

Interview with Marianne Strengell
Conducted by Robert Brown
At the Artist's home in Wellfleet, Massachusetts
January 8, March 18, and December 16, 1982

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Marianne Strengell on January 8, March 18, and December 16, 1982. The interview took place at the artist's home in Wellfleet, Massachusetts, and was conducted by Robert Brown for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview was transcribed as part of the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America.

The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

MARIANNE STRENGELL: Well, my family was really what shaped my life I guess, in lots of ways because my father was an architect and an excellent critic, and my mother was a completely self-made interior designer - not decorator, designer. She had excellent taste and a beautiful sense of color. [Inaudible.]

My childhood was very unlikely for anyone, much unlike my own children. I was a tomboy; I was absolutely left alone most of the time and did what I liked.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you have brothers and sisters?

MS. STRENGELL: I had an older brother and a younger sister. But anyway, it was very different from my own children.

MR. BROWN: And you grew up largely in Helsinki, in the city?

MS. STRENGELL: Yes. Mostly in the winters I was in Helsinki and the summers I spent with my grandfather, who was one the greatest influences in my life.

MR. BROWN: Really? In what way?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, he was just a wonderful, beautiful man. He was very poor and very musical. He wanted to become a concert pianist but he couldn't afford it, so he became a banker, and quite rich, which was nice. And he had a sister and a mother to provide for, and so forth and so on. But he was absolutely wonderful, and I think he had a lot to do with my upbringing.

MR. BROWN: What are some of the things you remember that he might have said to you, or the example he set for you?

MS. STRENGELL: You know, he didn't really say very much, but I mean - well, the music was number one. He was part of a quartet of beautiful, lovely older men, and they used to - I actually lived in the house, in his house; we had part of his house - and I used to creep downstairs and hide in back of a red curtain and listen to these gentlemen, you know - playing. So that really is part of me, entirely. I'm not musical, not in the least, but I appreciate it enormously, and I think it'll - [inaudible]. Later on when I got old enough to drive a car I used to drive him to concerts in our little old car and take him back home, and he used to open his little pouch and used to give me ten Finnish marks for the trip.

But he was a lovely person. He never interfered - he never said anything much, but he was always there.

MR. BROWN: You were very interested in music. Did you play anything?

MS. STRENGELL: No.

MR. BROWN: Did they give you - did you have lessons or anything?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, yes, I had lessons. I was -

MR. BROWN: But you didn't respond?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, I responded, yes, my knuckles did. I was hit on my knuckles over and over again. Really, I had no talent in that at all, but I do have that appreciation.

MR. BROWN: Now, when you were very young, what were some of the talents as you look back? Did you draw or do anything?

MS. STRENGELL: Yes, Yes, I did lots of drawings, you know - I mean, like most kids do at a certain time. I did very well, then I got terrible, then I grew up a little bit and -

MR. BROWN: You got terrible? You mean your drawings declined?

MS. STRENGELL: Yes, they did. I think that happens to almost every child.

MR. BROWN: When they get more self-conscious?

MS. STRENGELL: Yes, exactly. So -

MR. BROWN: Now, with your parents, your father an architect, did you ever go watch him work much?

MS. STRENGELL: He didn't do very much actual architectural work, as a matter of fact. He was mainly a critic. He was a brilliant critic.

MR. BROWN: Which meant what, he was writing or -

MS. STRENGELL: Yes, he wrote numerous books and - well, he was always just there, looking at things and deciding what was good or bad.

MR. BROWN: What was his name?

MS. STRENGELL: Gustaf Strengell.

MR. BROWN: And did you remember going around with him to look at buildings?

MS. STRENGELL: No, no. No, that sort of thing didn't exist in my days at all. I had, - as a matter of fact, we had little to do with my parents, but they were there.

MR. BROWN: They had their own life, so as a child you were kept apart.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah. I mean, it's nothing like what's going on now at all. [Laughs.]

MR. BROWN: Would he travel in his position as a critic? Would he go to other countries?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

MR. BROWN: I mean, Finland being a small country, there would be only so much he might want to write about.

MS. STRENGELL: No, no, he traveled a lot, and he was a great linguist. And he spoke numerous languages.

MR. BROWN: That was a time when Finnish art, architecture was reaching some prominence in Europe.

MS. STRENGELL: Exactly, that was the - well, altogether that was the year when Finnish art, architecture and so forth came through four - there was Sevelius, whom I knew well, there was Saarinen, and there were numerous painters - [inaudible] - and so forth. And they thought - it was a revolution.

MR. BROWN: Why do you suppose it came about at this one time, the first quarter of this century? Why do you think that may have happened at that time?

MS. STRENGELL: No, I don't know.

MR. BROWN: A great deal of excitement?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, indeed, indeed, and a lot going on.

MR. BROWN: So you knew Sevelius?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh yes.

MR. BROWN: What was he like?

MS. STRENGELL: He was charming.

MR. BROWN: Was he a friend of your grandfather's?

MS. STRENGELL: No, no, my father and Saarinen, you know, mainly to Saarinen at that time, I think.

MR. BROWN: Now, Saarinen, Eliel Saarinen, his family were good friends of your family?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, yes, yes. Well, I guess my father and Eliel - well, they went to school together. In other words, they grew up together. But they went to school together and they had lots of competition work that they did together, and they were part of this group, and they took - a wild group, believe me. [Laughs.]

MR. BROWN: Wild?

MS. STRENGELL: Yes, quite.

MR. BROWN: How so?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, they just could stay on forever and talk, talk, talk. There was this wonderful story about - oh, my goodness, I can't remember the name of the conductor. They went to - [inaudible] - and this conductor had to go to Russia to conduct a concert. Well, he was gone for a day or so and he came back and they were all [laughs] still there, you know. It was a very intense group; they just talked and talked and talked, and they did.

MR. BROWN: In other words, they'd have a party or something -

MS. STRENGELL: No, no party.

MR. BROWN: - or a discussion going and it continued right on until their friend came back a day or so later?

MS. STRENGELL: Yes, they were still there.

MR. BROWN: And it was still going?

MS. STRENGELL: Yes. [Laughter.]

I'm terribly sorry about not remembering names.

MR. BROWN: But were they also very hardworking, as you remember, your father and these people?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, I wouldn't say my father really, no. He wasn't very hardworking. My mother was very hardworking. And, as I say, she was extraordinary.

MR. BROWN: Now, had she had some formal training?

MS. STRENGELL: None, absolutely none. I don't know where she picked it up but she just had this beautiful inborn taste and sense of color and form.

MR. BROWN: What was her name?

MS. STRENGELL: Anna - [unintelligible].

MR. BROWN: And she began - when you were small do you remember her? Was she designing at home or did she - what was her involvement, the first that you remember?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, I think she started at home, yes, and then she became head of the Interior Textile - [inaudible] - the director of it. And -

MR. BROWN: What, something that she had founded or -

MS. STRENGELL: Yes. Now, she felt very strongly about people in the country who - I mean, she was very warmhearted - people in the country who really needed work and needed some extra income and so forth and so on, and so she started this thing, and it was a cottage industry which I followed up much later on in my own life. And she dug out all these little girls in the country, you know, who needed work and who had two hands and good sense - didn't want to design, they wanted just to work. And they wove for her for the firm that she was director of.

MR. BROWN: Would she provide the design?

MS. STRENGELL: I provided the design.

MR. BROWN: Oh, as you got older you provided the design, even when you were quite young?

MS. STRENGELL: Yes, I started young anyway. [Laughs.]

MR. BROWN: What kinds of designs were you - did you have them do in the early years?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, mostly just yard goods: upholstery, draperies, so forth and so on.

MR. BROWN: Just with geometric patterns in them?

MS. STRENGELL: No, mostly very simple. I never followed any of those bold things at all. As a matter of fact, when I first got my first job in that firm, I closed my eyes every minute, going into it because I didn't want to see anything that would be done that way. I just wanted to do it my own way.

MR. BROWN: When your mother began by going out in the country to get people to weave things, did those country people still have a traditional decorative form, or had that been pretty well lost?

MS. STRENGELL: No, I think it had been pretty well lost.

MR. BROWN: And she didn't attempt to revive any -

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, no, no.

MR. BROWN: - kind of peasant traditions?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, partly because of me because I didn't want to do that at all. I mean, I felt very strongly that this was a little different era and we could do something different.

MR. BROWN: What was the clientele for your mother's firm?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, partly it was a shop.

MR. BROWN: A shop in Helsinki?

MS. STRENGELL: In Helsinki, and people looked, came and bought yard goods; there were other things there too, embroidery, but part of it was that, the country weavers, and then there was the very exciting other part. Finland was a small country, and - it still is very small - and there were lots of people with money. I mean, in industry - I mean, people who really could afford things and wanted things, you know, that whole strata. And for them we did special things because they all knew each other, they all had cocktails everyday together [laughs] so they each wanted to have something special. And that was - and I liked challenges, because I had to provide each one with something. But at the same time, we were practical enough to do it possibly on a common work - [inaudible] - for instance, you know - instead of setting up everything new every time. I did lots of rugs and special things.

MR. BROWN: Well, that's jumping a little ahead of my question about your childhood still, so can we get back to that?

MS. STRENGELL: Okay [laughs].

MR. BROWN: One thing you've mentioned during that time was when your - in 1923 when your father went with Eliel Saarinen and came to this country.

MS. STRENGELL: Yes, right.

MR. BROWN: Can you just talk a bit about that? Did you hear about him at the time, or at least later you -

MS. STRENGELL: I think later. I really don't think, you know - I was, let's see, 23. No, I don't think that it was discussed with me particularly at the time. I just heard it.

MR. BROWN: What happened? Can you recall what happened or tell me what happened on that trip, what it amounted to?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, sure. Eliel got the second prize in -

MR. BROWN: That was in Chicago.

MS. STRENGELL: - *Chicago Tribune* thing, and he didn't speak English. I don't know if he spoke anything else, either, [laughs] but he didn't speak English. My father was a great linguist and they were great friends, so Eliel asked my father to come with him and be his spokesman, so to speak. So they came over, and it was all very beautiful and very gay and lots of parties. My father gave beautiful speeches and Eliel had some long, cool drinks, [laughs] and that was that.

After that tour my father came back to Finland but Eliel stayed on and got his family over, I would say, about half a year later.

MR. BROWN: By then had Eliel decided he would make a career over here?

MS. STRENGELL: I don't exactly know if he did or not. He was offered a job, I think, first in - [unintelligible] - and then somewhere else - and then in Ann Harbor.

MR. BROWN: Teaching at the University?

MS. STRENGELL: Teaching, but I really don't know much about that.

MR. BROWN: And you said he made connections there with - well, some of his students were - the Booths [George and Ellen] and all were setting up Cranbrook [Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan].

MS. STRENGELL: Right. One of the Booth sons, his youngest son, Henry, and Bob Swanson, who ultimately married - [unintelligible] - they were the ones that did the whole thing. And that's how we got to Cranbrook, and that's how Cranbrook was started, because Mr. Booth had had - he wanted to have immortality, I suppose, [laughs] and he had money and he had a beautiful, enormous piece of land in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, and he thought he would just start a museum. And I think Eliel managed to talk him out of that and say that a living person is more important. There's lots of museums, and why don't you start a school?

So that's how Cranbrook started. And Booth was tremendous. I mean, he had lots of money and he was very - he was a wonderful person, the older Booth.

MR. BROWN: You got to know him later, didn't you?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, and I came - [inaudible] - of course.

MR. BROWN: Oh, your father then came back to Finland, and you went on then to a school, industrial art school.

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, yes, yes.

MR. BROWN: Can you describe that a bit, your schooling?

MS. STRENGELL: I had sort of some stupid dreams about going to the university, which I would have been entirely unsuitable for.

MR. BROWN: Why, because you didn't have an academic sense?

MS. STRENGELL: No, not that kind of mind at all. So they just shoved me into art school, and I thought that that was very smart of them, actually. They took me out one year early. I never took my little white thing, you know, that little hat.

MR. BROWN: You mean from high school, you didn't quite finish that?

MS. STRENGELL: No. One year -

MR. BROWN: And you'd been a rather indifferent student?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, average student. I mean, I just didn't care. So I went to art school, and that was quite an experience. And that actually has influenced me in lots of ways for what I've done after that because the art school was terrible, I thought. I don't know what they wanted to do with us, but it was not to make us magnificent teachers or artists or something like that. It was actually boring, but of course I was 17, 18 and I had a glorious time otherwise: dancing, sports.

MR. BROWN: Can you describe the way they taught -

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, I can indeed.

MR. BROWN: - and what kind of courses you had?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, I can indeed, because that's why my students are better off in the long run.

Well, I got up to the weaving department and there were about five looms, and they were all set up with little white - [inaudible]. And I was told, get a shuttle and weave little towels in white. So, okay, I did that. And then I had done that; I said what do I do now? So, I was to weave towels with little borders, so I did that. And then I was supposed to weave some more towels and I said, thank you, no, and I just left because I just - it didn't do anything for me. I mean, imagination, inspiration, fun -

MR. BROWN: None of that.

MS. STRENGELL: No. Well, anybody can move a shuttle back and forth.

MR. BROWN: So what happened when you walked out that class?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, then I decided that the only thing that I could do was to go to a design class. Well, that was a little bit better, but not much because that whole school operated on the idea that the teachers would leave rather 3 in a half p.m. and not have to bother with students. So I got assignments that were supposed to keep me happy and unhappy for three weeks, and I was done in two days, so I was not very well liked at all as a matter of fact [laughs].

MR. BROWN: Well, you were able to master what they wanted you to do very quickly.

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, I mastered them in two days, but not in three weeks, so I was bored - [inaudible].

MR. BROWN: What kind of problems did they set you in design?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, I can only remember a wallpaper [laughs]. I was supposed to make a wallpaper, and I made something with enormous birds in wild colors. And that's the only thing I can remember.

MR. BROWN: Was that liked by the teachers?

MS. STRENGELL: Yes, as a matter of fact my design teacher was very pleased [laughs]. Nobody else had done that before, so she was a little shocked.

MR. BROWN: This was really an applied art school then. Was it mainly weaving wallpapers?

MS. STRENGELL: No, it was fine arts, sculpture, painting, ceramics. That was a good department, but I didn't go there.

MR. BROWN: Ceramics?

MS. STRENGELL: Yes.

MR. BROWN: Was that much more forward-looking and better instruction?

MS. STRENGELL: No, I think the man at the head of it was much more interesting, but I didn't take it so I don't know.

MR. BROWN: Well, what did you do since you had all this free time, because you finished your project in two days and you were given three weeks. Did you just do more design?

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, I worked pretty hard. I mean, I did what I was supposed to. But after school - and this has been worn out later on because some of my students who got fellowships to Finland felt very much the same, and the school has not changed at all. I mean, you would just get the job, get your paycheck and to heck with the students.

MR. BROWN: So you really couldn't talk much with the teachers at all?

MS. STRENGELL: Absolutely not.

MR. BROWN: They weren't even there all the time?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, they were there but, I mean, they weren't [laughs].

MR. BROWN: Did any of them amount to much as artists?

MS. STRENGELL: Some must have, I think, and some good people came out of there. Maybe I wasn't good enough. For instance, there was a girlfriend of mine, Dora Jung, who did some beautiful, beautiful things, but after school, not in school.

MR. BROWN: What did she do?

MS. STRENGELL: Textiles.

MR. BROWN: Textiles.

MS. STRENGELL: So, - well, anyway, that influenced my teaching at Cranbrook.

MR. BROWN: You decided you would be more with the students?

MS. STRENGELL: Not only that but just the family group - just a lovely, lovely time, even the 25 - almost 25 that didn't get to go over.

MR. BROWN: The family group? Do you mean -

MS. STRENGELL: Not if you go very close.

MR. BROWN: At Cranbrook?

MS. STRENGELL: Yes, at Cranbrook, and I let them go. As a matter of fact, I didn't let them into the library for half the year because I didn't want them to copy me. I made them cry. They did, too.

MR. BROWN: You made them struggle to develop their own -

MS. STRENGELL: I said, you go ahead and do this yourself, and some of them did cry [laughs].

MR. BROWN: You finished - the Central School of Industrial Art, you finished there in 1929.

MS. STRENGELL: Right, and then I got a job. My father, as a matter of fact, took me to Sweden on one of the big boats at the time and introduced me to Sweden. And I got the job with Svenska Slate [ph] Training.

MR. BROWN: And what sort of a place was that, Svenska Slate [ph] Training?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, that was actually mainly an office, but working with this industry and working with designers, and very, very much with the 1930 Stockholm Exhibition.

MR. BROWN: And what kind of a business was it? Was it a design firm?

MS. STRENGELL: No. I really don't know. I just know what I had to do, and I had to do everything. I was farmed out to designers to do working drawings, and when the buildings finally got up I was on the ground all the time doing everything, just everything. If somebody slacked I had to tap them on the head and say, stop it, you know - that sort of thing. I did everything.

MR. BROWN: So you designed working drawings? You had skill in draftsmanship so you could do the -

MS. STRENGELL: I didn't have it, but I developed it, you know. I just said, well, hey, if that's what I have to do, I will do it.

MR. BROWN: These were working designs for -

MS. STRENGELL: Tapestries, rugs, you know, things like that.

MR. BROWN: This is textiles mainly then?

MS. STRENGELL: Yes. There was a quite famous person at the time, her name was Elsa Gullberg and she had a big textile thing, but it was all very much Swedish and it was very traditional, mostly traditional.

MR. BROWN: But the Swedish were very different from what you were heading toward.

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, definitely.

MR. BROWN: Really? They were more interested in traditional -

MS. STRENGELL: Traditional patterns, very simple materials: linen mostly, wool, felt.

MR. BROWN: You found it dull?

MS. STRENGELL: I did.

MR. BROWN: But this work in 1929 and '30, getting ready for the exhibition in 1930 was exciting because -

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, it was very -

MR. BROWN: - you were so busy?

MS. STRENGELL: I was busy 21 hours a day. I had to get up early in the morning and I took typewriting and what have you and so forth, and then I went to the office and I worked all day on various projects that were handed out. Then I - [inaudible].

MR. BROWN: But most of your work then had to do with fabric, with textiles.

MS. STRENGELL: No, I wouldn't say so. I'm not sure because I really had to do a lot of other things too, which I did ultimately in some other jobs later.

MR. BROWN: You mean other types of design or -

MS. STRENGELL: No, no, no, just really odd jobs during the exhibition. After all, I was only 20 and I hadn't had any tremendous, you know, responsibilities.

MR. BROWN: What the purpose of the exhibition, do you recall, the "Stockholm Exhibition?"

MS. STRENGELL: Well, that was, I would say, the first thing that ever happened in Scandinavia - in Europe as a matter of fact, those modern architecture, modern design and so forth and so on, to gather them together. But I did every kind of job, manual and -

MR. BROWN: Is there anything in the exhibition that particularly stands out in your memory?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, the atmosphere was very, very, very exciting because it was completely different, you know. It was all simple, and the situation - [inaudible] - with lots of planting and stuff, so it's exciting, and the people I met, of course, you know. The architect, Asplund was wonderful, and everybody I worked with was fun, but I was a little green maybe.

MR. BROWN: Well, sure, you were pretty young.

What was Asplund like, Gunner Asplund, Swedish architect?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, I can't really tell you much about that. I mean, he was -

MR. BROWN: He was the really modernist Scandinavian, wasn't he?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, absolutely. He was a very serious man. I don't recall him having any great sense of humor or anything. He was good.

MR. BROWN: So this work continued through the summer of 1930, or something like that?

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, I came back in June, or something like that.

MR. BROWN: And you came back to do what?

MS. STRENGELL: I came back to be the head and only designer of this - [unintelligible] - which was my mother's shop, and this was all sort of tailor-made for me. But when I got there I had not really designed anything beforehand, nothing. The only thing I wanted to do was to be myself, and I didn't want to look at anybody else's work. And I actually closed my eyes when I had to go through the shop. They had a good designer before me but I'm actually very different. She was more traditional; no idea about color, which of course I loved.

MR. BROWN: What did you attempt to introduce into your designs? Did you do breakthroughs in color, brighter colors?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, yeah, definitely. Brighter - well, I had two sorts of lines. One was how to use whites and beiges and blacks well together, and the other one was color and texture. There was no texture in anything.

MR. BROWN: No variations?

MS. STRENGELL: Nothing, and also in raw materials. I mean, it was terribly dull.

MR. BROWN: And you began introducing a broader range of raw materials.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] That's what I did immediately. And that of course shocked everybody because I guess I have never had any compulsion about not mixing anything I like. I used everything, from rags to riches - [inaudible] - whole business.

MR. BROWN: Maybe we can go through each of those things. Now, the combination of beige, whites and blacks, what was the problem there? What were you trying to do with that?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, I think you can do a lot with those colors if you use them right, you know, if you strengthen them. I mean, it doesn't need to be dull, you know, you can be very dramatic. But I had - as I've said before, I had special clientele, you know, and that was interesting to me because they all wanted something different.

MR. BROWN: Would they talk with you privately about what they wanted or would you say, you're going to get what I -

MS. STRENGELL: No, they didn't discuss it with me; with my mother, yes, but not with me.

MR. BROWN: Perhaps fortunate for you is the fact that each one of them wanted to have something so different that they would accept something - if you did something utterly new that was all right, wasn't it?

MS. STRENGELL: Right, absolutely.

MR. BROWN: They were an unusually perceptive -

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, they were pleased, they were pleased. They were happy; they were best, different than the next door neighbor. That made it fun.

MR. BROWN: [Laughs.] And in terms of color, did you introduce brighter colors than had been used?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, definitely. You know, the old Finnish - [unintelligible] - had beautiful colors, but that had sort of disappeared in the meantime. But they had texture and -

MR. BROWN: Oh, they did?

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, well, they had, you know - [unintelligible] - and they had beautiful colors.

MR. BROWN: But you weren't consciously trying to revive that were you?

MS. STRENGELL: No, absolutely not.

MR. BROWN: Many designers or craftsmen take crafts as a very serious vocation, don't they? Did you do your mother's frame in a rather playful spirit, would you say? You were just going to experiment?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, I frankly don't know much about how other people do it, but I want to experiment, and I want a challenge.

MR. BROWN: Did your mother encourage you at that time?

MS. STRENGELL: At all times; she was magnificent about it. And we had a very close relationship because of that, not just because she was my mother, but we worked together, you know, and that made for a very ideal situation.

MR. BROWN: Now, did you find fairly soon that her clients liked your work quite a lot?

MS. STRENGELL: Yes, apparently, but she might have been a very good saleswoman too. [Laughs.] I mean, she really could convince people, and she always convinced them the right way. And she was critical, but really, she didn't have too much reason to be critical of me because I did things she liked.

MR. BROWN: You had to work on a pretty large scale, didn't you, if you were doing drapery and upholstery, rugs?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, I did everything, sure.

MR. BROWN: Did you mind having to do the very large things? Weren't those long, long projects?

MS. STRENGELL: No. I don't know what you mean with the long -

MR. BROWN: Well, I mean, it took a good long time to do a great big thing.

MS. STRENGELL: Well, of course I didn't weave it myself; I had weavers.

MR. BROWN: Oh, you had weavers. You would get the thing and -

MS. STRENGELL: I have always been a designer, not a weaver. I mean, I don't do the manual part of it. And I had excellent weavers. You know, the Finns - all of us talking about the Finns and Japanese and the - [inaudible] - and there's a lot to be told about that because my weavers, they had a sense of what I wanted to do. I mean, they did beautiful work. And I did a lot of work in Japan later on. It was the same thing.

MR. BROWN: But in your mother's shop, then, you would show - tell them - you would bring out the fabric you wanted or the thread you want to use.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, or I make a sample or a drawing for certain things like a hanging, you know. I had to make also make a drawing, of course, but never working drawings. I just worked with them. I mean, we just talked, you know, and they did it.

MR. BROWN: And the same thing if you went out to the cottages in the country; you'd just sort of get them started.

MS. STRENGELL: Well, actually, I never did go out.

MR. BROWN: Oh, your mother really -

MS. STRENGELL: My mother was the one. That was her -

MR. BROWN: You had not only, then, these custom commissions, really, but you had an open - a line.

MS. STRENGELL: Right, right.

MR. BROWN: And work, was that sold mostly just in Finland, or did your mother export?

MS. STRENGELL: No, she didn't export - right in the shop.

MR. BROWN: There wasn't then the competition as we have here from huge textile firms.

MS. STRENGELL: Well, you see, this was all hand-woven, for one thing. I mean, we made it different.

MR. BROWN: But there was a fairly large market for that in Finland at that time?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, it was, because you couldn't get anything else. There were one or two factories that turned out stuff, you know, and not very good, and a couple of places that did prints, but that was about all. So she really had the market. There wasn't much else.

MR. BROWN: At that time would that have been a market that would have extended to lower-income people too? Would some of them be buying?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, prices were reasonable, you know. This was not a high-priced place at all. I mean, certain things cost more than others, of course, but normally, anybody - I mean, I have always believed in low-cost fabrics, for instance. I mean, I can see why you have to go -

MR. BROWN: And the shop could turn out quite a large volume, could it?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, yes; oh, yes.

MR. BROWN: You had how many weavers?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, there must have been at least 50 of them in the country, you know. And we just sent the yarns to them and sent all the facts about the whole thing, and they went to work, and then they shipped it back. So it was a good cottage industry.

MR. BROWN: You stayed with it six years, until 1936.

MS. STRENGELL: Until I left.

MR. BROWN: During that time, I've talked about a couple things: in 1933, your trip to Milan, to Italy. How did that come about?

MS. STRENGELL: I have no idea. I can't see why I was picked, but I was picked as assistant to the architect who was going to put on the *Triennale* show [*V Triennale of Milan*, Palazzo del'Arte, May to September, 1933], the Finnish Pavilion.

MR. BROWN: The *Triennale* was an important exhibition at that time.

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, very. Oh, indeed, it still is I think. I don't know.

MR. BROWN: Who was the architect, do you recall - a Finnish architect?

MS. STRENGELL: A Finnish architect. I can't recall his name right now, I'm sorry.

MR. BROWN: When you got there, what was the task that had to be done?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, actually, when I got there - I went by myself. He came later, and I came first - it was Easter. And I came on the train from Berlin down to Milan, and I met a young German girl and German boy, and they were going to Venice. And they said, "Why don't you come to Venice." So I said, "Oh, that sounds great, why don't I go to Venice?" [Laughs.] So I went to Venice at Easter, and everybody was in Venice.

So, the best I could do was I slept in a bathtub, [laughs] and I had a wonderful time. So, then I got from there to Milan. And what I had to do was, again, more or less like the things - I had to do everything: I had to feed everybody, I had to run around, I had to unpack, I had to translate.

MR. BROWN: You were sort of the manager of the whole thing.

MS. STRENGELL: Well, I was just - yeah, all-trade.

MR. BROWN: But the building was going up, the Pavilion?

MS. STRENGELL: No, that was in the big palace. It was not a special -

MR. BROWN: Not a special building.

MS. STRENGELL: No, no, it was in the palace. And the next-door people were the Hungarians, as I told you, and they were delightful.

MR. BROWN: Were they?

MS. STRENGELL: Yes.

MR. BROWN: Oh, you mean you would chat with them quite a lot?

MS. STRENGELL: They would - [inaudible] - or cry all the time. No, no, we had a very good time.

MR. BROWN: What sort of things were represented in the exhibition?

MS. STRENGELL: As a matter of fact, it was textiles, because that seemed to be the project at the time, so it was mostly that - none of mine.

MR. BROWN: None of yours?

MS. STRENGELL: No.

MR. BROWN: None of your mother's?

MS. STRENGELL: No, no, it was mostly - well, it was some old things and some new things, but mostly textiles and some tapestries, and things like that.

MR. BROWN: Do you recall, what was the reaction of the public, of the critics and all to the exhibition?

MS. STRENGELL: I think it was very good. It was very good. And I think the press was good. I had to talk to them in the most mysterious language, half German and a little bit of Italian, and it was all right.

MR. BROWN: You did some writing during that time, didn't you?

MS. STRENGELL: I did.

MR. BROWN: On the exhibition?

MS. STRENGELL: No, not on that. No, mostly afterwards, you know. My favorite writing was done in Rome. And I was in hospital for 10 days after that because it was such a tremendous, tremendous thing. It was a Mussolini, a show on Mussolini and his march to Rome, and it was a grisly thing. It was all the bloody things hanging around, and the flags, and it was pitch black. And

there was this sound effect going, saying, "Proscenta [sp], proscenta, proscenta." It was a very, very eerie affair. It really got to me, so I wrote it for my paper in Finland and then I ended up in hospital. No, not quite right away, I went to Capri first. But that, of my writings at that time, is the one I like best. And unfortunately, I can't get it. It disappeared.

MR. BROWN: It might be in the newspapers' files.

MS. STRENGELL: No, it isn't, I tried. I couldn't get it.

MR. BROWN: But that was a horrifying aspect of the trip, the Mussolini presence.

MS. STRENGELL: It was absolutely fantastic, the whole thing regarding Mussolini at the time. You know, you'd just go out and sit in Piazza Venecia, you know, and you'd practically get shot through the heart because you were even there, because he was so close. It was really quite something.

MR. BROWN: But your time in Milan was different, wasn't it? I mean, that wasn't the capital.

MS. STRENGELL: No, no, no. I didn't like Milan, particularly.

MR. BROWN: No?

MS. STRENGELL: No, it's very commercial. I mean, a lot of places in Italy are like that.

MR. BROWN: But you had to really be in charge because the architect left, you said -

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, I had to.

MR. BROWN: Yeah, you didn't decide to go back?

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, it was a very funny situation. [Laughs.]

MR. BROWN: This was government-sponsored, wasn't it, under the Finnish government?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, I presume so, yeah, I'm sure. That's something I didn't have anything to do with.

MR. BROWN: Then the next year, 1934, you had your first exhibition, didn't you, in the Swedish National Museum?

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah.

MR. BROWN: How did that come about?

MS. STRENGELL: Again, I don't know.

MR. BROWN: You were just simply contacted one day?

MS. STRENGELL: Yes, somebody - I was contacted. I think what happened was that they had something lined up and it didn't really come through, and for some reason or another, just asked me. And I got two other people in on it because I didn't feel that I could really carry it by myself, but I had most of the stuff. And one of the big weavers at the time doing mostly pictorials, or tapestries, was called Maya Kunsonan [sp], and I got her in. And I got the ceramic from Arabia, A-RAB-I-A, you got me into Arabia [Laughs]. But it was a tremendous success, and it rocked the Swedes.

MR. BROWN: Really?

MS. STRENGELL: It really did. Here I was with my rags and riches, you know, in all the colors and all the stuff: crazy rugs, what have you, and so forth. I mean, they'd never seen anything like it. But I think I did influence them a little bit.

MR. BROWN: Was their criticism rather puzzled, perplexed?

MS. STRENGELL: No, it was completely positive. It was amazing, like - well, you don't speak Swedish, but I - it was very, very, very good. I mean, they were astonished, they were shocked, and they admitted it, you know, which is something for a Swede to do, admit that maybe there is

something outside Sweden. No, I think it was a good thing.

MR. BROWN: You had been in Sweden before, hadn't you?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, I was there that year, and Venice.

MR. BROWN: You found they were fairly self-satisfied.

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, very stuffy.

MR. BROWN: They were interested in -

MS. STRENGELL: No, they were amazed at the - [inaudible] - very shocked.

MR. BROWN: Were there random patterns in it too? They weren't the patterns they were used to; they were random.

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, there was nothing like - nothing traditional, no. Oh, there were lots of stripes, and I can show you some of the things I had in it. And then, it went on to Malmi and to Gutenberg, and so forth. And everywhere it was extremely well, you know -

MR. BROWN: So you found after that exhibition in Sweden you were quite renowned, weren't you?

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, I was, suddenly. I don't know how it came about, but that was when I got the job in Denmark, because of this show.

MR. BROWN: And how did that come about? What was the name of the place in Copenhagen?

MS. STRENGELL: [Unintelligible] - it means "how to live" in Danish. [Inaudible.] I was in Copenhagen, and the man who started it was a magnificent designer, interior designer mostly, and fabulous taste, really fabulous taste. I don't think I ever met anybody who had such a good taste in everything: glassware, textiles, anything. And the place was right on Stroget, which is the main thing - the main street.

MR. BROWN: The 5th Avenue of Copenhagen.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah.

MR. BROWN: What was his name?

MS. STRENGELL: His name was Kye Desau [ph].

MR. BROWN: And had you met him before you went to Denmark?

MS. STRENGELL: Yes, he came to Finland and he saw my things, and then he actually held a show in Stockholm for me. And after that he asked me to come down, so I went down every year for three years - twice a year, six weeks at a time. And at the time, they had really no textiles in Denmark at all. Now of course it's very different.

MR. BROWN: Why do you suppose they didn't?

MS. STRENGELL: I don't know.

MR. BROWN: They didn't import anything?

MS. STRENGELL: I don't know why, but they didn't have anything. So he opened a studio for me, and I had to train the weavers.

MR. BROWN: So he had a shop himself, which sold various things: glassware, metalware.

MS. STRENGELL: Right, furniture, all interior things.

MR. BROWN: Now, you've used the word several times, but maybe here would be a point for the first time to explain, what do you mean by good taste? You said Kye Desau was a man of fabulous taste. Can you put that in a few words, what you mean by, in your opinion, fine taste?

MS. STRENGELL: Everything was beautiful. And it was not just beautiful, it was also practical, it was everything that you could ask for. Can I explain it better?

MR. BROWN: Okay. And there your job was to design lines of textiles for him to sell?

MS. STRENGELL: Right, right.

MR. BROWN: And did he have weavers there, or how was it carried out?

MS. STRENGELL: Yes - well, he didn't have any weavers but we got a studio started with weavers, Danish weavers, and I worked with them directly.

MR. BROWN: Does it take very long to train weavers?

MS. STRENGELL: It depends on the weavers.

MR. BROWN: But I mean, in that case, did it take long?

MS. STRENGELL: No, I don't think so. I think they did very well.

MR. BROWN: In a few weeks, they could begin?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, well, simple things, yes, but nothing very difficult.

MR. BROWN: You still had, at that time, the Scandinavian artisan class, didn't you? I mean, these would be perhaps younger people who would be perfectly willing to just work in repetitive artisan tasks.

MS. STRENGELL: Well, actually, I'm surprised that happened even right here, you know, in Pontiac, Michigan. I had all these weavers that did not want to design; they wanted to just work. And they loved the actual manual work, and that was it.

MR. BROWN: But there were a number of people in Scandinavia, when you were young, who were perfectly willing to simply do that.

MS. STRENGELL: Yes, and even here.

MR. BROWN: But that was an exceptional group too, wasn't it, in Michigan? Weren't they Swedish?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, they were Swedish, yes. They had the background of that, but I think there is always - there is still a group of people who just like the manual work and the money.

MR. BROWN: So, you stayed with Desau. You stayed in Copenhagen, or at least part of the year for several years?

MS. STRENGELL: Six weeks twice a year for about three years. And he also had a big exhibition after - at the end of the time, and a big huge dinner party. It was very glamorous.

MR. BROWN: Did you like Denmark?

MS. STRENGELL: Yes I did, very much.

MR. BROWN: That was the time - the beginnings at least of a lot of their very influential furniture design, wasn't it, and architectural interior -

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, well, many of my best friends were architects.

MR. BROWN: Who were some of those?

MS. STRENGELL: Kay Fisker was the number one architect, and he was a very good friend of mine. His daughter lives in Cambridge, or in Lexington.

No, the architecture was just starting up at the time. And of course china, porcelain, that whole field was going, but no textile.

MR. BROWN: In Europe, as opposed to here, a fine design will be taken up by industry, won't it, or

many designers work for industry, which industry supplies the mass market, right?

MS. STRENGELL: Yes.

MR. BROWN: There's a very large market for very good things, isn't there?

MS. STRENGELL: Right, right. Well, in textiles it didn't happen at that time, but now, of course, it's completely different. I mean, there's lots of very good textiles in the market. But I would say mostly pottery was the number one thing at the time.

MR. BROWN: But that too was for production, wasn't it -

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, I think so.

MR. BROWN: - as opposed to, say, here, where the artist-potter, say in the 1930s, was doing a pretty small production for a few -

MS. STRENGELL: Well, at the time it was like that, actually.

MR. BROWN: It was.

MS. STRENGELL: Now of course everything's changed.

MR. BROWN: Well, you also, back at home, were either a cofounder, or you partly owned a shop.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah.

MR. BROWN: And this was, what was that, "Koti Hemmet [sp]?"

MS. STRENGELL: "Koti Hemmet." Now, that means "home" in Finnish and in Swedish. And actually, it was rather a crazy thing to do. There was an architect, a woman architect, and I decided to just do something about furniture and interiors -

MR. BROWN: You became partners with this -

MS. STRENGELL: Yes.

MR. BROWN: What was her name, your partner?

MS. STRENGELL: Move on.

MR. BROWN: And she was an architect, who was interested -

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, she was -

MR. BROWN: - and she did design of other things as well?

MS. STRENGELL: She designed furniture to some extent, and she did interiors. And actually, we opened our shop above the one where I worked in Hemfrid -

MR. BROWN: Your mother's.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah - and we paid in 1,000 Finn-mark at the time for the entire thing. You don't start that way anymore.

MR. BROWN: That was a fairly small amount of money then, wasn't it?

MS. STRENGELL: It was very tiny. But we opened it up and it was very successful, but of course it was extra work.

MR. BROWN: And did you commission various furniture makers and others to make things?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, yes. We had ceramics, we had glass, we had it all. It was a tiny little buoy, you know, but it wasn't - it wasn't in that class, but it was good. And I finally sold out when I left to come over here because it was - I had too much to do.

MR. BROWN: What led you to come over here? You came over - you traveled here at least in 1937.

MS. STRENGELL: Well, I had friends, and I felt I needed a refresher. You know, I needed a change

because - and I also was curious. And mainly, I had friends. I took one of the Swedish - well, it wasn't exactly a fruit boat, but it was a -

MR. BROWN: A freighter.

MS. STRENGELL: A freighter. There was - oh, I think we were only 12 people, passengers, and went all the way to the Caribbean and all of Japan and Okinawa, and so forth and so on.

MR. BROWN: And you went up to the Western United States - California?

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, I landed in Hollywood.

MR. BROWN: In Hollywood.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah. [Laughs.] That's where my friends lived, so it's not all that strange.

MR. BROWN: Were they in the film industry?

MS. STRENGELL: No, as a matter of fact they were not, but they lived in Hollywood. So I lived there for a while, and then I went to San Francisco, and then I got an offer to come to Cranbrook.

MR. BROWN: How did that happen? Did Saarinen know you were here?

MS. STRENGELL: Of course, and he had wanted me to come for years, but it had never really been finalized. So here I was, and they needed somebody, so they just said to me, "Come, come," and I was very happy to do so.

MR. BROWN: Well, you were a little tired of wandering by then, were you?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, I don't know. I was offered to sing in a nightclub in San Francisco but my voice is not quite right, so I didn't. I said, thank you, no.

MR. BROWN: But you'd been heard, apparently.

MS. STRENGELL: No, not really. It was just the accent, I suppose, or something. [Laughs.]

MR. BROWN: But Eliel Saarinen had been in touch with you over the years, since he'd been in America?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, yes. Well, they came every summer; they came to Finland, you know. There was a famous place, Hvittrask - I don't know if you know about that - that they built long ago, and every summer they came, so we always had a reunion.

MR. BROWN: And he talked very favorably of what was happening at Cranbrook?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, he wrote me about it, you know, what was going on, and he wanted me to come. I think he felt that that I was the right person for it, so it all worked out beautifully. I didn't have a cent then to - [inaudible].

MR. BROWN: Well, when you got there in '37, what did it seem - what was it like? What was built, what existed at that time?

MS. STRENGELL: Actually, quite a lot. Have you been there?

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MS. STRENGELL: Well, actually, Academy Road was more or less built, and the Saarinen House was built and the Milles House was built, and the girls' dormitory was built, and the studios: the weaving studios, ceramic studios, and the - [inaudible] - and the office, you know, and all that. It was all there.

MR. BROWN: Was Eliel Saarinen quite a warm man? What was his relation with you?

MS. STRENGELL: He was a lovely man, a very lovely man; extremely warm and sweet. No, no, we were very good friends. As a matter of fact, he visited our house - we were just across the street - one afternoon, and we had, oh, at least a two-hour talk, and then he went back home to listen to

the news and he died. So I was one of the last people to see him.

And he used to drive an absolutely fantastic old Buick, enormous - and he was not a good driver, believe me - and he used to ask us out for Sunday lunch with champagne cocktails -- that's the only thing you could drink in Michigan on Sunday - and that sort of thing, you know. It was very close. We spent Christmas with them.

MR. BROWN: What was his wife like?

MS. STRENGELL: Quite different. I mean, quite, you know, stiff and very quiet, but very dominating. She knew what she was doing.

MR. BROWN: And she was the one who was introducing textiles to Cranbrook, right?

MS. STRENGELL: Yes, she was.

MR. BROWN: So, when you came, were you to be her assistant, or -

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, well, I was supposed to take over the studio - not her studio; she had her studio separately down below. No, I was to take over the classes. She never interfered with me once, not once.

MR. BROWN: Had she been trained in weaving in Finland?

MS. STRENGELL: She must have, but actually she started out as a sculptress, you know, and that was actually what she was doing. And I don't know just when she started weaving, I really don't know. And, of course, her weaving was quite formal, you know. And part of it, I suppose, was actually designed by Eliel too. I mean, they worked together on it.

MR. BROWN: Well, you were quite an instructor in weaving and textile design in '37.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah.

MR. BROWN: What did you find there to work with? Had they been teaching weaving before you came? Had Mrs. Saarinen?

MS STRENGELL: No, no, not she, but there was a Swedish girl who had been fantastic.

MR. BROWN: Who had been there?

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, she had to go home to Sweden because her mother was ill, I think, so I took over from her. And the material I had to work with was very sad at the time. I mean, there were the looms, sure, but the people, the students were a very low category.

MR. BROWN: Where did they come from?

MS. STRENGELL: I think mostly they actually came locally, house wives and stuff like that, and a little below par.

MR. BROWN: Oh, they were just dabbling in it, were they?

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, but that was changed, believe me.

MR. BROWN: You found that they really weren't very good students, and I think you told me that the previous teacher mainly simply set them to do copy work, or something of that order.

MS. STRENGELL: Well, frankly, I can't recall anything else, and it was awful, and it was technically difficult for them. You know -

MR. BROWN: They couldn't even conceive the process very well, as far as you could tell?

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, and they certainly didn't design anything themselves, which was, of course, the number one thing that I insisted on.

MR. BROWN: So you then started out with design, and with this first group of students there wasn't too much you could do, I suppose, in terms of design.

MS. STRENGELL: No, that first half year there was nothing much I could do, yeah. But then we got much better students and I started them in on materials and colors and stuff, and, oh, just piled lots of yarns on the floor and sorted out and picked colors, and do things like that.

MR. BROWN: Is that a frequent working method of yours, or had been for you, just laying yarn down?

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, just play with it.

MR. BROWN: At that point just getting ideas.

MS. STRENGELL: Yes, way before I start a design, actually. And also, what I got them to do was to make sample - I mean, instead of starting on a huge piece that they wouldn't know how it would come out. We had sample works for everything. They were not allowed to do anything unless it had a sample work. So, they put it up and then they tried various things on it, you know, and then we picked the best one. But it was all their design. It was not mine. And that way they got into the fact that you have to try out things, you have to experiment.

MR. BROWN: Did you give them any kind of discussion, or did you have discussion beforehand on design, or did you talk about what is good design, things like that?

MS. STRENGELL: No, not very much. We had lots of very informal - at least once a week we had wonderful sort of informal discussions about things, you know. But no, I never told them what to do.

MR. BROWN: You said here's the way you do it and here's the material you're working with, and here's the -

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, and you are it.

MR. BROWN: You are it, and here to create what sort of thing?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, something personal. That's why I've said they couldn't go to the library. I bet somebody slipped in there anyway. And that was my number one rule: you can't copy anything. You have to just work it out by yourself. And I think that was fun for them, you know. It became fun for them, and it became personality.

MR. BROWN: These students, they at least had shown some aptitude before they were admitted to Cranbrook?

MS. STRENGELL: No, not necessarily, not to start with. After we got accredited, yes, then they had to because they had to be admitted, you know, but not the first years.

MR. BROWN: Oh, I see, people could just come who would pay the fee.

MS. STRENGELL: Right.

MR. BROWN: They could come to the art school.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, right. Well, that was just the first year.

MR. BROWN: So it worked out quite well fairly soon; as soon as you were through with, rid of that first group of rather casual students.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah. I hope to forget those, please. [Laughs.]

No, no, you know, I just feel that's the way to do about - during the war I fought - I went to Washington three times - to be allowed to do something for, you know, the veterans, you know, in the hospital, so forth and so on. I was not allowed to.

MR. BROWN: Why was that?

MS. STRENGELL: Because I was not a nurse. I didn't have a nurse's degree, so I was not allowed. So the poor guys, you know, there, without legs and what have you, they got the little loom and they

were told, throw a shuttle across it, but they had absolute no joy, and no creative things. Now, I could have provided all that and they would have adored it, I know it, you know, because I know because of my own experience when I went to school, but I wasn't allowed to.

MR. BROWN: And it certainly worked with some sculpture and some experiments in ceramics in such hospitals, in metalwork, but they did not allow you.

MS. STRENGELL: No, no. Dorothy Liebes, she was there; she wasn't a nurse. But, I mean, that was a different story.

MR. BROWN: Dorothy Liebes? Was she much more ingrained in the art establishment or something?

MS. STRENGELL: I suppose so. But that was very sad because I wanted so much to do something, and I know what I could have done, because that's one thing I did: at least I inspired my students. They were all joyful, and they were experimental, and they did their own thing.

MR. BROWN: When you were at Cranbrook, now, the Saarinen's were there; who were some of the other people you met right away and worked closely with?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, of course, Milles was there.

MR. BROWN: Carl Milles.

MS. STRENGELL: Carl Milles was there.

MR. BROWN: Did you become fairly close to him?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, yes, I think so, but I mean, I really never liked him very much. [Laughs.] But, of course, it was a terribly small group, you know. And there was Zoltan Sepeshy, a Hungarian-born painter, and his absolutely charming wife, Dorothy.

MR. BROWN: Was Sepeshy quite a good teacher?

MS. STRENGELL: Yes, I think so.

MR. BROWN: What about Milles? Was he considered a good -

MS. STRENGELL: Well, I think that his students loved him, yes. I didn't like him because he was very overbearing and pompous, you know - Swedish. [Laughs.]

MR. BROWN: But Sepeshy was another matter. He was not -

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah. No, he was a very good teacher too, and I think everybody liked him very much. Let's see, who else was there? Maija Grotell came from Finland.

MR. BROWN: About the same time?

MS. STRENGELL: A couple years later than I did, and she was excellent. She was really - kept to herself very much. She wasn't really part of the group. But the students were wonderful, and we had a good time.

MR. BROWN: You mentioned some of these students in '38, '39 or so, as a banner year, in your memory, in terms of the students you had.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, it was.

MR. BROWN: Maybe we can talk about some of them now.

MS. STRENGELL: Well, there's Charlie Eames, for one thing.

MR. BROWN: You had met him before he came to Cranbrook.

MS. STRENGELL: Well, I was the one that got him to Cranbrook -

MR. BROWN: Yeah, you met him in St. Louis.

MS. STRENGELL: - when I suggested he should apply for the scholarship. And he did, and he came and he stayed until he went to California in 1940.

MR. BROWN: He came in not simply as a student, right?

MS. STRENGELL: Yes, he came as a student, but then he stayed on as a - well, he had a student-teacher sort of situation. And Harry Bertoia was the same. He came as a student - as a matter of fact, a student in painting. I have something of his here. And then, he also knew about metalsmithing, and so he took over that department. And there was, as I said, Ben Baldwin, who was an architect -

MR. BROWN: Ben what?

MS. STRENGELL: Baldwin, yes - who was an excellent interior designer. And there's also - well, quite a few of them -

MR. BROWN: But several of these people then stayed on to be teachers, or at least fairly -

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah. Now, Wally Mitchell, for instance, came up as a student.

MR. BROWN: In what?

MS. STRENGELL: Painting. And then he stayed on, and then he became president. And -

MR. BROWN: What was he like when you first knew him?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, very nice, very warm, very sweet. I liked him very much. We did a lot of things. We used to go up to northern Michigan and paint together, for instance, things like that, yeah. He was a good man, very thoughtful, loved music, and a good painter. And I haven't got any of his things, but he was a very good painter.

MR. BROWN: You were doing some painting then too?

MS. STRENGELL: No, I did some pottery, remember? I don't think I did much painting - yeah, like that, yes, going up to northern Michigan and painting. I don't call that real creative painting. [Laughter.]

MR. BROWN: So, it was very small. How many students would there have been, say -

MS. STRENGELL: I would say 25 at the most. And we all had our meals together, you know, and so forth.

MR. BROWN: Did you all have anything to do with the boys and girls schools?

MS. STRENGELL: No.

MR. BROWN: You didn't teach at those or anything?

MS. STRENGELL: No.

MR. BROWN: Or was the museum a separate? Was that under a separate curator?

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah.

MR. BROWN: How did that relate to the art school?

MS. STRENGELL: The museum - well, it was part of it very much, but Albert Christiana [sp] - if you know him - we have one of his paintings here too. He was one of the people who headed the museum at the time. No, no, he at least tried. He gave Lily her first show.

MR. BROWN: Lily Saarinen. Well, She came about '39 too, didn't she?

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah.

MR. BROWN: And she taught for a while, I guess.

MS. STRENGELL: Taught?

MR. BROWN: Did she?

MS. STRENGELL: No, she was a student.

MR. BROWN: So, during World War II, was there a shortage of students, or how did that change things?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, the, you know, for one thing, I think that was about the time we started summer school to get, you know, to even out the curriculum a little bit. And that was quite a strain because summer school was long and there wasn't very much time in between school. No, we had a lot of students.

MR. BROWN: We you, in the '40s, trying out new things as a teacher? As you look back, do you remember trying to introduce new ways of approaching weaving or new materials?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, new materials, you know, they were fortunate there because I was working with industry all throughout, so I had new materials all the time. And so, they had the benefit of that.

MR. BROWN: You began working on the outside, then, fairly soon.

MS. STRENGELL: Almost right away, yeah.

MR. BROWN: What were some of the early ones you worked for? I know you listed some that were fairly early on. Well, one of your first industrial jobs was with Knoll Associates.

MS. STRENGELL: Yes, Yes. And I was quite a natural of course, because Florence Knoll was - we shared a dormitory. [Laughs.]

MR. BROWN: She was at Cranbrook.

MS. STRENGELL: She was at Cranbrook. She was more or less an adopted daughter of the Saarinens. Her parents died early, and she was in Kingswood School, and they took her more or less as a kid, you know, and took her to Finland, for instance. Actually, I met her first in Finland. She came over with the Saarinens. And I suppose that had something to do with it, but no.

MR. BROWN: What did you do for Knoll, design, upholster -

MS. STRENGELL: Prints -

MR. BROWN: Prints?

MS. STRENGELL: Yes, printed fabric.

MR. BROWN: Printed fabric.

MS. STRENGELL: No, at that point, I didn't do any - [inaudible] - at all.

MR. BROWN: Well, how early did she setup, in the early '40s or so?

MS. STRENGELL: I think so. I can't remember exactly when, but when she married Hans Knoll.

MR. BROWN: And it became -

[Audio break.]

MR. BROWN: Okay, we're continuing these interviews in Wellfleet with Marianne Strenge. Bob Brown, the interviewer. This is March 18, 1982. The last time we spoke, you had said a bit about your coming to Cranbrook, talked a bit about the way it was there in World War II, and at the end were talking something of Florence Knoll and Knoll Associates. But I was wondering if we could begin today going back a bit, and then forward, talking further about some of the people with whom you worked at Cranbrook, and then later maybe about some of the students.

For starters, what about the Saarinens? You have mentioned them, to some extent: how you knew them and your families knew each other back in Finland. When you came to Cranbrook, which was what, in the later '30s - '38 or '37 -

MS. STRENGELL: Thirty-seven.

MR. BROWN: Yes. What did the Saarinens provide for you? Were they very welcoming hosts? Were they the leading people there or were there also - the Americans who financed it, were they also involved, the Booth family?

MS. STRENGELL: Right. Well, actually, the whole thing started way back in Finland, with Eliel and Loja, who were very good friends of my parents. And Eliel, for some reason, wanted me to come work to Cranbrook. And he wrote me some beautiful letters about what he was doing, what the philosophy was, and what he wanted to accomplish, and his philosophy about the whole thing.

So, actually, it took quite a few years before I managed to do it. But then, in 1936, I came to America and, like everybody else, ran out of money. Fortunately enough, at the same time, almost a day after this financial thing, I got a wire from Eliel and Loja saying, won't you come and teach? So, I took a - [inaudible] - which took me six days, seven nights, something like that, across the continent, and I was welcomed in Bloomfield Hills.

Eliel picked me up, as a matter of fact, and I had a lovely dinner with the Saarinens and the - [unintelligible]. He was the secretary at the time. And Eliel had always been a great influence on my life. I mean, he was the most lovable person, warm, sweet, and we saw very much eye to eye.

So, I think I fitted in very well in the situation, partly because my education, in weaving for instance, which I disliked very much, and Eliel's feeling that everybody who was teaching at Cranbrook should do something on their own, they should express themselves, they should look into things. And of course that's what I'd been doing all my life. Loja was my boss for the first year, but she never interfered with me at all.

MR. BROWN: She was the head of the weaving department?

MS. STRENGELL: She was the head when I came. I was just an instructor until '42. But we had an extremely lovely - what do you call it - life together, very close.

MR. BROWN: Could you see that the school was going very well?

MS. STRENGELL: At the time, frankly, I didn't think so. You know, at least my own department was in horrible shape, I thought. I mean, there were inferior people, and so forth - students. And the equipment was all right and all that, but I wasn't too happy about it and I was all out for changing it.

MR. BROWN: And was Mrs. Saarinen backing you in that, which she taught -

MS. STRENGELL: She left a me completely free hand.

MR. BROWN: She felt perhaps there needed to be changes too?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, I think she probably did.

MR. BROWN: She designed for weaving, didn't she, but didn't -

MS. STRENGELL: Well, she designed but she had her own department. She had her own place downstairs and her own weavers, who later became my weavers. But there was really no connection at all.

MR. BROWN: Oh, really? She was sort of an artist on her own?

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah. No, she had nothing to do with the education business at all.

So, that's that. Now, would you like to know about some other people I -

MR. BROWN: Sure. Well, I was going to ask briefly, the Booths, people who provided for this art school, did you have some contact with them, and what was their attitude? Were they - say, compared with Eliel Saarinens?

MS. STRENGELL: No, actually, they did whatever Eliel said because, I mean, he had them convinced completely. But later on, there was some strange things. I mean, they didn't want, for

instance, a husband and wife work in the same place. My husband was asked later on to take over the architecture department, but Mr. Booth didn't like that. He even kicked out Eero because he was the son of Eliel. I don't know, that was just a little quick -

MR. BROWN: But you saw there was probably no problem in a husband and wife or a father and son being there.

MS. STRENGELL: Well, I can't see why if they're both - [inaudible] - and talented and brilliant. But anyway -

MR. BROWN: Maybe I haven't asked this: what do you think was Eliel's conception of the school? Was it going to be something different from any other school?

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, I think very much that he felt what I always felt too, that it shouldn't just be somebody coming in and sitting down and saying something, you know, year after year after year. He wanted people who were active; who were doing things. And that's I think why he liked me, because he had seen that I had done that in Europe. I mean, I was digging in and I was in everything, you know, and I wanted to find out, I wanted to do things. So, that was his philosophy, that people who are teaching should also be doers.

MR. BROWN: Was this true perhaps of the painters as well? They were supposed to be at least active and exhibiting?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, absolutely, everybody, yes. But not like them. You know, you had to write a book every year.

MR. BROWN: No, but I mean, a painter had to be actively exhibiting, perhaps have a dealer, and so forth.

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, yes.

MR. BROWN: Didn't want what we'd call ivory tower conditions there.

MS. STRENGELL: No, I don't think it was ever - at least I feel it was never an ivory tower, at least not in my department. It might have been in some others, but I don't want to talk about them.

MR. BROWN: You've talked a bit about Carl Milles, but I don't know if there's anything more to be said there. He was sort of the most renowned artist brought in, wasn't he?

MS. STRENGELL: Yes, he was a very, very good old friend of Eliel Saarinen.

MR. BROWN: And he was given special status, perhaps?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, yes. Eliel built a house for him, and so forth. I'm sorry, I was never terribly fond of him. We didn't have any communication. But of course he was a cult, you know, and I have never been a cultist.

MR. BROWN: Why do you think you never follow cults?

MS. STRENGELL: I don't think I have. I like to be myself; I prefer that.

MR. BROWN: Make your own judgments and have the right to change them?

MS. STRENGELL: Yes, yes.

MR. BROWN: What about some of the other colleagues you mentioned?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, I can mention many. There was Albert Christiana.

MR. BROWN: Now, what did he teach when you first came?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, he was not teaching, he was in charge of the museum, and then he went to various places, you know, to Pratt [Pratt Institute, New York].

MR. BROWN: You mean the person in charge of the museum? What was the relation of it to the

school, to the art school?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, it was part - it depended on who was the head. And while he was there, he did a great deal. For instance, he arranged Lily Saارينen's first show, you know, and gave her a chance to show, and so forth.

MR. BROWN: What was, as far as you can remember, the purpose supposed to be of the museum?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, that was - you know, Mr. Booth had always loved the idea of having a museum, and he picked up all this dilapidated stuff elsewhere, somewhere and other, and he wanted to show it. And that was the start. When Eliel came in, Eliel talked him out of that, said - [inaudible] - let's have a living museum, something people are doing.

MR. BROWN: You mean of contemporary artists?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, not just that, but something that means something, you know, not just puff -

MR. BROWN: Apparently, Mr. Booth's collection wasn't very good until Eliel came.

MS. STRENGELL: No, it was quite dreadful, as a matter of fact.

So the museum tried very much to do that. They had traveling shows, they bought things when they could, and some of that was rather fun. I have to try to remember to tell you that when I speak about the next guy, who was William McVey, and he's a sculptor in Cleveland. And he was teaching for many years in Cranbrook, a next-door neighbor to us. And he talked them into - I wish I had - [inaudible] - into buying one or more sculptures.

And he went to New York and he sold his thing, and he thought that that should go into a museum. At that point, Christiana was gone. He was not there any longer, it was somebody else. So for nothing, \$6,000, something like that, they bought this enormous and beautiful - [inaudible] - sculpture, which finally, the museum, when they needed money many, many years later, sold for something like \$300,000, \$400,000.

MR. BROWN: Was this a large outdoor sculpture?

MS. STRENGELL: It was wood thing, so it was kept inside.

MR. BROWN: So, what was the relation to the students? I mean, were they expected to look at the museum, go there regularly? Was it supposed to be a teaching collection at all? Did your teachers or, say, did Christiana, did he - would the students come in and he would talk to them about what was there? How closely related was it to the education?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, you know, truthfully, I can't answer that because I told my students for the first half years they were not going to go to the library, because I wanted them to dig it out of themselves and I didn't want them to go and copy something.

MR. BROWN: You mean, you wanted them to come out with ideas from their own feeling or intellect.

MS. STRENGELL: Absolutely, absolutely. They cried, they groaned, but they did it, and they did awfully well. So I can't really say. I never looked into that aspect.

MR. BROWN: For you, the museum was simply there.

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, it was for my own enjoyment, but I never beat my students to go there, which I know is rather unusual.

MR. BROWN: What was Christiana like? Did you become something of a friend of his?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, indeed. Well, he died, you know, drove down - in a coma. Oh, very, very good friends, still good friends. No, no, we went to all his shows. We have some of his things.

MR. BROWN: What was he like when you first knew him? What was his personality?

MS. STRENGELL: Quite suave, a little dandy, very handsome, but not rich, though. He had been in Chicago for a long time doing - I can't just say what he was doing there, but he wasn't on top, you know. And no, a wonderful person, terribly good taste, and I think a very good painter, actually. And his wife was one of my students, and we still write back and forth. No, unfortunately, he died very tragically - was never a good driver and just went over a mountain.

MR. BROWN: Now, William McVey you've mentioned. Was he a close friend too?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, yes; oh, yes, very much. He was also a neighbor. He took over the Christiana House.

MR. BROWN: Did he come in about the same time you did, or a little later?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, no, later. He took over, actually, from Milles, then he got sent to Italy. And he has done some very great work and now it's everywhere.

MR. BROWN: Now, the sculpture people and the painting people, was that considered a different kind of art, I mean, fine arts as opposed to crafts?

MS. STRENGELL: At the time.

MR. BROWN: Was there ever any kind of strain between -

MS. STRENGELL: No, no, no strain, but it was definitely considered fine art, and we were definitely considered crafts at the time. You know, it was before everybody started doing -

MR. BROWN: Well, was more status given to the fine arts? Not really, was there, at Cranbrook?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, I would presume at the beginning that it was, you know. I mean, craft was craft. I mean, they had pottery, and we had metalwork, and we had weaving, textiles, and so forth.

MR. BROWN: But what about in the mind of, say, Eliel Saarinen?

MS. STRENGELL: No.

MR. BROWN: Did he give equivalence - they were equal?

MS. STRENGELL: Eliel's philosophy was that anything, from the ashtray to a city plan, should be given the same input. I mean, he stuck to that. But the other ones, I don't know what they felt.

MR. BROWN: But still, that must have had an effect.

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, it did. That was his absolute -

MR. BROWN: It helped to counteract the normal - or the usual attitude, right?

MS. STRENGELL: I think so.

MR. BROWN: So it was an especially healthy place for a craftsman to work.

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, absolutely. Well, of course, Loja helped because she was in textiles, you know, and so forth and so on. But no, that was - I think from childhood on that was his philosophy, and my father's too. Well, [Berthold] Tex Schiwetz -

MR. BROWN: Tex Schiwetz -

MS. STRENGELL: - he helped Milles through all his last years. You know, he went to Italy with him, and he was also teaching at Cranbrook, and he was a great, great man. I liked him very much, great friend. I'm only talking about friends, I'm sorry. That's why I don't talk to - [inaudible] - Milles.

MR. BROWN: But Milles, did he come in sometime after you'd been there or -

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, yeah, quite a lot afterwards. I think he came - actually came to study with Bill McVey, and then he started working with Milles, helping Milles out. And then, he went to Italy with Milles and was there for many, many years.

MR. BROWN: What kind of work was he doing when you knew him?

MS. STRENGELL: I think very good work; very simple but very expressive - animals, things like that, mostly. And I don't know what more I can say. I liked him very much, and so did my husband. And unfortunately, he died of heart failure quite young. So, that was that.

Now, if you come to the painters, of course, there was Zoltan Sepeshy, who later took over after Eliel as president of Cranbrook Art Academy. And I admired him very much in various ways, and he was brilliant. He was born Hungarian, married a very charming person. As a matter of fact, two people - one was more charming. [Laughs.]

[Audio break.]

MR. BROWN: [Inaudible.]

MS. STRENGELL: Well, as I say, he was an Hungarian, and very Hungarian: his face, in his outlook, his paintings, and so forth.

MR. BROWN: What do you mean when you say very Hungarian?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, Hungarians and Finns have a lot in common.

MR. BROWN: Another language, or that sort something.

MS. STRENGELL: No, no, no, it hasn't. I only find two words that are even remotely alike. No, I mean, he was brilliant, he was a very good talker, he lived well, he drank well, he had a second wife that's very different, and the first one has been very helpful. They worked together, the two.

MR. BROWN: Were they both Americans, the wives?

MS. STRENGELL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And they had children that were the same age as my children, you know, so that also was another part. And Zoltan painted my portrait, and so forth and so on. He was especially good, I thought, in watercolors. He loved northern Michigan things, and he did a lot of stuff there. I think he was a very good president. I mean, there might be different views, but mine is that he was very good, because he let us do what we wanted to do, he listened to us, which some don't, and he also got, you know, the school - they finally allowed us to give degrees. That was one thing. I mean, he was efficient.

MR. BROWN: Perhaps he could combine being an artist, a man of very personal work -

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, he did.

MR. BROWN: - with being an administrator.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, he did because - I mean, after all, that was no easy matter to get that degree thing, you know, and he worked on it very hard.

MR. BROWN: Was that thought to be important, to get the degree?

MS. STRENGELL: Yes, it was, at that time because, you know, nobody could get the job unless they had a degree.

MR. BROWN: You're speaking now of, say, the 1950s, or something like that?

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah.

MR. BROWN: Around that time.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, after. Well, Eliel died in '50, so it was after that. And of course I never had a degree of any kind, and I still got along.

MR. BROWN: So, he was very good at working with a variety of people.

MS. STRENGELL: I think so.

MR. BROWN: And under him, say in the - he was president of the school into the 1960s or so, I

suppose.

MS. STRENGELL: I can't think of just when he finally stopped.

MR. BROWN: But under him, were very many new people brought in? There was some change, wasn't there?

MS. STRENGELL: Yes, there were changes, but in a way, you know, Cranbrook was inclined to get all students in because they had been brought up in this whole atmosphere, you know.

MR. BROWN: What do you think of that? Was that a good idea, do you think?

MS. STRENGELL: I think so, I think so. Well, for instance, Wallace Mitchell, who took over the - when he finally ended up as president he took over the painting.

MR. BROWN: He'd been a student in the late 30s, when you first -

MS. STRENGELL: When I first got there, yeah. And Fred Mitchell, who's - I have all of their paintings around here, I can show them to you. No, I think it was a good idea, because to get somebody completely different in at the time would have been very difficult, you know, because we were trying to build up to something, and we thought alike, and I think all that was very good.

MR. BROWN: What were you trying to build up to?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, we didn't want - a unity, let's say that. We wanted to - we thought the same way, I mean, all these people I'm referring to. I mean, we thought the same way and we wanted to do things, not impose ourselves, please, but we wanted freedom for the students. I think that's the number one thing.

MR. BROWN: And what do you think the shared outlook was? What did you share in common in terms of what you wanted to accomplish?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, I think just that. I mean, let the students have freedom and develop themselves, not be impose upon, but guided when needed.

MR. BROWN: And do you think that if you'd brought in, say, a strong personality from the outside, that that person might very well have - there was a risk that that person might not understand, and that they might try to impose their way of -

MS. STRENGELL: Well, I think, frankly, that that's what's happening right now with Slade, you know. He is, indeed, imposing himself on everything. I haven't been there for a while, so I -

MR. BROWN: But in your day, you allowed, and most of the teachers that you knew there allowed the students a good deal of freedom.

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, absolutely, absolutely. You know, that was one thing that - well, as I said before, I was brought - the little education I had in weaving was so dreadful, and I wanted - [inaudible] - I wanted them to develop themselves, I wanted them to have joy out of it, and I also wanted very much to unite the whole thing. So we used to have open house. We were - the weavers were the only ones that did that. Oh, about once a month we had a sherry party, and we asked all the other studios in and they looked around, and you know, we got something going. So it was quite uniform.

MR. BROWN: You mean you might get ideas from them? At least they'd know what you were doing?

MS. STRENGELL: They were, - Yeah, they had a feeling of companionship and understanding, and it was fun too.

MR. BROWN: There was no hiding of what you were doing.

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, no, absolutely not.

MR. BROWN: You welcomed them. Did some of the other departments also -

MS. STRENGELL: No, they didn't do it.

MR. BROWN: But would they mind a student from your department -

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, no.

MR. BROWN: They wouldn't mind that, but -

MS. STRENGELL: Well, some people minded when the students, painters, came over to weave, I know that.

MR. BROWN: Of course they couldn't - well, that would be jealousy, they didn't want to lose them to weaving.

MS. STRENGELL: In a way, they had to. That was Eliel's idea too, you know, that you had a major and you had a minor or two. You had to have an all-well-rounded thing. I mean - [inaudible].

MR. BROWN: It was sort of a total art.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, total picture.

MR. BROWN: Try, at least - try out the various forms.

MS. STRENGELL: Sure, learn a little bit, understand a little bit.

MR. BROWN: Of course, no doubt, your various aesthetic - your various styles or ways of doing things must have rubbed off on the students a bit, I suppose.

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, I think so, it did, but I generally let them loose. I think I inspired them, and I think that we covered an awful lot of ground in the teaching, in the weaving. For instance, that was something I was thinking about. We had, for instance - oh, twice a year we had a big, big party. And once, we had, - I made them design an outfit, clothing, weave it, make it, and then finally model it, you know, at the party - it was very glamorous - [inaudible]. So it was very much fun. [Laughs.]

I mean, that sort of thing. We'd pick one thing at a time and we'd just do it. And otherwise, it was very informal. We sat around a big table having coffee and just talking, you know, and chatting away, and I was telling about what I was doing and, of course, I knew what they were doing. Yeah, it was very informal.

MR. BROWN: But in a way, though, these open houses you spoke of earlier, plus the once-a-year modeling their weaving, forced them to have their things seen.

MS. STRENGELL: That's exactly it. They had to get something done. And when I left Cranbrook that was completely destroyed.

MR. BROWN: Was it?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, yeah they were allowed to sit down in their room and do a little knitting or something, you know. I mean, there was absolutely nothing at all of that spirit.

MR. BROWN: You mean it became more rigid.

MS. STRENGELL: I would say less rigid. They were allowed to do whatever they pleased. I mean, there was a guy who knitted two bodies on a slab, you know; one was black and one was white. He crocheted it, as a matter of fact. I mean, that's in his field. I mean, there was absolutely no discipline. I at least get better, but not by beating, just by making them interested in it. I think it was good years.

MR. BROWN: Now, in the classroom, how would you begin them? Maybe we could go through that a little bit - in no great detail.

MS. STRENGELL: No, no, no, that's very funny. Well, okay, most of them - practically everyone who came had never done any weaving at all, you know, at least most of them, in the summer school especially, or in the beginning. So the first thing I did, I put them on the loom. See, I was

brought up to just do this on something that was already there.

MR. BROWN: Oh, you mean just weave back and forth.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, right. So they had to learn how to make it work. And actually, what I did was I got one or two and I showed them in detail what to do, and how to setup the loom, how to make it work, perfect work, and then I let them teach the next two, and so on. And I criticized, of course. I mean, I was there, I watched out - [inaudible] - their mistakes. But boy, in the first day practically everybody was on the loom. Of course, all the sample little things, you know, with not too many ends to an inch and all that.

MR. BROWN: Very small on the end.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah. But anyway, they were on the loom and they knew what they had done, and -

MR. BROWN: And then they had to teach another - a beginner.

MS. STRENGELL: Right.

MR. BROWN: So they forced them to know the - learn the basics right away.

MS. STRENGELL: Yes, absolutely. And then - of course then I got into materials and all - well, they learned the basic weaves, you know: two harness, four harness, what have you and so forth. But mainly they got materials; they got the feel of materials, of the arms, the textures.

MR. BROWN: How did you go about that? You would have them look at the various materials and feel them, and you would maybe tell them a little bit of their properties, and then you'd have them try it out and see how it worked.

MS. STRENGELL: Right, right, and play - just play, have fun. And they did; they did wonderful.

MR. BROWN: I know in your own work, and I suppose in theirs too, you introduced new fibers as they came along -

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, yes.

MR. BROWN: - in the 1940s and -

MS. STRENGELL: Well, all along, I did that. I mean, that's one good thing, because I was working with industry I knew about materials.

MR. BROWN: Because I recall in the '30s you objected to, for example, the Swedish weavers who insisted on, I think, natural materials, folk art patterns.

MS. STRENGELL: Especially - not so much -

MR. BROWN: You felt that they should try out things -

MS. STRENGELL: I like natural materials too, but old patterns, no, absolutely not.

MR. BROWN: But you also introduced manufactured fibers.

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, I did.

MR. BROWN: And you tried them out.

MS. STRENGELL: And I spun them myself, you know.

MR. BROWN: Did you?

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah.

MR. BROWN: You would get like the basic nylon or the basic filament?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, various things and combine them - [inaudible]. I did that in the Philippines, in Jamaica and so forth.

MR. BROWN: So, as the students they were allowed freedom, they were allowed to play a bit -

MS. STRENGELL: Right.

MR. BROWN: - but they were also told they had to have -

MS. STRENGELL: They had to do something.

MR. BROWN: - something, because they were going to model it at some point, or there was going to be an open house; they'd better have something out there for others to see.

MS. STRENGELL: Right. They were spinning; they were doing all kinds of things.

MR. BROWN: For example, did your department then - would the students have an exhibition at the museum at least once a year?

MS. STRENGELL: No.

MR. BROWN: The museum wasn't for that, huh?

MS. STRENGELL: No, not for that. We had exhibitions in the studio, you know, but not in the museum.

MR. BROWN: What did you think of, say, exhibiting student work? Did you think it was premature, it shouldn't be done until they're more -

MS. STRENGELL: No, I think that whatever was good was - I mean, showed something of the students' work, and taught them to see some other things.

MR. BROWN: Were some of your students getting recognition fairly early? I mean, were they being shown by museums?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, to tell you the truth, I can't think really - oh, I still wanted to talk about this.

MR. BROWN: Oh, I know, that was just a general question and then - well, we'll talk later about - why don't we then go back? You want to talk a little more of some of your other colleagues.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah.

MR. BROWN: Well, you were talking about Wallace Mitchell.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, who became president after Zoltan.

MR. BROWN: Were you gone by then; by the time Wallace Mitchell became president?

MS. STRENGELL: Yes.

MR. BROWN: What was Wallace Mitchell like, as you knew him? He was your friend.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah - no, I think he really was very good. He was sort of a small, pale, blond man, not very outspoken. But I think he was very good with his students, who at that point started being quite difficult.

MR. BROWN: At what point? You mean in the -

MS. STRENGELL: Well, you know, I mean their general lifestyle.

MR. BROWN: You mean after World War II -

MS. STRENGELL: Oh yeah, this was -

MR. BROWN: - or somewhat later?

MS. STRENGELL: No, much later, because - I can't think of when Zoltan died. Eliel died '50, and then Zoltan took over, and then there was somebody else in between. And then, Wally, he was acting president, and he became president at that point in the '60s, '70s.

MR. BROWN: Sure. But what about - as you knew him as a colleague when you were still at Cranbrook, what was he like, Wallace Mitchell?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, first of all, as I say, he was a friend, and we used to take trips and paint, you know, together, and so forth. And it was at the same time there were the architects that I will talk to you about later. And he was a very good painter. He started with watercolors, a little bit in Zoltan Sepeshy's style, but then he became very personal, and he did tiny little squares - [inaudible] - but very beautiful, subdued colors, and he was good.

He did a lot of painting on driftwood, for instance, which was interesting. He picked it up in northern Michigan. And, well, he was a good guy - [inaudible].

MR. BROWN: Quiet, but -

MS. STRENGELL: Quiet, very quiet.

MR. BROWN: - in his way, probably a good teacher, and an influential teacher?

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, I think so. And - no, I think so, definitely.

MR. BROWN: You mentioned also Fred Mitchell.

MS. STRENGELL: Fred Mitchell. Well, we have a painting of his here.

MR. BROWN: Did he come along about the same time as Wallace Mitchell?

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, but he was a student to start with. I think he did some teaching afterwards, but he's one of the - and Harry Soviak is one other, I think.

MR. BROWN: Had he been a student at Cranbrook?

MS. STRENGELL: No, he didn't teach; he was a student.

MR. BROWN: A student. Harry -

MS. STRENGELL: Soviak.

MR. BROWN: Soviak. And he was a student who then became a good friend of yours.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, very much - [inaudible].

MR. BROWN: What was your relation to him or with him?

MS. STRENGELL: Just a friend.

MR. BROWN: But after he'd been -

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, but he did weaving. See, he was one of my weavers. The painters and the architects all were weavers too, and they added a tremendous lot to the studio, to the spirit, and to the - you know, because they fused the two things together, painting images and weaving. It was fun.

MR. BROWN: A painter coming to weaving is not used to such a demanding framework, is he? But he brings sort of a freedom.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, a lot of freedom was what I wanted.

MR. BROWN: And he tried - a painter might try to force into the - [inaudible] - some rather free patterns and forms -

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, absolutely.

MR. BROWN: - he does in his paintings.

MS. STRENGELL: Well, of course, that was exactly what I wanted, you know. I wanted people to force themselves into it, and they did.

MR. BROWN: Did he stay around? He didn't teach there, you say.

MS. STRENGELL: No.

MR. BROWN: Did he stay in the area?

MS. STRENGELL: No, no, he's been teaching in Philadelphia, I think, now, and so does Fred Mitchell. Well, the architects were the other ones that did weaving. And actually, Eliel almost threw them out of his class because he got so mad because they were weaving more than they were doing architecture.

MR. BROWN: And how were they as weavers compared to the painters?

MS. STRENGELL: They were great, but they had a different approach, you know. Well, maybe a little less color, you know. And also, they took pottery. They tried to get the really well-rounded picture, which I think was good. Well, there was Charlie Eames.

MR. BROWN: When you met him, he was a student, one of your - well, you got him to come there, you told me that already.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah - [laughs] - and I'm very proud of that. I really discovered Charlie.

MR. BROWN: Did he fit into the Cranbrook education very well?

MS. STRENGELL: He fit in very well. But of course, at the time, you know, when he came, about '39, '40, and we were very informal. I mean, there was no formal thing at all. He came down in his pajamas to have breakfast, you know, and stuff like that. And he had a studio next to mine so I saw a good deal of him.

MR. BROWN: Well, he concentrated in architecture, didn't he, under Eliel?

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, and also furniture. Then he started furniture with Eliel, and they did things together in that, then he got more and more into that line. Actually, his architecture, as I saw it in St. Louis, was not - but he had this thing about construction and furniture, and he did all that.

MR. BROWN: Did he become a pretty close friend of yours while he was there?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, yeah; oh, absolutely. He was to his death. We saw Ray, as a matter of fact, in California.

MR. BROWN: Recently.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, she was my student. But of course that was until she left in 1940; they got married in 1940.

MR. BROWN: And they left about then.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah.

MR. BROWN: He wasn't there long, in other words.

MS. STRENGELL: He was there a couple of years, first as a student and then as sort of a student instructor.

MR. BROWN: But you were later associated with him in various projects later?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, not really in projects, no.

MR. BROWN: Just friends.

MS. STRENGELL: He got into movies, you know, and the furniture, and he was living on the coast and I was still there in Cranbrook. But we never lost contact, and he was a very good friend. But Benjamin Baldwin, I don't know if you know him; he was an architect the same year. This was the famous year in Cranbrook.

MR. BROWN: Benjamin Waldmen?

MS. STRENGELL: Benjamin Baldwin.

MR. BROWN: Baldwin, yeah.

MS. STRENGELL: And he is an excellent interior designer, just super-class, you know, I mean, also super expensive class. He has done some marvelous, marvelous jobs. And he lives in Sarasota in the winter, and in the summer he has a beautiful place on Long Island, East Coast - East Hampton. He's a gardener.

MR. BROWN: Well, he was a student, one of your early students?

MS. STRENGELL: Yes, it was only that year.

MR. BROWN: Well, obviously - what was he interested in when he came, when you had him as a student?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, he came as an architect, you know; he got a scholarship as an architect. But he just wanted to know about everything there was to be known. He was one of those people. So was Harry Weese - you know him, of course - in Chicago, also a very good friend still. And, well, Henry Heyburn I did a lot of work with, but he was killed on the Cape on the way to come to see us. He ran into a sand truck.

MR. BROWN: Not too long ago?

MS. STRENGELL: Yes, quite, quite a while ago.

MR. BROWN: But what did you know of the way Eliel taught? Did you ever go to watch his classes?

MS. STRENGELL: No. I can't tell you anything about it, nothing. But I presume he treated them like he treated me, you know, talked to me. Olav could answer more about that, because Olav worked with Eliel. Mostly they talked dirty Finnish jokes.

MR. BROWN: But do you think he was - was Eliel was sort of a father figure, or was he fairly formal? How do you think he was? I mean, what - from these friends, these architects, what do they say?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, I could ask them.

MR. BROWN: But you don't remember there ever -

MS. STRENGELL: Well, I never investigated it, no, no, because that was his field and I had mine, you know. And after all, I was an underling and he was the boss, so I didn't. But I would say that he would have treated them much like he did me, you know, with understanding, warmth, and just trying to lead them into some good directions.

MR. BROWN: There was probably a lot of freedom, I mean, in terms of expression.

MS. STRENGELL: Well, I can't even remember what kind of things they did, but they did everything. They did city planning, they did, you know - [inaudible]. No, I'm sorry, I can't recall that, but you ask Olav. Now, Henry Heyburn was mostly doing residential work, and I did a great deal of work with him, to all his textiles and so forth. Once, I did a dog-proof house for him. [Laughs.]

Well, that's more or less that, but then he had the weavers.

MR. BROWN: Yeah, these are mainly your colleagues and students, right?

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, these were colleagues and the two kinds of students.

MR. BROWN: But as weavers, you're going to talk about students, for the most part.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, whatever you say.

MR. BROWN: Sure. I don't -

MS. STRENGELL: If I can just take them one by one. Am I talking too much?

MR. BROWN: Fine, this is good. Mm-hmm, mm-hmm [Affirmative.] Yeah, why don't we begin talking about some of your students?

MS. STRENGELL: All right. Are we on? Oh my God! [Laughs.] Well, actually, as I told you before, the students prior to 1940 or so were really not very good, and the material I had was sort of difficult. Then it started with all these great people who came over and picked up the atmosphere, and myself, and everybody. But I want to just talk about some of my top students who have done a tremendous lot, I feel, in the world.

But one was Neli Maher [sp] from India. We met her when we were lecturing in Bombay; and a tiny little girl in a beautiful sari, and a very ambitious girl.

MR. BROWN: This was somewhat later. This was after World War II, of course.

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, no, this was, as a matter of fact, '67, I think. I'm not doing them in order.

MR. BROWN: Yeah, these aren't necessarily students at Cranbrook.

MS. STRENGELL: Yes.

MR. BROWN: Oh, okay.

MS. STRENGELL: Because she wanted very much to come to Cranbrook, and I managed to get her a scholarship, which was really a feat in itself because at that point it was really quite hard to get a scholarship at Cranbrook. You had to have a lot of material, and you had to present yourself, and so forth. Well, she had done some prints in England, and they were not more than average, I would say, but I was very impressed with her personality. She had a tremendous feeling for - she wanted to do something. She had ambition; she had all that, you know, drive.

So, I really got her in - I faked her in as a matter of fact. I never showed a thing that she did, but I talked about India and about what happens in textiles in India, how necessary it would be to have something fresh and different, and so forth, and talked about ambition.

MR. BROWN: You don't mean fresh for Cranbrook, to have something new.

MS. STRENGELL: No, for India.

MR. BROWN: Oh, to have her have the Cranbrook experience.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, and she got in.

MR. BROWN: Now, what had she done in India?

MS. STRENGELL: No, nothing. She had gone to England and done some prints, which were no good at all.

MR. BROWN: Prints - printed textiles.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, they were, you know, just blah.

So, anyway, she got in. Well, I judged right, because she's the number one weaver in India. She does fabulous work for everybody, all the big things, you know: airline offices, this and that and so forth and so on. So I can't say enough about it. I judged right, and I was very happy about that, because it was a little, you know -

MR. BROWN: Yeah, you were pulling strings.

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, I was deceiving everyone.

MR. BROWN: You were taking a great chance.

MS. STRENGELL: Oh yeah, I did, I did, but I really was sure it would work, and it has.

MR. BROWN: Did she have - How would you characterize her sense of design and all? What was it like when she came to Cranbrook?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, she didn't bring any Indian designs; she wouldn't have been allowed to. I started her like everybody else here. I taught her some basics and some techniques and said, you go ahead, you do what you want to do.

MR. BROWN: What did she start by doing? Do you recall some of her early designs?

MS. STRENGELL: Yes, as a matter of fact, I do. She started - I was teaching her how to do a double-weave, for instance, and she did a black and white, very beautiful, stark tapestry, and that, that's quite tricky.

MR. BROWN: She showed technical facility from the beginning, then.

MS. STRENGELL: Well, they all did, more or less, you know. But no, she was different. I mean, she didn't try to do anything that anybody else had done. Really, truthfully, I got a lot out of that girl.

MR. BROWN: She was very original.

MS. STRENGELL: Very, very. And she had, of course - at the same time she had a background of the saris, and this and that, and so forth.

MR. BROWN: Of the saris. You mean of their tradition, their color, their quality.

MS. STRENGELL: Well, yes. Mostly, she worked in black and white to start with. I guess she tried to get away from the colors. And actually, I haven't really seen a great deal of color in her work.

MR. BROWN: By the way, did you ever try to ask students to work in neutral colors in the beginning, or you allowed them to -

MS. STRENGELL: No.

MR. BROWN: - whatever they would -

MS. STRENGELL: Absolutely. I never told them anything like that, no.

MR. BROWN: This is the third cassette of the interview with Marianne Strengell in Wellfleet, Massachusetts. This is Robert Brown interviewing. This is March 18, 1982.

We've been talking now about Neli Maher, one student of yours who was very ambitious and who has done very well back in India you said. I think you want to talk about a few more of your students who, for one reason or another you feel are notable or there's something significant about them.

MS. STRENGELL: Well, it's quite a hard choice, because I have so many. Anyway, as long as you talk about different countries, Neli Maher in India, I'd like to talk about Yuneko Youkota of Japan.

MR. BROWN: Can you spell that, maybe?

MS. STRENGELL: Yes. Y-U-N-E-K-O Y-O-U-K-O-T-A. She now has a married name which I can't recall for the moment. She has done more or less the same thing for Japan that Neli Maher has done for India.

MR. BROWN: Now, had she had any experience? Did she come over here, or did you urge her to come?

MS. STRENGELL: No, she came on her own. But anyway -

MR. BROWN: Had she had some art school experience, or what was her background?

MS. STRENGELL: I think some, but not really very prominent. There's not much I can say except, of course, she brought with her a great history of techniques, you know, like various kinds of weaves that are very Japanese, and so forth, which was good for all of us, including me.

MR. BROWN: There were things you hadn't really known about that you learned from her.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, I did.

MR. BROWN: When was she a student of yours?

MS. STRENGELL: About the same time as Neli Maher and these other girls.

No, I learned a lot from her, I really did. And, of course, we went twice to Japan and visited them, and so forth and so on.

MR. BROWN: And in Japan, she's become a prominent influence?

MS. STRENGELL: Yes, absolutely.

MR. BROWN: Working on her own or working with industry?

MS. STRENGELL: Both, I think - both, yeah.

MR. BROWN: With your students, you encouraged them, when they went home or when they went on their career, to work in industry?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, yes.

MR. BROWN: You didn't say you should be pure and stay on your own.

MS. STRENGELL: I did not. I think industry, because I've always been interested in having more people have more things, you know. And so, industry has always been one of the things that I like to do.

Well, I think she's been very successful. I haven't heard from her for a few years so I can't really give you the very latest thing.

Okay, then we have a girl called Annie Sanders [sp], and she married an architect from Cranbrook by the name of Peter Bowen [sp]. And she has done an awful lot of beautiful work in rugs right here in this country, designing them, and she has a studio.

MR. BROWN: With Annie Sanders, what was she like as a student? Was she a very precocious student? Were most of these people ones that were out of the ordinary as students?

MS. STRENGELL: Is that what you mean by precocious?

MR. BROWN: Well, were they very quick learners, and were they very imaginative?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, yes, very, extremely. No, she was a wonderful student. I'm not very sure about what you call them, but anyway, she was a great student. She was a young girl and she got a Fulbright to go to Finland, as a matter of fact. And she didn't actually like it because she had the same treatment as I, in my day, in the same school, and so she did work on her own.

MR. BROWN: So she found that the teaching was as narrow as you had found it, as strict?

MS. STRENGELL: I'm afraid so. She was tactful enough not to say so, but I mean -

Well, one of the very, very best students I ever had was Robert Kidd. And he had no experience at all, whatsoever; he just got the basics, and he went full-hilt and did a beautiful job, experimenting with all my fibers, doing everything, everything possible - very handsome. And he now has an art gallery, and he has a weaving outfit that does things: sells yarns and so forth in Birmingham, Michigan. And he was the top, really. He also helped me with the power loom later on.

MR. BROWN: He was particularly good on the technical side, then, the new materials?

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah. Not only that, he had great inspiration, and he had wonderful taste, and he was different. I really feel that he was very good.

Now, next - well, Ray Eames really just was there only for a short time because she married Charlie afterwards and she didn't want to stick around while he got his divorce, or something, so she left early. She didn't do very much, but she was my student.

MR. BROWN: She was. But as a student, I mean, she wasn't extremely notable.

MS. STRENGELL: No.

MR. BROWN: It was later that she found her career.

MS. STRENGELL: Well, because of Charlie, I think. Charlie was absolutely the person, was the leading one in the nation, and she did everything possible to help him, and she did very well. Now that Charlie is gone, I think she has a problem because she can't carry that ball alone. As a student, I don't think she was outstanding in any way.

Then we come to Jack Lenor Larsen.

MR. BROWN: Well, that's surely a very well known name there.

MS. STRENGELL: Well, that's the name; that's number one, one, one. And I have to tell that I didn't think much of Jack as a student.

MR. BROWN: He didn't seem imaginative?

MS. STRENGELL: No, he didn't do anything. Well, he did a couple of things. But he wanted to go back to San Francisco and write a book for a thousand bucks, and instead, he went to New York, and of course -

MR. BROWN: He wanted to write the book - he wanted to be a writer, you mean?

MS. STRENGELL: He wanted to write a book about textiles. But he didn't; he went to New York, and just at the right time because Dorothy Liebes was old and not working terribly hard.

MR. BROWN: You mean it was a time where a new person could take over the -

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, he was just right, you know. He was good looking, he was blond, he was gay. Yeah, I mean -

MR. BROWN: Was he a very persuasive sort of person?

MS. STRENGELL: No, not really, but he had his own ways. I admire him for a lot of things, but I can only say that he wasn't my best student. No, no, it turned out that he had a marvelous mind for economics, you know, and he got along with people. I mean, he's very charming, and, as I say, he's good looking. The fact that he was gay helped him a lot at the time. And well, he's done beautifully. He's certainly the number one name in the country at this point.

He also got lots of people - good people, with some money too, which was very nice. He took quite a few people from Cranbrook with him; you know, people that really would not have made it by themselves, but he sort of boosted them. One was a cripple, and so forth. But really, truthfully, I admire him very much for that.

MR. BROWN: But as far as you could see as his teacher, when he left you at Cranbrook there wasn't much sign of progress - or promise, rather.

MS. STRENGELL: Well, he actually didn't do anything.

MR. BROWN: Oh, really.

MS. STRENGELL: One thing he said, which bears out nicely what I was trying to do with him - he said at one point, at least you left us alone. [Laughs.] Well, I did, but I also - not just that. I tried to steer them a little bit, but I didn't prod them, you know.

MR. BROWN: As far as he was concerned, he stayed to himself sort of?

MS. STRENGELL: Very much, very much.

MR. BROWN: Was it a pretty close-knit community, these various students of yours? Were they close to each other, or were some rather reclusive? How would you characterize their life?

MS. STRENGELL: No, I think it was close-knit because the studio was very close. And, as I said, every day we had a talk for about a half an hour or so.

MR. BROWN: And most of them - or all of them lived right there, didn't they, in the dormitories?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, yeah, everyone. We didn't have any outside students at all at the time. So, it was close, sure.

Well, let's see - oh, another person, or two others. Helena Perhan [ph] was a Finn, and that was sort of a little problem in a way because, you know, Finn and Finn.

MR. BROWN: What do you mean?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, we were both Finns, and I thought maybe she would, in a way, resent the fact that we were both Finns and I was trying to tell her something. Well, anyway, she turned out to be a beautiful weaver and a very, very nice person. And she ended up in India at the design institute in Ahmedabad, which Charlie and Ray had started. We were in Ahmedabad before then, but they were really the ones that set up the thing. And she has been there now, it must have been 18 years or so, and it's very interesting what they're doing there, altogether.

MR. BROWN: You mean, she acts as an advisor in design, or in marketing, or everything?

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, I think everything.

MR. BROWN: Why did you say in the beginning that one Finn teaching another might cause tension? Are Finns very independent minded?

MS. STRENGELL: I don't know. Maybe it's because, you know, I was a Finn and I came to Cranbrook a year before Maija Grotell, who was also a Finn, and I think she resented me for some reason. I don't know why. I don't think I injured her. But there was that sort of thing, you know. So, when I had suddenly a Finnish student - she was also a scholarship student - I just worried just a little bit because I had had a previous experience. So, it worked out beautifully. She was a great friend. I have lots of her things here.

MR. BROWN: But maybe Maija Grotell, you felt - at that time maybe she felt that one Finn was interesting, but if you had several she would lose some of her uniqueness as a student.

MS. STRENGELL: I don't know what she thought. Maija Grotell was a very strange woman - very strange woman, but very talented. But I only know that she resented me.

MR. BROWN: You never really got very close to her.

MS. STRENGELL: No, I did a couple of pots and pans in her place, you know, but no, never.

MR. BROWN: Nothing other than -

MS. STRENGELL: No, she just plainly didn't like me. There might be all kinds of reasons for that, but I think the fact that I was a Finn had something to do with it.

MR. BROWN: She was also one of the best known. In terms of exhibiting -

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, indeed.

MR. BROWN: - she did it very widely.

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, indeed. I mean, she did beautiful work, and she was a wonderful teacher. I can't say anything else, but I did not get close to her.

MR. BROWN: Did you exhibit outside quite a lot while you were a teacher there?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, of course.

MR. BROWN: You regularly would submit to, what, America House?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, I had a lot of traveling exhibits, and, well, Crafts Museum [American

Craft Museum, New York, NY] and Museum of Modern Art [New York, NY], stuff like that. Oh, sure I did.

MR. BROWN: Did you travel to New York very often, or once in a while?

MS. STRENGELL: As a matter of fact, I did. I mean, I went about twice a month because I had work, you know, with the industry and with the architects, and stuff like that.

MR. BROWN: So even when you were teaching at Cranbrook you very frequently went to New York?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, yes; oh, yes. No, from scratch, almost, starting with no - and then I worked with Skidmore, for instance, and I had to go quite often for that. And - no, I did. And I took part in exhibitions, surely. I have a list of them if you want them, not quite as many -

MR. BROWN: Well, some of those other students you mentioned -

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah. Well, let's see. Did I say Helena Perhan?

MR. BROWN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Well, you spoke of her, but Olga -

MS. STRENGELL: Olga de Amaral, well, she came from Bogotá, and she is a great - [inaudible]. She does a great deal of stuff. She was more or less at the end of my session there.

Oh, yeah, we had Hawaii; we had three Hawaiians. And Toshiko Takaazu, as you know, is a great name in pottery, but she also was very, very good in textiles. She was my student, and she wrote a lot about Hawaiian natural fiber, stuff like that. And I even gave her a prize in something, at one point, when I was richer. And she now has done mostly pottery. I don't think she's done any textiles recently. But she was a wonderful person.

And Alice Cagaver [sp] was another one. They all came together the same year. And Alice, you know, she married a museum director in New Mexico, I think.

MR. BROWN: But she stuck with her weaving too?

MS. STRENGELL: Yes, yes. She's doing mostly pictorial things, you know, wall hangings. I tried to get them all to go through some kind of things so they would know the score, but that we can talk about later in some other -

MR. BROWN: You mean, some of them knew more or less what they wanted to do?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, I tried to just have a short thing of basic things, you know, that they should do, and then I let them loose. - Let's see now - yeah -

MR. BROWN: Would you say that most of these top students were with you in the '50s, or were they sort of sprinkled throughout your time at Cranbrook?

MS. STRENGELL: I would say - let's see, I left in '61 and they were before then, in one way or another. Marguerite [sp] I can't tell you about.

MR. BROWN: But were your last years at Cranbrook less rich in terms of students than - or can you generalize like that?

MS. STRENGELL: That's hard. Maybe a little bit. I would say that the middle '50s were the best of these students, you know, but I had other ones, I just can't recall them.

MR. BROWN: Well, by the late '50s were there other schools that were rivals to Cranbrook? There must have been others where they could go for weaving: California, or Rochester, or other places.

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, yeah, California, for instance. Yes, I went out there once.

MR. BROWN: But there was more rivalry to Cranbrook than there had been earlier.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, but Cranbrook still had a name of being the one, you know. But California, yes, and, oh, I guess -

MR. BROWN: But particularly in weaving Cranbrook was well known. Would you say that was probably -

MS. STRENGELL: It was called the lead school for - [inaudible].

MR. BROWN: For -

MS. STRENGELL: For weaving and for textile design.

MR. BROWN: I think it was probably more prominent in that than in the other crafts, I mean, because there were other places for silversmithing. Well, Dick Thomas was there by then, wasn't he?

MS. STRENGELL: Right, right, he's been there forever.

MR. BROWN: But you knew him, I guess.

MS. STRENGELL: Of course, of course. He was there when I got there.

MR. BROWN: Oh, he was?

MS. STRENGELL: He was one of those other student teachers at the time. - And -

MR. BROWN: What did you think of his work?

MS. STRENGELL: Very immaculate. Not very inspired I don't think, but he knows what to do.

MR. BROWN: But also in ceramics too there were a number of places, so that Cranbrook was but one of several, right?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, I think so, yes.

MR. BROWN: So it would be predominantly weaving then that you feel that Cranbrook was the strong place while you were there.

MS. STRENGELL: No, I think pottery very much.

Now, what I wanted to talk to you about, speaking about metalwork, was Harry Bertoia, and that I can talk for hours about - no, not for hours.

MR. BROWN: Let's hear a bit about him.

MS. STRENGELL: Well, anyway, he had a studio next to me too. And he came as a student - first as a student and then as student instructor and then he became head of the - I mean, he had a lot to do before Dick -

MR. BROWN: Thomas came?

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah.

MR. BROWN: But Bertoia came as a student about the time you came as an instructor.

MS. STRENGELL: Yes, yes, right. But then, so, we worked together on lots of things. And, you know, he came as a painter, as a matter of fact; he came as a painting student to Zoltan, and then he developed from there into these other things. And, well, he made, I don't know if you remember, but he made these printed things. I have one. And, then from there he went to three-dimensional metal. And we had the very first one of those, and that was the one that really inspired - well, Olav got him to do the big screen in Detroit.

MR. BROWN: At the Technical Center?

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, in the Technical Center.

MR. BROWN: The General Motors Technical Center.

MS. STRENGELL: Right. I mean, that's the first big thing he ever did, and it was inspired from this thing. I can't show it to you because I sent it to Birmingham to be sold at the Kidd Gallery, so I have

- I think I could find some pictures.

MR. BROWN: But Bertoia, was he someone that you felt close to from fairly early?

MS. STRENGELL: Very, very, from the first moment. He was the sweetest guy, really. He was just lovely, wonderful. So, I was surrounded by Charlie Eames and Bertoia, and myself. We were all in this little circle.

MR. BROWN: And you were all very imaginative, exploring many different things.

MS. STRENGELL: Yes, we all were, and we all took part of each other's enterprises, because I remember that when Harry started doing these printed things on paper, he was terribly excited. He had never done anything like that. I don't know what gave him the idea, but he just felt very strongly that he could express himself. And that's the only time in my entire life when I was very discouraged and quite disgusted with Eliel, because Harry came to my studio and he said, "Look at this. I mean, I want to show this to Mr. Saarinen," and I said, "My god, yes, you should," you know. He had never done this kind of - so we went to Eliel, and Eliel threw him out. It was very much against anything I'd ever known about Eliel, because - I don't know what he did, but Harry came back practically in tears.

MR. BROWN: Do you suppose Eliel thought they were trivial?

MS. STRENGELL: They weren't.

MR. BROWN: They were prints. [Inaudible.]

MS. STRENGELL: They were prints, yes. And he said, "You stick to your pots," you know. Well, Harry fortunately didn't, and I certainly didn't encourage him to. As a matter of fact, I took a lot of his later prints to New York and tried to sell them for him. And then from there he went into the three-dimensional.

MR. BROWN: What was he like? Was he a very confident person?

MS. STRENGELL: Just a sweet little Italian boy, you know, just wonderful. No, he was certainly not a positive person.

MR. BROWN: Did he strike you as very gifted?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, what I saw was very gifted, you know. I mean, I didn't particularly care about the things he had to do when he came, because that was, you know, shapes and pots and techniques, and stuff like that.

MR. BROWN: Oh, he'd had some training in pottery, or that's what he was specializing in?

MS. STRENGELL: No, I don't think so; no, metal. I don't know where he had his first training. I think he went to some kind of training school in Detroit for a year before he came, and then he came as a student. But he was absolutely a wonderful person, really; I think one of the sweetest in Cranbrook, really.

MR. BROWN: Well, by and large, you liked your time at Cranbrook, didn't you?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, yes, I did. Do you think I would have stayed 24 years?

MR. BROWN: How did it relate to Detroit and the museum in Detroit?

MS. STRENGELL: We had really no contact with them.

MR. BROWN: I know they had, beginning in - at least by the '50s they had some craft exhibitions and the like. Did they show you people very much?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, they probably did because they had some of my - [inaudible]. I don't think it was anything that really excited us.

MR. BROWN: In other words, you feel perhaps that Cranbrook could have been almost anywhere;

it was the community itself that mattered.

MS. STRENGELL: No, I didn't -

MR. BROWN: It didn't matter too much that you were in Bloomfield Hills or in Detroit, or -

MS. STRENGELL: No, it just so happened, and there was money and there was setup and there was Eliel Saarinen, you know. No, no, I'm sure that there must be other places like that that do well.

MR. BROWN: But yeah, it was irrespective of its location.

MS. STRENGELL: I think so; I really think so.

MR. BROWN: Well, when Saarinen died in '50, did you sense gradually a change, a good deal - a considerable change came over the place?

MS. STRENGELL: No, not immediately, not at all. As a matter of fact, not before I left, because it was just all right.

MR. BROWN: Well, Sepeshy had been there some time, hadn't he?

MS. STRENGELL: Yes, but as I told you, I liked him. I think he knew what he was doing and he knew what we were doing, and so forth.

Okay, so I left '61, and after that I nominated one of my students - not on this list - to take over. And then I came back a couple of years later and I was very disappointed in what he had been doing. And he left, and it was sort of a mess, generally speaking. And you know, they sold the looms, they did things like that.

MR. BROWN: What happened within two years? You mean the training of the students had fallen down?

MS. STRENGELL: I think definitely, yes. Because, let's see, I left '61, and I think '66 I was called back because this guy had left and they were in a mess, they didn't know what to do, and they wanted to have some name there, you know. So they called me back, and every month I went for three days over there, and I made a program. And when I got there, as I say, everybody was either absent or something or other, or they were doing something that had nothing to do with weaving at all. So I put them on what I called an architectural program, and this was just - I beat them into doing actual architectural interiors, starting with rugs - we started with rugs.

MR. BROWN: You mean, had them rough-sketch them out, or -

MS. STRENGELL: Weave them. They cried; they didn't like it at all. I was very unpopular. But anyway, they did a beautiful job, and I had a show of that in Cranbrook, not elsewhere, and lots of them got very, very good jobs, you know - [inaudible].

MR. BROWN: In other words, you made them apply themselves to a real -

MS. STRENGELL: Exactly, program.

MR. BROWN: - problem, as you had done always while you were there.

MS. STRENGELL: [Inaudible.] But this was rougher because they had been let loose. You know, they were sitting in their bedrooms doing knitting or something, you know, so it really hurt them. I bet they really hated me. But they did a wonderful job. I mean, you can if you want to. - So -

MR. BROWN: Well, in teaching you feel that - you have said before, at least, that you must make it very exciting -

MS. STRENGELL: Yes, yes, I think you have to.

MR. BROWN: - and that you have to make them put their feet into a real situation such as architecture or some of the other problems you mentioned.

MS. STRENGELL: Clothing, yeah.

No, no, I think excitement is the number one thing. I mean, that was the reason I was terribly unhappy during the war, because I tried so hard to get into therapy, and I was not allowed to because I didn't have a nursing degree. What the heck did that mean? Nothing. I mean, I could have made those poor guys have some fun, but that was not allowed. So that was a great disappointment to me. And I think I made my students have fun too. And, you know, they respected themselves.

MR. BROWN: Did the summer schools work out that you had? Did you have them throughout your time or just during World War II?

MS. STRENGELL: For quite a few years. Well, I don't think they were that successful.

MR. BROWN: Were they too short?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, people were tired and materials were hard to get, and so forth. I enjoyed more doing - which I did very often - just, say, a three- or four-week thing, very intense. I did that in Connecticut and various other places in Michigan. And that I enjoyed because that was, again, you know, it was a challenge - [inaudible] - we have this time, and get them going. So, that was my teaching.

MR. BROWN: Continuing the interview, this is December 16, 1982.

Before we move from your teaching, you'd said that all along you tried to set specific, concrete problems for your students, and you've just mentioned in the previous interview that when you came back after you had left, and you were asked to help out, I gather that you found that the students were sort of floundering; they weren't given specific things. Why do you think it's important that a student be given very particular work? Is it necessary at an early stage of development; they need a lot?

MS. STRENGELL: No, I think it's - I do think it's important, yes. I mean, they were floundering. They were just doing whatever they pleased, and none of it led anywhere. There was no discipline, and I was against that so I did give them some extremely specific things that they had never heard of before, as a matter of fact.

MR. BROWN: Right. What would be an example?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, mostly I made a program that would deal with architecture or textiles; textiles that make a framework for your life, and practical things - rugs, what have you and so forth - which we would not only do that for them but it also gave them a chance to earn a living, which they certainly did not have when I got them. Well, I started them with rugs, and they did very well. They didn't like anything about it, but they did very well.

So, it can be taught and it can be disciplined. And we just started with rugs and went into upholstery fabrics and draperies and so forth and so on. We did not do anything outside of that; it was all architecture, and I believe very much in that. And a few of my students got extremely good jobs because of it.

MR. BROWN: But you say that at the time, those students, they don't like it necessarily.

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, they did not.

MR. BROWN: It's too rigid, they want to express themselves.

MS. STRENGELL: Exactly, they want to knit or crochet or stay in their bedrooms for a longer nap, I don't know. But anyway, they did not want to go to class, they did not - so at least they got some discipline into them.

MR. BROWN: You were always, I guess, concerned with that, because in this recent article in *American Craft*, he mentions that small samples of things to be used in interiors were what the students were expected to do, as opposed to expressing themselves.

MS. STRENGELL: No, no. First of all, they could express themselves there too, you know. But I

mean, it was a little more limited; they were not just daydreaming, you know. So, yes, I did start them on that.

MR. BROWN: I want to ask one other thing. This recent article by Ed Rossbach - I guess a former student - in *American Craft* - he doesn't really make clear - he mentions when he was at Cranbrook as your student you had handlooms and you worked on a small scale, and yet you would always encouraged them to think in terms of industrial or commercial work, which would require eventually going to manufacturers working with power looms. How did the student make that transition? Eventually, you got a power loom at Cranbrook, and I gather from Rossbach's article that eventually that was put into use as well. But most of the time when the students were there they worked with the hand weaving.

MS. STRENGELL: Well, that was the way I worked myself, because I worked for industry for many, many years, and I had certain guidelines for that. If I was approached by a factory and mill, then I worked with the mills, A, number one, their equipment, their power loom, and with their own yarns and with their own limitations. And I felt that the students should be able, for their own future, to be able to work within this limitation.

So, it's very true. Well, we had handlooms, and everybody had to design on the loom, not on paper; not get something out of books.

MR. BROWN: Why did you make them go directly to the loom, and not to do any - rather than work things on paper?

MS. STRENGELL: No, because I felt that actually the loom was their tool, the materials were their yarns, and if you put those together and a little bit of imagination, I mean, you got something that you wouldn't get out of a book.

MR. BROWN: Did some people work more from books; did some teachers rely more on drawings?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, yes, indeed, books, books, books.

MR. BROWN: People in this country?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, everywhere. But I just didn't allow them. I told them they couldn't go to the library for the first half year; they couldn't look at anything. And they cried, they were angry, and so forth, but just the same it got them there. You can't believe what some of those people do. It was wonderful.

MR. BROWN: They were forced into -

MS. STRENGELL: Forced into digging into themselves, no?

MR. BROWN: And you had them work on a handloom as opposed to a power loom.

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, yes, yes, you couldn't. I mean, a power loom is really quite a difficult instrument. You couldn't start there. They started with the handloom, and then there was a handloom that was semi sort of a power loom in operation.

MR. BROWN: The shuttle was mechanized or something.

MS. STRENGELL: Well, that had nothing to do with it, but dissecting of patterns. And I got that one from Finland, as a matter of fact.

MR. BROWN: And there, they could work out their ideas and make their mistakes -

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, right.

MR. BROWN: - and receive your critique.

MS. STRENGELL: And then, from then on, they went to the power loom.

MR. BROWN: Did you give them critiques fairly regularly? Would you have them put things up for you?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, yes, very much so. I mean, for instance, that session when I went back to Cranbrook and we had -

MR. BROWN: In the mid '60s -

MS. STRENGELL: - we had big shows, and it was all - [inaudible] - big discussions about it, and I think it was very, very good. They did a good job, but they were certainly beaten to it. [Laughs.] They didn't want to do it at all.

MR. BROWN: But you had a high percentage of your students that went on to be influential in their own right.

MS. STRENGELL: Absolutely, absolutely.

MR. BROWN: And you think part of the reason is because they had that sort of discipline?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, they knew what it was all about, you know. They had the basics, which they didn't. And after I left Cranbrook, I mean, it was left entirely to the students to do whatever they pleased, and I don't think that's right. Partly, this goes back to the fact that when I went to textile school in Finland, you know, I had no encouragement to use my brain, or my heart, my intuition, my color sense. It was just doing mechanical things.

MR. BROWN: You were just a little cog in a wheel, or given very over-simplified exercises?

MS. STRENGELL: I would say so.

MR. BROWN: Whereas you found, when you came back to Cranbrook, it was the opposite in some ways. They were just allowed to do what they pleased.

MS. STRENGELL: Right.

MR. BROWN: But in a way, it was the same effect. They didn't grow, did they?

MS. STRENGELL: No, I don't think so.

MR. BROWN: That's why you rebelled as a young woman against your education.

MS. STRENGELL: Yes, absolutely.

MR. BROWN: Although, it was much more rigorous.

MS. STRENGELL: Well, that was even worse. It was dreadful.

MR. BROWN: I know you've said earlier, you exhibited pretty early on in this country. Were there really very many places to which you could send examples of your weaving, say in the 1940s? Were there many shows or -

MS. STRENGELL: Well, frankly, I never pushed anything because I really don't feel that - I didn't feel that that it was important. That's why I worked with people, with architects, with mills.<

MR. BROWN: Do you think, in fact, the exhibits at that time really weren't very important - design exhibitions?

MS. STRENGELL: Maybe for some people, but I didn't feel it was that for me. I mean, I knew what I was doing.

MR. BROWN: There were a series of design shows at the Museum of Modern Art.

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, yes.

MR. BROWN: And from those, did you -

MS. STRENGELL: And Metropolitan [Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City], and so forth and so on.

MR. BROWN: Did you get some response from those that you recall?

MS. STRENGELL: I think so. But, I mean, I didn't aim for it that way - [inaudible] - because that wasn't the way I was working.

MR. BROWN: But do you think that things changed later and that exhibitions became more important?

MS. STRENGELL: I presume it always has been that way, but I just didn't work that way, that's all.

MR. BROWN: Well, your emphasis was toward application of your designs too, wasn't it, by industry or by architects?

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, right.

MR. BROWN: And the route to go was not necessarily through exhibitions, therefore.

MS. STRENGELL: No, not at all. I don't think I got a single job through that.

MR. BROWN: You mention in your resume one important show - you say it's important - the one at the Brooklyn Museum in 1961, "Masters of Contemporary American Crafts."

MS. STRENGELL: It was a very nice show, and it was the worst snowstorm in New York. I don't think that it particularly did anything for me, no. I mean, I think they wanted me to be there to represent what I was doing, but I don't think I got a single job from it.

MR. BROWN: By then, you were an established figure.

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, I was very established in New York.

MR. BROWN: So, exhibitions, by and large, have not been a very important thing in your career.

MS. STRENGELL: No. I had fun, you know, I mean, San Francisco World's Fair, New York World's Fair -

MR. BROWN: And Russell, you were in.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, and the House and Garden, you know, that [Marcel] Breuer did in New York at the Museum [Museum of Modern Art] --

MR. BROWN: You were involved with furnishings in that.

MS. STRENGELL: Textiles. I mean, that sort of thing it was a great boost to me, but I don't think that it really did anything for me otherwise. I love meeting new people; I love working with them.

MR. BROWN: But otherwise, not really much of a factor.

MS. STRENGELL: I don't think so.

MR. BROWN: Why did you leave Cranbrook? Were you through with teaching, really, about in 1961?

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah. Look, I had 24 and nine-tenths of a year, and our son was gone to college. It was the logical time to quit.

MR. BROWN: They would be leaving - your children would be leaving anyway.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah. One had already left, and our son was leaving to go to college. And it seemed that that was the best way to do it. I mean, it might have been a little hard on him because he couldn't come back to see his friends and so forth, but it was the logical thing to do.

MR. BROWN: And teaching, I mean, although it had been important to you, and as we know you were very pleased with your many successful students. Still, throughout practically all of your teaching career you've had at least as active a parallel career on your own.

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, absolutely.

MR. BROWN: Commissions and freelance.

MS. STRENGELL: No, Cranbrook was - Eliel Saarinen, that was his philosophy, that you should be active outside of school. And so, he liked me for that.

MR. BROWN: Were most people at Cranbrook, on the faculty there, actually -

MS. STRENGELL: Not all of them, no.

MR. BROWN: They weren't all really -

MS. STRENGELL: No, some of them just came and did a little job.

MR. BROWN: But some were really, weren't they? Maija Grotell, didn't she - she worked outside as much as inside?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, she worked mostly for museums. She didn't really sell a lot of her art. She didn't have any commercial ties.

MR. BROWN: No, but she still had a lot of work she was pointing outside of the school.

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, yeah, sure. But generally speaking, no, I would say very little of it. So, I think I was number one in that.

MR. BROWN: Do you think it had a detrimental effect on your students, the fact that you were spending so much time -

MS. STRENGELL: On the contrary. No, for heaven's sakes, they shared with me. I told them what was going on - [inaudible].

MR. BROWN: Right, and they saw what was potential.

MS. STRENGELL: Well, of course, they did, and that was part of the whole philosophy. Now I think that they would have been a good deal worse off if I hadn't done it.

MR. BROWN: Maybe we ought to think now of talking about some of that outside work you've done.

Okay, well, you came to Cranbrook in '37.

MS. STRENGELL: Right, February.

MR. BROWN: And apparently that same year you had some work with the architectural firm of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, beginning about then. How did that come about, through Eliel Saarinen?

MS. STRENGELL: No, nothing. It absolutely was all my own doing. [Inaudible.] I don't remember; I really don't remember.

MR. BROWN: And you worked on a hotel in Cincinnati.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, Terrace Plaza, which was very exciting.

MR. BROWN: Why was it exciting?

MS. STRENGELL: It was exciting because I was in three years before it was built. I grew up with the whole thing, the architecture and stuff like that, yeah.

MR. BROWN: How many instructions did you have? Were you given some idea of what they intended?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, I could see the drawings, and we had meetings in New York. It was back and forth - going back and forth. And I was in from scratch, which I think is a terribly important point.

MR. BROWN: Certainly.

MS. STRENGELL: And there wasn't even a hole in the ground when I got there.

MR. BROWN: What did they have in mind, do you recall?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, they had a special problem because they had a place that was - the hotel was really on the eighth or ninth floor, or something like that. It was on top, and below was other things, offices and stuff. So you really had the hotel up above. And [Joan] Miro was doing something there, and I was doing something with Miro, and it was fun.

MR. BROWN: So it was quite a sophisticated project.

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, very - extremely. That was my very first one with Skidmore. After that, I did quite a few other things.

MR. BROWN: And what sort of things for the Terrace Plaza Hotel did you do? Do you recall what those fabrics were like?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, yes. First of all, I did all of the printed fabrics for the rooms. They had printed curtains and stuff. I did all the things for the restaurant, you know, table mats. I still have one.

MR. BROWN: Now, these prints were of what sort? Can you describe - remember what they were like?

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, they were rather bold and colorful, shapes and simple shapes. I don't think I have -

MR. BROWN: So, rather abstract shapes? These weren't -

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, yeah. No, no, flowers.

MR. BROWN: And you had rejected folk things -

MS. STRENGELL: Yep, I did.

MR. BROWN: - even before you came over here.

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, yes, in Finland too, for god sakes, yes.

MR. BROWN: So patterns these were, and repetitions?

MS. STRENGELL: Different colorings. But I mean, it was, I think, one pattern. And I don't think I have anything -

MR. BROWN: Did you work these out right on the loom, or did you -

MS. STRENGELL: No, these are prints. I did those on paper.

MR. BROWN: You did drawings for them, and then they were sent to the manufacturer?

MS. STRENGELL: Right. And the wovens I wove. And I had George Royal [sp] -

MR. BROWN: George Royal?

MS. STRENGELL: Royal Company, who wove them. And that was just after the war, so it was really quite a problem to get anybody to do it. He wove them, and then I did hand-woven things for certain very special areas like upstairs, you know, special rooms.

MR. BROWN: Did you work closely with the George Royal Company?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, yes.

MR. BROWN: Would you go to their plant and help them to translate your drawings into the power loom?

MS. STRENGELL: Are we on?

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MS. STRENGELL: Well, actually, Dorothy Liebes, you know, did hand-woven things and hand

them transplanted - or translated. I never did that. I always used the fabrics that were at hand, and I wove the samples according to that and according to the equipment, so they could do it without any change at all. And I think that was very important.

MR. BROWN: Certainly. So there was little if any alteration -

MS. STRENGELL: Absolutely -

MR. BROWN: - other than what you'd done and they ran off.

MS. STRENGELL: No, absolutely not.

MR. BROWN: So, this led to work for other architectural firms then, I'm sure, didn't it?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, yes; yes it did.

MR. BROWN: What was the reaction to what you'd done there? Probably very favorable.

MS. STRENGELL: I think it was extremely favorable. It was right after the war; it was a very difficult situation of getting raw materials, getting everything, you know, so I had quite a struggle. But it was an excellent setup. The architects did a beautiful job. Miro was doing his drawings on the walls, and this and that. It was great company.

MR. BROWN: And you worked also on the Manhattan House in New York for them.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah.

MR. BROWN: You described that as very exciting work.

MS. STRENGELL: Yes, it was.

MR. BROWN: What do you mean by that?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, it was a challenge, you know. Any challenge to me is exciting, and it was a challenge. I mean, it was a certain situation.

MR. BROWN: What was the challenging situation?

MS. STRENGELL: I can't really recall anything.

MR. BROWN: Was it maybe just a great big, bare building interior?

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, it was that, yeah.

MR. BROWN: And you had to enliven it, then.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, right.

MR. BROWN: I know Liebes has been described here as having really garish colors. Were yours -

MS. STRENGELL: No, I think - not at all like Dorothy Liebes. The materials - she liked to mix materials too, you know, but I did it differently. And my colors were either pure or very natural - very pure, strong ones but very natural. So far as I remember, Manhattan House was a great deal of greens and things, plus curtains and those rugs and so forth, and upholstery. No, you can't compare us in that respect at all.

MR. BROWN: You'd mix materials if you wanted a certain texture or a certain reflection, or something like that?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, yeah, of course.

MR. BROWN: Is that why you would use a new material, for example?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, first of all, I liked new materials. I like to experiment with everything I can lay my hands on, from fiberglass on. And it of course depends on the architectural problem too; I mean, how much light, how much, you know - [inaudible] - whatever you have.

MR. BROWN: Well, by the time you came in on the Skidmore Owings buildings, they were up,

were they, so you could get a pretty good idea of how much light there would be -

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, indeed.

MR. BROWN: - the orientation of the building to the sun.

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, absolutely. I mean, I insisted on that.

MR. BROWN: So you had all of that.

MS. STRENGELL: Well, I insisted on it. Now, I also did, you know, the fiberglass building for them. That was not the one that exists now; it was the first one. And that was extremely interesting because it had never been done before. Fiberglass was just brand new, and it was terrible. It was glossy and slick, and it was hard to handle, and your face broke out, and what have you. Well, anyway -

MR. BROWN: How'd you overcome those problems?

MS. STRENGELL: I had them. Three years after that I had to quit because I broke out all over. Yeah, well, that was one of those early things. Now they have licked that problem, so that's all right.

MR. BROWN: But aesthetically, how did you respond to fiberglass?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, actually, I changed it very much, because I made them spin it differently and make novelty arms. I also had a dull fiber thing, which I made into tweeds and stuff. And that all went into that building.

MR. BROWN: Do you feel that material fiberglass has much of a future? Was it potentially, as far as you were concerned, an important material? Was it an important change, breakthrough?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, look - Well, obviously, yes, but I just felt it was a great challenge, and I live by that always: a challenge, I was there.

MR. BROWN: So, if you've done something once, you don't really want to repeat it or do anything too much like it.

MS. STRENGELL: No, no.

MR. BROWN: You'd prefer to jump into something new.

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, absolutely. And I like to start with - this was a new fiber, you know. It was a tremendous challenge. Well, actually, what was interesting, they went along with me, you know. I made, as I said, tweeds, you know; I mixed it with asbestos a little bit here and there, and so forth - all very dangerous nowadays. But actually, they didn't think it would stand up, but it stood up for 10-15 years.

MR. BROWN: You mean they thought the material would deteriorate?

MS. STRENGELL: Yes, they were not sure about it, or my approach to it.

MR. BROWN: Did you work closely with its executives, with Owens Fiberglass, Owens Corning?

MS. STRENGELL: Yes.

MR. BROWN: And they were interested in innovation and that sort of thing?

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, I think so. I mean, I went down quite a few times to the mill, and they were not doing very well at the time, because at one point we had lunch, I remember, and they had these curtains made out of fiberglass. And they said, "Look, this is fireproof." So one executive just took out a match and lit the curtains, and bingo, they went all the way up. [Laughs.]

MR. BROWN: You had a fire, right?

MS. STRENGELL: A fire. [Laughs.] But anyway, they licked all that. But I think I had a great deal to do with the fact that fiberglass looks like it does now, because of the - A, the texture, you know,

we tried to introduce, and -

MR. BROWN: You mean to get away from the fact - the early fiberglass used to get embedded in the skin, didn't it, and cause irritation?

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, well, it's also slick, and it was -

MR. BROWN: And you got them to work toward a matte finish.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, and a texture.

MR. BROWN: So I assume these executives, they were very excited, but you were very interested in taking a new product -

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, yeah.

MR. BROWN: - and enlarging its possibilities.

MS. STRENGELL: Right.

MR. BROWN: That must have appealed to them.

MS. STRENGELL: I did that many other times after that.

MR. BROWN: And you were working sort of on prototypes, really, weren't you? In their terms, those were prototypes for something that they might want to go on with.

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, they did; they did. Look at fiberglass now. But they fired me.

MR. BROWN: Why is that?

MS. STRENGELL: You know when they fired me? On my honeymoon with Olav. [Laughs.]

MR. BROWN: Ow, really?

MS. STRENGELL: Yes, that really was something.

MR. BROWN: Why? Did they think that you were a luxury or something?

MS. STRENGELL: I don't know what they thought. They thought they had enough. I had done my little bit.

MR. BROWN: Well, when you came back after your honeymoon, of course you were still at Cranbrook. Did you have other commercial or industrial clients?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, yes, I had that. No, no, this happened right in the Cape, you know, because we were married on the Cape. And they called me up to Providence, Rhode Island where one of the mills was, right in the midst of the whole thing. So, I had to go, just to fire me. They could have done that one the phone, I thought. [Inaudible.]

MR. BROWN: Were there other clients at that time that you could mention?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, yes.

MR. BROWN: Were there any others you could mention?

MS. STRENGELL: You know, I can't remember when and what.

MR. BROWN: Maybe you were already working with the Saarinen firm in Michigan, for which Olav was also working by this time.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah. Well, no, it must have been before that because I was married in 1949.

MR. BROWN: Yeah, right afterward I think - at least, you were working there.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, sure.

MR. BROWN: And maybe we can talk a bit about your work with Eliel Saarinen Associates.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, I'd like to.

MR. BROWN: Well, you must have also, of course, known - were you working with the firm when Eliel was still alive?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, yes, indeed.

MR. BROWN: And what are your recollections of Eliel and the firm? I mean, we've talked about Eliel earlier, but now can you talk about him as a colleague in the practice? Could you say a bit about that?

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah. Well, first of all in Cranbrook - I mean, I think that he picked the right person when he picked me because of his philosophy: somebody who would want to do things on the side and show what happens in the world, you know, not just read out of books. And of course he was a lifelong friend, because the family became very close. And as a matter of fact, the day he died, he came over to - we had a two-hour talk at 3:00 in Cranbrook, just he and I. And then he went back home and listened to news and died. I mean, we were very close. And, no, no, he appreciated what I was doing, I think.

MR. BROWN: When you - On projects for the architectural firm, would he discuss them extensively with you? How did he work with you on that?

MS. STRENGELL: Actually, no, at that point it hadn't got to the point where I could do anything - [inaudible] - he was observing. Olav was working.

MR. BROWN: So you really - So when you first started doing things for the firm, it was when Eero was in charge.

MS. STRENGELL: Well, they were both in charge, but it was later. I don't recall any particular discussions.

MR. BROWN: Well, your first large project with him was for the General Motors Technical Center [Warren, Michigan]?

MS. STRENGELL: Right, and I was great.

MR. BROWN: At what point were you brought in on that? I know Olav's talked about when he - of course, he was in on the drafting of the buildings.

MS. STRENGELL: All the buildings had not been built at the time. The first one I was in on was the engineering building, and that was really mostly Eero, because Eero felt very strongly that everything was glass, it was marble, it was metal, so on, so on, so on, a little human thing. He wasn't very human, but just the same he realized the idea of introducing something else.

MR. BROWN: You found he wasn't too human. He was a driven sort of a person.

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, he was very driven. No, I don't think he was very human.

MR. BROWN: But he seemed to, or somebody seems to have recognized the need for some human - [inaudible].

MS. STRENGELL: No, I think Eero did. Really, he was the one that started the whole thing.

MR. BROWN: Did he propose or discuss with you what he had in mind? Or how did it come about?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, he just showed me the materials and said, "Why don't you go ahead and see what you can do?"

MR. BROWN: What materials? You mean those -

MS. STRENGELL: Well, there was some huge rugs, for instance, on this terrazzo floor, which were really very bare and very cold looking, and there were curtains to be made. And this was in the lobby. That was the first job I had.

MR. BROWN: He showed you some examples of the kind of material, the textile -

MS. STRENGELL: No, no, I did that.

MR. BROWN: Okay, you had steel and glass and marble, and what kind of fabric did you -

MS. STRENGELL: And me. [Laughs.]

MR. BROWN: And you. And what kind of fabric did you, therefore, think might be appropriate?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, one thing, it was a very sunny place, so the curtains I did mostly in grays, blacks and whites.

MR. BROWN: To counteract some of the -

MS. STRENGELL: To counter the sun. And the rug was equally quite dark and fluffy, and so forth. And that was certainly a problem right there with the people who took care of the building, because they were scared to death of that rug.

MR. BROWN: They didn't think they'd be able to maintain it?

MS. STRENGELL: That's exactly it. They'd say, "What do we do?" You know, I was calling it a special thing. And I gave them a broom and said, "This." Of course, they died because, I mean, they had all this machinery and stuff like that. Anyway, we all got along.

MR. BROWN: And what kind of fiber did you select for it?

MS. STRENGELL: Mostly wool for the rug; and for the other ones, certain synthetics and cotton, linen, right, so forth. That was a problem because it was so sunny, you see. I mean, you had a problem, maybe disintegrating fabrics.

MR. BROWN: So you selected ones you thought would be most durable.

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, yeah.

Well, that was just the beginning. And after that I did every lobby there was in the whole place, and that was quite a few lobbies.

MR. BROWN: Now, what was your challenge in those lobbies? They were big lobbies.

MS. STRENGELL: They were huge lobbies.

MR. BROWN: And what did you attempt to do with your rugs in those lobbies?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, I tried to do something that would go with the architecture and go with the - go, be practical, and so forth. I wasn't trying to be flashy. I was flashy in one place, and that was in the - I forgot - Harley Earl's office.

MR. BROWN: Harley -

MS. STRENGELL: Harley Earl. He was, at the time, the number one in the design department, and he was the boss. And in there, I let myself go a lot more. But generally speaking, I just provided texture and warmth, practicality.

MR. BROWN: And by practicality, what do you mean? You've used the word several times here.

MS. STRENGELL: Well, something that, A, doesn't dirt easily, that can be cleaned, can be fluffed out; you know, just stay as it was designed.

MR. BROWN: Now, what was the rug supposed to do? You had a terrazzo floor. It's fairly handsome in itself.

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, the rugs had to join groups too, and that was terribly important.

MR. BROWN: Had to join groups -

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, they had to make groups, groupings, you know. I mean, that's what I feel

very strongly. It was a room divider on the floor.

MR. BROWN: You mean there were groups of furniture -

MS. STRENGELL: Right.

MR. BROWN: - that would be put on the one carpet, and then another group would be on another carpet, so to speak.

MS. STRENGELL: Right, right. Now, one thing that I don't think anybody had ever done before was I combined the two in one carpet - done in Puerto Rico, as a matter of fact. I had a floor covering of a kind, and then I had built-in area rugs for the groups, and it was all in one carpet. I have some -

MR. BROWN: Really, all in one thing?

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah. I have some photographs.

MR. BROWN: And you did that just to see whether it could be done or it seemed the most practical?

MS. STRENGELL: No, it was not practical from that standpoint, but I felt it was. You know, I felt it was a way to solve it instead of having some flat floor covering and shoving some rugs on top of it, so I built them all in.

MR. BROWN: It sounds like you - Who had made the decision that there would be areas of furniture and the like?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, that was quite architectural.

MR. BROWN: Because it sounds like these were immense spaces -

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, yes.

MR. BROWN: - and they wanted to break them up by putting the furniture in various settings, and your rugs would -

MS. STRENGELL: Defined it.

MR. BROWN: - define that. And you mentioned, to give warmth. So in some areas you moved away from the grays and blacks -

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, yes; yes, I did. Oh, I did. It wasn't all gray and black. It was just the first one.

MR. BROWN: Were the clients themselves - did they work closely with you? Did they look in frequently at what you were designing?

MS. STRENGELL: They were very good, as a matter of fact. I mean, their buying office wasn't always crazy about it.

MR. BROWN: Oh, you mean the purchasing -

MS. STRENGELL: The purchaser, because they just felt that - funnily enough, they felt that I was expensive, which was not true. They sent their wives down to Hudson's, you know -

MR. BROWN: The big department store.

MS. STRENGELL: - and they priced rugs at certain prices, and they came back and said that, my god, she's asking too much. Of course, mine was all hand-woven, it was that high, and so forth.

MR. BROWN: An inch and a half or two inches.

MS. STRENGELL: Didn't I ever tell you that joke about it?

MR. BROWN: No.

MS. STRENGELL: It's a wonderful one. Well, this purchasing agent really didn't like me. He said, "That dame gets a trip to Europe every time we get a rug." It was not true, but anyway. He - He - Well, there was this big meeting - Olav was in on it. I was not, but Olav was in on it because they didn't even know really that we were married at the time, so he was there. So they said, well, all right, here we have the Hudson rugs and we have the Strenzell rugs, and here is this difference in price, you know. So the boss, whoever it was, I don't remember, said, all right, what's the difference? Well, it turned out to be \$1,349.50, you know, something like that. So he said, that's just shabby, he said. So from then on I made all the rugs, every one. Yeah, that was a funny relationship, but it was all right.

MR. BROWN: It was funny with the purchasing agents, but it worked out all right because -

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, it did, it did.

MR. BROWN: - the bosses had a good deal of money to spend. This was to be a bit of a showcase, wasn't it, this Technical Center?

MS. STRENGELL: It was a tremendous showcase. But you know, actually, what was interesting was I did all the upholstery for all the offices in some of the buildings, and they were all different, but I did them on a common warp. In other words, I had one warp that went on, and each office had a different, individual - I mean, I was not famous at all. And actually, I think my fabrics are cheaper than what you could have got in a market. They were hand-woven.

MR. BROWN: They were hand-woven?

MS. STRENGELL: Hand-woven, and they were individually designed for each office.

MR. BROWN: Who did the hand weaving?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, I had marvelous weavers: Swedish girls in Pontiac, Michigan. They did all the weaving.

MR. BROWN: For the upholstery.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, and the rugs.

MR. BROWN: Oh, the rugs too?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, yeah.

MR. BROWN: Oh, they weren't done in a large commercial mill?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, no, in Pontiac, Michigan on a little handloom downstairs in the basement. Oh, they were great gals, really terrific. Unfortunately, they've retired so I can't do it anymore.

MR. BROWN: So you were able there - you didn't have to make that - you didn't have to align up what you were doing with what a power loom would do.

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, no, no. No, it couldn't have been on a power loom.

MR. BROWN: This was a very special, almost a luxury commission, wasn't it, the Technical Center?

MS. STRENGELL: It was. But as I say, really truthfully it didn't cost them any more money than they would have paid otherwise at all, and it was individual.

MR. BROWN: Well, this was - your big project under Eliel Saarinen was the Technical Center.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah. Well, I did some other things for him too.

MR. BROWN: And the restaurants you did too. And you've mentioned, I think, earlier about Harry Bertoia, whom you'd known as a student at Cranbrook, and he got his first big commission, didn't he, in the great metal screen at that time?

MS. STRENGELL: Thanks to us, really. Yes, because - well, Harry was also student when I first

met him, and he had his studio down below. And he became a student teacher, and then he became head of the metal thing. And he was a wonderful man; just a lovely, lovely man. Did you ever meet him?

MR. BROWN: No.

MS. STRENGELL: Lovely man. I mean, sweet, marvelous, what have you. And well, he got from there into painting, and I have a print. And then from there he got into the three-dimensional screen, and because of that - we got the first one, Olav and I - because of that, Olav got him the job to make that big screen, which was the first big one he ever did. And then he went on.

MR. BROWN: Was Harley Earl the man you worked closest with at General Motors?

MS. STRENGELL: No, not at all. I didn't work with any of them, really. I worked with Mr. - I showed things to the architects. I didn't work with them. I met them - afterwards of course I met them, because I did a lot of overtime, but that was a different thing.

MR. BROWN: So, that followed from that?

MS. STRENGELL: No, I don't know if it did or not. No, I don't think so.

MR. BROWN: You've described Harley Earl as a character. What do you mean by that?

MS. STRENGELL: What do you mean as a character? [Laughs.]

MR. BROWN: He seemed sort of eccentric in some ways?

MS. STRENGELL: I can't really tell you, really. He was just a character.

MR. BROWN: Well, another commission known to me, when you were with Saarinen, was the Kresge Auditorium at MIT.

MS. STRENGELL: Right.

MR. BROWN: That was a great curtain you did, that stage curtain. Can you describe, was that an interesting project, anything in particular?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, it was a very difficult one.

MR. BROWN: Why was that?

MS. STRENGELL: First of all, it was an enormous thing and, well, it was done out of diamonds that were sewn together. It was just very difficult; it took a lot of time.

MR. BROWN: And was that mass-produced down to commercial?

MS. STRENGELL: No, we used mass-produced fabric, and then it was cut into these diamond shapes and then it was sewn together. That had a lot to do with - you had to design it on paper with the samples.

MR. BROWN: And then, you knew what the manufacture product was?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, I knew the fabric, sure.

MR. BROWN: And then you had it fabricated, put together by -

MS. STRENGELL: By somebody. I didn't do that.

MR. BROWN: You had lots of contacts with weavers.

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, yeah. Well, no, this was not a weaving project; it was strictly a design project.

MR. BROWN: But you liked designing on paper. Would you prefer, if you had your choice, to work right on the loom?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, I always did that, but I can do both. I mean, prints you have to design one

way or another, but in the case of prints I did all kinds of methods you know, photograms, potato prints, whatever have you. But otherwise, I certainly think that for a textile, for a woven thing, you have to do it on the loom.

MR. BROWN: Were you finding by the early '50s that in America your idea of design, your interests, your kinds of colors, really sort of natural colors, or primary, right -

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah.

MR. BROWN: - were becoming the predominant taste? Or would you say there was still a lot of interest in other things; in, say, folk designs?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, of course there was.

MR. BROWN: There was.

MS. STRENGELL: A few that -- Dorothy Liebes did some things.

MR. BROWN: And others did too.

MS. STRENGELL: And I did. I think ours was in a very different -

MR. BROWN: But you did some folk things.

MS. STRENGELL: No, never.

MR. BROWN: No, you didn't. But Liebes did.

MS. STRENGELL: No, she didn't.

MR. BROWN: No?

MS. STRENGELLS: I don't think so. But I mean, we were closest together because we both liked texture, we liked color.

MR. BROWN: And you both worked extensively with industry too, right?

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah. Now, ours was very different. I mean, this was brainwork, you know.

MR. BROWN: This was brainwork? Did you get to know her a bit when you moved back to Connecticut?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, yes, we saw her quite often, both of them.

MR. BROWN: Was she quite approachable? Did you talk about weaving much?

MS. STRENGELL: No, not really. We talked about other things, I think. I mean, I think we both realized that we were not doing the same kind, you know. I mean, she was very - [inaudible] - very much so, and beautiful, beautiful stuff. But no, we were just friends.

MR. BROWN: When you say beautiful, you mean the sense of composition or -

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, I think in what she did, I think she was very, very good. She's still alive.

MR. BROWN: Could you see the Bauhaus design sort of becoming predominant, or not?

MS. STRENGELL: Here?

MR. BROWN: Did you think it would?

MS. STRENGELL: You mean now?

MR. BROWN: Well, then. Did you think it would someday sort of sweep the field?

MS. STRENGELL: No - well, it wasn't my field at all.

MR. BROWN: Why not, do you think?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, because I just liked other things. You know, I didn't like rigid things. I

like texture and I liked color. She had very little color in her stuff.

MR. BROWN: But you like to take, like, for example, a new fabric or a new fiber and see what effects it would have, right?

MS. STRENGELL: Of course.

MR. BROWN: You were more interested in how that might carry you, rather than pre-thinking out everything and making everything conform to -

MS. STRENGELL: Look, I had one rule, and that was I don't care, I mix everything and I see what comes out, and I test it. I mean, I wouldn't just throw it at somebody without knowing what it would do. And she worked very simply in wools, linens, and really was very different, fortunately. But I do admire her; I think she's a lovely, lovely person.

MR. BROWN: Maybe we could talk now a bit about some of the commercial and industrial clients for which you particularly worked. You've emphasized a few of them; I thought maybe now would be a good time to continue on with some of this, and then in here, maybe a couple of these - or maybe there are others as well.

Let's do talk now about some of your work with industry. And you said that Knoll Associates was one of the first. How did you come to know them? Did you know Florence Knoll?

MS. STRENGELL: Florence Knoll and I were the first ones to share a dormitory in Cranbrook. So I met her first and then of course I met Hans, and from there on we just went on doing things. So that's how; the introduction was really from Cranbrook, because -

MR. BROWN: What was their strength, would you say, the Knolls, what was their - were they - their business sense, their -

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, Hans was a wonderful businessman.

MR. BROWN: And Florence, what was her contribution?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, she was a great, great designer. I mean, she had sensitivity, color sense, so on and so forth. No, I knew Florence from before. She was actually almost a daughter to the Saarinens. Her parents died, and she was in Kingwood School, and she spent a lot of time with the Saarinens, and she came to Finland. So I first met her -

MR. BROWN: You'd met her even before you came over.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, I did. I know it was very funny because she came over and she busted her leg, and Eliel was carrying her around, arms all over the place. And they came to my summer place, and so forth and so on. So I knew her before, yes. And then we were fairly close because we were the only two people in the dormitory, you know. So we got to know each other well.

MR. BROWN: And Knoll Associates was formed in the '40s, I guess, or something like that.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, in the '40s, but I don't remember when.

MR. BROWN: And this was one of your first jobs. What sort of things did you do with the Knoll -

MS. STRENGELL: Printed fabrics, at the time.

MR. BROWN: Printed fabrics.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, no wovens at the time; later on, yes, but just printed. Something called *Shooting Stars* was the number one thing. I haven't got -

MR. BROWN: Have you got an example of that? Were these fairly abstract designs?

MS. STRENGELL: Yes.

MR. BROWN: Would you get some instructions from Florence Knoll?

MS. STRENGELL: No.

MR. BROWN: She just thought that what you did she would want to show.

MS. STRENGELL: Right.

MR. BROWN: And were these to be - were these sold separately as fabrics, or were these sold also as upholstery?

MS. STRENGELL: Most of them were drapery fabrics to start with. And, no, they were just shown and sold in the shop. No. No, actually, I have never had much instructions from my clients, you know. I mean, okay, I do something and I show it to them; if they like it, fine.

MR. BROWN: Was Knoll Associates fairly quickly a success?

MS. STRENGELL: I think so; I think so. You know, as I say, Hans had a good background, you know, because Knoll - in Germany, parents, grandparents - I don't know. Anyway, he was a good businessman and he had very good sense, and the combination was good.

MR. BROWN: So you became very well known, in a way, through this work, didn't you?

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, partly, I suppose. I was the first one. I can show you some samples later on.

MR. BROWN: Now, other industrial clients that you've emphasized before -

MS. STRENGELL: Right, George Royal was the one that did all the things for in Terrace Plaza.

MR. BROWN: George Royal was the company which you -

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah. Now, I did things for all of these, but they were smaller things. Now, Chatham Manufacturing Company was one - the top one. They did automobile fabric. They came over in 1954, and at that time they started going into suit jackets, and their suit jackets were terrible, believe me.

MR. BROWN: Really? What do you mean, they looked terrible?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, yeah, they were shiny, glossy. Oh, they were gruesome, you know. So I got them - I worked for them for six years, and I got them to accept texture again, tweedy things instead of this horrible gloss.

MR. BROWN: Sort of uniform things they'd done before.

MS. STRENGELL: Well, they only did one thing, only different colors. It was all glossy, and it was probably all right, practical and so forth, but it was awful, really awful. So I got them onto this other thing. I can show you samples of that.

MR. BROWN: And the result was what? Was it very favorable for them? I mean, this was much more popular.

MS. STRENGELL: Yes, yes.

MR. BROWN: You were using artificial fibers.

MS. STRENGELL: Oh yes, entirely, because I had to do that. But I, again, made them spin it up differently, do different things - [inaudible] - instead of having this one single-strand, horrible glossy thing. They made tweedy arms -

MR. BROWN: You mean they made them rougher, ones that would break a bit as they were spun - I mean, as they were twisted?

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah. Well, they were bigger yarns.

MR. BROWN: And not - [inaudible.]

MS. STRENGELL: I can show you some samples. It's hard for me to just explain it.

MR. BROWN: Okay, now we're looking at several samples of the work you did for Chatham Manufacturing Company, automobile upholstery.

MS. STRENGELL: Right.

MR. BROWN: And I think you want to make a few comments. I'd like to ask some questions, maybe, as you talk about various ones.

MS. STRENGELL: No, I would like to. When I was approached by them, to start with -

MR. BROWN: You were approached by Chatham itself.

MS. STRENGELL: Chatham itself. And actually, the guys in Detroit, they were in contact with the manufacturers of cars. Well, I was approached, and at the time they had to go into synthetics, and they did - [inaudible] - all very glossy, very slick, very dull, and you skidded along; if you sat down you couldn't stay in your seat -

MR. BROWN: They were too slick.

MS. STRENGELL: - and so forth. So, okay, so I told them at the time - there were two very, very nice guys, Gordon and Ralph Getzinger [sp]. Gordon was working with Ford, Getzinger was working with -

MR. BROWN: General Motors?

MS. STRENGELL: General Motors, and so forth, in Albany. So I told them I'd be delighted. It was a terrific challenge, seeing those things, what they had done, you know. I said, yes, but I would like to have your own yarns, your own materials, I want to see the mill, and I want to know just what the equipment is, what the personnel is, and how you sell it. And I want to weave up samples on my handloom out of this, with all these limitations in mind, and then I want to go down and see, with you, with Gordon and Ralph, to see the people who are in charge of the styling for the various cars.

So that's the way it came about. And it was the only way it could be done, really, from my end, and I think from theirs too, because they were quite flattered, you know: okay, I came down with samples - [inaudible]. And I said, look, I mean, okay, how do you like it; what do you say, you know? So they felt that they had designed the things, which they really did not. But anyway, they felt very strongly they were a part of the thing, so we worked it out. I met some very interesting characters.

MR. BROWN: Did you?

MS. STRENGELL: Yes, I did. [Laughs.]

MR. BROWN: Like, for example, do you remember?

MS. STRENGELL: No, I won't tell any names, but it was fun. It was crazy, but it was fun.

So anyway, from that very slick beginning I got them steered into this sort of thing that I'm showing you now, which is - if there is a pattern, it's discrete, it's all over. One reason for that is because, prior to this deal I did an upholstered fabric for somebody, I forgot who it was. It was a glen plaid sort of thing, very subtle in itself, but it was still a big plaid. And they put it into a streamlined car with - every line was rounded; there was not a single straight line anywhere, and it was a nightmare.

So, whatever patterns I did, it was discrete. So you can see here, either a small pattern that would fit in, or a bigger pattern but in less contrasting colors so it would still be an all-over effect. And that was one end of it, and the other one was tweeds. That, I really think, was the best thing for the cars.

MR. BROWN: Whereas a very contrasting, or a large pattern -

MS. STRENGELL: Yes, indeed. I mean, you have to always think about the fabric, the way it's used. You can't have a curtain that has some certain patterns, if you fold it, it will look completely different. You have to think of those things. And especially in this case where you sit for a long time

in the same place, you have to have a nice atmosphere, you have to have -

MR. BROWN: A fairly - [inaudible].

MS. STRENGELL: That's true, and a background for the people. That's one of my pet things: I want textiles to be background for people.

MR. BROWN: You don't want them to compete with them and their personalities.

MS. STRENGELL: No, no, certainly not.

MR. BROWN: So you devised, then, a small patterned type of upholstery. We see some examples here, three at least. There's one that's quite formal. It's sort of a hexagonal, ringed in black - blue ringed in black.

MS. STRENGELL: It's very simple, but I mean, it will fit and it gives an overall color picture, you know. And then, this one is a little bit fancier, but on the other hand it's all in one color, you know, and you can use this either way, depending on the design of the car.

MR. BROWN: This is in distinct registers, this one. Yeah, it's almost like a thumbnail pattern, but rather looser and more open than that. It's not so rigid as the other, the scale pattern.

MS. STRENGELL: Now, this one is my favorite.

MR. BROWN: Now, this is more of a tweedier -

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, that's a combination of tweed and - it's like stripes.

MR. BROWN: Now, okay, this is tweed, which we think of as associated with the traditional, sort of almost craft -- tweed we do -- but into this you've introduced black, a very strong color, and metallic thread.

MS. STRENGELL: I don't think of it as traditional.

MR. BROWN: Tweed?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, but I think -

MR. BROWN: Not the overall effect. No, I'm saying, in this context certainly it isn't, but I'm saying the nubby -

MS. STRENGELL: Well, the texture.

MR. BROWN: - texture of tweed. And then, why do you introduce the metallic thread as well?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, because actually that was the era of the metallic. Everybody wanted something metallic.

MR. BROWN: To suggest the future, up to date, do you think?

MS. STRENGELL: Up to date, yeah. This was made '59 and, of course, everybody wanted to have Lurex.

MR. BROWN: Lurex, which was, what, a metallic product of that time?

MS. STRENGELL: Right. And here it's rather - as you can see it's rather discrete, but still there.

MR. BROWN: Yeah, it does not shine the way the fabrics had before you came in on it.

MS. STRENGELL: No, I think it's very handsome. - So. Okay. -

MR. BROWN: So that work with Chatham, then, was exciting.

MS. STRENGELL: Very.

MR. BROWN: I mean, it opened you up into the mainstream of public taste; what people were going to sit on and look at.

MS. STRENGELL: Well, not only that, but it was a tremendous challenge to me. You know, here were all these new materials, different mills, and all these characters, as I said before, all these personalities, let's call them that.

MR. BROWN: You mean they were all very strong-minded?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, yes, they were strong-minded, and they didn't always have very good taste.

MR. BROWN: No, I was going to ask, did they think that they were designers? You said that sometimes they thought they were.

MS. STRENGELL: No. Oh, they thought they were, of course.

MR. BROWN: But until you came along, for the most part had they not really ever employed a sophisticated designer?

MS. STRENGELL: No. I don't think very much, no.

MR. BROWN: And the auto industry itself had also just more or less picked out from their samples?

MS. STRENGELL: I know, and they put things together.

MR. BROWN: Is that right?

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, exactly.

MR. BROWN: This, then -

MS. STRENGELL: This was very personalized.

MR. BROWN: This now meant Detroit was beginning to think more and plan more deliberately, and create custom fabrics for almost each model.

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, yes, they did, they did. Well, it was a person-to-person thing, which was good, because I think that's why we did so well.

MR. BROWN: And these did do very well.

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, very well, for six years.

MR. BROWN: You also - another major client, at least in terms of innovation at about that time, the late '50s, was Alcoa in Pittsburgh, the Aluminum Company of America.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah.

MR. BROWN: I know you've shown me some of the prominent advertising they did for it. This was your - it was a challenge there, wasn't it?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, it was indeed.

MR. BROWN: Did they come to you?

MS. STRENGELL: Yes.

MR. BROWN: And what did they say?

MS. STRENGELL: They said they had a program - I had that downstairs, but I -

MR. BROWN: Yeah, I've seen some of them.

MS. STRENGELL: They had a program and they wanted to have these fibers used.

MR. BROWN: And these were aluminum.

MS. STRENGELL: All aluminum. And they had - well, Charlie Eames did something with the aluminum, I know that, and I did something -

MR. BROWN: You mean he did a textile, or something else?

MS. STRENGELL: No, no.

MR. BROWN: He did a structural -

MS. STRENGELL: He did something with - the toys. You know, he was good at toys. I was the raw material person. No, there was a Frenchman who did a beautiful evening dress in this material.

MR. BROWN: Was it a difficult material? When you saw it, what did you think?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, I was horrified.

MR. BROWN: Really? Why?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, it's glossy - I can show it to you, you can see there - glossy. The colors are very good, a great range of colors, but glossy and slick and, you know. Well, they wanted me to make a rug out of it, and I couldn't believe them. I said, "A rug out of that? But anyway, I did, and I still have the picture of that.

MR. BROWN: Tell me, you've mentioned several times, whenever you say glossy you sort of reject it. Is that a problem - do you have a problem in a woven fabric, a glossiness?

MS. STRENGELL: No, I think a little bit is all right, but this was supposed to be -

MR. BROWN: Entirely glossy.

MS. STRENGELL: - all in a rug.

MR. BROWN: And what would the problem have been, just - would the effect have been distasteful?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, it could be very garish, you know, and it was. The colors were brilliant all over. They were good colors in themselves -

MR. BROWN: Good colors.

MS. STRENGELL: - but I had to put them all together, you know, and that was quite a little challenge there.

MR. BROWN: What do you mean by putting them all together? You were supposed to use them all, or -

MS. STRENGELL: Would you like me to go and get that?

MR. BROWN: Well, you just said that for this Alcoa commission of a great rug, you said it was rather frightening because you didn't even make a sketch for it.

MS. STRENGELL: No.

MR. BROWN: There wasn't time, or you just thought you wanted to -

MS. STRENGELL: No, I just couldn't, for one thing or another. I don't know why. But normally, I might have made a sketch. But I had all these 30 different shades of aluminum, which was a very shiny material, and I had to make it into a rug. And I was appalled when I was first approached by this whole thing. But then, of course, being myself, I thought, aha, here is a new challenge.

MR. BROWN: Here is a challenge, and you love challenges.

MS. STRENGELL: I love challenges.

MR. BROWN: And you didn't bother to sketch; you decided that you'd just plunge right in.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, I plunged in. So I made a piece, a little different color yarns, and I played with them, and that's all. And I took it down, and I never was so scared in my life.

MR. BROWN: Took it down to what?

MS. STRENGELL: From the loom. And it turned out really quite wonderful, because it was subtle and it was sturdy, and it draped, as you can see from this drawing. And this was one of the first when I was still not going all the way up. See, I was using some other materials.

MR. BROWN: You introduced it into other materials.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, a little bit of linen or a little bit of something else and so forth. But this one I did up with practically -

MR. BROWN: You retained, though, on the final rug, some of this heavy pile. You relieved -

MS. STRENGELL: No, I did that - yes, I divided it up.

MR. BROWN: And you did in the aluminum as well to a degree, didn't you?

MS. STRENGELL: No, this was not aluminum.

MR. BROWN: Oh, you did alternate the aluminum.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, I did.

MR. BROWN: You did introduce, what, linen or wool or what?

MS. STRENGELL: Wool. No, I had to because it was just too much, and it also emphasized Alcoa, see?

MR. BROWN: And what did Alcoa think of that, the fact that you introduced other registers?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, they loved it.

MR. BROWN: They didn't mind that you'd introduced a little wool?

MS. STRENGELL: No, I think they saw my point, that this really enhanced their material, because it was a contrast.

MR. BROWN: Do you think it also maybe gave a little prestige to aluminum, that it could be in company with wool?

MS. STRENGELL: Hopefully.

MR. BROWN: Maybe it did, yeah; the traditional, admired, sturdy material.

MS. STRENGELL: Well, they were terribly pleased with it, so that's all I asked. And I was pleased too.

MR. BROWN: What pleased you so much about what the aluminum could do? What do you think it was?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, just to get the material and conquer it, you know. It was what I did.

MR. BROWN: Was it difficult to work with as a fiber?

MS. STRENGELL: No, not really that bad. I mean, it was like having a Philippine harsh fiber, you know. Every fiber works different. No, that wasn't the problem. But I think I managed to conquer it. I didn't think that to start with.

MR. BROWN: But then did Alcoa proceed to do quite a promotion of this?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, yes, and I had quite a lot to do with it after that too.

MR. BROWN: Did you travel -

MS. STRENGELL: No.

MR. BROWN: - or what did you do to help them out?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, I just experimented and made samples and stuff. And then I worked with Dow -

MR. BROWN: Dow Chemical.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, and with their new materials, and led into that whole field. That was good too. But as I said before, I never approached anybody for a job, ever, in my entire life, and Olav hasn't either.

MR. BROWN: Why do they keep coming to you? Because they knew you would accept a challenge, and they knew that your -

MS. STRENGELL: I hope so, and that I knew how.

MR. BROWN: - your prototypes would lead to production.

MS. STRENGELL: I hope so. I didn't read their mind.

MR. BROWN: Would they pay you a retainer, or did you have some kind of royalty arrangement, or how was that done?

MS. STRENGELL: No, a retainer. I had a couple of royalty things, but I didn't believe very much in that. No, I asked for a retainer, and that's usually what happens.

MR. BROWN: Now, in the '50s and all, when so much of this was getting underway, you were very prominent. You were one of the leading people - artist-weavers being employed by industry, weren't you, in this country?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, I would say so. I would say number one then. I mean, Dorothy Liebes, sure, but she worked with - [inaudible] - but I think I had the wider appeal.

MR. BROWN: Yes, she was principally with one, yeah.

MS. STRENGELL: So, no, I think so, and I'm very proud of it.

MR. BROWN: And this must of - Did this gradually have quite an effect on younger weavers coming along, that they could see by your example?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, as our friend Ed Rossbach says, osmosis. [Laughs.] Well, anyway - okay, no, I think I had an influence on them, I do, and I think many of them were very successful.

MR. BROWN: Does industry continue - did it continue into the '60s coming to you, and into the '70s, or were the '50s the heyday of this?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, of this particular thing, yes, because that was 1960s stuff, this one stuff. But then I did Field Crest and Karastan, and then I got into designing yarns, which I think was interesting because that was part of my deal too.

MR. BROWN: That was with whom?

MS. STRENGELL: Darworth - Darworth. Well, I designed yarns for them; different twists, different novelties, and so forth and so on. I did that for quite a few years.

Have you got that in -

MR. BROWN: No, I don't.

MS. STRENGELL: No, I can't find it -

[Audio break.]

MR. BROWN: So, Darworth, was in the '60s, or something you worked with them?

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah.

MR. BROWN: And you designed yarns themselves, so that meant you got into the initial process before the fabric was even - I mean, the yarns were made.

MS. STRENGELL: Right, which is important.

MR. BROWN: You had not had that opportunity before, really.

MS. STRENGELL: Well, I had done some of it in the Philippines, where you had to make your own yarns.

MR. BROWN: But that was a special project, which we'll talk about later.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah.

MR. BROWN: But otherwise, working with the textile industry, they'd say, here are our fibers, see what you can do with them.

MS. STRENGELL: Right.

MR. BROWN: And what did you attempt to do with Darworth?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, I attempted to - as I said before, I love texture, I wanted to utilize different fibers and mix them. And then, I wove up samples for them out of them out of those - [inaudible].

MR. BROWN: What were they aiming toward? What sort of clients did they have that you would have -

MS. STRENGELL: Well, they were, in a way, rather experimental themselves. We are talking about Darworth Incorporated in Simsbury, Connecticut; a marvelous, marvelous outfit - actually run by idealists, I think - interested in yarn, construction of yarns, what to do with them, how to combine them, and so forth.

I worked with them for quite a while and developed various textured yarns, combinations of fibers and so forth, and finally, just wove them into samples of upholstery, drapery, and so forth, for them, just to show what can be done. And I felt -- to me, it was a very great thing because, I mean, everything in textiles starts with yarns or fiber, and I got to the very beginning of it this way.

MR. BROWN: You worked also, by the early '60s, with Field Crest.

MS. STRENGELL: Yes.

MR. BROWN: And was that much of a challenge, or was that simply - [inaudible] - work?

MS. STRENGELL: Actually, it was a challenge, but not a very great one because it was all a question of price. I started working with them on bedspreads, inexpensive bedspreads, but then I got into the rug department, and that was a great challenge and a great joy. I worked with them for many years.

MR. BROWN: What about - I think it was a Hong Kong firm, but with an office in New York, Tai Ping.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, well, Tai Ping actually did things in Hong Kong, but they also had an outfit in Japan called Joto, and I did about 100 rugs for Joto in Japan. And I did rugs in Hong Kong, and I also did some other things in Hong Kong, which interested me very much. I think I saved some people's lives, or livelihood anyway.

It was a small outfit up very close to the Chinese border at the time, run by an Irish priest, and he got some of the people coming over from China, and he employed them, and they wove, and so forth. But they had terrible equipment. Everything was wrong about it. The looms were small and the yarns were miserable and very thin, and it took them forever to do things.

Well, I did design some lines for them, mainly in napkins and so forth, because the looms were narrow and they couldn't do anything big. And actually, they had a tremendous success here. This was all imported to USA.

MR. BROWN: How did that job come about for you?

MS. STRENGELL: Just going up there. We had an artist friend in Hong Kong, and he lent us a car

and we went up there. And we found this priest and found the place, and we could see the hardships, you know, so I just volunteered to do this.

MR. BROWN: It just happened like that.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, just like that, lots of things do.

MR. BROWN: You also worked with this large, I guess, American company, Karastan.

MS. STRENGELL: Yes, that was delightful too; that was really delightful. Well, I designed rugs for them for numerous years, and quite a few of them were executed. Again, I got the yarns, I went down to the mill and could see their problems, their production thing and so forth.

MR. BROWN: What was their problem?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, the market - that market - [inaudible].

MR. BROWN: And so, you're working within those constraints. By then you knew -

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, yeah.

MR. BROWN: This would be the 1960s, or so, and you'd know -

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, later too, up to '75.

No, no, that's one thing I feel very strongly about: I like to work within limitations. I like to know what's hard and what's difficult, and I start with that. I don't just go up in the blue sky and do something.

MR. BROWN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] You described that with Chatham, how you asked them exactly what for, what -

MS. STRENGELL: Every time, limitations; I mean, machinery, labor problems, raw materials, markets, climate. For instance, in - well, that goes into the next one, the Philippines.

MR. BROWN: The constraints of climate as well.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah.

MR. BROWN: Well, these jobs we've just described, they were presumably the chief ones. You also - we talked somewhat earlier when you were working with architecture; you've also worked, however, worked with industrial designers.

MS. STRENGELL: Yes, yes.

MR. BROWN: I don't know if you want to say a bit about that. Is there anything in particular you want to -

MS. STRENGELL: Well, it was - look, when you come to Russell Wright and the Saarinen Swanson Group, I mean, that was always interior design. I mean, they did the furniture, I did the textiles. So, we worked as a unit on those things.

MR. BROWN: Those people were used to working with a single person and with a designer, because they were designers themselves, weren't they?

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, well, I don't know how it came about. Again Saarinen Swanson of course was practically in the family, but Russell Wright - I forgot how that happened.

MR. BROWN: What about Raymond Loewy?

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, I don't know how that came about either.

MR. BROWN: For United Airlines.

MS. STRENGELL: Well, at the time, you know, it had to be lightweight and fireproof, and all that. So I had lots of things to think about. The General Motors Motorama was fun because there was

tremendous yardage shown in their cars.

MR. BROWN: You mean these were sort of back - drapery that is background for the automobile?

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, all around the top and bottom.

MR. BROWN: And you had to think, what, designs that would show off the cars?

MS. STRENGELL: Exactly.

MR. BROWN: Therefore, it had to be not too blatant.

MS. STRENGELL: No, no, no. But on the other hand, they also had to have texture, they had to have a little - we had a lot of Lurex in those because it set off the cars. No, it was fun. I did that for a couple years.

MR. BROWN: Well, while you were still at Cranbrook in the early '50s, you were recently married and you were doing a lot of work with Saarinen and others. You also, you and Olav as well, I gather, in 1951 worked on - through the United States, and then later with the United Nations, on craft, I guess as an advisor in the Philippines and Japan, Southeast Asia. Maybe you could say something about that, and how and why you got into such a project.

MS. STRENGELL: Well, how, number one. That was 1951, and that was because of a friend of mine, Irene Murphy. Irene Murphy had been in the Philippines many years ago because her brother in law was the governor at the time, and she was his hostess. So she got very involved with the Philippines and their health program, and so forth and so on. So she came up with this deal about trying to help the Philippines by doing a crafts program. Now, that had not existed for 30 years because of the fact that 30 years ago some senator, nameless as far as I'm concerned, had decided that it should be discontinued, that they couldn't work, there was a child problem -

MR. BROWN: Child labor problem?

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, child labor problem.

MR. BROWN: So in the 1920s this had been abolished? There had been a former -

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, 30 years before we got there. So this was a completely new thing. So I was asked by USA, and my husband was asked by U.N., and there were three other people from Cranbrook that formed a group, and we went over there to start a program for crafts. And the Huks were around.

MR. BROWN: The Huks - the communist terrorists.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, and the economy was terrible.

MR. BROWN: Now, how did they select a group of you from the Cranbrook area? Was it Irene -

MS. STRENGELL: I think it was all thanks to Irene Murphy.

MR. BROWN: Who was from that area.

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, yeah, she lived right in - [inaudible] - next door, and she had previous experience with the problems, and so forth.

MR. BROWN: Who else from Cranbrook went out with you?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, there was a guy called John Risley and his wife, Mary Risley, and one of my students, Elizabeth [inaudible] - and Olav Hammarstrom and myself.

MR. BROWN: And what was your job supposed to be? Was it fairly spelled out?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, the idea was to just start up a new craft program- [inaudible] - start by just doing things and earning some money, and so forth. We were, I think, very well picked, and I think that the third part - U.N., USA, and the third part was the Philippine government, they were all together in this thing, and I think that the Philippine government had some marvelous people in

it, and they did a very, very good job.

MR. BROWN: They were anxious to have such a program.

MS. STRENGELL: They did. They did. They needed it.

MR. BROWN: They did? For what? For employment, income?

MS. STRENGELL: For employment, exactly. They had actually got down to - they established a minimum labor - monetary thing.

MR. BROWN: Wage.

MS. STRENGELL: Wage, yeah. So, okay, we got there, and first we went to Japan, more or less for studying what could be done, I mean, because of - you know, there was no machinery. All they had was still a little remnant, from 30 years back, of some people that knew how to weave, for instance.

MR. BROWN: You first went to Japan, you said.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, we went to Japan just for a study trip.

MR. BROWN: Because they were doing similar things?

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, well, they were doing some things. We studied for a while and then we went to the Philippines. But the whole program was extremely well planned. We got there, we had a group of, I think, nine or 10 people from the biggest villages, and they became our students - my students in weaving and Olav's students in doing other things. And we trained them for about a month and sent them out to their villages. And they, in turn, trained people, 10 more people in the village, and they went out. It was just like a stone in a pond, and it worked very well.

MR. BROWN: Did the Philippine government have any preconceptions as to what they wanted to be done?

MS. STRENGELL: No, I don't think they had any idea at all. They just wanted something.

MR. BROWN: You said that you - at one time you told me that you had to overcome the Philippine desire to use artificial fibers.

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, yes, because they had nothing else. It was all artificial. Everything - Everything was imported.

MR. BROWN: Imported. And you overcame that because you saw it would cost them too much to import?

MS. STRENGELL: Not that. They had lots of natural fibers that could be used, you know, and I felt very strongly -

MR. BROWN: Why not use what you have?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, of course, I mean, it's ridiculous to get some sleazy stuff, rayon -

MR. BROWN: But they probably thought that that would sell better.

MS. STRENGELL: They did, because we had a great deal to overcome like that. I mean, they just felt, you know, that that was the thing to do. Everything was imported, every scrap of fabric.

MR. BROWN: Do you think it was a matter of pride; they didn't want to appear old fashioned in what they were going to sell?

MS. STRENGELL: No, I don't think that.

MR. BROWN: They just were naïve. They were ignorant of international market conditions.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, whatever it is.

MR. BROWN: So you went down to the villages, or they came mainly to Manila?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, we started in Manila, but then we also went to the villages. But we started in Manila, and we had a very closely-knit thing there, and very successful. Right now, they are millionaires; all my students are millionaires because they supply stuff to the whole of Asia.

MR. BROWN: I see, they continued this cottage industry -

MS. STRENGELL: They did, on their own.

MR. BROWN: Was it mostly hand weaving, or entirely?

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, no machinery. As a matter of fact, I mean, they tried to get some semi-machinery in from Japan, against my absolute wishes because I had seen them. They were all iron on things, you know, and obviously not for the climate in the Philippines. So, they were dumped - [inaudible].

MR. BROWN: So, the wages were low enough in the Philippines that you could compete worldwide with hand weaving.

MS. STRENGELL: No, not worldwide to start with. I mean, we tried to sell in New York, for instance. We had shows in New York, and so forth.

MR. BROWN: How did they work out?

MS. STRENGELL: So-so, you know.

MR. BROWN: Why didn't they sell, do you think?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, to start with, you know, you have to have a great campaign - [inaudible] - and so forth and so on. But the main thing was they knew that they had something, that they could do it. And for instance, Chrysler - [inaudible] - Chrysler had an assembly plant there in the Philippines, so I designed this fabric for them, which was breathing, you know.

MR. BROWN: For a hot climate, yeah.

MS. STRENGELL: Sure, it was wonderful. So I got them into that sort of thing. They also had this fabulous fabric, husi, a silk thing that they used for all their very elegant dresses, you know - [inaudible] - and embroidery - of course, embroidery was one of the things - and terribly, terribly expensive, so I got them into screen-printing. We had the husi fabric and we screen-printed it instead of making the embroidery.

MR. BROWN: How do you spell husi?

MS. STRENGELL: H-U-S-I.

MR. BROWN: And so, this would sell more widely, this screen print, as opposed to embroidery.

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, it did, it did. I think I gave you some of those samples.

MR. BROWN: And they did find an export market for that?

MS. STRENGELL: To start with, it started around right there, locally, but I think right now, all of Asia is interested in it. Every hotel has it, and so forth.

MR. BROWN: What about the plainer fabrics, such as linens and the like? They've done a lot of that, haven't they?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, they didn't really have a good linen.

MR. BROWN: But they've done some plain weaving -

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, yeah.

MR. BROWN: - which is exported, and they sold it quite widely, didn't it?

MS. STRENGELL: After a while, Olav and I designed a loom for them. That was the beginning of their -

MR. BROWN: Oh, they didn't have a proper loom.

MS. STRENGELL: They just had little things this wide, you know.

MR. BROWN: Little things they put in their lap, or -

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, more or less. So, we designed a loom, and we took that with us when we went there first. And, oh, they have hundreds and hundreds. It could be done for 10 dollars in a village, and it was 48 inches wide, and it had a fly shuttle. And, you know, they all have very short arms, so it was really - it really helped an awful lot. So that was part of it.

MR. BROWN: Well, now, you and Olav worked closely in the Philippines, as you frequently do in the United States. What form did that collaboration take over there? I know that he worked on some furniture designs and the use of rattan and other native canes and wood things. How did you work with him; in what respects?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, it's very hard to pin down, I think, in a way, but it combined textiles with wood projects, and so forth and so on. And we had an all-over pattern we followed that we made up ourselves, and we worked very hard. We worked all day long, and at night we worked again.

MR. BROWN: Now, was this part of the general idea of getting some cottage industries going?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, absolutely, that was the only thing we -

MR. BROWN: And you saw that you cannot simply be with weaving, but that they can also work in -

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, no, you had to combine it, obviously, yeah.

MR. BROWN: Both of you - you already mentioned that Olav developed a labor-saving and larger loom that they could use. Did you both work toward things that, after you left, would be simple and that they could carry out without much expense?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, I think that actually what we did while we were there, you know - I mean, in regard to material and so forth and so on - was there to stay, which it's proved out to be. I mean, it grew, and grew, and grew, and they're all millionaires now.

MR. BROWN: It seems that they've done very well.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, they did much better than we did.

MR. BROWN: Well, this was in '51 and '52, something like that, but you, a number of times, have gone both to Europe and Asia, lecturing. And how did you and Olav decide, and what led you to go into some lecture programs, some of which I think were sponsored by the American government, weren't they?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, to start with, we were supposed to go to Samoa and do the same sort of thing we did in the Philippines, but something happened. There was a change of presidents or something, you know, so it did not come off. And after a while we thought, well, we'd like to do it ourselves, and we did. We spent a year mostly on trying to prepare for this thing, and we were going to go to the Far East and we were going to lecture, and we were going to also try to bring some of the USA to them.

MR. BROWN: And what were you going to lecture on?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, we were going to lecture on architecture, fine arts, crafts, and so forth. And we decided to just limit it to the last five years here.

MR. BROWN: You mean what was going on within the last five years in the United States?

MS. STRENGELL: Right.

MR. BROWN: Well, what was the aim of this, to entertain people, or -

MS. STRENGELL: No; tell, exchange.

MR. BROWN: And did you begin by going to Europe? Your first tour was in Europe.

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, only in Finland because of our parents. And then we went to Turkey, and then we went to the Far East.

MR. BROWN: When you went back to Finland - and neither you nor Olav had been back there for quite a while, had you?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, we had, but we hadn't done anything professionally.

MR. BROWN: How did you find it, professionally, in Finland? When you went there, it was about 1956, I think.

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, quite a lot of things going on, I mean, no doubt. I mean, the Finns are very good.

MR. BROWN: And the mid-'50s were a high point of the influence of modern Scandinavian design, weren't they?

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, I think so. Well, it's really been going on for a long time. Actually, I had a show in 1956, and I think that started some things going in Finland; color, for instance, which has not been their number one thing.

MR. BROWN: No, they were more interested in texture and natural -

MS. STRENGELL: No, not texture, just patterns.

MR. BROWN: Were they still, did you find, still somewhat caught up in folk designs, or was that a thing of the past?

MS. STRENGELL: No, no, no, it's still there. Now, I think it's different - today.

MR. BROWN: Then you went to Asia.

MS. STRENGELL: Right.

MR. BROWN: You went to India in '57.

MS. STRENGELL: Right.

MR. BROWN: Was that your first visit there?

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah.

MR. BROWN: And you went there to lecture or, what, to observe?

MS. STRENGELL: Lecture - oh, both. Everywhere we liked to say what we had to say, and we liked to learn what we could learn.

MR. BROWN: Under what auspices did you go to India?

MS. STRENGELL: Actually, our own. Oh, we had a blessing from the State Department. They thought we were wonderful, but they did not do much, certainly no money. And - no.

MR. BROWN: Did you secure sponsors in India, people who would -

MS. STRENGELL: No, no, we actually did it ourselves.

MR. BROWN: But did you have contacts there?

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, we had contacts, some contacts, yeah.

MR. BROWN: What sort of contacts were these? You'd had a pupil who was from a prominent Indian family. Was that an -

MS. STRENGELL: Yes, I know, but I got her there. I got her when I was there.

MR. BROWN: Oh, I see.

MS. STRENGELL: No, no, it was really our own doing. I don't know how we did it, as a matter of fact.

MR. BROWN: Now, you mentioned a little earlier to me that in Ahmedabad there was this Textile Training Center. Did you go there, or did you lecture there at that time?

MS. STRENGELL: No, that was not there yet.

MR. BROWN: It was not there yet.

MS. STRENGELL: No, no. Charlie Eames started that whole thing later. No, we just met - I'm terribly sorry, I can't think of his name now. We met them here, and so we visited them there. But they had nothing to do - this whole thing was really self-made, you know. We did it. I don't know.

MR. BROWN: What was the effect of this? You must have gotten some reaction in subsequent months and years to your lecture tour.

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, indeed. It was great from our point of view, of course, because we got there and we offered what we had to offer, which was, okay, the last five years of architecture, fine arts, and so forth, here, and then they all wanted to tell us that they did much better. So we learned a tremendous lot, but nobody - I'd say nobody has ever heard that much.

MR. BROWN: So, you learned what they were doing.

MS. STRENGELL: Yes.

MR. BROWN: Did you make notes and so forth of that?

MS. STRENGELL: Not on paper, no; in our minds.

MR. BROWN: But you learned a great deal.

MS. STRENGELL: We did, we did.

MR. BROWN: This was a good way of soaking up what was being done -

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, it was fabulous.

MR. BROWN: - in unpublicized places, right?

MS. STRENGELL: I know, absolutely.

MR. BROWN: Did you notice thereafter any effect on your own work from what you were seeing they were doing, some of the things you were learning?

MS. STRENGELL: Well, you know, my inspiration has always been nature and color. Now, color, yes, in India, my god, beautiful, the saris. No, not directly, let's put it that way.

MR. BROWN: That lecture tour, you only held them really in the '50s, didn't you?

MS. STRENGELL: Fifty-seven.

MR. BROWN: And you did some work similar to that you'd done in the Philippines in Jamaica in the '60s.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, somewhat similar, yes. That was, again, started off by Seaga.

MR. BROWN: Edward Seaga, who became, later, prime minister, didn't he?

MS. STRENGELL: Right, right. He looked us up. We were staying on 50th Street in New York, and he came over to see us, and he wanted very much to - that was a political thing at the time, I am quite sure, and he wanted to inspire people to do more, villages and so forth. So he engaged us, and we went down at first for a few months, under the Jamaican government, then we were sent back by U.N., both of us.

MR. BROWN: What was the situation like in Jamaica, say, compared with the Philippines?

MS. STRENGELL: Terrible.

MR. BROWN: There was no traditional cottage industry?

MS. STRENGELL: None whatsoever. And of course we were working right in the slums, you know. No, it was quite difficult. I think it was harder because the government didn't really do as much as they did in the Philippines, but anyway -

MR. BROWN: Did anything much, do you think, result from that in Jamaica?

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, I think so; I think so.

MR. BROWN: They were also aiming toward income producing through export markets?

MS. STRENGELL: They did indeed. And as I say, okay - well, we started out. I had to get a place and looms and weavers, and what have you and so forth. I had 15 weavers to start with, and I got all the equipment from the USA, and we started working. And then we came back under the U.N., and I think it was very successful, very.

MR. BROWN: It eventually did produce a program by then.

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, yes; oh, indeed. Well, not so much here, as they had hoped for, but I think locally and tourists and stuff like that. It had a great deal to do there.

MR. BROWN: You did something analogous to that in Appalachia; you proposed a program.

MS. STRENGELL: Well, let's just say that I proposed -

MR. BROWN: In 1968.

MS. STRENGELL: - and it did not come through.

MR. BROWN: Was that simply because they decided it wasn't worth - the government decided it wasn't worth promoting?

MS. STRENGELL: I don't know what happened.

MR. BROWN: It just died.

MS. STRENGELL: It just died. Well anyway, it was a good program. It was a difficult program, because if they wanted weaving, I mean, all right, so we had to get looms out in the country, we had to have mobile units doing that hard work, you know. No, it didn't work out. I'm sorry. It could have.

MR. BROWN: Do you think so? They could have competed with imported things or with mass industry?

MS. STRENGELL: I don't know about that. They could at least - a living, you know. No, I don't think they could have competed. No, I can't see that because, after all, they are not well educated, and the whole setup, but they could have earned a living.

MR. BROWN: Well now, not well educated - you mean there weren't any supervisors nearby who were well educated either, unlike the Philippines, let's say, where you had sophisticated people who could run the program.

MS. STRENGELL: No, it was a different scheme, but it was basically the same. But it had to be done by people going out and picking up things and selling things, checking things, and so forth. Well, it was not approved, let's just put it that way. The program was okay.

MR. BROWN: Well, this was really sort of a side thing for you, though, wasn't it, because by the '60s, you had moved back to Connecticut and to Manhattan.

MS. STRENGELL: I know, but I still was - you know, my mother did a wonderful job in Finland.

She got people involved in doing weaving and earning some money when they were not necessarily putting up potatoes, or putting out potatoes. And so, I had a little background of that.

MR. BROWN: When you were a girl, your mother sponsored things like that.

MS. STRENGELL: Yes. Oh, yeah, I had nothing to do with it, except later on when I designed stuff myself. But it was in my blood, in a way. I do feel very strongly that I like to help people and want to, but the programs are far between.

MR. BROWN: Well, the real - in the last 20 years, most of your time was spent before with clients and industry, wasn't it, once you'd left Cranbrook -

MS. STRENGELL: Right.

MR. BROWN: - except for going back there that one time to consult on their programs.

MS. STRENGELL: Oh, yeah, I did things like that.

MR. BROWN: Most of the time you spent with your clients in industry.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, but I had some short programs, you know, trying to teach somebody something.

MR. BROWN: Did you primarily live in Connecticut and New York City until fairly recently?

MS. STRENGELL: No, then we went to Cambridge.

MR. BROWN: In Cambridge you lived?

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, '64

MR. BROWN: Did you have particular roots in any of those places, or they were simply new bases for you?

MS. STRENGELL: They were a new base.

MR. BROWN: And then you had your clients; that continued.

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, sure. But I liked the bases, all of them.

MR. BROWN: Well, I suppose New York would be, particularly, the good base for -

MS. STRENGELL: It was. It was.

MR. BROWN: - clients.

MS. STRENGELL: Well, for instance, right now, you know, there's no chance in the world that I can get a contract with anybody because I'm not there. And you have to be there to go up and down the street, you know, you have to. So, I mean, I've given that up. It was a little rough, but I gave it up.

MR. BROWN: You're happy enough to be here.

MS. STRENGELL: Well, I'm doing other things. I'm doing photography, I'm doing painting, I'm doing this and that and so forth. I'm not exactly idle.

MR. BROWN: What is Wellfleet? First the house that Olav built, and now, here in the village of Wellfleet, has that meant a great deal to you, Wellfleet?

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, I like Wellfleet. You know, I don't mind leaving our Olav house - that Olav house was - [inaudible] - but I think this is all right. And we still can move, we can do things, you know. There's no question there.

MR. BROWN: Has Wellfleet had some attachment for you, or was it simply that you came here 30-some years ago -

MS. STRENGELL: Just about that.

MR. BROWN: It was just sort of an accidental thing, or rather, through friends -

MS. STRENGELL: Yeah, I think so.

MR. BROWN: How did it happen you came here?

MS. STRENGELL: Very funnily enough, I had lunch with a girl who was working for Skidmore, Owings & Merrill in New York, and she had a spin out here and she had some photographs, and she showed them to me, and I said, wow, that looks great, I'd like to go there this summer. And Ward Bennett, you know - we have one of his pieces out there - he was here, and I wrote Ward and said, look, we'd like to stay somewhere in Wellfleet, and he got us a place. So that's how we got here.

MR. BROWN: And you found there were a number of other designers and so forth living here.

MS. STRENGELL: There are lots. You can't imagine how many, but they are all in the woods.

MR. BROWN: No, not that they touch base with each other, do they?

MS. STRENGELL: No, they don't, they're very subtle. Well, Serge [Sabarsky], you know - [inaudible] - is okay. He's over in the woods.

MR. BROWN: But you did like this kind of place where you could be to yourself if you wished.

MS. STRENGELL: Well, we did, and we thought very hard, where would we go, what should we do, you know, and so forth. But we decided no, no, we'll just stay here, and then we'll go traveling.

Have you got any more questions?

[END OF INTERVIEW.]