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Oral history interview with Arthur Espenet Carpenter, 2001 June 20-2001 September 4

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Arthur Espenet Carpenter on June 20 and September 4, 2001. The interview took place in Bolinas, California, and was conducted by Kathleen Hanna 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.

Arthur Espenet Carpenter and Kathleen Hanna have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

MS. KATHLEEN HANNA: This is Kathleen Hanna interviewing Art Espenet Carpenter at his home and studio in Bolinas, California, on June 20, 2001. Art, we're supposed to start at the very beginning. When and where were you born?

MR. ARTHUR CARPENTER: New York City, January 20, 1920.

MS. HANNA: Can you tell us a little bit about your childhood background?

MR. CARPENTER: All I can remember is sort of dark and sepia in Brooklyn, in an apartment house. Do you want my first memory? Sort of cavorting in horse manure in the street out front. And, of course, what is the beginning and the end of childhood? I don't know. I suppose there's more to say about childhood, but I can't think of anything at the moment. That was sufficient.

MS. HANNA: How about your early education?

MR. CARPENTER: That was at a Brooklyn grammar school that was even more Dickensian than the rest of the environment. And for pinching the girl next to me, I was put in the wastebasket butt-first, and I was looking out between my ankles. That's my memory of school.

MS. HANNA: You went off to college after that.

MR. CARPENTER: You're confusing me with the sequence here, because I didn't suddenly jump from grammar school to college. My parents got a divorce, and I moved with my mother to Oregon, where we lived with her parents. And I went to high school in Medford, Oregon, and then went to college at Dartmouth.

MS. HANNA: What did you study at Dartmouth?

MR. CARPENTER: Economics -- fallback position for people who have absolutely no talent.

MS. HANNA: But at some point, you decided that that was not for you, bookkeeping, economics, accounting.

MR. CARPENTER: I probably decided that when I was in it. But I had no alternative. I couldn't think of anything else. Fortunately, before I had to think of anything else, the war interceded.

MS. HANNA: Interceded and intervened and gave you time to reflect.

MR. CARPENTER: You're putting words in my mouth. It did give me time to reflect. And so, it gave me a bravado so that I could jump track and do whatever I wanted to do. So that was cool. So I spent four years in the Navy.

MS. HANNA: And then?

MR. CARPENTER: In the Pacific. And then, I went to New York City, where I got a job with an oriental import-export outfit, and mostly hung out at the Museum of Modern Art. And at that time, Edgar Kaufman was putting on a show called "Good Design" at the Museum of Modern Art, as I said, and I was really taken by the things that he was showing. And they were utilitarian things that were beautiful and useful.

So one of these shows, or at least the show that I saw at that time -- this was sort of a revolving show. I think it was about four or five years, consecutive years. And I saw a bowl made by James Prestini, and it must have been the first piece of wood I had seen made beautifully, and I was really taken with it. I'm not quite sure why, but I was. In college, to back up a bit, I was in an art appreciation course, which we all take, and saw slides of everything, and particularly, a slide of [Robert] Maillart's bridges, and was really taken by that as well. So those

were my two -- what's the word when something strikes you?

MS. HANNA: Inspiration.

MR. CARPENTER: Well, inspiration is a good word, but I've got a different word back in there somewhere. Well, I'll think of it eventually, maybe. But I was struck with those two happenings. I decided to see what I could do in making small utilities, and went as far as I could from New York to San Francisco, because I had spent several weeks on a beautiful shore leave and really fell in love with the city. So I figured, if you're going to start something, you might as well start in a place that you really enjoy.

So I signed up for the GI Bill and got my $100 a month to start a business. And you had to check in every week to -- I guess maybe it was every month -- to make sure that you were spending it legitimately. You can really go wild on $100 a month. But actually, it did pay all expenses. I found a place for $20 a month down in the Mission District, and I used to eat at Gene Compton's restaurant for a dollar-and-a-half dinner. I guess it was the expenses that you have to --

MS. HANNA: Well, what about setting up shop? Did you need to buy tools?

MR. CARPENTER: First, I needed to find out what the tools were. So for some reason, I hadn't heard of Bob Stocksdale, so I bought a lathe entirely on my own -- so I bought a lathe, just the headstock of a lathe, and not really knowing -- I know what's confusing me. At the same time I'm talking with you, I'm writing a chapter in the book which is repeating it almost word for word. And I'm getting a little confused as to what I'm saying to you and what I'm saying to the book.

MS. HANNA: Maybe I should just read the book.

MR. CARPENTER: Yeah, you could just read the book, because I do explain that particular thing of buying machinery. And what machinery I had to buy. I set myself up – it was a condemned building, and I set myself up with this headstock and the lathe, and started turning bowls. Right down the street, there was a lumberyard, so I bought all the kinds of woods that they had, to see what would work. And I had no idea of the tools that you used, the hand tools, the chisels. So I bought used files and sharpened them down on a grinder that I also bought. So I must have put out about maybe two or three hundred dollars on tools, and set it all up in the upstairs loft of a derelict building and gradually taught myself how to turn bowls.

So that went on down on Mission Street for about -- I guess Mission Street was about five or six years. And very soon, I -- people to make bowls. I figured, it didn't take much to make a bowl. I mean, it was a pretty easy operation. So I made bowls and got them down to about a quarter-inch thick, and nobody else was doing it with that fineness of detail. So I started selling them wholesale, and I found an agent who took them to the Brack shops in LA, and then they spread to the Merchandise Mart in Chicago, and so I started selling everything I could make, between those two things.

But I got bored making bowls, so I wanted to get into something a little bit more involved. So I gradually divorced myself from the bowl making and went into furniture making on a very small scale. I think coffee tables were the first things I made. Oh, I did make a chair all turned on the lathe. There's nothing on the chair that was not turned on the lathe. The only machine I could handle was the bloody lathe.

Oh, at that time I took -- probably about eight years after I had opened up on Mission Street, I changed venue and opened a shop on Geary Boulevard. And Geary Boulevard had a storefront, and in the back it had enough room for machinery, so I made things in the back of the shop and sold things in the front, and experimented with all kinds of things, with the customers as the recipients. I sold it cheap, so they got something cheap. They paid cheap.

In Europe, you have to pass an exam before you are allowed to do what I was doing, but I did it anyway. So I think that shop lasted for maybe three or four years. At the same time as that shop was going, I joined up with four other craftspeople, all female at that time, and opened a shop at 1414 Grant Avenue on Telegraph Hill, and sold our products at that location, and I was selling my products at Geary. So at this point comes a break, and the break is -- what happened at that point?

Well, what really happened was that I got some money. We got $35,000 from my father, who had saved -- when I was in the Navy, I sent my money back to him and he invested it in his company, which was a milk company in Philadelphia. And that was about 12 years of investment, I guess. And the investment grew to $35,000, and he signed it over to me. So with $35,000, which was a lot of money, on a trip to Bolinas Beach -- I had two kids at that time and a wife -- and on the way to Bolinas Beach, we saw a sign that said, "24 acres or we'll subdivide."

So that was a dream of mine for a long time, was living out in the country and having my own house, and having a shop. So we investigated and I couldn't afford 24 acres, but in any event, we bought I think it was about ten

acres, and it was a thousand dollars an acre, which is embarrassing now. I mean, the acreage is ridiculous in price. But in any event, even that, because I wanted to build a house on it, I sold off five acres. Anyway, I kept five acres and built a shop.

Then we started prefabricated in the shop in San Francisco. It was 1957. And I gradually assembled the shop, and I had both shops running at the same time. At that time, I had worked up to about six employees in the city. So one of them was willing to come out with me, so he and I built the shop. In fact, the only hired labor we had outside of ourselves was the people who put in the concrete foundation. So that was finished at the end of '57.

And there was a little farmhouse on the property, so we lived in that and gradually started building a house for ourselves, which eventually took six years to build, because I had to make a living at the same time. So it was a long process.

MS. HANNA: So you started building furniture from the start.

MR. CARPENTER: Yeah. There was a layover of making bowls for maybe a year or two in Bolinas, but I got more serious about making furniture.

MS. HANNA: And were you able to sell it right away when you started?

MR. CARPENTER: Well, I started in San Francisco, so I started selling it right away. The San Francisco shop really prospered because, well, I advertised. I did not start out as a craftsman. I started out with the idea of being independent and making my own living, and being -- well, inventing my own way. That's something that seems to be in my genes. I had to invent my own way, whatever it was.

And I was brash enough not to get much input. Yeah, in the beginning, I had to go down the street and ask cabinetmakers, how do you put two pieces of wood together. So that's basically how I learned.

MS. HANNA: So you have no formal training in woodworking at all, except for the advice that you got from the older, experienced people.

MR. CARPENTER: Right.

MS. HANNA: You never went to any of the craft schools or apprenticed with anybody.

MR. CARPENTER: No, I didn't think of myself as a craftsman at all. I didn't care how I made it, provided it came out right. And you know, the faster I could make it, the more profit I could get. So it was a very gradual process. Well, I entered every show that came up. I seemed to be really hip on advertising. In any event, the Upper Grand Avenue Show was a good seller.

MS. HANNA: These are the street fairs.

MR. CARPENTER: Street fairs. And the San Francisco Art Festival was good.

MS. HANNA: It was held in the civic center park, wasn't it?

MR. CARPENTER: Actually, the first one I entered was in Union Square. We took over Union Square. It must have been about 1956, '57. And then after that, as you say, in front of the city hall, and then it was in some lot at North Beach. But in any event, they were very good advertising venues, and whether I sold anything or not at them, they at least told people that I existed on Geary Boulevard and 1414 Grant. So it was really a gradual process, and I dropped the wholesale entirely.

MS. HANNA: You were able to exist solely upon the commission work at that time.

MR. CARPENTER: Right, yeah.

MS. HANNA: And what about your design ideas at that time? Where were you getting your design ideas?

MR. CARPENTER: That's the standard question: where do you get your design ideas? I don't have the faintest idea where I get my design ideas. You get them from everywhere. You can get it from looking at old furniture, which I seldom do, because I don't like it. And I skipped most of the centuries between us and the Egyptians. I'll stick to the Egyptians, and the Greeks did pretty well, but hardly any furniture in between.

MS. HANNA: What about function?

MR. CARPENTER: That, I guess, would be the kernel of it. I made things that worked. I made nothing that -- how would I say it? I was not making any art. Nothing that existed for meaning beyond itself. It's made of old stuff.

Chairs are to sit in. So whatever beauty derived from that, it derived from a straightforward desire for utility. That harks all the way back to what I had seen in college, that is, Maillart's bridges, which was pure utility, but in absolutely gorgeous lines, or hardly lines -- about two lines. And so I've stuck with that. I don't make anything that refers to anything else.

MS. HANNA: When you were doing commission work in the early days, were you doing the designs yourself as well, or did you listen to your clients and work with them?

MR. CARPENTER: I never listened to my clients. The minute you start listening to the clients or making things to order, as it were, you've lost any reputation that you had in the beginning. You're just another cabinet shop. Anybody can do that. No, my pleasure is in making something that hasn't been made before, but making it in a very simplified way and thinking entirely of utility. How can you make this thing work in the fewest possible lines and the minimum of material, not necessarily for the money economics of it, but the visual and aesthetic economics. That's what I'm after.

MS. HANNA: So you didn't have much of a relationship with any of the dealers or gallery people during this time.

MR. CARPENTER: No. Let's see, did I?

MS. HANNA: Or at any time for that matter.

MR. CARPENTER: Occasionally, one would come out. I had one price. Maybe that's the catch. I had one price; you can buy it at the price that I've got here. Anybody can buy it, used as a reseller or used as a user. So nobody wanted to do that. So that got me around selling through shops. Occasionally, I would put them in gallery shows, but usually the shows are outside of the Bay Area. And at least they're inside the Bay Area, in other words, whether they can compete directly with me.

I will make something specific that they can set their own price for. But that doesn't normally happen. It's not beneficial to stores to do that. So I sell it mostly direct. And people come for a function. In other words, they want a dining table. They want a chair or a desk, and I will make a model or make a little sketch. I get an idea of size, what specifically they're going to use the furniture for. And I also think about the color and if it's going to go into a room that's light or one that's dark. And the size of the spot that they have –

So they've got the overall statistics that they give to me, and then I try to put the little lines together to make it work.

MS. HANNA: And have they always been happy with what you've done?

MR. CARPENTER: It seems to. They haven't told me if it didn't work. I'll have to admit that I did screw up early on. But if I screwed up, they can get it for nothing. Because I was making some panels for a cabinet when I was on Geary Boulevard, and every one of them warped. Oh, boy, that was a sad day. I think I redid the whole thing. But in any event, I haven't had too many of those fiascos.

MS. HANNA: So, basically, throughout your whole career, you've been working the same way: with private clients.

MR. CARPENTER: Yeah. A few biggees like the Mill Valley Library and a job down in Mountain View. But most of them are mobilia, which I think is a great word. I make mostly mobilia, stuff that can be moved around. And never got into the kitchen cabinets, which I probably should have because there's more money in it. But it's mostly stuff that I make here and truck on out.

MS. HANNA: When you started working, you were one of the very few furniture makers making contemporary furniture and one-of-a-kind pieces. Do you think that things have changed over the years? What have you noticed in the so-called market for American craft?

MR. CARPENTER: Well, there's more of us. At the time I was doing this in San Francisco, I honestly thought that I was probably one of the last people to do it. There were maybe five of us in the country, and I was the youngest of the five, and I figured it was a dying proposition. The small craftsmen just don't survive. And I thought that the people that came after maybe were wiser than I was and knew enough not to get into the racket. But there are a hell of a lot of them in the racket.

MS. HANNA: And they seem to be surviving.

MR. CARPENTER: And they do seem to be surviving. But I think a lot of it has to do with survival. If you put utility on one side and art on the other side, I think most of them were surviving close to the art side rather than the utility side. So it's a different kind of stuff. The schools, in particular, push the art aspect. I suppose they figure that IKEA can do all of the utility.

[TAPE CHANGE.]

MR. CARPENTER: -- except on the weekends, when we were in the city, we used to drive out here. And now, it's the background noise, I think -- visual noise. And would you rather have visual noise of the country and where I am, or would you rather have the city? But you know, I could have options on that, because if I were in a nice place in the city and had my own house and so forth, that would be cool. The ideal thing, of course, is to have a place here and in the city too.

MS. HANNA: The town house?

MR. CARPENTER: The town house, yes. You see, my problem with a lot of questions is that they're not my questions. So I don't worry about working environment. The working environment is what's inside the shop. I mean, and the shop could be on a -- somewhere -- or it could be in downtown San Francisco. So that's my working environment, and it all focuses on what I'm doing now, living environment. As a living environment, I prefer living out here than I would to living in Mission. So I prefer living with plants rather than concrete. That's basically it. But that's the living environment.

MS. HANNA: Is there a community that's been important to you during your work and during your history?

MR. CARPENTER: A community, well the community that I have been sort of, by necessity, thrown up against, is the artists, craftsmen community. So I have, because of what I'm doing, been thrown into that community. But I think most people are thrown into whatever community they happen to be professional in. Of course, you've got the community of a small town. So having been on the school board here in Bolinas -- well, at least that time I got to know practically everybody, particularly those who were objecting to whatever it was that we were doing. So, yeah, the community of Bolinas, it's where I live.

MS. HANNA: But as far as a community that might have been instrumental in your development or in your work.

MR. CARPENTER: No. I think of a community as personal relationships, and no, there's no community. There's the community of books, but that's a different community.

MS. HANNA: Well, you were instrumental in the beginning of the Bolinas Craft Guild in 1972. Can you talk something about that and tell us a little bit about how that organization came into being?

MR. CARPENTER: Well, that's on Tom d'Onofrio's shoulders. He was an apprentice of mine back in probably about 1970, '71. And at that time, there were a lot of people knocking on the door asking to learn, or work, or whatever, and to hang out basically. And I would hire some people and allow some people to work for nothing, or have people stand around and not touch anything. And so Tom thought of the possibility of organizing it. So there were five craftsmen in Bolinas. I think there was a jeweler, and a potter, and a weaver, and a photographer, and something else, maybe two or three more.

And he got us all together and suggested organizing it in a way that it was a little more professional, where we would actually teach and see how it progressed. And at that time too, it was at a time when people were interested in being independent and doing their own thing out in the woods, and they thought of this as an apt place. So the idea of teaching in a more professional way, I suppose, was inevitable.

So we started out with the five. And, of course, we started out right off the bat with five disparate craftsmen, craftspeople, because I think there were just as many women as men. So it gradually grew and grew. And most of the people that started it are no longer here in Bolinas, and Bolinas has had the members of the guild from everywhere, and more of them are from "over the hill," as we say, on the east side of Marin County, rather than the west. So it has changed. So it would refer to a more general geography than the Bolinas craft.

MS. HANNA: But the beginning was definitely -- the guild was formed in order to have an apprentice program.

MR. CARPENTER: Yeah, and Tom was willing to do all the organization, which I was not interested in at all. And I really just let it go on as it was. But he organized it, and whatever you do when you organize.

MS. HANNA: So over the years, you had many, many apprentices.

MR. CARPENTER: Over the years, I counted them once, maybe about five or six years ago, and I had 130. That's a hell of a lot of people. And it's difficult to use the word apprentices. It basically equated down to a three-month period, and some people stayed longer; some people stayed three days. And it was done by feel. Some people were apt at it; some people were not apt; some people couldn't see a fair curve; and I wouldn't let some people touch machinery, because blood would be on the machinery, and I didn't want that.

And also there was another reason for having the guilds, speaking of blood. It was a way of insuring our group, which seems to be a necessity these days. So it expanded. I think there are 40 people now.

MS. HANNA: Yeah, 40 active members. So it's interesting that for someone who's never had any formal education in art or furniture making, that you became a teacher, a very influential teacher.

MR. CARPENTER: Well, I became a teacher by precept. That was my method of teaching. I went ahead and worked on whatever I was working on and let other people work alongside or just watch. And there was absolutely no formal organization whatsoever. I never said, this is the way you do this, or particularly, this is the way you do dovetails, because I didn't know how to make dovetails, except very raggedly. I had a machine that made dovetails. So my expertise was just in making machines that would keep me from doing the real thing by hand.

So that's how I began. I never thought of myself as a teacher. But as an aside to that, no matter what racket that I was in, my tendency was to play it to the limit. In other words, I would speak it, I would teach it, I would do it, and use all the powers at my command just for me, not particularly for the craft. So that's one of the reasons I was elected to the Bolinas school board. It was there and -- of course, my kids were in school at the time, so I was delighted in choosing some of the teachers. So that was an aside. But yeah, it was mostly for selfish reasons that I did it.

[Audio break.]

MS. HANNA: And did it work for you to have those people in your studio, the apprentices?

MR. CARPENTER: Yeah, I enjoyed some and didn't enjoy others. Yeah, it was good. Sometimes I had three apprentices in the shop, three people hanging around in the shop, and sometimes I had nobody. But I thought that was fun; I enjoyed it.

MS. HANNA: Something else happened in 1972 that must have been important for you, and that was a show, an exhibition.

MR. CARPENTER: Oh yes -- "Out of the Blue," here it comes -- Oh, who was it at the time? The curator of the Renwick Museum: who's he? [Lloyd Herman] I knew his name very well; I probably still do, but it's encased in plastic in the back of my brain. So anyway, he came to the door -- I don't think he even called ahead of time -- and looked around, and I'm not sure whether he told me then or later, asked me if I wanted to be one of the group that showed. Of course, I said no. But in any event, that's how it came about: "Out of the Blue."

MS. HANNA: And then you found yourself in an exhibition with George Nakashima, Sam Maloof, Esherick, Wendell Castle, people whose work you'd seen before.

MR. CARPENTER: Yeah, I admired all of them, as a matter of fact, and figured that they were craftsmen and I wasn't. So I don't know how I got there, but I got there.

MS. HANNA: And you found yourself confirmed at that point.

MR. CARPENTER: Yes, I was confirmed. I was recognized as a possible inheritor of whatever.

MS. HANNA: So that exhibition defined American craft, American woodworking. Were you aware at the time, or had you thought about international furniture making, and do you see American work in that context? Is it something unique, or is it part of the whole?

MR. CARPENTER: No, I get a little bit of knowledge every now and then of what other people are doing in other countries, but in general, I don't know much about it. People have dropped by. There's names, of course, that I forget, French, German, and English, and not Japanese. I have a Japanese apprentice. I have two Japanese apprentices, to change the subject a bit. But in any event, people drop by, and I sort of get an inkling of what's going from them and from publications.

But there was something, though, that you just referred to. Oh, you said that the Renwick Gallery showed the "Woodworks" exposition -- was a recognition of craftsmen, something like that.

MS. HANNA: More of a confirmation of yourself among the people that you'd already recognized.

MR. CARPENTER: Oh, yes. But have you ever heard of Janet Malcolm? Anyway, Janet Malcolm wrote a review of the show for the New Yorker magazine and, I mean, used some adjectives that I thought were -- first of all, all of the furniture that she saw in the show could have been made by her grandfather in a basement. And then, there were a few other comments. But that was the only review that I had seen then or since. So that has been one point of view. I mean, there can be another point of view, but that was her point of view.

MS. HANNA: And how did you feel about that?

MR. CARPENTER: Well, I thought it was enjoyable to hear comments. You know, I've had a couple of people just walk in the showroom here and take a look around, and walk out without saying anything. So you get all kinds of comments, particularly the comment that you make to yourself: why the hell did you get into it in the first place?

MS. HANNA: Do you want to continue on that vein?

MR. CARPENTER: No. [Laughs.] No, after you've been in it for maybe five or ten years, and you're eking out a living, you've got to see how it ends up. So I hung in there to see how it ends up.

MS. HANNA: Do you have any thoughts on the direction that American furniture is taking?

MR. CARPENTER: It's getting arty. I think there is a general assumption, perhaps two layers. An economic layer: you can sell art for more per cubic inch than you can sell craft. And the other one is you're in a higher economic category, but you've become a higher professional category. So most of the schools are teaching you how to do art and not crafts, the two-and four-year schools, the places like Haystack [Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, Deer Isle, Maine] and Penland [Penland School of Crafts, Penland, North Carolina]. And I'm trying to think of somebody who just opened up shop two or three years ago and does very nice work, and I think he pushes craft as a utility. But the four-year colleges, I don't think any of them teach craft as a utility, in the wood department anyway.

MS. HANNA: You think that they're pushing people in the direction of art, in other words.

MR. CARPENTER: Yeah, they're pushing in the direction of art. When I first came to San Francisco and sort of snooped around to see what was going on, there were four-year possibilities in ceramics, and in weaving, and furniture, and in all kinds of things. But gradually, the universities dropped it, figuring, I guess, that it's not a servile enough occupation for them to support it.

MS. HANNA: At one point, you were involved in the university system yourself, when Dr. [John] Kassay invited you to teach at San Francisco State.

MR. CARPENTER: Yeah, that was part of my theory that I'll do anything just to see what it's like. But that was a very interesting possibility, because usually the industrial arts, which we are, and the fine arts are completely separated by administration as well as classroom and, as a matter of fact, the actual physical level of the teaching space. The industrial arts is down at the bottom in the basement, and the others are up a little bit higher.

But Kassay was interested in getting the art department and the industrial arts together. So those were my classes, half industrial arts and half fine arts. And it was great because the industrial arts didn't know a damn thing about the fine arts, and the fine arts didn't know anything about industrial arts. So they cross-fertilized, and they cross-fertilized right there in the classroom. How do you do this? One guy from one place and another guy from another place, they asked each other how you manage this particular process. And it worked great, yeah.

Yeah, I'm still friends with some of them. One of the students is now the, what would you call it? The major domo is what I've been calling her, for the machinery department of UC Berkeley [University of California at Berkeley]. So she runs the machines.

MS. HANNA: There were a number of other people who joined the Bolinas Craft Guild because of meeting you at San Francisco State -- Jim Bacigalupi, Don Braden, Grif Okie, Bruce McQuilken.

MR. CARPENTER: Yeah, I don't know if Grif was in there, but in any event, yeah, a number of people. And we still keep in contact. But that lasted until Proposition 13, when all of us were uprooted for teaching trivialities.

MS. HANNA: Because of funding cuts in the university system.

MR. CARPENTER: Right.

MS. HANNA: Let's go back to criticism again. Do you have any ideas on the significant writers in the field of American craft?

MR. CARPENTER: The one I like tremendously recently is Danto, Arthur Danto, D-A-N-T-O. He wrote a nice forward to Garry Bennett's book. But I met him reading The Nation. He's a reporter for The Nation magazine. And he's the only one who's allowed himself to talk about craft. He professes to be a philosopher. That's what he teaches: philosophy. So anyway, Danto is one. Who else? [David] Pye. He's got a first name, but I forget what it is. He's a teacher at the London School of whatever it is, arts, crafts, something. His book, and I think [James] Krenov's books -- I've only read one, but nevertheless, the one that I read was, I think, quite pertinent. It was a good book.

MS. HANNA: In what way? Would you care to elaborate on that?

MR. CARPENTER: He's clear and concise, and is telling you why he's doing certain things and how to do it, and I like the language he uses. Most of the books by artists or craftsmen are self-aggrandizing books, and his I don't think is.

MS. HANNA: And going back to Arthur Danto, who is more of a critic.

MR. CARPENTER: No, he's a philosopher.

MS. HANNA: And what is he talking about?

MR. CARPENTER: He's talking about the place of crafts in the art milieu. And he talks particularly about Garry's courage in putting a -- nail on the middle of one of his cabinets. And the profundities that it revealed, most of which I don't understand, but in any event, it's fascinating.

MS. HANNA: Do you pay much attention to criticism about American craft work in general?

MR. CARPENTER: No. We do our thing and we do the best we can, and you let it fall where it fits.

MS. HANNA: Over the years, have you read the periodicals like Fine Woodworking and the other trade magazines?

MR. CARPENTER: Yeah, I get everything that Fine Woodworking has written up until the last year. I finally quit because I think I know everything that they're talking about. And, of course, I looked at the other magazines, but in general, I don't pay any attention to any of it anymore. But initially, way back in the Netherlands, I think it's called Wood Handbook, put out by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in Madison, Wisconsin. I remember all of those. And in the little cupboards over there, I have all the pamphlets. And I got all the pamphlets about all the different woods, and it tells the machining capabilities, and how much they shrink, and all of the stuff.

That's where I got my initial information on most of what I worked with. And they have a website, which, if anybody is interested, when they buy my book, they can tell them what the website is. I guess, maybe you just look under Forest Products Laboratories and you can find it.

MS. HANNA: So you found that the USDA pamphlets were more --

[Audio break.]

MR. CARPENTER: Does that have anything to do with a career? That has to do with a little self-advertising, which is kind of cool.

MS. HANNA: Well, if it leads to exhibitions, which leads to sales.

MR. CARPENTER: Oh, no, it doesn't. I don't think it ever led to a sale. Nobody who reads those magazines buys your stuff. Nobody who reads those magazines makes enough money to buy your stuff. They're all back in their basements doing their little thing, like me.

MS. HANNA: Can you talk about what you consider to be your most important commissioned works?

MR. CARPENTER: Well, let's drop the word important. The one that I've enjoyed the most and reflect on as one of the best that I've done is the Mill Valley Library [Marin County, California]. And second to that I suppose is the Mountain View Council Chamber [San Francisco, California]. So those are the two big ones. I've done a number of churches, but I don't count them as some of my best work. So I've been primarily concentrating on mobilia.

MS. HANNA: These are pieces that can be taken home.

MR. CARPENTER: Mobile. Everything but wheels.

MS. HANNA: The Mill Valley Commission was in 1966. Do you want to tell me how that came about?

MR. CARPENTER: It came about the way most things come about, through contacts. I know somebody on the board of the Mill Library, and he recommended –

[Audio Break.]

MR. CARPENTER: I guess he suggested to the rest of the board that I be included among those who would sort of compete for the job, and so I did. And after I did that, maybe a year or two after, I found out that I was also competing against San Quentin, which I assumed that they'd jacked up their prices. But I felt that was kind of

interesting that I'd beat out San Quentin.

MS. HANNA: Meaning the shop, San Quentin the woodshop.

MR. CARPENTER: No, meaning the jail.

MS. HANNA: Yeah, and the people who worked in the woodshop.

MR. CARPENTER: Yeah, they make institutional furniture, but I hope I didn't beat them out on price. You know, you never charge enough for what you do. But in any event, it worked, and I've enjoyed making stuff. The librarians have been very helpful and appreciative, so that helps.

MS. HANNA: I've been told that you had a very short time to complete that commission, and that you did some particular design series.

MR. CARPENTER: Oh yeah, it was interesting. I'd figure out the logistics because they are needed on a particular day, a year hence or whatever it was. And so my shop isn't exactly an institution, so I had to make all this stuff early on. Where was I going to put it? So I had to hire a truck to take it to store it and get it all organized so it would all get there by Tuesday the twelfth at 11:30 or whatever. So that was interesting. But I think there was a day it had to be there, but I don't think we could have brought it in in one day. We must have taken a week to bring it in.

MS. HANNA: But you did do a specific design for that project, that commission. You developed something specific for that.

MR. CARPENTER: Yeah, made specific things, and designed them for this one that I like in particular. I designed a reading carrel with curves, nice curves. I thought it was great curves. And so, I made a model. I made a model of a good number of things. And when the model came back, they suggested that I straighten out the curves, which was fine because it's cheaper to have a straight line than a curve. And in any event, there were modifications on my proposals, but in general, they were accepted. It was cool.

MS. HANNA: Do you feel that your early work has developed along the way, or are there similarities and differences between what you do now and what you did in the early part of your career?

MR. CARPENTER: Some things I've harked back to the very beginnings, say the late '50s. No, probably in the '60s. I wasn't really making furniture in the '50s. I was imitating [Charles] Eames in the '50s. I was even making aluminum-edged furniture, and I was making furniture that imitated -- very popular in the '50s, what's his name -- [Alexander] Calder. So I was making Calderesque beam-line shapes.

[TAPE CHANGE.]

MS. HANNA: Carpenter session one, tape 2, side A. When we were interrupted, we were talking about your early influences and who you were looking at. You talked about Eames, and we were talking about Alexander Calder.

MR. CARPENTER: Yeah, the thing that struck me about Eames was the lamination process that he actually developed in order to get those compound curves, and his beautiful lines. And Calder, of course, had the fish shapes and boomerang shapes, which I also imitated. And Bertoia: I tried the little wire thing with Bertoia at one time. So in the fifties, I was playing around with anything, just you know, seeing what would work and what was -- I really didn't get into wood at all. I got into Formica, all that kind of stuff.

I guess I gradually slipped over into wood because I had a small shop and small machinery. I could handle wood, but I couldn't handle Formica, and I couldn't handle wire metal. I had some things cast. So as a matter of fact, these started even before the bowls, having little boxes made for real. So the idea early on was I would design and others would make, and not necessarily in my own shop.

Well unfortunately, I found out that I had to know something. I mean, if you design something, you have to know how to put two pieces of something together. I found out that I didn't know that. So I think that's the reason I gradually got into actually making stuff myself. So that forced my making of the things, and then I got into the making of stuff and found out that wood was -- I picked wood initially because you didn't have to know anything, I figured. If you had clay, you had to know something about temperature and glazes, and stuff. If you had metals, you had to know a little bit about something, alchemy anyway.

But with wood, what do you have to know? The stuff grows, and you just cut it down and make something. So I followed the path of least resistance. So what was the question, or was there one?

MS. HANNA: We were on a digression about the early choices that you made. We were talking about designs, and Calder, and Eames, and influences on your work, and then that you actually started working in materials

other than wood.

MR. CARPENTER: Yeah, the transition is interesting. I'm not sure where the transition comes. One of the ways I remember what I did was because I did take some snapshots. And so, I started making furniture, basically anything that I could turn on the lathe. So I made stools, which I can make the top and four legs all turned on the lathe. And I made a chair, which all parts were turned. So I gradually got sufficient bravado to actually put two sticks of wood together and make something out of them. But I still don't know what the question was.

MS. HANNA: Let's go to another one. The wishbone chair, which is one of your so-called signature pieces.

MR. CARPENTER: That was a gradual development. I think it started way back in 1960, something like that. It comes back to me. I put this in the book -- I forgot. Since I didn't know how to put two pieces of wood together -- I mean, you've got to take that literally, because I knew about mortise and tenons but I didn't know how to make good mortise and tenons. So it occurred to me, skeletons: how did bones hold together? So the first wishbone chair was bony; I had a fist going into a socket, so that's easy. How do you hold a fist in the socket? So what did I try? Well, I ended up using bolts.

And the frame of the chair was, sort of, long things going into concave things. So then it developed that the back -- I was putting the back -- the leg was coming up and hitting the back flat like that, which meant that if you were going to keep it from twisting, you needed two things rather than one thing. So you want to cut it down to one thing. So to keep it from twisting with just one thing -- that thing is a bolt, or a screw, or whatever -- you have to put it into a slot. This took me a year or two to figure out. I mean, I was a very slow learner. So I got it so that it could go like that. And I had to do probably ten years before I got to this chair.

MS. HANNA: And the difference in this one --

MR. CARPENTER: I mean, that's the one I'm explaining.

MS. HANNA: This is the one with the slot with one bolt.

MR. CARPENTER: Yeah. You see, this is why cutoff calls, those of us who do things like this -- it's called engineer art. Because no craftsman in their right mind would make a sloppy joint like that, because you want to make it square and fit perfectly in little squares. So that whole chair is an anti-craftsman's chair. I just made up a new word -- [Laughs.]

MS. HANNA: You want me to call you the anti-craftsman?

MR. CARPENTER: Yeah, but you didn't take sufficient notice of it, so I had to point it out.

MS. HANNA: But the chair does work.

MR. CARPENTER: The chair works, and I think it looks pretty good, and I can make it cheaper than I could if I was making motise and tenons and stuff. So I stuck to this sort of thing. I suppose, as you can see, there's one development that I perpetrated on humanity, and that's the bolts rather than glue.

MS. HANNA: So you consider that one of the influences that you might have had on the followers.

MR. CARPENTER: Nobody does it. I mean, I'm the only one who does it still today, because it's not crafty.

MS. HANNA: Besides innovations like that, you also innovated a number of tools and methods.

MR. CARPENTER: Yeah, the first one was a -- that would glow redhot and burn out on the insides of the bowls. I was ordering teak from -- not Thailand, Siam? Is that Thailand? Okay, I was ordering teak from Thailand. And you can get it cheaper if you get it in short blocks. So I got teak in short blocks, but big. And as I recall, it cost about 65 cents a board for it, which is pretty cheap. So I got these nice big blocks, and I'd put them on the lathe, and I'd waste all that wood that was in the center. So I figured, well, you just can't do that.

So I figured out this way of chiseling down the inside of the bowl, keeping about an inch thick all the way and going down as far as I could. And when you get down there, you've got these two slots, and you've got a couple of prongs that go in with a nycro alloy wire in between, which you attach to a battery and it glows red hot, and the thing goes around and burns out the inside block. So you can make another bowl. As a matter of fact, some blocks are big enough so you can make three to four bowls out of the inside.

Of course, at the same time you're turning here at the lathe, you've got this thing over there that's burning the inside out, so you get the smoke coming out. And occasionally, if it gets hung up, flames come out. It's exciting, but it was kind of fun. So nobody's copied that one. All of my inventions are purely personal and end up with me. With my death, there will be no chairs with bolts in them.

MS. HANNA: And nobody burning the lathe.

MR. CARPENTER: And nobody burning -- I used to dream of ice cream scoops. Why the hell couldn't you make an ice cream scoop with a chainsaw on the edge? I never could figure that one out. But they have something practically like that occur too. It goes in there, but it still gives me the willies, because you get that tool hung up in there, and it breaks the tool, or the bowl, or you.

MS. HANNA: What about the dovetail jig?

MR. CARPENTER: Well now dovetailing, that wasn't because I couldn't make dovetails. Because there was a guy from Germany that came in the shop one day and saw me apparently hacking out a dovetail, and he took the chisels out of my hand and he started making dovetails. He spent all afternoon teaching me how to make dovetails. So I learned how to make dovetails pretty well, but they take forever. So I figured there must be a faster way to make a dovetail.

So I brought up this little jig that makes dovetails, purely because of the speed and the economy. If you make the dovetail jig properly and accurately, every dovetail is perfect. You can't beat that.

MS. HANNA: You also used a router quite a bit more than your contemporaries.

MR. CARPENTER: Oh, what's his name, over right across the Bay is quite well known in the router department. And I'm embarrassed to say I don't remember who it was. Anyway, yeah, I use the router quite a bit, but I don't think much more than anybody else.

MS. HANNA: What about the -- auto body grinder?

MR. CARPENTER: Oh, I think somebody else has used that before me. As a matter of fact, I may have heard of it. I'm not sure. But in any event, I was making a circular staircase for David Davies, and I couldn't think of a better or a faster way. I keep talking about speed. I guess I have to do everything very fast. Well, the very fast had to do with economics. The faster you can make something, the better price you get out of it.

So what am I saying? Oh, because the stair treads were being -- what did they look like? They remind me of something, but I forget what. Anyway, they're big sculptured forms. And how can you get at that except with a hammer and a chisel? And I figured that was a little bit much. So I got very rough paper and used a body grinder to knock them down to shape, and it worked.

MS. HANNA: It was expedient.

MR. CARPENTER: It was expedient and it worked fine. Whatever works.

MS. HANNA: Can you address the California round-over style that's been identified with you quite a bit?

MR. CARPENTER: Well, that's not my fault. Who's the guy, the publisher I was talking about a bit ago?

MS. HANNA: [John] Kelsey.

MR. CARPENTER: Kelsey. John Kelsey made a speech, I think it was at San Francisco State, and he referred to me as making the round-over. And this was way back late in the '60s. In any event, so that's how I got tied up with it. Of course, I have to admit that I did make round-over stuff, but so did [Sam] Maloof. But I think the guy that started us both on that trip is [Charles and Henry] Green and Green, because he rounded over everything, big beams and whatever.

MS. HANNA: So that's another influence that we haven't talked about yet.

MR. CARPENTER: Green and Green. Yeah well, Green and Green is quite an influence. Of course, no bigger than, say, Japanese art. Japanese was a very important one. These things aren't important. They just are, and you happen to have contact with them, and you resonate to their kind of -- I hate to use that word -- but in any event, you pick up on it.

MS. HANNA: Where did you see this work, the Japanese work?

MR. CARPENTER: Oh, I was in the racket for a while, and I was interested in learning about the Japanese things. The two years that I spent in New York City, 1949, '48 -- no, it was earlier than that. When was the war over, for Christ sakes?

MS. HANNA: Forty-five, wasn't it?

MR. CARPENTER: Forty-five. So for the first two or three years after the war, I was in New York City doing this. And so, anyway, and my father was a collector of Japanese art.

MS. HANNA: When you say racket, you mean you were in the business of selling oriental furniture or Asian furniture.

MR. CARPENTER: I have a loose tongue. I use the word "racket" very loosely. It is sort of a racket.

MS. HANNA: Of the way it's always import-export.

MR. CARPENTER: Oh, that racket. I thought you were talking about this racket, the furniture racket. I mean, that's a real racket. But, no, the Japanese were doing it seriously. I don't make anything seriously.

MS. HANNA: Never?

MR. CARPENTER: Never, unless it's something -- yeah, I do make it seriously, because I do want whoever it's going to to be happy with it.

MS. HANNA: So we've talked about the influence of everyone from Green and Green to Alexander Calder, and passing by Eames, et cetera.

MR. CARPENTER: You're influenced by every damn thing you see, including trees.

MS. HANNA: And other organic things like shells, which brings us to --

MR. CARPENTER: Oh yes, the shells. Well, I guess it's the way one speaks of things, but that just serendipitously looked like a shell. But the reason for its form has to do with a structural use of wood, and specifically in that case to how flexible you can bend a quarter-inch piece of wood. And these things that look like pieces of shells are the wedges that go between these curved pieces of wood.

So the fact that it looks like a shell has nothing to do with my prior concept. The prior concept was to see -- up to that point, all of the bentwood was the beginning and end of the project. But what happens, it occurred to me, if you opened up all those slots in that wood and put things in between? You'd have a board; you'd have a flat piece to work on. So that was the experiment.

So I ended up with a flat piece on which you can put a shelf and pigeonholes in the top, and everything. So even though it's shell-like, it's not a shell.

MS. HANNA: So this way of laminating with almost the wedges to open up the wood, open up the shape. Do you consider that as one of your innovations?

MR. CARPENTER: You know, you ask me whether things were innovations. I frequently have never seen them before or since, but I have no idea whether other people are doing it or not. I made a stool once, which I thought was a rather clever stool, and flipping through some old prints, here comes a print from 1600 of my stool. So I don't know where they come from. Most of it comes from basic logic. If you're looking for something to sit on, it's the logical outcome of thinking of the function of a piece.

MS. HANNA: Yeah, and here we come back to your original statement that function was the most important thing.

MR. CARPENTER: Yeah. And then, of course, I've tried a lot of experiments to see if they would work too. Mainly, that's what the desk was with the wedges. That was an experiment to see if it would work and see what would happen. Linus Pauling was once asked how he came up with all of his great ideas, and he says, I've had 10,000, three of which have worked out. And that's about it. So you get a lot of ideas, but not all of them work out.

MS. HANNA: Political and social commentary are not something that figure directly into your work. It's probably more your life itself and your choices and your determination to be independent that's been your social commentary, political commentary.

MR. CARPENTER: Yeah, that's my political commentary. It's not verbal; it's doing it, living.

MS. HANNA: Do you feel like it's possible for young craftsmen today to do that?

MR. CARPENTER: No, if I were a young craftsman today, I would be a computer programmer. You know, I mentioned early on that I rented a place down on Mission Street for 20 bucks a month. And I lived there and ate dinner for a dollar and a half. You can't do that anymore. And I don't know if a craftsman can find anything for -- I don't know what the equivalent of $20 now is, maybe $100. You can't find anything for the equivalent of $100.

So I don't think I would have done it.

[TAPE CHANGE.]

MS. HANNA: But all through these years, you've managed on your own to be independent, to stay independent as everything. There have been some things that have infringed on your independence.

MR. CARPENTER: Well, it had to -- that sort of infringes on one's independence.

MS. HANNA: Let's talk more about that. Some people say that in order to be a successful craftsperson, that you need at least two people, one person to be doing the creative work and another person to be doing the business of living, of marketing.

MR. CARPENTER: Yeah, it's a great combination. I've never found anybody who was interested in what I was doing, really -- certainly not interested in doing the books. Freda -- Do you remember Freda Koblick?

MS. HANNA: Vaguely, yes.

MR. CARPENTER: I've got a couple of great plastic trays that she formed by putting them in the oven to soften them up, and then she sat on them.

MS. HANNA: Before vacuum formation.

MR. CARPENTER: [Laughs.] I thought that was absolutely delightful. So anyway, we were talking about something.

MS. HANNA: We were talking about partnerships in craft couples.

MR. CARPENTER: Yeah, that works. Certainly, Garry and Sylvia [Bennett] work, and Freda and Sam [Maloof], and I don't know who else. Oh, the guy up in Santa Rosa.

MS. HANNA: David Marks.

MR. CARPENTER: Yeah.

MS. HANNA: And your former apprentice, Tom Saydah.

MR. CARPENTER: Yeah, Tom. Yeah, it really works. It's certainly easier if you've got somebody who is interested in what you're doing and wanting to invest time in it. No, I didn't have that.

MS. HANNA: But you still did it.

MR. CARPENTER: Well, you can say I did it despite it, and it was a very selfish thing to do. See, I refer to myself as an artist. I don't know whatever term to use. Anybody who sort of experiments with their time is -- and that's all that I've been doing is experimenting with my time. And I've lost contact with what I was saying, something fascinating!

MS. HANNA: We were talking about being able to be independent.

MR. CARPENTER: Oh yeah, but the selfishness part of it is built into anybody who does this sort of thing. I mean, anybody who attempts to really create something for the sake of creation hasn't in mind bringing home the bacon.

MS. HANNA: The creation is first and the bacon is second.

MR. CARPENTER: Well, it has to be, because you're going against all the standard methods of making a living.

MS. HANNA: But it's managed to work for you because --

MR. CARPENTER: I'm a bulldog. I refuse to give up. I mean, there were places and times in there that I was ready to give up. If there had been an obvious direction to go, I probably would have given up.

MS. HANNA: But the clients kept coming in, the commissions kept coming in.

MR. CARPENTER: Yeah, it just kept me barely alive.

MS. HANNA: And the exhibitions?

MR. CARPENTER: Didn't cost anything.

MS. HANNA: Have they done much for you?

MR. CARPENTER: They've given me notoriety. I was in the exhibitions primarily for the advertising, and you never know -- if you think about that in a literal sense, you never know what the advertising does. Where did you get the idea to come here? So I lost my thought again. I'm too old for this sort of thing.

MS. HANNA: We were talking about exhibitions and how they do or do not further your career or help you make a living, or remain independent.

MR. CARPENTER: Yeah well, I don't think exhibitions do much. They keep your name up among those who are interested, and your contemporaries. For instance, going to the Arizona shindig, that was fun because your name was in prominence, and what more can you ask.

MS. HANNA: That was the Furniture Society Conference in March of this year, 2001, in Tempe, Arizona.

MR. CARPENTER: Right, yeah.

MS. HANNA: And that's a relatively new organization. They've been around for about five years now. Have you belonged to any other craft organizations?

MR. CARPENTER: The BCG.

MS. HANNA: The Bolinas Craft Guild. And then, in the big national organizations?

MR. CARPENTER: Well, are you automatically a member of the ACC [American Craft Council] if you get the magazine [American Craft]? That's what I do.

MS. HANNA: If you get the magazine, that means you subscribe and you contribute.

MR. CARPENTER: Occasionally, I subscribe. I think I was a part of it and it was my duty to subscribe. Most of the stuff they print has nothing to do with -- as I say, their feeling is over on the art side. I don't think there's a utilitarian thing in the magazine.

MS. HANNA: That's the tendency that you see.

MR. CARPENTER: Right.

MS. HANNA: Do you ever go to any other gatherings like the Furniture Society gathering in Tempe? Did you attend conferences, and meetings, and things like that?

MR. CARPENTER: Oh yes, the ACC had a great one in 1954.

MS. HANNA: What was that like?

MR. CARPENTER: -- and Aileen Webb was there. And I met Esherick, and I met Eames, and I guess a few others. And the most memorable thing at that particular gathering was when I observed Mrs. Webb coming in from the beach with an armload of poison oak. She was out of commission for a day or two after that.

MS. HANNA: She was gathering it.

MR. CARPENTER: She was gathering it. It was so pretty. It was in the fall and it was gorgeous wood -- poison oak.

MS. HANNA: So at that conference, you did actually meet people whose work you'd seen and admired over the years.

MR. CARPENTER: Yeah, particularly those two. I forgot their names already.

MS. HANNA: Esherick and Eames.

MR. CARPENTER: Yeah, thank you.

MS. HANNA: At the Furniture Society Conference in Tempe this spring, you were given an award, interestingly enough, along with Sam Maloof and --

MR. CARPENTER: The group.

MS. HANNA: The group -- all of whom were in the first shows that you saw in the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and later showed with.

MR. CARPENTER: Yeah, in '72. We're all octogenarians. The next group will come along as soon as we're killed off.

MS. HANNA: Do you have anything else to say about that conference, about the award?

MR. CARPENTER: Well, it's fun meeting these people. That's the primary reason you go.

MS. HANNA: Do you find --

MR. CARPENTER: Occasionally, I would find particular venues, other classes, other venues, those sessions that I would be interested in.

MS. HANNA: The workshops and the talks that they give during the conference. So there is some professional interest information there too. But as you say, at this point, you don't feel like you need anymore input.

MR. CARPENTER: No, I'm about to wrap it up.

MS. HANNA: Speaking of wrapping it up, you're working on a book.

MR. CARPENTER: I sure am. It's taking forever. It's a very slow process. I find myself –

MS. HANNA: Talk about the process of writing your book.

MR. CARPENTER: Now, this book I started ten years ago, more or less; I'm not quite sure when. And it was just thoughts that bottled up every now and then while working in the shop. You get more ridiculous thoughts while working in the shop, or sitting in the john. That's another place you get a good thought. I filled in more paragraphs by sitting in the john. But it's been a long, slow job, and I've been a little bit more serious about it in the last year by having a very astute and intelligent editor who helps me along the rough spots.

And so I almost think of her as my teacher. I don't want to disappoint her, so I have to be there, and I have to make a paragraph every week or whatever. And so, she's my what? She's there to make sure that I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing, keeping me on track. So that's where it's at.

MS. HANNA: Are you covering your technical work, your design work?

MR. CARPENTER: Well, it's a mishmash of everything. I start with "I was born," and then I go through talking about various things, a chapter on this and a chapter on that, with a little "how-to" thrown in and an appendix. But it's basically my observations and discoveries in the world of the craft, the world of the making. That's the word I use: make. I think maybe once or twice I've used the word "craftsman," but I get around it by saying "crafters," straightforward. So anyway, yeah, the book's coming. Give me another year.

MS. HANNA: So you've entered the world of modern technology with a computer to do this project.

MR. CARPENTER: Yeah, I taught myself how to use the computer, and Quark, Photoshop, and all of those things that are kind of fun to play with initially, and finally get onto the e-mail. And I don't look at it for a week, which is okay too because I don't want to read it all. It's been handy every now and then. It's been handy with a few customers that like to communicate with e-mail, but in general, it's a side issue.

MS. HANNA: Did you find yourself eager to get back into the shop after you'd been sitting in front of the computer for a while?

MR. CARPENTER: It's a nice way to spend the day. I'm in the shop in the morning -- at least that's the way I've managed it recently -- and at the computer in the afternoon. And it's a nice way to change gears, so it works. And I've found that, as I was saying before, I get ideas from all over the place, and I can be thinking of the book, which you're, Zen-like, not supposed to, but I'm thinking of the book while I'm making a chair. So yeah, ideas come.

MS. HANNA: We talked a lot about different materials that you used. You said even that you started working with materials that were not wood in the beginning, but you've gone back over the years from time to time. You did the Mondrian series, and you did some painted work.

MR. CARPENTER: You call it the Mondrian series? That never happened. Or did they call it the Mondrian series?

MS. HANNA: It's being called that in some of the more recent publications.

MR. CARPENTER: I made one Mondrian cabinet out of the small little sister cabinet, which is mostly Braque. It's a little bit of Mondrian, but more Braque.

MS. HANNA: So you don't consider it --

MR. CARPENTER: I don't think of it as a series. Let's see, I did a series. Well, the rolltop desk, I did a series of those, and I seem to be doing four of these shell desks, so I suppose that's a series.

MS. HANNA: I think Dick Webber was referring probably to the pieces in which you used cutouts of laminants and outlines. They're black and white.

MR. CARPENTER: Oh this, yeah, I know what you mean. It's either my George Price series or my black-and-white series, I guess you can call it. But there's a French artist whose name I always forget. But anyway, it's sort of a combination of George Price and Duchamp -- I don't know what it is. And I've made four of those tables. Yeah, I haven't figured out how to make anything else. And it is one of the few things that I've made that is non-utilitarian, because they fall apart.

That black graphic tape on the edge, which I attempt to hold down with about five coats of lacquer, invariably comes off. So I sold one half-price to somebody with the tape sort of hanging by a thread, but nevertheless, they said they'll take it. So they took it.

MS. HANNA: Are you exploring any other new materials or different surface techniques like painting?

MR. CARPENTER: A painter who lives in Bolinas by the name of Arthur Okamura and I are combining a show in our great Bolinas Museum, which consists of two little rooms, for next January. We're going to have a combo show. He'll paint some of my stuff; I'm not sure what I can do with his stuff. But in any event, we'll see if a painter and a furniture maker can come up with something.

MS. HANNA: A collaborative work, not just a two-person show, but actually --

MR. CARPENTER: Oh, it's a collaborative work, right. This is his upholstery and my frame.

MS. HANNA: Where did this idea come from?

MR. CARPENTER: Dolores [Richards].

MS. HANNA: Dolores?

MR. CARPENTER: Is the curator. And she suggested it, and both Arthur and I said, sure, why not, let's see if we can do it.

MS. HANNA: Are you enjoying that?

MR. CARPENTER: Well yeah, it's interesting to think about as a possibility. You know, I like the idea of getting two people together to see if they can come up with something that neither can do on their own. So it's interesting.

MS. HANNA: Have you done any of that type of work before in the past?

MR. CARPENTER: Collaborated with somebody. Did I collaborate with somebody? No, I usually hired it. I was thinking of the possibility of the upholstery as a collaboration, but no, the upholsterer hadn't had any input but her skill. So in this case, it will be both of our input, including our skill, if any.

MS. HANNA: But do you find your determination to be independent of everything else that's going on in the world is part of your --

MR. CARPENTER: Well, that's hard to do.

MS. HANNA: Well, independent as a worker/maker. Do you find that that's part of your character, that you work alone as well?

MR. CARPENTER: Yeah, I think that's part of the genetic trip. I want to do it myself.

MS. HANNA: Do you think it's genetic, or do you think it's typical of artists, makers, hands-on artists?

MR. CARPENTER: Which comes first, the chicken or the egg? I have absolutely no idea what went into my makeup, why I'm doing certain things. Of course, you can always blame your mother, so maybe that's the handiest thing to come up with.

MS. HANNA: You've already said that if you were going to start all over again that you would not be a furniture maker, that you would go into --

MR. CARPENTER: Because I couldn't afford to be.

MS. HANNA: But in an ideal world, what kind of advice would you give to a younger person who's determined to lived this way, as far as education --

MR. CARPENTER: First, you inherit money. That's the preferable way. Now, I might not be doing this out here in the beautiful, idyllic hinterlands if I hadn't gotten that $35,000. I would still be in San Francisco and renting a place, and maybe even doing something else, because it would have been tougher.

MS. HANNA: But as far as learning the craft --

MR. CARPENTER: And start first with that $100 a month, which was important, because I had a little savings from the Navy, but not much, and I was able to use it in that operation. And so, those little things add up considerably.

MS. HANNA: That $100 a month from the GI Bill was an important factor in a lot of contemporary artists' lives.

MR. CARPENTER: Yeah, it certainly was, and I would be surprised to see it happen again. Of course, $100 a month now is what, a thousand dollars?

MS. HANNA: I'm not sure. Do you think that short of a GI Bill, which stems from a situation like World War II, do you think that there's another way for an ideal society to support developing artists?

MR. CARPENTER: Well, my ridiculous side comes up, because I can't answer that question seriously. Because I think it will be moot within a generation or two, that there are artists and no artists. The ocean will be over our heads, and there will be 50 billion more people.

MS. HANNA: But let's say we were going to stay high and dry and that the population would be under control, would you go to art school at the university, would you apprentice with somebody, or would you start by the seat of your pants again?

MR. CARPENTER: Probably by the seat of my pants. That's what I say. It comes from the genetic disposition or from feeding at your mother's breast, somewhere back there. It has a lot to do with what? To me, the other horror would have been to know what I would be doing for the rest of my life. I have met people like that who know -- they're in an insurance company or something -- they know exactly where they're going to be at age 30, 40, whatever. I would die. So it would have to be something that's just, throw myself out on the water and see what happens. So that's always the question.

[TAPE CHANGE.]

MS. HANNA: This is Kathleen Hanna interviewing Arthur Espenet Carpenter at his home and shop in Bolinas, California, on September 4, 2001. Before we get started into the other questions, there's one thing that I wanted to clear up, because I've heard many versions of it, and that's the origin of the name Espenet. Where and when did you decide to call yourself Espenet?

MR. CARPENTER: Well, that's interesting. Where would be on Mission Street, when I first started, and when would be in the beginning, when I started in the 1950s, and the why, which is more to the point, is because it was not Carpenter, because Carpenter would have me doing outbuildings and garages, and all the things I was incapable of doing. So I chose my grandmother's maiden -- is it maiden? Is the first name maiden or the last name maiden? I don't know. My grandmother's name, which was Espenet, and it sounded pretty good, and it skirted the necessity to call me Carpenter. So that's the reason I got Espenet.

MS. HANNA: What's the origin of Espenet?

MR. CARPENTER: It's French Huguenot, which she was, sort of several times removed.

MS. HANNA: Several times removed from France.

MR. CARPENTER: From France, right -- French Huguenot. So that's where it came from.

MS. HANNA: And so, you've been putting that between the Art and the Carpenter since the '50s.

MR. CARPENTER: Yeah, the Art and the Carpenter is rather embarrassing because it's so obvious a pun. Even Herb Caen picked it up once and said, there's an Arty Carpenter out on Geary Boulevard. So I tried to play the

Arty Carpenter down and pick up the Espenet, which has no other meaning that I'm aware of, other than its sound. So that's Espenet.

MS. HANNA: Thank you.

MR. CARPENTER: And I say Espenet over the telephone --

MS. HANNA: And not Espenet –

MR. CARPENTER: Because nobody knows how Espenet is spelled.

MS. HANNA: I'd like to talk more about the exhibitions. We covered most of them in the first interview, but still, this is the way that a lot of people -- more people see your work in these exhibitions than they do in private collections, et cetera.

MR. CARPENTER: Isn't that a shame? It would be nice if there were more private collections, but we do the best we can.

MS. HANNA: And it's also a way that, through the exhibitions, the exhibition catalogues and reviews, et cetera, it's a way that, historically, the pieces are recorded and the work is recorded. So going back to the very first exhibitions, I believe, that you participated in, those would be the "Good Design" shows at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, curated by Edgar Kaufman.

MR. CARPENTER: Well, what are you saying, that they were my first exhibitions? I think the first ones were really at the San Francisco Museum, and of course, at this point, I have no idea what the hell the dates were.

MS. HANNA: At the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, or at the de Young [Golden Gate Park, San Francisco, California]?

MR. CARPENTER: At the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. There was a time back in the ;50s when there was somebody in the museum that was interested in crafts, and they actually had furniture shows in the San Francisco Museum. And they must have fired the guy early on, because I haven't seen any since. And I recall some particular pieces of furniture that I thought were just great, but I would be damned if I can tell you the name of the show or the year of the show. But they did have craft shows.

MS. HANNA: Well, there was one in 1957 at the de Young Museum in San Francisco and Golden Gate Park that was curated by Elizabeth Moses, and it was called "Designer Craftsmen of the West."

MR. CARPENTER: Yeah, I have this catalogue; I don't recall being in it. Was I in it?

MS. HANNA: It says here that you had two bowls; two turned bowls were in this show.

MR. CARPENTER: Oh, okay.

MS. HANNA: But flip through the catalogue and take a look, and see if it jogs your memory at all.

MR. CARPENTER: Well, I know the people on it: Freda Koblick, Mary Linheim [?], Edith Heath, and Arthur Hanna. So there are a lot of people who are acquaintances of mine. And Roz Butkin [?], she's on there too. She fell through the top of her septic tank; that's what I remember about her. We were walking across a septic tank, and she went straight down.

MS. HANNA: So that was in 1957, and the "Good Design" shows were during the early '50s as well, the ones in New York. I was curious if you'd ever gone back to see one of those shows when you were included in them in New York.

MR. CARPENTER: No, no. I didn't have enough money to go across the country to go see a museum.

MS. HANNA: So how did Kaufman see your work and include you?

MR. CARPENTER: Oh, I was selling bowls mostly wholesale, and the initial wholesale thing was to take them in my car, under my arm, and go to various stores in the Bay Area and sell the bowls. So that was the first thing, and I thought that was a little bit cumbersome, so I contacted somebody in the Merchandise Mart in San Francisco -- what the hell was his name? Anyway, he was with me for about maybe almost 10 years, selling things. And then, I also had somebody in Chicago, whose name I don't think I ever knew, who sold things in the Chicago area. And that's where what's-his-name --

MS. HANNA: -- Edgar Kaufman.

MR. CARPENTER: Kaufman saw the stuff. And Brack Shops -- Brack Shops I think is Los Angeles. And the fellow that was selling on the West Coast had a showroom in Brack Shops as well as in the San Francisco building. I just called it the Merchandise Mart.

MS. HANNA: Was it Tenth and Market, the furniture showroom there?

MR. CARPENTER: It's on Market and about -- yeah, about Tenth and Market. And that's all I have to say about that.

MS. HANNA: So after the "Good Design" show, or the "Designer Craftsmen of the West," the show that was at the de Young, then would you consider the next important show being "Woodenworks," that was at the inaugural show at the Renwick?

MR. CARPENTER: I consider the "Woodenworks" show to be the wake-up show for me, because I really never considered that any of my stuff would be nationally known. I thought I was just producing things for the locals. So it was an eye-opener, and it was all because of what's his name --

MS. HANNA: The director at the time.

MR. CARPENTER: Who was the director at the time?

MS. HANNA: Lloyd Herman.

MR. CARPENTER: Lloyd Herman. He actually came out in person, and where he got the idea I have absolutely no idea. How did he know about me? I don't know.

MS. HANNA: But he did and he came.

MR. CARPENTER: But he came and he looked at the stuff, and disappeared, and eventually he asked for a certain number of pieces for the show.

MS. HANNA: Pieces that he'd seen or pieces that you were allowed to --

MR. CARPENTER: I don't know.

MS. HANNA: Were you allowed the freedom to produce those pieces and bring them to the show?

MR. CARPENTER: I don't recall that there was any discussion with regard to which pieces.

MS. HANNA: So you showed a number of pieces: a music-stand stool, a table, a desk, a chair.

MR. CARPENTER: No, I showed a bunch of pieces. I think I showed what I had; that's about it.

MS. HANNA: So you shipped it off to him.

MR. CARPENTER: And I shipped it, which was an absolute delight -- the first time that had ever happened in my entire lifetime, when they hired a truck and actually came out here, and other people actually lifted the stuff up and put it in the truck, and I didn't have to do anything. I thought that was just Nirvana.

MS. HANNA: Did you go back to New York for that show?

MR. CARPENTER: No, I couldn't afford to go back to New York for any show. I sent my brother. Oh, there was an opening for the "Woodenworks" show, and they wanted all of us, I guess, to show up and have dinner, and be awarded kudos, and I figured I couldn't afford to do it. So I sent my brother, who lived in Philadelphia, and is better-looking than I am and twice as tall. And so, he went in my stead, and I think he did a good job. Probably everybody who was there thinks I am good looking and tall, which I am not.

MS. HANNA: And he enjoyed himself.

MR. CARPENTER: And he enjoyed himself.

MS. HANNA: So it's a good to have a second person.

MR. CARPENTER: Oh, yes.

MS. HANNA: The San Francisco Arts Commission --

MR. CARPENTER: The San Francisco Arts Commission?

MS. HANNA: They did a number of shows.

MR. CARPENTER: They did the outdoor fairs, yeah, okay. I think I still have one of their pretty posters that says 1961.

MS. HANNA: So they staged those shows in different places, like in front of the city hall. And another place they staged was in Washington Square in North Beach, in front of an Italian church there.

MR. CARPENTER: To tell you the truth, I don't recall that show at all. I recall a show -- Where could it have been?

MS. HANNA: Aquatic Park.

MR. CARPENTER: Yeah, it was Aquatic Park, and I've got a picture of Peter Machiarini there, who just died -- he died a couple weeks ago. So yeah, I entered that show, and I entered a show that was -- the first one, I think, was in the Union Square in downtown San Francisco. No, I entered all of those shows that I could. And there was a show in front of the city hall, but I don't –

MS. HANNA: I think the city hall was probably the latest place where they staged them after Aquatic Park.

MR. CARPENTER: Right, yeah. So if I was to bet on anything, I would bet that I was in three shows.

MS. HANNA: So you don't continue to search out that kind of venue.

MR. CARPENTER: It's a lot of work. No, I don't.

MS. HANNA: You just mentioned Peter Machiarini, and he was one of the people who was settled in North Beach on Grant Avenue and had a studio and shop there.

MR. CARPENTER: Even before I got there, along with my tribe of -- was it four or five women who were doing crafts, and they opened that shop called Local Color?

MS. HANNA: And that was at 1414.

MR. CARPENTER: 1414 Grant Avenue.

MS. HANNA: Can you tell me who else was in that shop?

MR. CARPENTER: Well, Gretchen. I can remember her name because she was a girlfriend.

MS. HANNA: What did Gretchen do?

MR. CARPENTER: Gretchen was a jeweler.

MS. HANNA: What was her last name?

MR. CARPENTER: McAllister, Gretchen McAllister, who died of smoking too many damn cigarettes, which she surely did. She was always in a haze of cigarette smoke.

MS. HANNA: And who else?

MR. CARPENTER: And who else? Well, I suppose if I went back through the files, I can remember the names, but I don't remember the names.

MS. HANNA: Was there a potter?

MR. CARPENTER: I think Mary -- Mary Jin, Miller was her married name. What the hell was her name at that time? I forget. But anyway, Mary Jin, she did very fine little drawings and sold cards with her artwork on it. And who was the potter? I'm afraid that's the limit of my memory.

MS. HANNA: Well, there were a lot of people working on Grant Avenue at that time.

MR. CARPENTER: Oh yes, Rhoda and Jim Pack.

MS. HANNA: There was also a potter named Johnny Magnani.

MR. CARPENTER: Oh, I remember John Magnani very much, who actually worked with somebody with probably more fame than any of us --

MS. HANNA: Sargent Johnson.

MR. CARPENTER: Sargent Johnson.

MS. HANNA: Actually, Sargent Johnson was firing in John's kiln.

MR. CARPENTER: Right, a sculptor.

MS. HANNA: And Margery Livingston was Johnny Magnani's wife at the time -- a weaver.

MR. CARPENTER: Right. As far as I know, she didn't have anything to do with that particular block of Grant Avenue, but in any event, somehow we organized that block and started the Upper Grant Avenue Fair.

MS. HANNA: So you were part of that group that started the Upper Grant Avenue Street Fair, along with Pete Machiarini.

MR. CARPENTER: Right. We had our 25-year reunion about 25 years ago. That was kind of fun.

MS. HANNA: So what were those fairs like, compared, for example, to the Arts Commission shows?

MR. CARPENTER: Oh well, these were certainly completely unorganized and enjoyable events where you could have your bottle out there in a paper bag and drink yourself silly while people were walking by and watching the stuff. So you just picked a square footage out in front of anything in the street and set up shop, and it didn't cost a dime -- that was the nice part of the event. Everything that you put into outdoor festivals now costs you money. But at that time, you could possibly enter things for nothing.

MS. HANNA: And the people came and they bought.

MR. CARPENTER: And the people came and they bought. We produced a little flyer, a copy of which I still have, and I guess we knew enough to do the advertising, and people came by and bought stuff. Actually, that particular fair, the date I don't recall, but it was early on -- was it the late '50s, or even the early '50s? It was the first time that I started really selling furniture, and I think I sold something like $2,000 worth of furniture, which to me was winning the lottery.

MS. HANNA: Well, at that time, that was quite a sell.

MR. CARPENTER: Yeah.

MS. HANNA: Do you remember the dates of the 1414 Grant Avenue Local Colors store, approximately?

MR. CARPENTER: Well, about 1951, I would say, for Local Color, and I don't think it dropped dead until about the early '70s. It was going on for a long time, mainly because of Gretchen, who held it open until she got too sick to do it.

MS. HANNA: So other artists revolved through that.

MR. CARPENTER: Well, Gretchen had the advantage of doing jewelry, which she could do in the back of the shop, so she could hold the shop open. And yeah, we revolved other -- at the end of the '50s, I had left San Francisco, so I didn't have much to do with the shop anyway.

MS. HANNA: So you didn't bring work in from Bolinas to the shop.

MR. CARPENTER: Well, I brought some of the bowls in, yeah, but that wasn't really a part of it.

MS. HANNA: Another person who was in that group or who showed on that street was Emmy Lou Packard.

MR. CARPENTER: Yeah, and I forget where she showed. I know the name.

MS. HANNA: She did woodblocks and woodcrafts, and that kind of thing.

MR. CARPENTER: Yeah, I've got some prints of hers.

MS. HANNA: But I think she had her own shop. She wasn't part of Local Color.

MR. CARPENTER: No, she wasn't part of -- well now, I will take that back, because she might have been a part of Local Color. And I vaguely recall there's a small picture in one of the attics of my brain that sees one of her pictures in Local Color. It's possible that she sold some stuff through Local Color.

MS. HANNA: Do you remember anybody else on that street -- take a walk down Grant Avenue and take a look at what else was going on at the time?

MR. CARPENTER: I mean to do just that with Janet, my editor, and poke into places that I haven't been through that place for two decades, particularly where we lived on --

MS. HANNA: So at some point in some of those Arts Commission shows -- going back to the Arts Commission shows -- did you do any structures as well as furniture in those shows?

MR. CARPENTER: Yeah, since you mentioned it before, I've been trying to think of -- I remember setting it up on a street. It was on asphalt, and we had to pound stakes into macadam -- we couldn't do it in concrete.

MS. HANNA: So you actually built a wooden structure.

MR. CARPENTER: So we actually built a wooden structure, sort of as a sales booth.

MS. HANNA: That you designed.

MR. CARPENTER: Yeah, that I designed and built, and I have no idea what the economics of it was. But in any event, I designed it and built it, and strangely, there are absolutely no photographs that I'm aware of.

MS. HANNA: There's one photograph of you attaching the center pieces of the structure taken from below up to you. I've seen it and I'll find it again.

MR. CARPENTER: That's Bolinas.

MS. HANNA: That was a Bolinas photograph?

MR. CARPENTER: That was a Bolinas photograph and a Bolinas structure; that was not that structure.

MS. HANNA: We'll have to notate that, because in one of these publications that I've been going through, it says that it's a San Francisco Arts Commission Fair. So we'll correct it.

MR. CARPENTER: Well, maybe, I don't know. But even if I don't have it, somebody must have photographed that fair.

MS. HANNA: Well, the only photograph I've seen is the one looking up at you constructing it, and it definitely says it's at one of these Arts Commission fairs. At any rate, going back, there's another collection of work which includes Wharton Esherick, George Nakashima, and the gang from "Woodworks," the 1972 show at the Renwick. And this is a publication, not a show catalogue, but an actual book by Michael Stone [Contemporary American Woodworkers, Salt Lake City : G.M. Smith, 1986], which includes you.

MR. CARPENTER: I hope he made a buck out of it. He certainly worked hard on it.

MS. HANNA: He did.

MR. CARPENTER: Did he make a dollar?

MS. HANNA: Oh, make a buck, I don't know. But he did certainly work hard. This looks like the table that was very similar to the one that was in "Woodenworks."

MR. CARPENTER: Yeah, it may have been the same one. I have the same table in the shop at the moment.

MS. HANNA: Did he come out and interview for this?

MR. CARPENTER: Oh yeah, Michael came out and interviewed for a day, or maybe two days. Yes, he came out full of enthusiasm.

MS. HANNA: Okay, so it's a 1975 crafts fair in Bolinas.

MR. CARPENTER: Right. Actually, it's here at the head of the lagoon; it wasn't even in Bolinas.

MS. HANNA: So let's talk some more about that, since we're looking at this photograph and talking about craft fairs that happened in Bolinas and in the Bolinas lagoon area. Those were sponsored by the Bolinas Craft Guild.

MR. CARPENTER: Yeah, the Bolinas Craft Guild did the sponsoring, and the work, and the advertising. And Tom d'Onofrio, who was the prime organizer, did much of the work.

MS. HANNA: But you were one of the founding members of that organization, and you remained an active member for many, many years.

MR. CARPENTER: Yeah, I sure did.

MS. HANNA: Why was that?

MR. CARPENTER: Well, the philosophy of it was the reason that I stayed in it. I was intrigued with the idea of people doing their own thing, craftspeople, or anybody for that matter. And this organization was set up initially so that we would spread the idea of independent craftsmanship in whatever mediums; it didn't make any difference. So I was interested in keeping in touch, even though I wasn't in the vicinity.

MS. HANNA: But you did teach many apprentices.

MR. CARPENTER: Oh, yeah. I think it was last year that I counted up that I had something like 130 apprentices. Well, I do have to broaden that, because there were employees, and there were apprentices, and there were people just hanging out. And, of course, this was in the '60s and early '70s, when everybody was trying to escape IBM and thought it would be cool to be independent and do your own thing. Things have changed, but at that time, it was popular.

MS. HANNA: Can you tell us more about the shows that happened in those early days of the Bolinas Craft Guild, in and around Bolinas, in the fields?

MR. CARPENTER: So we were saying something about something.

MS. HANNA: We're going to talk about the early shows that the Bolinas Craft Guild organized out here in Bolinas, either around the lagoon or in the fields around the town.

MR. CARPENTER: Right. I forget the chronology of the shows, but there was one at the head of the lagoon, only about a quarter of a mile from here. And there was one, or maybe two here --

MS. HANNA: At your place, on your property.

MR. CARPENTER: Right. And that may have been it, but I don't recall. We did have some trouble with the Gestapo, because we were parking all over the place and there was too much traffic. And we had it here one year maybe, and then they stopped us from doing it because it was too crowded with traffic. And then, you know, we got a little heady and decided to have one "over the hill," which means, in this case, Sausalito. And that has really expanded to what you're doing, is the fair, wherever the hell it is.

MS. HANNA: What, the California Design Show?

MR. CARPENTER: The California Design Show.

MS. HANNA: In 1987, I think, the guild had its first big show, called "Design, 1987," in one of the brick buildings south of Market in the design center.

MR. CARPENTER: Right. That was an outcome of these little shows.

MS. HANNA: And then, subsequent to that, Eudora Moore of the Pasadena, California, Design Shows gave the guild permission to use the name California Design, and the guild continued to produce these shows. The one in 2002 will be the twelfth that the guild has produced.

MR. CARPENTER: Counting how far back?

MS. HANNA: From 1987.

MR. CARPENTER: Is that back far enough?

MS. HANNA: That's as far as the shows under that name.

MR. CARPENTER: Does that include the ones here?

MS. HANNA: No, this includes only the ones called California Design, with her permission.

MR. CARPENTER: So it extends three or four years before that.

MS. HANNA: Yeah. So I've been told that those shows lasted several days, and everybody camped out.

MR. CARPENTER: Yeah, they'd get a little bit high and spend a little bit extra time.

MS. HANNA: So was there any kind of jury or invitation or anything, or was it extremely informal?

MR. CARPENTER: No. As a matter of fact, I recall -- somebody had to do it -- I recall interviewing somebody who wanted to put their stuff in the show, and they were candles with sequins on them, or something like that. And I said, no, we don't want candles with sequins on them; it's got to be something a little more clever, or whatever. And they put up a real racket. You know, this was in the '60s, and you're supposed to do what the hell you wanted to do, and nobody was going to tell me whether my stuff was good enough to be in a show. And I said, sorry, it's not quite the full '60s yet, apparently, so we denied them entrances.

But that was the general attitude, that I can do my stuff and nobody can tell me otherwise. But as I recall, we said that this is our fair.

MS. HANNA: So it was basically for the members of the guild.

MR. CARPENTER: Oh yes, it was only the members of the guild. Nobody could come in otherwise. It didn't cost anybody anything, except the work of putting up the fair.

MS. HANNA: And when the guild started, there were actually five core members at the time.

MR. CARPENTER: I think so.

MS. HANNA: And then, you began to grow. How were those new members recruited?

MR. CARPENTER: Gee, I draw a blank; I have no idea how they were recruited. You have to interview Tom for that. He did a lot of the legwork.

MS. HANNA: I heard stories about people having to bring work in.

MR. CARPENTER: Yeah, okay. You remind me of the way you get into the guild. I thought you still had to get into the guild by showing your work and your interest in teaching. So that was part of the guild right from the beginning, was that you had to show your work, be accepted on that basis, and not only be interested, but have the room or facilities so that you could teach.

MS. HANNA: So that you could teach in the apprentice program.

MR. CARPENTER: Right.

MS. HANNA: And so, at that time, when the group was very small, the entire group looked at the work of a new, prospective member and made the judgment.

MR. CARPENTER: I think so.

MS. HANNA: Now it has to be done by a committee because there's so many members.

MR. CARPENTER: Right.

MS. HANNA: Going on to something completely different, and that is one of the two major commissions that you've mentioned. We talked about the Mill Valley Library before, but we really haven't talked about the Mountain View City Council chambers. And do you have any photographs of that?

MR. CARPENTER: Yeah, I have photographs of the Mountain View and of --

MS. HANNA: Mill Valley, that's well photographed, but I have not seen the photographs of the Mountain View City Council chambers. What kind of work did you do there?

MR. CARPENTER: I did the -- I never can figure out what the hell -- is it dais [a raised platform, as in a hall or large room]? What do you sit behind? The council chamber sits at desks behind this thing, which is I think what you stand on at the podium. The thing that protects you from your audience is the dais.

MS. HANNA: Perhaps. And did you do their table and chairs too, the conference table?

MR. CARPENTER: No, this was just a semicircular piece that was implanted right into the concrete in the floor; so this was it.

MS. HANNA: How did that commission come about?

MR. CARPENTER: The architect who was designing the building went all the way back to New York City to look through their folio for somebody who they thought might be capable of building this thing. So I suppose the fact that I lived here, close to the job, was a factor. But it was interesting to me that they had to go all the way back to New York to figure out that they ought to hire my stuff.

MS. HANNA: Did they look in the Smithsonian Archives?

MR. CARPENTER: Oh, I didn't mention it -- they looked through the -- gee, I really am blotting out.

MS. HANNA: Well, through the Smithsonian Archives.

MR. CARPENTER: No, not the Smithsonian.

MS. HANNA: American Craft Council.

MR. CARPENTER: American Craft Council, their slide collection. So they saw my stuff there and they got a hold of me. And the reason it was billed as a separate unit was that it was part of the artwork. Every building did or does have the necessity of giving two percent to art. So instead of putting a statue out on the front lawn, they had me make this thing.

MS. HANNA: I see. And that was in --

MR. CARPENTER: Nineteen-eighty-something. No, I think it was closer to 1990.

MS. HANNA: You have two children: have they gone on to pursue careers in the arts?

MR. CARPENTER: Well, my daughter paints, which, of course, you don't make a living at, so she teaches. And my son turns bowls, which he doesn't make a living at. He sells, so he has a little income on the side, but he also teaches.

MS. HANNA: What does he teach?

MR. CARPENTER: Well, he has a credential to teach grammar school. He hates to be held down to a job, so he prefers to do it on the basis of a substitute teacher.

MS. HANNA: The independent spirit lives on.

MR. CARPENTER: The independent spirit will never die in that boy.

MS. HANNA: What are their names?

MR. CARPENTER: Tripp, which is Arthur the third, and Victoria, or Tory, which stands for Victoria.

MS. HANNA: So what's it all been about, and what is it all about?

MR. CARPENTER: It's about doing your own thing. It's about being independent. It's about not being told what to do. I think it's about selfishness, basically. Yeah, I'm really very selfish. I insist on doing my thing my way. And if you do that, you separate yourself from the big events of the day. You just make your little stuff.

MS. HANNA: What are the big events?

MR. CARPENTER: Shooting up your neighbors. What are the big events? The big events in politics, as a politician. I was on a school board for 10 years. Now, those were big events. You actually chose where the playground would be and where you would put certain school buildings and that sort of thing; that was a big event. But making a music stand was not...

[TAPE CHANGE.]

MS. HANNA: At the end of side A, we were talking about making a music stand as being a minor event, or a small event, compared to major events in the world of society and politics.

MR. CARPENTER: Yeah, that's very true. I do my little thing, and everyone does their own little thing, but it is a little thing.

MS. HANNA: Well, it's certainly not a little thing in your mind.

MR. CARPENTER: No, I just happen to be built in such a way that I enjoy doing that sort of thing, and I attempt to manage my life so that I can continue doing that sort of thing. And in order to make it a prime event in my life, I

have to make a living from it, rather than making a living from something more pecunious, and subsidizing my craft. That's an option many people do. They teach or they're a bank teller, or whatever, and they do what interests them on the side. But I insisted that the work actually pays for itself. That's a long struggle.

MS. HANNA: But it has worked for you.

MR. CARPENTER: It's worked.

MS. HANNA: You haven't had to teach.

MR. CARPENTER: Fortunately, because I think I'm a lousy teacher. I have taught several places at several times, but I don't think it's been very successful. No, it's been adamant selfishness.

MS. HANNA: Do you use that word in a pejorative sense, or it's just a --

MR. CARPENTER: That's the way it is.

MS. HANNA: Going back to effectiveness as a teacher, I would beg to differ with you, because I've interviewed five or six people who were your students, when you taught at Dr. Kassay's request at San Francisco State University. All of those people say that that was a major turning point in their lives.

MR. CARPENTER: It certainly couldn't have had anything to do with me. I asked Tom Trammel, who is the teacher of the woodworking department at San Francisco State -- anyway, down south in one of those university schools -- how he turned out so many good students, and he did turn out three women in particular who really did -- he said, well, all he did was show them the tools and what each one would do, and then he just disappeared. And that was basically it. He didn't have to do anything. He just let them be. So I basically let them be.

MS. HANNA: Well, I think that one of the things that all of those people seem to say what impressed them the most was the fact that you were able to live independently, to live in Bolinas, to do your work, and not have to sacrifice anything.

MR. CARPENTER: I could live my talk. So I was a good example, from that point of view. And by the way, Tom Trammel is at the University of California, Northridge.

MS. HANNA: Is he still teaching there today?

MR. CARPENTER: I think he's retired, probably. He must be at least as old as I
am, and that's old. I think I did influence people because they could see that I was living, what did I say, walking the walk and talking that talk. That's true. And that's always been my theory, even with my own kids, is that you learn by precept; you don't learn by telling anybody anything. They just see what you do. That's it.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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