPÄ: The revolution. Oh, yes. Oh, yes. They already had come back in 1917. I was not even born. And when they came back, they established the goldsmith shops and their own businesses. But, little by little, they passed away. But then there were still some old people who stayed and worked in the business when I was working for the industry. There was one guy [Mr. Lajunen] who actually had worked in St. Petersburg, and he showed me how to reticulate. And he told me where the reticulation came from-from Carl Fabergé's shops, where the apprentices would heat the coffee pot that they were soldering the spout to. Heat one spot a little bit too much and it would reticulate. And then they found out that, hey, this is a nice surface.

MR. HERMAN: We can use this.

MR. SEPPÄ: We can use this technique. So, they researched it and made it almost infallible kind of process. And those days they made cigar containers, eyeglass containers, cigarette containers, and all kinds of little boxes and things that they turned it into very, very fine application of surface textures. And they're all different.

MR. HERMAN: I think about the sort of production things I've seen that came out of the Fabergé studios as transparent enamels over chased, I assume chased, surfaces.

MR. SEPPÄ: No. No, they were not chased. It was called-["engine turning" texture]-can't remember it. It was done with a machine.

MR. HERMAN: It would have to be done much faster than hand-chasing.

MR. SEPPÄ: Oh, yeah. It's a very, very even-

MR. HERMAN: Those were the lower, lower end.



MR. SEPPÄ: Oh, yes.

MR. HERMAN: But still very beautiful. But I wondered whether enameling, because it seems to have been so important to a lot of the Fabergé pieces that I've seen, both the production and the Easter eggs, was something that was very important when you were taught in the goldsmith school.

MR. SEPPÄ: The enameling, we had very, very little education in the goldsmith school.

MR. HERMAN: It had already passed its period of popularity by then?

MR. SEPPÄ: Right, right. I had to learn enameling all together new, and I learned it in Louisville. There was a good enameler there and she was taking classes from me. And then I asked her to be an assistant instructor for enameling course. And I took that enameling course from her.

MR. HERMAN: It's kind of disappointing that enameling is not used more today than it is, because it's a wonderful way to add color and sort of a gemlike brilliance to metalwork.

MR. SEPPÄ: But when you really think of what is offered now in gemology, enameling has to take the second place for it.

MR. HERMAN: Has gemology changed that much?

MR. SEPPÄ: Since I retired, there are so many new stones, and their names I don't even know.

MR. HERMAN: I thought maybe you meant that there are different ways of cutting stones, because I think Fabergé also had those wonderful things that would be bouquets of flowers carved in jade or lapis.

MR. SEPPÄ: Oh, yes. I mean, he was really a pioneer in gemological kind of forming. And, of course, the King's House, Queen's House in England were a great contributor to his wealth.

MR. HERMAN: Which house?

MR. SEPPÄ: The royal house.

MR. HERMAN: The royal house. Oh, sorry. The Windsor House. And that's what you said.

MR. SEPPÄ: So that kept old Carl busy in St. Petersburg. A lot of his carvings went to England.

MR. HERMAN: Well, I do think the queen has the largest collection, doesn't she? Or is the one in New Orleans? No, I guess that's now part of the Virginia Museum, the Matilda Geddings, I want to say, Collection, that was a New Orleans collection, I think maybe now is in Richmond, as well. Of course, Malcolm Forbes had a Fabergé collection, too.

MR. SEPPÄ: Oh, he did?

MR. HERMAN: It's still in that museum in New York down on lower Fifth Avenue.

MR. SEPPÄ: But it was very interesting that this old fellow was only making coffee pots, was sitting only two places-like, if I were sitting here, he was sitting over there.

MR. HERMAN: This was at goldsmith school?

MR. SEPPÄ: No, no. This was in industry where I worked in Hopeatakomo Oy. There was an enameler here [Mr. Palme]. He was a very good enameler, and he was often not sitting here because he had his own enameling shop on the third floor or something. And I would sneak out to this old fellow who had been working for Carl Fabergé. And he was very, very sort of a dour guy. He did not want to talk to anybody. He just did his work and got his pay. But I snuck over his shoulder and watched how he worked. And I was just admiring how he would juxtapose everything, everything together, and soldered it. And it was perfect every time. Great admiration for craftsmanship.

But he would not teach me how to reticulate. There was another guy who was mostly drunk all the time. He was, like, sitting over there at Hopeatakomo Oy. And he was making only cigarette cases from the reticulated sheets. And he would come to work somewhat drunk and he would reticulate. And it was perfect.

MR. HERMAN: Just running on automatic, as we would say.

MR. SEPPÄ: Yeah, right. They were always just absolutely wonderful. And then his workmanship was very sloppy, but it was very fast. And he had means of hiding his sloppy workmanship. And when those two halves went together, there was no way you could even get in it. I mean, he filed it just so, absolutely flat. But, underneath there were lumps of solder. [They laugh.] Well, he was just earning a living.

MR. HERMAN: How old were you then at that time?

MR. SEPPÄ: He may have been over 50 years old. But this guy who had worked in Carl Fabergé's shop, he must have been over 70, but he was still working - quiet guy.

MR. HERMAN: Well, talking about people over 70, maybe this is a way to, kind of, conclude this interview by asking, as someone who is now over 70, where you see your work going and what you pursue in the future.

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, I don't think, design-wise, I'm going to make much of a contribution in the field. I'm fairly well cemented into my old beliefs, not old beliefs, but former beliefs that whatever I can say about life and whatever I can say through my work about my existence, feelings, and whatever I need to say will come through the silver eventually-if I have not said it already before. But now that it's without the secondary motive of experimentation, it may be even truer statement of what I am, what my thoughts are, what my beliefs are than before.

MR. HERMAN: So I read that as saying you will continue to refine those ideas and-

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, the techniques I hardly can refine any more. The techniques, as I have-

MR. HERMAN: Not techniques. I wasn't thinking of that, but really using your formal vocabulary of standing on that and refining that.

MR. SEPPÄ: I hope to forget where it will take hold, because our field does not really have a meaning in terms of-we're just riding on other people's suggestions. And the silversmiths have been in this world for longer than many people; why don't we have nomenclature that is particularly ours? And I'm suggesting that it would be about form. I'm suggesting that the terms of processes no longer carry us. Because we are interested in forms, we are probably contributing to the vocabulary of expression.

MR. HERMAN: Are you saying that that vocabulary of forms that you identified has not been accepted by the larger silversmithing community?

MR. SEPPÄ: No, no, it has not? And in my enthusiasm in early 1970s when shell structures began to be a reality and teaching ways-ways were found-vocabulary was emerging. I, in my naïveté, thought, oh, give it another 10 years and everybody will be talking in the generic terms about forms. It didn't happen. But it is happening very, very slowly.

MR. HERMAN: Is it-well, it has happened, though.

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, take a look at the word *spiculum*. It's on everybody's lips now. But that's just one form. When I give a workshop this summer in Haystack, I'll only focus on mono-shells. And there'll be about 30 forms that I will present in two weeks time.

MR. HERMAN: Are these rungs of that form vocabulary?

MR. SEPPÄ: Yeah. I mean, in this book they were computer drawn. And they look like bakery items.

MR. HERMAN: Bakery items?

Is there anything else you'd like to add to this, in terms philosophy or future directions you would hope the metalsmithing field would-

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, I'm just hoping that silversmiths will have their place in the coming cultural field. They have been neglected for such a long time, and much of it is their own fault, because they're still working on 200-year-old designs that don't say anything. I just hope that silver will have its own place in the art field, where it will be considered as a medium that can express something.

[End Tape 4, Side A.]

MR. SEPPÄ: -for silver, and I don't think we ought to neglect it. We ought to nurture it. We ought to have a place where I have tried to at least present, through my own experiences and through my own beliefs, a way and role for it. Whether this is going to flourish, whether this is going to grow, I don't know. But we see an example of that with jewelry. Jewelry has grown. It's a metal. It's applied to precious metals, gold and platinum and so on. I cannot see why we would forget silver. And silver being less expensive than gold or to have a little larger way of expressing themselves. There are still a lot of items and objects that people harbor in their homes, including glass and ceramics. And there still ought to be room for silver as well.

MR. HERMAN: Do you think that that's partly a result of this, sort of, marketing-driven consumerism rather than market-driven, if you understand my distinction, that people respond to what they see advertised, what they see in other people's houses, and there is no silver sculpture, and that silver has lost its, sort of, credibility as a symbol of prosperity. And even that was only with elaborate silver table services. And there has been no real, kind of, socially acceptable or covetable role made for silver sculpture, unlike jewelry.

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, I mean you preface this question very, very nicely. But, the shortcut to silver demise is that it tarnishes. The coffee pots and urns and sugar and saltshakers, they end up in vitrines. They're not used. And the vitrines will keep them somewhat safe from oxidization. But, ultimately, they will have to be cleaned up before they go completely black. Okay. Silver development has not really come up with nontarnishable silver until now. We realize that from the sources of England and Finland that silver is less responsive to the workmen and hotter, but it will

not tarnish. Once that fact is realized, maybe silver will have a little bit more acceptable role in human life. And then there's also a covering that's called lacquering that will keep it for 25 years. So there are ways.

It was actually the fault of silver development itself that just ended up being an old material and undesirable. You take a very ornate piece of silver, and when it oxidizes, it's just terrible to clean up. And then when you clean it up, it doesn't really come out the way that maker left it. So there are problems. I have one piece that is very exemplary of that. And that's this piece that the St. Louis Art and Education Council gave me-no, wait a minute now-gave me almost as a surprise.

MR. HERMAN: This was a commission?

MR. SEPPÄ: No, I did not make that.

MR. HERMAN: Oh, you didn't?

MR. SEPPÄ: I received it.

MR. HERMAN: That part looks like it might be yours.

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, that was, to my surprise, made by one of my former students. I did not know that he was making it.

MR. HERMAN: I should say that I am looking an illustration of an object on an announcement of the Fifth Annual St. Louis Arts Awards in 1996. How did you respond to that?

MR. SEPPÄ: Well, I sat there as one of the five recipients and went up and got it. And I was surprised of the design. And then I looked around the audience, a big dinner affair, maybe over 100 people there. And I spotted David Jaworski, who had been my student 10 years earlier and graduated very, very nicely. And he is still doing what he ought to be doing.

MR. HERMAN: He made this?

MR. SEPPÄ: He made this. And I got it. And I still have it.

MR. HERMAN: Is this glass?

MR. SEPPÄ: That's glass. He also dabbled in glassblowing, but I think he farms those out. Somebody else makes them.

MR. HERMAN: Oh, his life is better, it seems-[they laugh].

MR. SEPPÄ: No, I think the glass is all right. So, I mean, all this stuff, you know, the recent thing was in *Lapidary Journal*, a very surprising thing; they gave me some chalices.

MR. HERMAN: Oh, those are the ones. Those aren't the triangular ones, though.

MR. SEPPÄ: Yes.

MR. HERMAN: Oh, they are? Oh, I can see. Yes.

MR. SEPPÄ: Triangular. And then the cross is Teflon, the white Teflon.

MR. HERMAN: I'm looking at illustrations in publications, so I'm going to close the tape. Is there anything else you'd like to say?

Thank you. I've really enjoyed this a lot. I've learned a great deal.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

Last updated... *January 19, 2006*