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Oral history interview with Mary Giles, 2006  
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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Mary Giles on July 18, 2006. The interview took place in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and was conducted by Jane Sauer 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.

Mary Giles has reviewed the transcript and has made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

## Interview

JANE SAUER: This is Jane Sauer interviewing Mary Giles at my home in Santa Fe, New Mexico, on July 18, 2006, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc number one.

When and where were you born?

MARY GILES: I was born in St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1944.

MS. SAUER: Would you describe your childhood and family background?

MS. GILES: Oh, boy. I was one of three children. I have an older brother, who is 15 months older, and a sister, three and half years younger. We were born and raised in a nice little community called Falcon Heights, with a local school and a local church. We had a little Cape Cod house, and my sister and I shared a bedroom, which at times was a little bit chaotic, but that is what kids do, I think.

My father had his own insurance business, and my mother was a stay-at-home mom and a homemaker, and also a Norwegian rosemaling [Norwegian decorative painting] painter. She began that in World War II and studied under a number of Norwegian painters that came to the United States, and she eventually taught it and marketed her work in some shops in St. Paul.

My father was born in Hinckley, Minnesota, northern Minnesota, and before he met and married my mother, had started buying some property up there—back when you could buy property from the government—on a lake. Of course, everybody had a lake place in Minnesota; it seemed like it, because of all the lakes. So every Friday night the traffic moved north, and every Sunday night the traffic moved back south again to the city.

Dad had bought about 70 acres on a place called Pine Lake, and so he owned one side at the end of the lake, and my uncle owned the other side, and—his brother—and, as children, we spent our childhood summers and weekends up there. That was a very important place for me. I was able to have horses, which I loved, and my sister had her cats, and my brother had his fishing, and we had our turtles and all the good things that come with living on a lake.

My parents' marriage was rather volatile all through our childhood. It was a difficult one. And so mother getting away with us kids up to the cabin was always kind of a refresher, always as a bit of a relief from some of the tensions that were there.

But it was fun. We had a wonderful time as kids up there. I loved collecting insects and I loved turtles and fish guts and rocks, and swimming, and surfing, all the fun things we did. I think it was just really wonderful. Actually, mother started taking us up there all summer when the polio scare came back in the '50s and we lost a cousin to polio. And so getting away for the summer, mother always felt it was a little healthier for us.

MS. SAUER: I want to come back to how that impacted your art, but for right now would you discuss your early education and how you came to career choices?

MS. GILES: Well, our schooling system was pretty traditional, kindergarten, elementary school. I remember junior high always being awkward and difficult. I thought that was—I just never felt like I had the right clothes, the right walk, the right—there were such cool girls. Well, I had an older brother who was super left-brain, super smart, and so I always felt like the dumb blonde kid.

But once I got to high school, I was kind of pretty and I had a lot of—I was kind of popular and up for all those beauty queen things, prom things and homecoming things, and I had a pretty happy high school.

I had a wonderful art teacher. Art was a little incidental in our educational system. You took art if you had a little extra time; otherwise academics were pretty well stressed. Apparently I had enough time to take an art course.

And he was real individual. He let each of us, kind of, just do things we liked to do, and one of the things he helped me do was cast a silver piece from a wax mold in the lost-wax process. And I still have that little silver head. And it just amazed me to make things like that. My mother always encouraged us to see museums and collect things, too, but I think that class in high school was kind of pivotal.

I went off to college with a plan based on mother and dad's suggestion that you get a practical degree to get a job, but I found I loved the art classes, and I got—ended up with an art education major. So I did satisfy mother and dad's idea of having a teaching degree, but I also got to spend more time with the art. And I had some terrific teachers in college, and they seemed to like some of my work, because they kept it. And so I was still developing that idea of doing artwork, not being an artist, but just doing artwork.

But I got married in college—I liked weaving right away. I was trying to work on some weavings, and that was the period in the '70s, late '60s, when a lot of rag weavings were being done. I was using mop heads and lots of things, and they were real shaggy, fuzzy. My husband hated it. He says, it's too much mess around the house. Well, so guess what? You put them away; you don't do it. Well, that only lasted five years and he was gone. [They laugh.] But that's kind of where education took me. It was rather traditional and rather focused on a practical degree.

MS. SAUER: And where was it you went to college?

MS. GILES: Mankato, Minnesota [Mankato State University]. I went 90 miles south from home, to get away from home. [They laugh.]

MS. SAUER: And what do you think it was that motivated you to do what you do today, the kind of work that you do today?

MS. GILES: Boy, I didn't start this work until the late '70s, but I did have the fundamentals of weaving and so on that I'd experimented with. I had lived alone for a long time, 20-some years between marriages, and I was very interested in tribal art. For some reason I particularly got excited about New Guinea, and, of course, I wanted to go there and everything. I never did. But there was a lot of work available in the museums, and the Coyote's Paw Gallery in St. Louis [MO] had all kinds of wonderful sculptures and things made by these people, and I thought they were just very intriguing.

Also, teaching elementary art, I think, gives you kind of a focus on a folk-type approach to things as well as tribal. It's got a simplistic, honest, basic expression to it that's terribly fresh and wonderful. I think there is a correlation between children's art and tribal art and—because it's just so fresh; it isn't affected by a lot of industrial, political, or commercial influence, or world events even; children do it from their own little personal world. Tribes were very isolated often and just related to what was essential around them. And so I think there was a lot of influence. I love children's work. I have kept a lot of what the kids gave me over the years, and I love it to this day.

MS. SAUER: Were you ever interested in other art or craft forms other than constructing?

MS. GILES: I did a lot of drawing, lot of drawings and watercolors early on. College professors emphasized the need for drawing and the basics of drawing as essential to everything.

And then when I began teaching, I found that students were so insecure. About grade three they just started losing their confidence in themselves and became much more self-conscious that they couldn't draw it the way it looked.

Along came a writer named Betty Edwards, who wrote *Drawing From the Right Side of the Brain* [*Drawing On the Right Side of the Brain*. Los Angeles: J.P. Tarcher, 1979]. It was a revelation to me, and I suddenly could teach children to draw well and realistically. Beginning about fourth grade is when I would start those units. It was just tremendous, and how it gave them the confidence of beginning—of drawing with quite a bit of skill. We would start with some "before" drawings, go through the units of drawing, and then at the end do "after" drawings. It was remarkable, the improvement—how you could teach people to draw. And most adults stop developing their drawing skills about grade four, about age 10. They stick with that same stylized left-brain symbolism, and so that was terrific. I loved to draw; I always did.

But there was also—I can't remember the person who developed this test for right-brain, left-brain strengths—and I have no left brain; I'm all right brain. The right brain is where the abstract, the drawing, the no sense of time, the visual memory all is. And that was another confidence builder.

MS. SAUER: I was just asking if you had other media that—

MS. GILES: I drew a lot. I had a lot of sketchbooks and a lot of drawings, but most of that went in a flood a few

years ago in our basement, so—[Sauer laughs.]

I'll remember them but I don't have them. [Laughs.] We used to go to Colorado. I loved drawing the mountains; I loved drawing the pines. And I developed a little technique with smoke on the drawings, smoking the drawings, and then removing the smoke, creating negative and positive areas. It was kind of fun. I showed some of that work for a while. Once I started the baskets or the weavings, that all disappeared.

MS. SAUER: Could you discuss the difference, if you see any, between university-trained artists and ones that learned craft outside of academia?

MS. GILES: Well, since I'm not really a university-trained artist, I'm self-taught in what I do. Well, I think they have more skills in technology, for instance. I think, like, weavers with these incredible looms, sophisticated looms, computerized looms, jacquard looms, and so on, I don't know how to use those kinds of things. And please don't give me a computer. [They laugh.]

Well, going to Haystack [Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, Deer Isle, ME], Penland [Penland School of Crafts, Penland, NC], Arrowmont [Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, Gatlinburg, TN], taking a lot of workshops, talking with a lot of professional artists, I think one of the things, if I had gone back to school for a specific art degree—professors challenge you. They make you break out of what you are doing and make you do other things. I think that is a real positive thing, and I have had a few experiences that way that have been wonderful. Just challenge you to do something else with maybe your technique or something but something completely different, and that can be—that's good. Rattle your cage a little bit, you know.

So I think that stimulation from professors and other fellow artists who are working with you, you know, like when we went to Haystack. Gosh, it was wonderful to see other people working 24 hours a day and watching them develop their work. That was great.

MS. SAUER: It seems to me, though, that you challenge yourself a great deal.

MS. GILES: Well, part of that is living with a critic.

MS. SAUER: [Laughs] I was thinking how you lived with a college professor also with that.

MS. GILES: Yes, very much so.

MS. SAUER: You have your in-house college professor.

MS. GILES: The in-house professor who challenges bright students, who has a great artistic eye, and who also wrote critiques for the *St. Louis Post Dispatch*. So he brings all this, and he's very verbal.

MS. SAUER: So maybe we should—

MS. GILES: That's another area, I think probably. Yeah.

MS. SAUER: And may we, for the purpose of the Archives, have you just say a little bit about who you're married to, so that somebody reading this will know what we're talking about here.

MS. GILES: Twelve years ago, July 14, I married Jim Harris, who has been a teacher of architecture and basic design at Washington University in St. Louis.

MS. SAUER: Okay. What has been your most rewarding educational experience?

MS. GILES: Haystack just jumps right out. When you, Jane Sauer, took me as your technical assistant in 1981, we went for two weeks to Haystack Mountain School of Crafts on Deer Island, Maine, and it was phenomenal. I didn't know how artists worked even. I had not lived with a colony of artists; I had only been doing my own thing on the side. I was an educator, not an artist. And I think it was the first time I saw myself as living as an artist. It was extraordinarily powerful.

There were wonderful people working there—Dale Chihuly and William Morris and Graham Marks, and the weaver—I'm losing some names—

MS. SAUER: Cynthia Schira.

MS. GILES: Cynthia Schira was there. Oh, gosh, Jim Wallace. There were just wonderful folks.

And we worked, if you wanted to, 24 hours a day. There were wonderful people leaving little things all over campus that they had made, little secret messages of things. We camped out on the rocks on the water's edge.

It was beautiful.

And I know I cried on the airplane coming home, and I said to myself, this has been a renaissance for me. This has been, you know—I could hardly stand to leave. I was so—leaving places has always been hard for me anyhow; saying goodbye has always been hard, but that was one of those. Oh, I just never wanted to go away from there, it was so wonderful.

MS. SAUER: Well, I think that answers, somewhat, the next question but—about whether the schools that are available to us have affected your career. Have there been others other than Haystack?

MS. GILES: Yes. Penland, I went with a workshop with Mary Lee Hu, the jeweler. Mary Hu's work is so perfect and so gorgeous, and I'm so not perfect in my work. But I did learn a lot about jewelry techniques and equipment. And I adopted an oxyacetylene torch out of that experience and did a lot of work with copper melting and iron fusing and things like that that I would not have had.

So mostly I learned some—how to work materials, but I certainly never was able to do the precision that Mary Lee Hu did. We're just totally different. But she was wonderfully generous about saying that was great, too; take out of this workshop what works for you and what you're—where you're going.

And Arrowmont—I went to Arrowmont. That was swell, too, but Haystack was by far the greatest. [Laughs.]

MS. SAUER: And any others that we've left out?

MS. GILES: Well, a lot of workshops through Craft Alliance [St. Louis, MO], particularly. That was in St. Louis back in those early '80s, late '70s, early '80s, were tremendous. You, Jane Sauer, came, and I remember that workshop vividly. That was wonderful. And John McQueen, Diane Sheehan—there's the no left brain—she does the totally detailed knotted and coiled—

MS. SAUER: Diane Itter.

MS. GILES: Oh, Diane Itter was wonderful; now I have to bring her up. The poet—she's like a poet philosopher; she's so introspective. I'll get her name—

MS. SAUER: Ferne Jacobs.

MS. GILES: Ferne Jacobs, of course. Oh, my God, she was tremendous.

And then Diane Itter—Diane Itter was one of, I think, one of the last ones I remember, because Diane taught—instead of teaching her work, she taught developing units of design and repetition of those units of design. That was a tremendous idea for people like us who do these repetition of units.

And I had just received a handful of porcupine quills from my father. He's a woodsman; he was a woodsman—loved hunting, fishing, was always out in the woods. And he said, these are so beautiful; maybe you could use these in your work. Well, I had done some feathers and shells prior to that. And Diane was teaching this unit; well, the quill became the unit perforating the walls of the basket in various rhythms of depth and density and all.

That series really launched me. Jack Lenor Larsen saw my work at the Minneapolis Institute of Art, a series of quill pieces I had done, and then he had the Erie Art Museum purchase one from a gallery in New York City that was representing me, and that was the launch.

Preceding that, I had gone over to talk to Walter Nottingham in Wisconsin, where he taught at River Falls. I had been doing a lot of different baskets—I tried a little bit of this, a little bit of that, little bit of everything. I took them over there and asked him to critique my work. And this was when he said, what you need is that mystical symbol—he was into John Cage—and said, this signature that identifies your work as you. People walk into a room; see it; that's a Mary Giles. And that was a very key point, too.

And the quills then after—I was doing some Walking Tentacle series, I think, before that, sea life. I had taken up scuba diving. But then came the quill pieces, and I think they were more sophisticated, more mature, more resolved kinds of pieces, and not so quirky. They just were more beautiful in their minimalism, I think. That was very nice. Although they weren't minimal, but they translated minimal, you know, with the repetitions. And those were important points, I think.

And I think maybe a lot of artists experience that, the development of your expression, what will your work be like. And you do look at other people's work. Native Americans—I went to the Apache reservation in northern New Mexico and talked to them about their work. I went to the Mille Lacs Indian Reservation in Minnesota and talked to them about their birch bark work and how they gathered it and how they made it. And so I'm really

indebted to those people.

And the Southwest work, well, I mean, I just loved it, and the figurative things on baskets and all that. And I did some of that. I called it tapestry.

MS. SAUER: I remember that very well.

MS. GILES: I'm really indebted to the two, historical work and tribal work, in many forms.

MS. SAUER: And it kind of leads into my next question, because we have discussed traveling in the United States. But has travel outside of the United States had any influence on your work?

MS. GILES: Probably not, not in my—this work that I'm doing. It's affecting my concrete sculpture, but that's something else again.

The Southwest trips, we did about six or seven of those that were, I think, just wonderfully beautiful. The landscapes and the mesas became a lot of my forms and are still influencing my forms today, so that kind of travel.

We were going to Minnesota. I bought some property up in northern Minnesota and built a cabin, and I—just still to this day we're going to—I go to the woods for my inspiration, woods and water. You know, all those things that are there at those places are very beautiful to me. Foreign countries haven't particularly—we've been to Europe a few times and up the Northwest coast. And again, I see the tribal work, and hurray, hurray, they're wonderful.

MS. SAUER: That kind of leads to the next question. Do you consider yourself part of an international tradition, or one that is more American tradition?

MS. GILES: I consider myself an historical tradition, maybe because of the indebtedness to this kind of work that has been done for thousands of years. I very much owe a debt of gratitude to the wonderful fiber sculptors that preceded me, that put this kind of work up a level that just raised it up to an art form rather than strictly as a functional craft, a basket as a functional craft.

I think Native Americans elevated it, too, in their beauty and how much pride they took in the craftsmanship and the beauty. And as did other cultures, they made them very beautiful. They made them as gifts for and honored people with a gift of a beautifully made object like that.

I think it goes all over the place. It's hard for me to say, but Americans made it possible for me to be seen as a viable artist in this medium rather than just kind of a—a what—you know, handy hands at home—

MS. SAUER: Yes, I know what you're saying.

MS. GILES: —some of those goofy expressions and stuff, you know.

MS. SAUER: Yeah. And so this maybe leads to the next question—handy hands at home; I understand that. Do you think that any of the issues of gender, politics, ethnicity have affected your work?

MS. GILES: That's a great question because I think it's absolutely nothing. But then again, I'm indebted to traditions already established by Native Americans, by contemporary fiber artists, women fiber artists—and men, too.

Back in the early—I guess it would be in the '80s—I joined a group in St. Louis called Women's Caucus for Art. And it sounds very political and single-minded, but it really wasn't; it was just another venue for giving women an opportunity to exhibit their art. And I did enjoy them for a while. But I found out I wasn't discriminated against as a woman in my field. Now, that might be true in other areas. But as a fiber artist there was no discrimination whatsoever.

Ethnically, I've never thought of myself one way or another. It comes from so many ethnic backgrounds, the kind of work we do—worldwide, tribal wise, race wise, everything. I mean, all of the cultures have developed this and in beautiful forms. So I think we're all in it together. I've never thought of it as one or the other or anything, you know.

MS. SAUER: I've noted that around—many of your baskets, they're male figures, and does come from any place in particular?

MS. GILES: I think more is fun. But I also spent, you know, as I said, 20-some years single and dated a lot, and hated it and loved it and had all kinds of terrible experiences—it wasn't a lot of fun really.

But I think men have an awful lot of power, and I think you have to just let them have it, because we do, too. Women have a lot of power, and we don't really need them that much.

But also, I think one other thing I saw in so much tribal expression was the position of man became the symbol for the whole tribe. That was sort of the thinking of the position of men. They like—they need that; they need to think that they have all this power. I don't want all that power. What for? It's just a responsibility; you're there—you make lots of mistakes; you hurt a lot of people. I don't want power.

And then there was another thing that my mother was very concerned about—and I think she saw this in her lifetime—was world population and how that is—how much damage overpopulation is doing to the earth and to locales and to everything else. And so for the last 10 years or so I just participated a little bit in some of that zero population growth. And I think it is a real crisis. I think it's real critical; population densities—we can see what is happening to our own environments. And then the quality of life for people in places—what happens is they just end up dying off from starvation and disease and wars and everything else. So I think population and this multiples of people—it was a little bit of that, too.

But it also was decorative. They were very handsome as repetition pieces. And the joke was, you know, that people would say, oh, dear, look at all the decoration of little men on there. And Jim would say, oh, Mary has always thought of men as decorative objects. [Sauer laughs.] So it played into all this. It became a nice unit to use as an artistic expression. People are essential. It's a part of us, so they make a fabulous sculptural form. So they were just real useable, real useful [they laugh] in a lot of ways.

MS. SAUER: Well, I notice you have some women in [your] most recent work, or at least what I'm interpreting that way. Are you interpreting it that way?

MS. GILES: No. I'm not. Because I really now just see men as people. It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter. I think if you put boobs on the front of some of those, they would look a little too frontal, but just by neutralizing them they're a little bit of everything. There are penises under a lot of those wires and surfaces, but it almost isn't necessary, but it's there.

MS. SAUER: I have it.

MS. GILES: Yeah, and it is okay. At one time I did try to make specifically women, but I'm not really interested in women's causes. I don't think we need to work that way. And I did live through that time when women were very vocal and very out there, and I wasn't there. I think we are extremely strong, extremely capable, and I think working in subtler ways is more effective sometimes. Don't force it down people's throat; just be it.

MS. SAUER: I understand.

MS. GILES: Oh, good.

MS. SAUER: Does the functionality of objects play any role in your art?

MS. GILES: No. They never have. I mean, meaning as useful objects being as you—

MS. SAUER: Perhaps patterning, anything that you've done from useful objects.

MS. GILES: Oh, no. No. Although, you know, a lot of them are—have been bowl forms or vessels forms, but no. And I was asked to do a teapot one time. I've been asked to do one as a commission. I can't do it; I can't even imagine doing it. So there's—no—although, aren't I indebted to vessel forms, wonderful.

The biggest problem I've had is engineering fiber with a lot of weight on it to stand up, to hold up, and sometimes it probably would be easier if they weren't so vessel shaped to do that.

MS. SAUER: If they were a solid form

MS. GILES: Yeah, maybe solid or much more vertical, only vertical, or on the wall—

MS. SAUER: But you've done some of that, too.

MS. GILES: I've started to do a little bit. But it was also fun to have the challenge of engineering them, and I am still restructuring some of those from those years that weren't quite as strong, that didn't survive. The weight over time does some pressure, downward pressure—I've now got some material that can strengthen them. This trip out here I got a couple from Helen Gabriel to repair, and I can do that now. But I think the challenge of those forms has been fun. See how far you can go with it.

MS. SAUER: The architecture.

MS. GILES: Yes. And they have, because of the architect's influence, have had some of that, and they've been built out of parts and structured, really structured. Yeah.

MS. SAUER: And I guess I think about the—and I don't know if this would be functionality—but I think about your work in a different way, of the functionality of a ritual object in people's lives, because they seem ritualistic to me.

MS. GILES: Yes, I think so. I think they definitely would come more from that than, like, the everyday object in the house or something.

MS. SAUER: Does religion or a sense of spirituality play any role in your work?

MS. GILES: No. Ritual in that I've seen it in tribal work and that they have a real innate sense of that. I'm not a religious person in any formal sense at all. I do carry pennies around in everything; they're in drawers and everything, and the expression "In God We Trust" is on there, and I have a strong feeling about that because I—well, because of the things I've gone through in my life, and back in the—let's see, I guess it's been 25 years, too—that back when I went through treatment for alcoholism, this idea of turning it over to God, to a higher power. They said, if you can't swallow, God take on some higher power. Well, I believe that I didn't do it; I didn't get sober. Something else happened there, and so that has always been good for me.

I believe that's there, but I don't like what man has done to it. I don't like what humans have made out of religions and God and using God for all kinds of self-promotion, and I don't like any of that. It's got to be so personal and so private. You know, even talking about it is kind of—it's just got to be between you and whatever else you have. And then it can be all kinds of higher powers.

I mean, I couldn't have done what I see around me. I couldn't have created this earth or—it's amazing. Nature is so beautiful to me; it's just extraordinary. It's so much more than we are. And so there is something out there, and it's not for me to know. I can't possibly know it.

MS. SAUER: I'm not sure that this is the place to insert it, but I noted that when you talked about your early childhood and talked about your family, that you talked about going to the woods in Minnesota in a cabin and the wonderful experiences that you had there, and I keep seeing that connected in what you just now said about this spirituality of the world, the land, our environment. And I wondered if you would just expand a little bit on how those early influences you feel have come through your work to this day.

MS. GILES: Well, I think when you're a kid, you're just—you investigate everything. Dad used to fish a lot, and he would come home with his fish and he would clean them on the dock, and I would sort the guts and the eyeballs and the innards and make a little fish market. And mother said, you should have been a biologist; you love just investigating. And when I scuba dived, oh my, that was an amazing world.

It's hereditary, too. My father loved the woods. My mother taught us to collect agates, took us out and showed us wild moccasin flowers, the Minnesota state flower, where they grew in this ravine and how we—she said, we never pick them; we respect them. And all those messages came across from both of them to love the environment. She took us to fish, swimming lessons, and we went and picked berries to make jam. She would make jam, things like that. We cleared brush an hour a day—we were supposed to do that to keep the road open—with a timer, so we would have to work the whole hour—[they laugh]—a little rigid. But just, I think, hereditary. I think they had a natural love of this, and they taught us, and we lived in it in those formative years all as a child.

I call it a resource today; it's just a rich, beautiful resource. A walk in the woods is inspiring. I look down a lot. There's moss and there's wood, and how the colors of wood age and accumulate humidity, or things that grow in them, and that stuff is just gorgeous. It's just wonderful.

MS. SAUER: And then I find it sort of interesting that you grew up in Minnesota, in this close-to-the-earth kind of environment, and then you came to St. Louis, which is a fairly large city and a lot of concrete and—

MS. GILES: Yeah. But every summer, being a teacher, I had most of my summers off and vacations. I would go back to Minnesota. And my brother had a cabin up north. My parents, when Dad retired, sold our cabin, which just broke my brother's heart, but he was in the Peace Corps in South America, couldn't help it. So as soon as he got back, he bought his property and built a cabin. We started using his. So he couldn't keep us away from it. We had to go back.

MS. SAUER: But didn't you buy a cabin?

MS. GILES: And then I bought property and then built a cabin.



It's like I told children at school who were really talented and I knew how they were gifted. I said, even if you have to go out and get a practical job and have a career and do all that, you will always have that in you. It's innate to you; you can't escape it. You have that gift. And someday, when you can revisit it and bring it back for yourself, you'll do it again. And I think that happens. I've talked to people and it's true. I think what you've experienced in your early childhood is really powerful. You'll never lose it. It's always there.

MS. SAUER: And could you give sort of a little scenario of how you came to — you left Minnesota and came to St. Louis?

MS. GILES: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] I was married to that first husband. And he had—we had been there two and a half years, maybe, and I had been teaching at a high school—art teacher. And he took a job in St. Louis in 1969, and we moved to St. Louis. And when I left that high school, they said, oh, if you're going to St. Louis, get a job in Ladue school district. They love art; they support the art program. So I went knocking on their door and interviewed with the superintendent and then called him back, and I got a job. And I spent 28 years there. So that's what brought me to St. Louis. And Doug and I were divorced just a couple years after we got there.

MS. SAUER: So during that period of time you taught school, and was it high school or elementary?

MS. GILES: Well, at Ladue I started out high school and elementary. They liked to shuffle you around because you were new on the block, and then eventually I settled into full-time elementary, which was terrific.

MS. SAUER: And you've retired now?

MS. GILES: Oh, yes, for maybe eight years now. It has been quite a while.

MS. SAUER: And what happened after that, after you retired?

MS. GILES: Oh, retirement was a gift; I was ready to leave. Public school teaching is challenging, and although I had a lovely job, and they pretty much gave me free reign, all the demands of children succeeding in education today are just—they're still searching for the answers on how to educate kids and maximize their skills and knowledge and all.

So I just slid from the—I was already doing the baskets; I was already showing them. I worked morning to night when I had any time and kind of still do. [They laugh.] I just love to do it, so you just do it. And it was just a gift; I was able to stop teaching and then work full-time. It was great.

MS. SAUER: But your career did flourish quite a bit during the time that you were teaching.

MS. GILES: It really—yeah.

MS. SAUER: So could you expand a little bit on how you managed to teach full-time and—

MS. GILES: Well, I was single. And I lived in an apartment; I didn't own a house or anything. And so I would come home and that's all I would do; I would work. I also was taking those workshops, and there were a lot of wonderful people out there inspiring me.

I did my first show about two years after making my first piece. I sold my first piece for \$25 to another teacher in the school building, and I thought, my God, why would anybody pay \$25 for this? And it was probably three inches high. [Laughs.] And a lot of these nice workshops and this high school weaving class that I was given was what really got me started on the baskets.

Because I wanted to teach myself—teach the kids something else they could take home with them. And so I had the looms for in class, and then I taught myself to do the baskets. And the coiling was so nice. That worked just beautifully for carry-home stuff. So teaching myself to teach the kids, I just fell in love with it myself. And the kids made coasters, and I went on with my own stuff. [They laugh.]

But where were we going with this?

MS. SAUER: Well, I was asking how you managed to have two careers, because I—you've developed a great deal of your career during the time that you worked full-time.

MS. GILES: I was single and I was alone a lot, so I could work as much as I wanted.

MS. SAUER: Also, you just talked about how the materials were such that you could carry them home; you could carry them to Minnesota, if that's where you're going there. They were portable to some degree. But I'm just curious to explore a little bit with you how you fell in love with wax linen as your material, and the metals—if you could talk a little bit more about those.

MS. GILES: It has to be you. [Laughs.] I'm trying to think of what my first basket—raffia; I used a lot of raffia. It was a school product, too. I was familiar with using that at school and teaching kids to make the reed baskets and things like that. So the first stuff I did, I worked with raffia. And then I had used all that mop linen and stuff from my early weavings, and I was using some of that, too, and using it around reed but reed wasn't very—you know, it's pretty rigid.

Then I think I took your workshop, Jane—I think it has to be that—when you had wax linen. And here was this flexible core, too, that you can now bend it out and bend it in, and you could control it, rather than the rigidity of the reed controlling it—

[END TAPE 1 SIDE A.]

—and I think that was big, because I think what you saw in my early work was I was imitating Southwest baskets and putting little figures on the—into the wrapping and the different colors of raffia and jute and fuzzy of old jute, scratchy stuff. And here was this wonderful tough wax linen and wax core, and I've been using it ever since. And adding wire to the core now, so I can get more strength, too—in the walls—and hold forms better. But I think that was—I would say that's where it came from.

MS. SAUER: And then it's just all about figuring out how—what works for you—

MS. GILES: Yeah, yeah.

MS. SAUER: —and what is the vehicle for your expression.

MS. GILES: Coiling. I tried the twining and the knotting and everything, and I just love the coiling. And also, with coiling, it's easier to take out if you don't like what it's doing. You can cut it off and restart. It just worked well for me.

MS. SAUER: Do you do very much of that, cutting it off and starting again?

MS. GILES: If it has to be. Yeah, I think I had one bonfire when we moved in St. Louis and got rid of a lot of old pieces that I finally said, I don't need to keep this anymore. If it needs to, yeah. But you know, it doesn't always tell you it needs to until you've had it around for a while, too. You live so closely with a piece for so long, two, three hundred hours, that sometimes when you are done—you think you finished it, and you put it out there—and often you send it off to a show pretty fast.; you haven't had time to live with it, and you wonder when it comes back, what—and you look at it and you go, well, I know why that didn't sell—[Sauer laughs]—look, there's a dip in that that just isn't right; it just doesn't flow or something. Chop it off and redo it, yeah.

MS. SAUER: It's hard to do, isn't it?

MS. GILES: Yes, it is. It is. And it's better if you don't do it right after you've finished a piece; put it away for a while, because then you forget how long you've been on that and how much time you're throwing away [laughs] and just wait awhile.

MS. SAUER: And I want to explore how you came to the metal, which plays a very prominent role in your art.

MS. GILES: Well, there's two places I have to mention; one is I got a pair of jewel earrings that were hammer drops—Asian, Indonesian, something. They were layers of hammer drops, and I thought, aren't those beautiful? And so my first hammered piece—and I just did it with a two-and-a-half-pound hammer and an anvil at the high school in their shop—I hammered out iron, because this was—the earrings I think were, like, silvery color. They weren't silver but something—so I hammered out iron.

And the first basket I did with that—my sister has it—and I won an award with it. I was like, wow. But I hammered all these little pieces and added them, bent them like a horseshoe, and added them in and made kind of a feathered top, and left the bottom bare. And it was beautiful how the hammer looked—or the wire looked—it's about 16-gauge wire variations—how beautiful the wire looked hammered—hand hammered is really beautiful, but I can't do that anymore—and then how it layers beautifully as scales or feathers or just a wonderful surface.

And then I had done some iron. And I had a dealer named Henry Wallengren in SoHo in New York City. Henry was adorable. How did I meet him? He found me at maybe this first ACC [American Craft Council] craft show I did in St. Paul. Those are good venues, too, for artists. But Henry Wallengren was my New York dealer, and he was terrific.

And Henry said, you know, when I go to the jewelry—or go to art shows—people are just hovering over all this flashy jewelry. I had tried a little copper. He said, your copper stuff is just kind of—that's got an interesting start there. And I got more into the copper. And the copper is wonderful because it's beautiful fresh and hammered;

it's beautiful torched. I don't do chemicals much; I just do torching and hammering, and you can vary it so much. And so the copper developed more or less out of Henry saying that, and these little earrings. And it also was useful in saying what I wanted to say, these landscapes and color changes.

MS. SAUER: Yeah, I can see the land and a lot of the variation of earth and a lot of the patinas that you get, also in the pure forms themselves.

MS. GILES: Yeah.

MS. SAUER: I can see that a great deal.

MS. GILES: And I like the fact that the metal is going to change over time, and time will affect these pieces. The copper, the oldest pieces I've seen, have really only gone to a little deeper orange, you know, the darkening of that. The iron, sometimes it starts to pick up a little rust. I'm not too afraid of that; I mean, I don't want people to put them in water or anything, but I think that's another part of the process that's okay. See what happens to them and let the surfaces mature and age, like we all are.

MS. SAUER: And do you connect that to any of your nature experiences?

MS. GILES: The eroding and the effect of environment on surfaces, oh, yeah. Oh, and they're beautiful, beautiful. I found a bunch of old Civil War cannonballs in a garage sale one time and they're pitted, just corroded. I think there is nothing more beautiful. It's great.

MS. SAUER: Well, I happen to know that you have another interest and that is in collecting things that have been made by some of your influences.

MS. GILES: Yeah.

MS. SAUER: Some of the Southwest art and things that are historical, just like you mentioned the cannonballs. And I wondered if you would expand a little bit on marriage between that and your work?

MS. GILES: Oh, my earliest pieces I collected, which were really probably just tourist pieces, were New Guinea. The New Guinea people use natural reeds in materials, and they used these wonderful ochers and colors on the paint, for paint on the surfaces, and talc and things, and those were—the surfaces in those were beautiful, and that application of color.

I've done some wax coloration of surfaces to affect them, but basically it's what the wax linen is and what the metal will do with heat and age. Those were important. I mean, I think the old pieces are wonderful. And I like Navajo rugs, the age in those and the older pieces are more handsome. Okay.

And so I like old things. I like the older surfaces, rather than the newer things. I like what happens when things age. And that's a real message for a woman today, too. It's a struggle. I think it's real hard not to want to be 30 years old. [Laughs.]

MS. SAUER: Yes, it is. [Laughs.]

MS. GILES: And how do you accept that in that and not just want to go do all of this stuff that doctors are offering these days? And so if you can look at cultural people and other cultures that age beautifully, successful women that age beautifully, and materials and artifacts that age beautifully, you can maybe give yourself permission to just enjoy it a little bit, as much as it's hard to do.

MS. SAUER: I agree. But I do find your work to be a celebration of the natural evolution of materials, of all materials.

MS. GILES: Oh, that's wonderful. I have so barely scratched any surfaces of what's available for inspiration. I think moss is an incredible material, and how it grows and where it grows and everything. Rust is one; I collect lots of old rusty implements.

MS. SAUER: I will stop here and go to the next one.

[Audio break.]

This is Jane Sauer interviewing Mary Giles at my home in Santa Fe, New Mexico, on July 18, 2006, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc number two.

Mary, we were talking a little bit about the development of your art and how you conducted two careers simultaneously. And then you retired in—what year was that?

MS. GILES: Oh, boy, '97, I think—1997 or '98.

MS. SAUER: And so how did that open new doors for you to—

MS. GILES: Oh, I was so busy with the work, and it seemed like I never could get enough done. It just opened the door to have more time to work, and I just flowed right into it. Of course, I don't think there is ever enough time, but it was a lot more time, shall we say.

MS. SAUER: I was going to ask you if there's enough time now.

MS. GILES: No, of course not. Not when you have a husband. [They laugh.] They are always wanting some time, too.

MS. SAUER: Yes, they are. How do you think that that changed, in your time element, changed your work, or do you think it did at all?

MS. GILES: Oh, no, I don't think so, because I've always been a real hard worker. I will get up at five in the morning and work till I had to go to work, come home and work the entire evening till ten o'clock. I didn't mind that at all.

I don't think having more time—I think I had a wonderful studio in St. Louis when I retired. And the studio space, I think, is almost more critical, to have a nice place to work, where you really can set up your materials; you can have your pieces of what you're working on set out. The way I work is basically from paper cutouts of forms. And so I stick those up on walls, and I work from those when I'm developing a piece or building the piece. And I retain my form. I measure and mark it off on the way up and so on. So I think a studio is as important as having time, a place where you're not disturbed, a place that's—you make your own little nest out of—and that's important.

MS. SAUER: And what are, for you, the qualities of that work environment that make it good—is it space, is it materials, is it—

MS. GILES: Yeah, I'm going through a little frustration right now in my new studio in Minnesota. I have a studio up in the garage for the big power hammer and a lot of storage of materials, but I'm in the house. I like to work in the house. I like to just be—I don't know—it's always been comfortable for me. I can go throw a load of wash in—a lot of sitting, and so getting up and doing a little movement once in a while is better for the back and stuff.

But the problem with my studio—of the workspace now—the view is beautiful, so it's very inspiring, but I don't have enough walls and enough privacy right now. It's kind of an open space in the house, looking into the dining room and kitchen. And I have a husband who loves to be on the phone, so we're creating the office space away from there. We're going to get—we're going to work it out, and it's just going to take a little time.

MS. SAUER: Well, let me go back a little bit, because I'm not sure we've covered this transition.

MS. GILES: Oh, right, of course.

MS. SAUER: When you retired, would you—

MS. GILES: I jumped.

MS. SAUER: A little bit. That's fine, but a little bit of chronology—that you retired and you were in St. Louis and—

MS. GILES: Right.

MS. SAUER: —and you had more time to do your work, and then what happened with your life?

MS. GILES: Well, I had this great studio there, just the best one I've had along the way. It was just another nice big, big space. And Jim was still teaching at—my husband was still teaching at Washington University and—but I knew that I wanted to go back to Minnesota some day. My husband is from Missouri and he likes Missouri summers; I can't imagine why, but does. I love Minnesota; I always have.

And Jim was going to Michigan to study with a woodcut artist for—my husband does wonderful woodcuts—and he was looking at property in Michigan. And I was really worrying about that, because I thought, why would we go to Michigan, we don't know anybody in Michigan.

And so just on kind of a fluke—I was going up to help my sister move my mother into an assisted living area, and I—my sister had been sending me real estate notices [laughs] of property in the area, and so I went with this real estate agent. I wanted a place on water, and the Saint Croix River is the main water area up there in this part—Stillwater in Minnesota-Wisconsin border.

So I went out with this real estate agent. We looked at one property and it was terrible, and I—she said, well, I have another one to show you. We went up and looked at this and it was magical. And we drove in—I had just—couldn't believe how beautiful it was. It was perfect; it was just perfect. I called Jim; I said, I have found our house. We e-mailed him photos. He was amazed. The timing was just perfect because these people had just dropped the price a big amount because a deal had fallen through. It now got into our price range and we could possibly consider. Jim got the pictures and said, I love it. It was just miraculous. I couldn't believe it. So he said, you may offer them their price based on my seeing it next weekend; I'll fly out. So he did; he loved it; we bought it, and we rented it until he retired this last—until recently.

And it's just a magically beautiful place. So I don't believe we even have it. [Laughs.]

MS. SAUER: So that's where you're living now.

MS. GILES: That is where we have just re-located, with Jim's retirement, and we will be there most of the year, except the dead of winter, when I think we'll be somewhere else.

MS. SAUER: And [we] are overlooking the Saint Croix?

MS. GILES: We are on the Saint Croix. As a matter of fact, we bought the house in 2001; in 2002 the floods came. The water came within six inches of the main floor. I said to Jim, I'm going to die in this house, so you know what we're going to do; we're going to raise it. And we literally did. We had one of those companies come in; they lifted the house. Jim designed a new addition for the back for our bedroom. It was old; it was built in 1901, the original house, and literally was sitting on a huge boulder underneath. That was the foundation of the center of the house. We raised it enough to—I think in our lifetime—be pretty dry and did the re-muddling, as an architect would do; he has to re-muddle things. And it's just fabulous. I just love it; I love it.

MS. SAUER: Do you think that's going to affect your work even further?

MS. GILES: Oh, it has. It already has. I mean, just the time that I've been able to spend up there now is so mellowing, so exquisitely beautiful. I love to get up right away in the morning, go out on the deck, and look at the water. I also see it from where I'm sitting in my studio. But the water, I look right at the water, and across the river is a slough, it's called Page's Slough, and then through those islands and stuff we see Wisconsin. It's all water there. There are houses on either side of us but far enough away we don't even—we're not really looking at other houses; we just look at nature.

MS. SAUER: It sounds like nirvana.

MS. GILES: It's beyond. I said to Jim, I just—sometimes I don't even believe we're here. It's just one of those kind of places.

MS. SAUER: So would you, sort of, give me a sense of your workday?

MS. GILES: Yeah. One tough thing about this new place is it's awfully fun to go play. We have some kayaks and canoes. And it's fun to go out on the water, and it's fun to play in the gardens. So my discipline is I work till noon every day in the studio. I just absolutely make myself stay there. And so I work from, say, 6:00 or 7:00, or whenever we get up, and I work till 12:00. Then I can go out and play in the gardens or go in the water or do all of the other things. And then Jim is turning into a nice cook, thank you very much. And so all my evenings are also in the studio. And so usually from 6:00 till 10:00 I spend back in the studio.

So I spend a good eight hours in the studio every day and often more. And I take the work with me. If we're driving somewhere, I always can work in the car. I always have that size piece I can work on, or materials I can be bending or cutting or wrapping or knotting or tying up or something.

MS. SAUER: And you mentioned play, and I wonder if there is an element—I understand there is an element of life of play, but there is an element of play in your process or in the finished work?

MS. GILES: No, I don't think so, only in that the play gives me more exposure to all these beautiful environments, you know, that I see more things. Oh, I'm always collecting stuff when we're out. I'm a beachcomber, whether it's land or anywhere; I pick up things and bring things home that are interesting and beautiful—and seedpods or rocks or weeds, or anything I collect.

MS. SAUER: Now, I'll move a little bit to ask some more general questions. And has the market for American craft changed in your lifetime?

MS. GILES: Well, I might be a little too close to it right now, but I think there has been a fairly good change in the last year. I think I came along at a wonderful time. Textile arts were being seen as a very strong art expression by museums and collectors, and I think the last 20 years have been extraordinary. The Friends of Fiber Art group

developed during this time.

I've been collected by eight museums, many collectors with significant collections, and I think it has been a tremendous time. Even when the markets sunk back in the late '90s, or when was that—early 2000, whenever—early 2000—the work kept selling. The reception was great; the museums still collected. It was just—it's just been a really positive time. Books have been published.

I don't know what is happening right now. It's been the quietest last year of my life. And there are a couple things about that. One, I don't know if it's going to get deeper or longer or what. Who knows? One doesn't know. But I also said—and I think this is true—when things change like that and maybe you're not selling as much, it does give you time to back off a little bit under—from the pressures of just producing work to maybe now I can spend a little more time messing around with some ideas, where you maybe didn't give yourself the luxury of doing that before. And I'm sure artists—I know artists need that.

Of course, we love to sell work, it's a great impetus, but we also—it's time to ask yourself, well, would I make it anyhow, even if I didn't sell it? Well, I probably wouldn't make as much, let's put it that way. [Laughs.] But I certainly love to make it, but I also love to do other things.

MS. SAUER: It maybe adds a little balance—

MS. GILES: Yes.

MS. SAUER: —to have breathing room.

MS. GILES: Well, one of the things I love to do is some—I've started doing is some concrete sculpture work, but it's a French tradition called *faux bois*, which is fake wood. So it is wood-looking things in concrete. And it was done a lot in the French parks. We saw it a lot in Paris, where they would do all the railings in concrete, but they looked like wood. So I have done some containers and sculptures.

And what's so beautiful about where we are is the naturalness. So I don't want to bring in outdoor things that are all colorful and bright and competitive with nature; it's too beautiful. So I can make these concrete things, and they just kind of blend in and grow a lot of moss on them, and then they just kind of blend into the woods. So I've been doing some of that. And I got some major projects I want to do up at this place, that if I get some time, I'll be able to kind of step aside for a while and do that.

MS. SAUER: Which is art also?

MS. GILES: Oh, my goodness, yes. I went to Fred Smith's Concrete Park in northern Wisconsin [Phillips, WI]. He was a fellow back in the '40s, an outsider artist, obviously, who created this entire park full of animals and people and Indians and the Clydesdale horses, wagons and—all in concrete and oversized—not people sized; oversized figures and oversized animals, and embedded and crusted with broken bottles and metals and glass and pottery and gas station insignias and just—this is magic.

So I took a workshop from an artist over in Wisconsin who does this—Rianna DeRaad. She was just genius and she's just wonderful. And I've taken two workshops from her. And so from her I'm learning how to mix the concrete and how to layer it and how to do all that. She does all the incusted stuff. I'm not doing the color part; I'm just doing the *faux bois*, which means fake wood. And it's great. F-A-U-X, B-O-I-S, *faux bois*. It's great.

MS. SAUER: Thank you. Is there any particular community that's been important to you in the development of your art?

MS. GILES: Women fiber artists are—have—well, it's just been a glorious time. What I was able to step into already going, all the artists that were doing vessels, basketry, sculpture, was really—I mean, it made it so easy for me. I mean, really, I wasn't a pioneer at all. I don't see myself in that at all. I just see myself as somebody who's stuck to it for quite a while. I know a lot of artists haven't; they went into jewelry. I remember seeing one artist, and loved her baskets, and then all of a sudden I ran into her at an art show and she was doing jewelry. She just couldn't do it anymore. I mean, that's what I see myself, as just somebody who's done it, kept doing it. But I don't see myself as an initiator particularly; it was all really developing, you know, by other artists when I moved into it.

MS. SAUER: Well, it's certainly taken in your own direction. You do have your own—clearly you have your own voice.

MS. GILES: Well, I think in order to do it for a long period of time and do as much as I have, you have to find your own voice. I mean, to just imitate others, or repeat yourself would be too difficult for this kind of work that takes so long to do just one piece. It needs to be from yourself; it has to be something that you're motivated to do.

MS. SAUER: Has the community of basket makers helped you with your own art, with your own expression?

MS. GILES: Oh, I think more—I so much don't want to be anybody else. I think that is critical. I mean, I just don't want to be doing other people's work, and I hope that—I know early on when somebody saw my baskets, they said, oh, is that Jane Sauer, you know, and I just—oh, it just—it was just so not what I wanted at all. So I think it's really the community of basket makers have been important in that we show together; shows are created with the groups brought together. I just love a lot of them.

There is a lot of wonderful folk out there doing this stuff. They are great people. We do have a camaraderie because we know what it's like to do what we do, you know. We're fans of each other, and I think in that regard—but I don't look to any of them for ways doing anything particular.

You know, over these years with our workshops and all, we have shared materials and problem-solving things and stuff that have been good—that has been great—but not to get ideas from. I remember going to Arrowmont one time, and I just didn't take any of the workshops, because I didn't want to do anybody else's stuff. I went around and schmoozed with everybody so I could be with them, but I purposefully—I don't want to learn how they do their work in the how-to. I like to talk just, you know, artist to artist, but not basket maker to basket maker.

MS. SAUER: So you're more of a way of working—your preferable way of working is to go in your studio and solve the problems within your own mind and—

MS. GILES: Yeah, yes.

MS. SAUER: The American craft—other areas—glass, wood—well, you are using metal, but the other movements, have they had influence in your work other than fiber and—

MS. GILES: You know, I think there is a little underling current of competitiveness between those different fields. You know, you'll hear—you'll go to SOFA [Sculpture Objects & Functional Art exposition], Chicago, and you'll hear, oh, glass is really hot this year. [Laughs.] Or they will say, oh, God, everybody else has got glass; I wish there was something else. And then they kind of—next year it's something else again, you know.

I think we see ourselves as a little competitive with on another, the ceramics, the glass, the fibers, you know, the jewelry maybe—I mean, jewelry is pretty constant though, frankly—[laughs]—but those—and I think they do have their higher times when they are—the field is kind of, really, sort of elevated and hot, and there is some really great new stuff coming on and everything, and that kind of subsides. And I think collectors want to see new things, and then they go off on another way, too, you know, another direction a little bit.

MS. SAUER: How do you see American craft as ranking on an international level?

MS. GILES: Wow. Not being that informed, I'm sort of in the studio. I'm not a real out-schmoozer person. I'm hugely impressed with what the Japanese are doing in craft. And they also have a tradition of honoring their finest people. They are revered, oh, my gosh—also in ceramics. I have to say we have every opportunity in this country to express and involve ourselves. So if we lag, it's only from our lack of initiative. This country generally has supported the craft field very well in my experience.

So how do we size up with other countries? I met an architect, a friend of Jim's, from India. India also puts crafts on the same level as art. It's all exactly the same. There is no division. We might, in this country, have to compete a little bit to validate our work as sophisticated as much—we compete with painting and that sort of thing, I think, a bit. I'm not articulating that very well.

So I think—and that still exists. I don't see that that is particularly disappearing. You don't see a lot of million-dollar fiber arts running around. [They laugh.]

MS. SAUER: No.

MS. GILES: But you certainly do in painting, don't you, or sculpture, you know what I'm saying? I also think—and my husband and I have discussed this—as craft artists, a lot of us are very afraid of our pricing. We are very nervous about that—keeping our prices down, you know. And then we read the art newspaper and what the latest auctions have gone, what things have gone for, and it's just like—boggles your mind, you know. And you're apologizing for raising your prices a thousand dollars or something. That is so tricky. So that exists. How other countries feel about how that happens for them, I don't have enough experience to compare it.

MS. SAUER: And do you think that the field of fiber arts or American craft are moving in any particular obvious directions, from your point of view?

MS. GILES: Oh, boy. Boy, I think you, as a gallery director, probably have a much greater vision than I do. I go to

SOFA, Chicago, every year to see my friends, and I show there, so I like to see how things are looking. I do see that the Japanese are here and being well received. And I think they are extremely innovative and new and loose and big and free, and there is some real tremendous stuff there. So that is my limited experience.

MS. SAUER: Good answer.

MS. GILES: Thank you.

MS. SAUER: What are the most powerful influences in your career, either people or art movements—probably not technical developments—as you look back and think about what has had the most influence?

MS. GILES: As I have been practicing my art, as I have been doing my art, the early workshops—my first show was with one of the Caroline art walks in Clayton, Missouri, where I lived. I think I did it a couple of years and won best of show in the last one. I then went—I think it was the Minnesota Crafts Festival I was going to—I did those for about three years, and then the third year I won the best of show there. Those were very—what is that word—enforcing or very validating, or very complimentary. Then I did the ACC craft show, the first one that was in Minnesota, at St. Paul. And a number of galleries asked to represent me. That was the most valuable thing about that.

And I think that is when Henry Wallengren in New York City, and then Barbara Rose Okun, picked me up—she was a dealer in St. Louis and sold my work. And Nancy Kranzberg gave us an invitational show [1988] in her home to show, to support the new music circle, up-and-coming artists in St. Louis, as she called it. And I don't have the date on that, but I can find it. That was amazing, you know. Those kinds of things that happened along the way were powerful.

Jack Lenor Larsen coming in and picking out one of my quill pieces from Henry Wallengren, and he helped the museum make their collection—amazing, and it went on the cover of *American Craft* magazine. This was just—my mother was flabbergasted. [They laugh.] We were all flabbergasted, I think. But people who said things and, you know, were positive and reinforcing. And Walter Nottingham, even just critiquing it like that, giving me impetus.

MS. SAUER: I would judge from what you're saying that it's more the people that you came in contact with rather than art movements.

MS. GILES: Oh, exactly. I was an isolator anyhow. You know, I did go to the craft schools and the art schools out there, the workshops and stuff, but then I would go home alone. And I was teaching full-time, too. I wasn't in movements; I wasn't in universities where there were a lot of things. I wasn't involved in that, so I didn't—I wasn't influenced by that. No, it was individuals, wonderful people that were positive.

MS. SAUER: And would you describe your relationship with various dealers that you have had throughout your career?

MS. GILES: Yeah, sure. I think I have been very fortunate. I have never had a falling out with a dealer; nor did I have one with any of my school principals that I worked with. [They laugh.] One of my early dealers was Barbara Rose Okun; a more wonderful person you couldn't find. And she was tremendously positive. Of course, she also introduced me to Jim Harris, who was a friend of hers and became my husband. So Barbara Rose was all over the place in my life. She was pretty terrific.

The first dealer outside of there was Henry Wallengren in New York City. Henry was a darling man, very, very sweet fellow. I had a number of other ones along the way that I was there for a period of time. And then I'm not even sure why it was just—you know, the work didn't sell or whatever, or that I would go there for special shows, have special shows with group—group basket shows or something.

Then—I'm not chronologically getting this correctly. Duane Reed in St. Louis when I—I'm not sure how I found Duane Reed. [Laughs.] Frankly, I'm trying to think how that transpired. But he became—I guess it was after Barbara Rose had moved to Santa Fe, and I had a few shows here, and then she closed her gallery here. And so I might have been looking for somebody else then. And Duane was in St. Louis. And I have gotten along fine with Duane. He can be temperamental, but I'm not a confrontational person so I don't even get into it; I just kind of stay in the background. And I think as long as they like your work, they will treat you pretty gently.

And I have had very honest people. I have never had anybody, you know, not pay me or damage a piece or any of that. I just have been so lucky. I mean, it really has been great. So dealers have been, you know, terrific, not a problem. When I used to sell my own pieces, and then you start showing with a dealer, and they take 50 percent, it's always like, oh, this is kind of a shock. But I'm terrible talking with people in public; I don't want to do that, so dealers are a blessing. They can hear all of the criticism and filter everything back to you, although I do want to hear what is going on with people's responses.



But, I mean, when I used to sell my own work, people would ask me what they could do with it. Could they put a candle in it; things like that.

MS. SAUER: [Inaudible, cross talk.]

MS. GILES: I am very grateful for dealers. [They laugh.]

MS. SAUER: I understand. What do you see as the place of universities in the American craft movement, and specifically in terms of teaching the kinds of things that we do, material-based art?

MS. GILES: Well, I know that some very accomplished artists teach in those schools. And they already have shown how well the work can be done. And so I think for them to be able to affect students is tremendous. I mean, these are first-rate people; you know, they are top notch—because it's hard to make a living in this medium, in this craft field—very hard. So they are out there teaching, which is wonderful.

So I think in that regard, they elevate it to a higher education, and then put it at those levels—

[END TAPE 1 SIDE B.]

They infuse it with a sophistication that's—takes it out of the lowly, kind of daily, functional-wear stuff, or whatever. And so I think there is a—yeah, I think it's an important aspect of it, an important part of it.

MS. SAUER: And are there any particular writers in the field of American craft that stand out for you, that you'd like to see more of their writing?

MS. GILES: Jane, I try to read articles on art reviews and stuff, and I find it to be so much gobbledygook. I just love to read *The Art Newspaper*, for instance. I like *American Craft* magazine so much. I mean, I read those kinds of things. But when you get into some of these—even *Art in America*, which we get—I start to read some of those reviews of things and I'm just like, what are you talking about? You know, I'm sorry. [Laughs.] That's my simple response, because I don't read a lot. I don't. I'm working.

MS. SAUER: In terms of just sort of critical review of your work and other exhibits that you see and perhaps exhibits that might [be] particularly meaningful for you, like basket shows—that, sort of, group basket shows—or solo shows by somebody in the material-based art area—where do you get your most valuable feedback? Or even for your own work? Is there a particular source that—

MS. GILES: Very few things have been written about my work, very few. When I've been in group shows, I'm usually—they'll say something about the tribal thing or something like that, you know, and that's it.

MS. SAUER: But I even mean as you're working or as you're thinking about your work, or when you see another person's show or group show, not specifically only yours, but where do you get your best feedback, when you are sort of thinking about—

MS. GILES: Thinking about what's coming, what ideas I'm developing or something?

MS. SAUER: Yes, that you're developing.

MS. GILES: Probably not from anything being done in my field. Sculpture is very—I saw a Ruth Duckworth in Belles Artes Gallery [Santa Fe, NM] the other day, and it's one of those wonderful, vertical porcelain pieces that has the big slit in it that is just paper-thin piece of porcelain sitting in it. That was beautiful. That was inspiring to me. I mean, ceramics—Richard DeVore is just delicious, too, you know?

Of course, my favorite, favorite, favorite artist in the whole world is Agnes Martin. Now, could Agnes and I be any more different? Probably not. [Laughs.] But just going to a room of her paintings is the most beautiful internal feeling. And I've read her writings, and Agnes could sit for weeks and months waiting for an inspiration to come. That's how she would do it. Oh, it's just so beautiful. I'm not there. I don't do that, you know? I'm always working. She is wonderful, and I think Magdalena Abakanowicz is just extraordinary. Those are my two fave-faves [ph]. But I don't do anything like them.

I guess it's just because they are so defined and they know just where they are. I don't see a glimmer of doubt in either one of them, you know? And they're so beautiful. Well, Magdalena's newest work is kind of surprising, but I—those figures, those wonderful burlappy [ph] figures, and repetitions—

MS. SAUER: I'm understanding from your words—and I don't want to put words in your mouth, but I want to ask if I'm understanding this correctly—that your inspiration, more than coming from writing, is seeing.

MS. GILES: Oh, yes. Nothing from writing, no.

MS. SAUER: It's experiencing the work?

MS. GILES: Seeing the work, sure. And you know, like taking all those workshops, you get to know the artists, like Fern Jacobs, who is so introspective and so intellectual, but more philosophical. They're beautiful and I'm not them, but I mean that artists can just go whatever direction they need to go. They can be however they need to be to follow that mystical symbol, or that which is them. So, no, I don't read much about that. When I read articles that are being written about that person, it's not usually that person writing about themselves. The other person is observing and kind of using their own personal experience to say what they're seeing.

MS. SAUER: Have there been any particular periodicals that have influenced you, in terms of your art, that you read? I think of *Metalsmith*, of *American Craft*, of *ARTnews*, *Art in America*.

MS. GILES: Probably *Tribal Arts* magazine is a really good one. Jim gets that; my husband subscribes to that. That's fabulous. Those are delicious, and the photographs are beautiful. I can't say so, no. I mean, I've looked—Jim has an incredible library. We have tons of books. I've collected them. Oh, I think—no, it's all visual. It's not words; it's visual. Andy Goldsworthy is now a new fave-fave. We went to see his work up in Grand Rapids, Michigan, an installation of his arches and pieces. Andy Goldsworthy is just beyond belief to me. He's so spectacular. No, it's visual stuff; it's not words for me.

MS. SAUER: I was just going to say it's not about the words; it's about the vision, with you, the image.

MS. GILES: See, I have no left brain [laughs].

MS. SAUER: Could you discuss the importance of your materials in your expression? We may have covered that somewhat, but could you explore that a little bit more?

MS. GILES: Well, I stay with the wax linen, because I love the surface that it creates, but it's also, practically, strong. Most often, it's mostly covered. So you don't see a lot of the substructure anyhow. It's more of a vehicle to do what I want to do. But it also—when you do see it, you see all the wraps; you see all the individual wraps and some of the sew-through, some of the figure eight. You know, we studied this.

Native Americans—and the lazy-squaw stitch these Apache women told me about was really frowned upon. It was faster to do that complete wraparound, and you saw every wraparound, but it did not make the basket strong. So the figure eight or the sew-throughs as they did—and they actually did it a little different than my sew-through—but those were much more respected among the women. So when you do see it, I think the wall surface is nice; it's really nice. And it allows me to shape it more, and coiling in the flexible core, and wire helps me shape it and keep it in shape and stuff.

MS. SAUER: And do you find limitations in this material?

MS. GILES: Oh, of course, of course. It's flexible. That's the biggest limitation, because of all this weight I want to put on it. I've used lead fishing weights. And you've got to know—you've got to have your substructure right in order to use those, incorporate those. I've used old square nails. As a matter of fact, a piece I made was purchased by Halle Berry, the actress. And it got to her apartment in New York City and it started to collapse.

So they sent it back, and I ended up putting an iron armature up through it to support it. But it had a lot of old rusty square nails hanging amongst all these fibers, and the weight of it was just—you know, you send it out there and you don't have control about where people put a piece, and they don't know heat and light, direct sunlight, are pretty nasty. So materials like that have to be—so this fiber has a limit. If it was welded to a steel structure, hey, it's great. Like Deborah Butterworth, who makes the fiber horses and then casts them in bronze, you know, smart girl. Oh, yeah. [They laugh.]

MS. SAUER: And you obviously, to me, haven't limited—you've overcome the limitations of the material. And I wonder how you've gone about that?

MS. GILES: Well, failure is painful. You know, when you've gone in and seen a piece that collapsed. I don't like that feeling. I don't like to fail and have it public. [They laugh.] So I think just knowing that it might be subjected to various stresses, just as this latest show, the armature bent. You try to avoid those things, so you try to overcompensate for them.

So no, it's been very challenging. And, like I was talking about, early on I thought I had to have the entire idea resolved before I started a piece. I had to know everything about it. And I learned just by making a lot of pieces. I've made close to 400 now. I've kept record of every one and every material and sometimes most of them who bought them—but by making more—and they progress slowly. They change slowly. I don't make usually very big leaps in form or any idea. They just—one idea develops into the next idea and to the next.

But by having problems and solving those along the way, and also knowing that you don't have to know the end, sometimes the exact finish—you have your form cut out, you have your shape, you have your plan. You've made your—I make, like, a little index card sketches now. It's about all I do. And I do a paper cutout usually.

But when something happens in there that changes it, and you go, I don't like this. I like it there and I like it on the drawing. I like it on the wall, but I don't like the piece. You've got to be ready to go, okay, what are you going to do about it? Are you going to stop and start over? Are you going to cut it off, or are you going to change the idea? And something will come, especially if you have time to put it away and look at it and don't have to rush it through and get it into a show or something. I think that's—the biggest mistakes I've made are rushing through something and pushing it out there before it had time to be evaluated and I took the time to really work through it.

MS. SAUER: I think that that happens to all artists.

MS. GILES: I think we do and we don't like it. We like it if it doesn't get noticed. But boy, do we not like it when it glaringly screams out, this didn't work. And that happened at a show at Duane's, and it happened to be the same show that you did with him. Remember when you were in that one room down on Taylor and I was in the other? And which piece—one of them collapsed or something, and one of them was ugly, and one of them was — and I just tried to make a whole bunch of pieces and get them in there and it was very uncomfortable. I never want to do that. I hope I never forget how bad it was.

MS. SAUER: I know that path only too well.

MS. GILES: Yes.

MS. SAUER: What do you think were the most important shows that you had or work that you did for a specific show that pushed your mind into new avenues?

MS. GILES: Holy cow. Well, you know, like I said, I work pretty small increments in change. The best ideas for me come while I'm working on a piece, and I make a mental note, sketches of ideas that kind of develop. And maybe one out of 20 of those might end up as a piece. But it's kind of a way of—so I have to—it's hands-on time.

I used to be able to get ideas when I took a nap, because there's kind of that sleep zone where you're almost asleep but you're not quite. And then ideas for—you know, you're visualizing it. I did make one piece exactly like that and it turned out exactly like—I really liked it. But normally, it's just as I am working, and I'm going, oh, I could have done this; I could have done that. Or I'd get a piece finished, and I'd go, oh, what if I had done this, and maybe it's worthwhile enough to make that the next piece. It's got enough of a change in it that it's worth doing another whole piece for.

You know, I guess I read somewhere, never repeat yourself, never. And I don't know how you could anyhow, because it just takes too dang long. [Laughs.] You don't want to do the same thing. You don't want to copy a piece you've made. I've never done that. But enough of a change, and I think it just—and sometimes, they're not as good as the first piece, the second one off of that.

MS. SAUER: It's true. Have there been any commissions yet that you've had that have been particularly inspiring? Pushed you in your ways?

MS. GILES: No. One that I made a proposal for never went through, so I didn't really—I didn't give it a lot of time. No, actually, I've only done private commissions for somebody's personal collection. I've never done a public commission. And so, no, and they've only kind of responded to what I had already, and said, I would like something in this area. And the only ones I've done have been kind of something more I would like to do with what they were responding to, which was agreeable to me, and then the fact is they wouldn't have to take it if it wasn't agreeable. So you make sure you make something you want to make.

MS. SAUER: And was this different than other work, when you had a commission? Was it different for you?

MS. GILES: No, it wasn't. They wanted a totem, you know, a big totem, or they wanted—oh, I remember one that went to the Netherlands. And they wanted it in copper, something like I had done at SOFA, only in copper. And it was agreeable to me. I mean, I could make it different enough, and besides I'd only done one like that anyhow, so a second one wasn't like a duplicate.

MS. SAUER: And did that process reveal anything to you?

MS. GILES: Well, it kind of holds you from doing some other things you might have wanted to do. Let's say that. It makes you—because they do take, you know, a month to do, maybe. And so, you aren't doing all the stuff you've been thinking about doing; you're sticking to that commission, because they have a deadline and they

want it and the gallery wants it. So I think that's the only thing. And I've never had anybody say, do whatever you want. So it's kind of been a little more restrictive than anything.

MS. SAUER: Well, even for residential commissions where, you know, it might not have been public, but did that process—were there any limitations? Are there strengths in that process of the commission?

MS. GILES: It's a little scary in a way because they might reject it. You know, you really are one piece for one person, so it's like you might get a rejection. But sometimes what I wanted to do—and you know, I used a lot of variations in materials, the service materials, the copper, the iron, the brass, the mixture of that, the combination with wire, the lead, you know, the twists, the flat, the skinny, the wide—there's just—so I can vary that enough to make it an interesting enough new piece for me that, you know—so that is kind of where those came from. They were a variation in those materials, kind of. Not like it was a brand new idea.

MS. SAUER: And would you explain the similarities and the differences between your work now and your earliest work? Maybe I should say just earlier work?

MS. GILES: Yeah, similarities and differences. Probably the first series I ever did was I called the Walking Tentacle series [1984]. And it was based on sea forms from scuba diving. I had taken that up, and it's a magical world down there. And the color and the forms are bizarre, you know? So I interpreted some of these things with being able to coil an irregular-shaped wire with the foundation for these tentacles that they stood on and the little—and they were all fuzzy and rather colorful, kind of amazing. I did that. But then how could you not with sea life? And saltwater sea life is so beautiful.

And so, what was the question?

MS. SAUER: The similarities and the differences.

MS. GILES: Yeah, so again, it was nature that was influencing me. But there I was doing much more direct interpretation of nature. They didn't look like the exact pieces under there, but they were tentacles and fuzzy and standing up in little orifices of their little small mouth parts with little fuzzy openings like sea urchins have. So it was much more direct.

Then along came the Quill series [1986-88], and those were vessels and tubes that had nothing to do with porcupines. So they were—I took the walking tentacle forms or some of the sea forms, and some of the tubes were like underwater things. The color left. It was now just browns and creams. And that was beautiful. And I like that much more. And I don't think I ever went back to color other than copper, you know, ever again. I didn't go back there. And then the land masses came in—birds, I did some of these bird forms because those hammered metal parts were so feathery. So there were kind of some head forms, but real simplified.

So nature was again—things in nature were more playing in. After that came the hammered metal and the figures—lots and lots of figures, little people. They were landscapes, and we were coming to the Southwest and all the Native American old dwellings and kivas and things like that, and the ceremonial niches and things inside. And I had interior figures on them and multi-layers, like they would be built.

But that was environment, but not natural. It was manmade, a lot of that. And now it's some of all of that and coloration—and I think they're much more—thank you, Agnes—much more subtle; less is more. Such is the double artifact that is in your gallery with a copper shard down the center; it's just a line of light going up through those two pieces and the rest is all black—texture, but all black. And that's enough. But they're just all nature, and man and nature—well, why not? That's another vehicle for translating some of these things I see.

MS. SAUER: It is very interesting, though, that your earlier work was—even in the very beginning—was a combination of metal and wax linen—or wet metal and a linear, pliable material—that you brought those two together from the very beginning.

MS. GILES: But you know, not being trained as an artist per se, I thought you could only make one of anything, so I made that one hammered metal, kind of a bird head that won that best of show in Clayton, and I didn't do metals for years again. I went into the Quill series. But then the Quill series, when Jack Larsen bought that, I was doing more of one kind of thing. But I was doing one raffia and figures. You know, one metal and this—you know, just, one with color. It was just crazy. Oh, I did one of two people kissing. You know, just so different. They were all over the place, and there was Walter Nottingham saying, pull it back together. Get your one thing that is you, infusing all of your stuff.

MS. SAUER: Your muse.

MS. GILES: Your muse, yeah.

[Personal conversation, direction.]

My first show—borrowed the little elementary school bleachers from the school, a set of wooden bleachers. I covered them in burlap and I set up my pieces. And I remember the prices were, like, \$30 and \$60 or something like that. It was very arbitrary. And they were all different. It was really my survey of all the different experiments I had made. And I remember it was out in the sun, and one of the pieces, the wax melted and sat in a pool in the bottom of the basket. It was terrible. It was just an awful thing.

But I did that show for two or three years and finally won best of show. And so that was a wonderful experience. I did a number of fairs like that, outdoors or where we set up our little booths. And then I did the American ACC craft show in St. Paul, Minnesota, the first year it opened there. And my father helped me make pedestals out of carpet cardboard tubes [laughs] and wooden tops and bottoms. They were just as homely as could be. And I remember Jan Buckman, the basket maker, fiber artist; her husband had built her a display booth that was just gorgeous. And I just felt like the ugly duckling there. It was really funny. [Laughs.] But some very nice dealers approached me and asked to represent me, and it wasn't—I think it was probably the last time I did my own exhibition.

MS. SAUER: And how about early exhibitions in galleries? Where were they?

MS. GILES: Well, Horty Shieber had a gallery in St. Louis called ProArt. And she gave me my first one-person show. That was pretty exciting. And Horty shortly thereafter closed that gallery, but it was a very positive experience. Then Duane Reed in St. Louis exhibited my work. And I don't have my dates very clear here. This is back in the—by now it's the mid-'80s probably, early to mid-, not early but '84, '85, '86 maybe, that this was all happening. And the gallery in New York also picked up my work.

There weren't a lot of craft artist galleries around. And I didn't feel very national yet. One of my galleries had some of my work selected for the Minneapolis Institute of Art back in this time, and that was my first museum show. When I think about it, it was pretty special to be that early at my work. And this was when I was doing the quill pieces.

But galleries were wonderful. I no longer had to stand out there and talk about it, because that was always awkward, and I think sometimes people couldn't say what they felt, either, when you're confronted with the artist themselves. So it was nice to have galleries, and I appreciated them.

MS. SAUER: And when did you start showing outside of St. Louis? When did that begin to happen?

MS. GILES: Well, that ACC show was a big jump. That was excellent. That's when I moved out of St. Louis and I had the gallery in New York.

MS. SAUER: What was the name of the gallery?

MS. GILES: Wallengren, USA. That was Henry Wallengren. USA, yeah. And I can't say the street name now, but it's one of the little short streets in SoHo [Thompson Street], right in the middle of SoHo.

MS. SAUER: That must have been exciting.

MS. GILES: Very cool. That was totally amazing.

MS. SAUER: For your first gallery to be in New York, that must have been—

MS. GILES: Yes, yeah. And he was strictly ceramics and fibers. Jack Larsen knew Henry well, and Jack, I think, even sold some of his collection there. And we went there several times. It was a wonderful surprise, yeah.

MS. SAUER: And do you have anything else to say in terms of ideas for your work or sources of inspiration? Is there anything that we haven't developed?

MS. GILES: I don't think so, because I think the environment that I'm in is just exactly where I'm working from. You know, the woods and the water. Barbara Rose one time said to me—I said, Barbara, I don't use color in my work. She said, well, of course you do. You use the color of wood and stone and earth. And that's where it's coming from. It's coming—and the water is very important now, because water is all about light and the amazing changes during one day, or as the light—sun—changes as the wind changes the surface of the water. I'm seeing so much of that that is beautiful.

The bark of trees is another textural thing that is very nice. And kind of what my new power hammer that I purchased about a year or so ago can do—because now I can really beat heavy metals—whether or not I'll get into a lot of heavier stuff because of its difficulty in supporting it on a piece—but I can hammer out much wider material, much thinner. I've wanted to work with sheet lead, and I've only worked with small lead. And I think

there might be something in that that I haven't done yet. They make a beautiful roofing material that has a lead component to it that weathers just gorgeous in this matte gray look. And I've been working on getting ahold of that, and so there's some material to explore. But it's still much in the vein of what I've been doing.

MS. SAUER: And I think the mention of the power hammer came up earlier, but I didn't ask you to describe that to me.

MS. GILES: Yes, it's run by an air compressor—very powerful. This one's a 20-pound hammer. It's primarily used by blacksmiths and mostly artisans. It's for hammering out hot iron, so it's usually used in conjunction with a forge. But since I don't work with hot metals—although I heat metals and alter them—I could hammer out hot iron material and all that on this hammer. It has that potential.

But I needed something that would require less physical stamina and less repetition for me. And the last hammer I had was also a blacksmith's, but it was called a trip hammer. And I had to step to get every pound. And that was my advance from a handheld hammer, but that, again, was another set of conditions I knew couldn't be permanent. So I finally graduated to a power hammer. I wanted one years ago, but they're very terrifying. They're very powerful. You don't want to ever get your finger in there. It would just be disastrous. So I think I have enough confidence now, and I know how I'm working well enough, that I feel pretty good about it. But it's a wonderful piece of equipment.

MS. SAUER: It sounds exciting.

MS. GILES: And it's loud, and you need earplugs to buffer yourself from it.

MS. SAUER: And where do you do this?

MS. GILES: In the garage up in the woods in Minnesota. As I said, where neighbors are not particularly close, and I also only do it during the daytime. I wouldn't do it to anybody at night anyhow. But you know, I can hammer out a lot of material much faster too. I mean, it's a real bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang. And I can get every piece done, every little piece of wire, hammered out very quickly.

MS. SAUER: And are you hammering on sheets of material, or are you hammering on small pieces?

MS. GILES: Wire. I cut—some of it sheet copper, sheet lead—I use a little bit. But primarily it's 15-, 16-, 18-gauge copper, iron, brass, tin-coated copper. Tin-coated copper is beautiful. It is a coated wire used commercially. I know most of my wire comes from a big wire company in Texas. But the tin-coated copper is gorgeous because as soon as you hammer it out, it breaks the tin away from some of the copper and the copper is exposed. And then I heat that, and you get these different grays in the tin and these oranges or even blacks if I heat it a long time or high temperature.

So that's a beautiful metal, and I can control the amount of temperature I put on it, so I can get as much gray or as much orange as I want to. These are all done with wires cut in three- or four-inch pieces, five-inch pieces. And then each end is hammered out and they naturally, with the hammering, take that nice curve-drop form. I don't have to shape them at all; the hammer shapes them.

MS. SAUER: So you do each one of these individually on this power?

MS. GILES: Yeah, I cut each wire. I buy two-, three-, four-, five-thousand-foot spools of wire, and then I cut off each one, make a pile of cuts in a box, and I hammer one end and the wire gets hot getting hammered. So you can't hammer both ends at the same time; you have to do one end of a whole series, and then you turn it over and do the other end. And I can do probably hundreds in a half an hour.

MS. SAUER: That's pretty fast.

MS. GILES: That's efficient. It's really nice.

MS. SAUER: And when does the color come in? When do you torch it?

MS. GILES: You need to do it after you've hammered it and usually after you've bent it, because heating it softens it a lot and anneals it. And if you tried to bend it after you've torched it, you can dent it. You want to get it kind of in position before you heat it. And then I often have to squeeze the horseshoe and the loop with the pliers, so it's a little more pulled together. So every piece of wire gets handled multiple times. Sometimes I've had college students helping me, assisting me, but primarily I've done it myself.

MS. SAUER: And do you control the colorations with the heat or with the hammering?

MS. GILES: No, with the heat. The hammering only gets the surface. I can make the surface completely smooth,

or if I move it around under the hammer, I can give it some indentations and some irregularities, which is real nice when they get wide. The coloration is strictly by temperature and the amount of time it's exposed to that temperature.

And I use either an oxyacetylene, a propane, or what's called MAPP gas. MAPP gas is about 400 degrees hotter than propane. Oxyacetylene is the hottest, and that's much harder to control. You use that primarily for melting or fusing. But the MAPP gas is beautiful on, like, brass, which takes a lot of temperature to get it to change color, and it's just much harder. The copper is real easy. It's not a perfect control process, but what you do is you torch enough of them and then you sort them, and you use the colors that you need at the time. And if it's gradating from light to dark, you select your pieces according to what you're making, what you're doing at the time.

MS. SAUER: And I'm curious to know how you learned all this—these torches and—

MS. GILES: Well, I went to Penland with Mary Lee Hu, and we did some of that jewelry, and I melted things. I made my little men there for the first time, my little wired men. And I learned I needed a hotter, higher-temperature armature to wrap the copper around. If I made the armature and the copper wrapping out of the same—both copper—they'd often fall apart, because everything would melt. But if I do an iron armature underneath and wrap it with copper, I can really melt the copper onto the iron.

So it was just an accumulation along the way of that, just people sharing things. You know, the blacksmiths, too, have lots of techniques with metals. They're very knowledgeable. The high school mechanics teacher at Horton Watkins High School in Ladue, he shared his metalsmithing books with me. And so it's just, everybody was nice. Craft Alliance has a metal shop, too, and they—oh, what's his name there that's so good—not Dale [Dan]. I'm losing his name, but he was very generous in sharing some ideas on how to use different metals, and stuff, too, along the way.

MS. SAUER: So it's a process of networking.

MS. GILES: Exactly. And artists are very nice about sharing ideas and helping you with techniques and information.

MS. SAUER: And would you say people that work with materials are any more sharing than other groups?

MS. GILES: I never worked with other groups much, you know? I wouldn't know. I don't think a painter deals in the myriad of techniques or materials that we do, you know? I'm sure there's some pretty solid basics they need to follow, but we're always experimenting. We're always trying to pull new stuff into it or doing it so many different ways.

MS. SAUER: I understand completely what you're saying. So would you say that when you've conquered technical problems, it has been through this inter-netting, networking?

MS. GILES: Yeah, a lot of it. A lot of it is just trying it out, too. You see something and it gives you an idea and you go, how can I do that? How can I make it look like that, or how can I get a surface like that? And if you want to give more texture to the hammered-out piece, you hammer one piece on top of another, and they'll embed their own images onto each other. You can do—oh, I mean, you can just go everywhere; you can just do tons of stuff. You can hammer with sand and form it over a sand thing and get a much different texture. But there's also a limit to how much fussing you can do if you're going to use 5,000 pieces on one project. You're not going to be doing that with every little piece, too, you know?

MS. SAUER: And how many parts of metal would you say—components of metal are on some of your—

MS. GILES: I have never counted. I made a basket one time that was, maybe, five inches in diameter, and it had over a thousand feathers on it. I think that's one of the only times I've counted a number. I've never, never counted. Isn't that funny? I never thought of doing that.

MS. SAUER: Now you'll probably. [They laugh.]

MS. GILES: Now I probably will. I remember I used to count the number of men around the top and that became the title of the piece, you know, 49 men, 68 men, or whatever. But I didn't count the metal. [Laughs.]

MS. SAUER: You probably don't want to.

MS. GILES: Maybe not, maybe not.

MS. SAUER: And what involvement with any national organizations like the American Crafts Council or Blacksmith Association of North America [Artists Blacksmith's Association of North America]—what influence has that had, or have any of the gatherings of those organizations—have you attended them or if they had any influence on you?

MS. GILES: Probably not much, because I haven't done much of that. Going to the—you know, going to museums, you see a level of quality that makes you want to do better and better. You go to the ACC shows with new artists. You know who is mastering their work. It gives you an eye for maybe helping you see your own work and how you're doing it. The SOFA shows have been terrific to see quality and to see what other people in your medium are doing, and just seeing how things are developing in the field, I think. I've only belonged to the American Craft Council, and that's just meant basically getting the magazine, and seeing every other month what's coming out and what people are doing.

MS. SAUER: Other than working with a college student, only occasionally, to pound metal, have you worked with anybody else or shared a studio?

MS. GILES: No, I've never had anybody work the coiling process. I just never figured out how that would ever work. My hairdresser does help me with prepping materials and loves to—and actually traded work time for a small piece one time, which was terrific. He was thrilled. And he's great at doing little stuff.

MS. SAUER: Are you referring to cutting the wire when you're prepping materials?

MS. GILES: He might cut wire. He might wrap and tie knots or, you know, on these little fractional pieces that are going to be incorporated.

[Audio break.]

He hammered in the basement for about a year, things like that—and students, a few college students. But I could never get them working on the actual pieces. They helped assemble materials or prepare materials—the pieces, the units. That was good. That was great. I loved that if you can get help that way.

MS. SAUER: And I'm thinking about the major piece that you made for the Triennale in Poland [*Totem Field*, 2000]. And I wonder if that had any lasting influence in your life? I'm thinking that was the biggest piece, so correct me if I'm wrong.

MS. GILES: It absolutely was the biggest piece, yeah. And I almost made it twice, too, because I had to remake it when it came back, simply because I didn't have a strong enough armature made for it when I sent it over. And I tried to limit the weight of it, but that was not a good idea, so I had to take it all apart and reconstruct it on a heavier armature before I put it out again. That was very ambitious as far as—but I was told it had to be big.

And isn't that interesting that I just ended up doing a repetitious piece, because there were the quills and the Diane Itter workshop of repetition—take a unit and repeat it and repeat it, you know. So I took the totem and I repeated it with a slight variation. But every single body on those—every totem, every row was exactly counted for the same, exactly the same number and combination of threads, to get the exact gradation all the way out.

Now I don't think I'd be so precise. I think I might let the colors change a little more regularly. But I was a little terrified of that assignment, you know. And so I just thought I had to have this thing just as perfect and as everything can be. And it was a major experience because, first of all, you learn about shipping overseas and getting things back from overseas. I contacted somebody over there and had the pedestal made over there by a Polish man. And it was actually the father of one of the curators or something. But it was a lot of work. [Laughs.]

MS. SAUER: Could you tell a little bit about how this—because I just threw out the name—but how this came about in the exhibit itself?

MS. GILES: Yes, apparently, this exhibit, they invite a diverse group to select people from their country every time they have—is it every third year or every two years? Every three years, triennial. And so Camille Cook was selected for that year, and, of course, as the one who started Friends of Fiber Art International, she wanted to select some of her fiber artists from people that—of course, I think that's what the whole thing was about. And she just chose myself and this other group of fiber artists from the United States. So that's how it happened.

MS. SAUER: And do you recall the size of that piece or approximate size of that piece?

MS. GILES: It was about four and a half feet high—yeah, about four and a half feet high, and about four feet wide. So that wasn't very big compared to a lot of—was this four feet—maybe five feet wide. I'm sorry; it's been awhile.

MS. SAUER: I know it's very, very large.

MS. GILES: For me. But in comparison to other people's things that went there, that was not big.

MS. SAUER: That's probably due to the technique.



MS. GILES: Yes, exactly, of course.

MS. SAUER: And how did that impact your work after that?

MS. GILES: I did much smaller multiple totem groupings. [They laugh.] I did. I had made some wonderful—the ones I liked very much—small totem groupings that had maybe five totems in them, but proportionally much smaller. And I gradated the material horizontally. And it really got me into gradating materials, though, too, and incorporating wire. Then finally it wasn't just hammered and thread; it was wire and hammered and thread. And now it's almost all wire. I don't even use thread as part of the texture anymore. But I just knew I couldn't do—unless there were some particular reason to do one that big, I didn't know that I needed to do that again.

MS. SAUER: Was it physically demanding?

MS. GILES: Well, it was so repetitious. I mean, there were seven totems in total. Every bottom figure was the same, so there were seven exactly that kind—seven—and they are five high. So 35 bodies, all exactly the same size, but then the colors had to be counted in them. Every row had to be counted and every one across. That's a bit much for one person, yeah.

MS. SAUER: Yes, right. And so do you think today you work more intuitively and less geometrically?

MS. GILES: Oh, I'm doing more multiples now. There's another point—yeah, more multiple pieces where one relates to the other. I think that's a nice thing, and they don't exactly match up. No, there's asymmetrical shadows cast on one from the other, things like that. Yeah, they're looser; they're much looser than that piece.

MS. SAUER: And do you think that changed the course of your career in any way?

MS. GILES: No. [Laughs.] No, I really don't. I was asked to exhibit in Korea, and I decided it was just too much. I couldn't. I didn't want to go to three different government agencies, which I had to do to get my piece out of hoc when it came back to this country. I just resented the bureaucracy that was so absurd about it. And then what I had to do was drive it to Chicago to this shipper to get all of these—I can't even remember the wording of it—all this different paperwork you had to have done to take it, send it over there, so it could be allowed to come back into the country. And this is before 9/11. I can't imagine now what it would be like. It was just a huge hassle.

MS. SAUER: So you'd rather make art, is what you're saying?

MS. GILES: For sure. I'd rather have somebody else do it if they wanted to. But maybe if the right thing came along, sure. I mean, who knows? But that was a lot of work experience.

MS. SAUER: But because you didn't have assistants, you went through this process yourself?

MS. GILES: Yeah, everything was mine. Yeah, I know. And I don't know if I—doing assistants, since I'm kind of antisocial, that might interfere with me anyhow, you know? I might find that just kind of inconvenient. The way I've done it, I've been able to send work home with people or send them to the basement. [They laugh.] I guess now I could send them to the garage, but you know.

MS. SAUER: Kind of the same thing. [They laugh.]

MS. GILES: Yeah, right, exactly. And they don't necessarily like that.

MS. SAUER: I'm sure.

MS. GILES: Yeah.

MS. SAUER: Were there any other motivating factors that we've missed that caused major shifts in your work or opened new avenues for you?

MS. GILES: That we haven't mentioned? You know, I talked about my father handing me a handful of porcupine quills. That was pretty neat—the workshops of people who gave you an idea, not a way to do something. They made you use your ways on new ideas—Diane Itter's thing was really interesting. Jack Lenor Larsen's choosing a piece for a museum. Who could have—that was amazing. And they buoy you up. They help you to move on.

When we were here about nine years ago, I told you I was a fan of Agnes Martin, and we went up to Taos. And Jim said, I know she lives in a nursing home on the back—a kind of a senior citizen home—I didn't mean a nursing home—a senior citizen home, on the back road behind this plaza. He said, and I know her dealer bought her a white Mercedes. He said, do you think we might be able to see where she lives?

And lo and behold, we drove into that place, and there was this white Mercedes down near the end in the most

modest of residence kind of places—just amazed. And then another day, he said, you know, I think her gallery is in the back of the square. Let's go by. And we went by her gallery to where we thought her studio might be, and there was the white Mercedes parked there. So Jim says, I'm going to get out and take a picture.

I kind of stood around behind the car because I thought, I'm too embarrassed. I wouldn't ever want to disturb this contemplative woman in any way. And just as he's about to snap the picture, the door of the studio opens. There is Agnes Martin standing there. It was just, like, I've seen God. She ended up inviting us in, and she had nothing she was working on. There was just a blank wall with all this kind of splatters around it. But knowing now how she worked, she could have been sitting there for weeks looking at that space thinking. But she was just wonderful, just wonderful.

And Agnes's writings talk about if you really want to be an artist, you should never have superfluous friends; you shouldn't have pets by any means; and none of this unnecessary stuff, you know? Your life needs to be so uncluttered that you can just be thinking art, thinking your art. And that's how Agnes lived. I mean, I will never be that, but I also can admire that huge—you know, and just think wonderful things. I don't know if that—I did name a piece—there is an *Agnes* totem at the gallery, but only because it's all gray, and it's one of my quietest pieces. But it's maybe something I would strive for, but I don't know how to get there. You know what I mean? She's just so pure. That was pretty neat.

MS. SAUER: That does sound like a pivotal experience.

MS. GILES: Yes, just extraordinary. I don't even know if it's discipline. I think it was just so internal to her, so natural to her. It didn't seem like an agonizing thing at all. She just knew how to get quiet and be in that quiet for long periods of time and wait until the inspiration came to her. That's how she did it.

MS. SAUER: Pretty magical.

MS. GILES: Isn't that wonderful?

MS. SAUER: Yes.

MS. GILES: Oh, my goodness. Such peace, such harmony with everything.

MS. SAUER: But you have some of that, too.

MS. GILES: I wish more. No, but that's nice. Thank you.

MS. SAUER: So we've talked about—I know you've spent a lot of your time teaching young children. And sprinkled throughout this interview have been conversations about your teaching theories, as you've accepted the teaching of others and how you have taught. But maybe in summary, any other personal insights that you have?

MS. GILES: I think the discovery of this art expression for me was a great gift. It happened—it started before my major life changes, you know. And it's continued on, and it's like a gift. I feel so wonderful when I am into my work, not just picking it up and working it a little bit, but really into it, when I've spent hours and hours. And I suppose it's sort of like those endorphins that runners get when they are maxing out their exercise; it feels so good.

When I'm really working and it's really humming along and one thing's building on another, it's the most wonderful feeling. It's my endorphins. You know, it's my—oh, I just feel so good. I feel strong. I feel happy, you know, real happy, real positive. And every once in a while those glimmers come that there is something really good coming out here, you know, something—and it just goes right. It just kicks right in. But you need—for me, I need nice long periods of time to get all that nice stuff to come together. It really does take an investment of yourself a lot.

MS. SAUER: And if you were to tell a young artist who were to come to you and say, I really would like to be as famous as you; what should I do? What would be your advice?

MS. GILES: Do you love doing what you do? You've got to love it. And then you're going to give it time, and it's going to come to you. What should come to you will come to you. You can't make it; you can't go out and beat the pavement and make yourself a great artist. I think you have to invest yourself in it. You have to love doing it. And, you know, expose yourself to various things like shows or dealers or something, but just love doing it. And then make the best things you can make. Let people criticize them, or be honest about what you're making, too, because you've got to hear other looks. But you also—it just has to be really from you.

MS. SAUER: Good advice.

MS. GILES: Thank you.

MS. SAUER: And is there anything that we have missed that you would like to say?

MS. GILES: I think I would say mostly I'm very lucky.

MS. SAUER: And tell me more about that.

MS. GILES: I am lucky because of the people that have helped me along in my work. I know from my husband, who is a critic and who is very observant of the art world, that there are many wonderful artists out there that are never found. They're never put out to show. They're never really given the recognition they need to get. I think I've been very fortunate.

I love to do what I'm doing. I'm so lucky to have this work for myself. I think it's really, really worked well for me. It just makes me feel good when I do it, so I'm just real lucky I found it. And I didn't find it until I was in my late 30s, you know, so that's kind of surprising—I mean, really found it. There was a diddle here and diddle there, but it was kind of a late discovery. So I tell that to people, too. Don't say, I'm too old or too something. Do it. Just go do it, you know?

MS. SAUER: And how old were you when you had your first art exhibit?

MS. GILES: Well, that was—I think I'm saying 39. When did I do that—'80 or '81 or something—so I'm 62 now, so that was—so if I've been doing it some—there's my math; what is that? [Laughs.] Twenty-six years ago, subtract that from 62, what is it? [They laugh.]

MS. SAUER: I can't.

MS. GILES: What do you do? Well, it was late 30s—

MS. SAUER: When you first—

MS. GILES: I didn't marry Jim until I was 50. That was my 50-year miracle—God, that was a miracle. And so, yeah, I had been doing it for some time there before him.

MS. SAUER: You have come a long way in those years.

MS. GILES: Isn't that extraordinary?

MS. SAUER: It is. You have done many things.

MS. GILES: Because the movement was already there, Jane, I didn't plot new ground. I didn't go out and try to convert all the doubters. There were already a lot of people there that believed in this kind of work. Our predecessors, too, that were the major fiber artists—wow. They did—they broke the barriers. So there was already a nice path there to walk on.

MS. SAUER: And I don't know if you wanted to say anything more about how you felt about coming into the field with that first generation happening, because I feel that way too, that it is the Ferne Jacobses and the Diane Itters, and Cynthia Schira and people like that that were the first ones that said, fiber art is art, that it's not placemats and table runners. And if you wanted to expand on that thought?

MS. GILES: Well, they were so established and so hugely received already, I think I just snuck in the back door, you know? I think it's pretty quietly that way. I mean, I don't even put myself in the same category as they are.

MS. SAUER: You should.

MS. GILES: You know, I just think they were so—pioneers. It's kind of trivial, but it's true. They were; they were. And you know, they had to break that barrier, and that's not easy to do. I never really had to do that as a woman or as an artist. I just kind of felt I was received in all those regards, and that was wonderful.

MS. SAUER: Well, it probably is because some people came before both of us.

MS. GILES: Yeah, I think it has to have helped a lot. I did start out with rather traditional little vessels. They were kind of knockoffs of or just a container kind of thing, because I didn't have a lot of courage yet about it, and I hadn't come out of that art school ready to hit the galleries like the students are sometimes, but those people gave me windows of possibilities that are still there.

MS. SAUER: Do you feel like you're opening up some windows and doors for the next generation?

MS. GILES: Oh, there's a lot of new ones coming along already. Oh, yes. Oh, yes. I think I'm getting old already for this field, even though 24 years or 25 years isn't a lot of time. There's younger people working and that's great. There will be some that stay with it and really make their marks, and maybe they'll be grateful to us, too, you know, who knows?

MS. SAUER: I guess we like to think that.

MS. GILES: Wouldn't that be something? [They laugh.] Yeah, exactly.

MS. SAUER: Someone besides us is going to sit across a table from each other and thank people like us for opening doors.

MS. GILES: Yeah, that we persevered or whatever. We'll see; we'll see.

MS. SAUER: Well, thank you so much for allowing me to be your interviewer. It's been wonderful.

MS. GILES: Well, Jane, it's an honor to be a part of this archive. I mean, that is quite amazing.

MS. SAUER: I feel the same way. Now, if I missed anything before we close?

MS. GILES: I feel I said far more than I should have. [They laugh.] Thank you.

MS. SAUER: People will enjoy this very much. Thank you so much for being so open, too. It's made my part of this interview very easy.

MS. GILES: Well, I learned a lot. Thank you. [They laugh.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]