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Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California

Fiber Arts Series

Charles Edmund Rossbach

ARTIST, MENTOR, PROFESSOR, WRITER

With an Introduction by
Jack Lenor Larsen

An Interview Conducted by
Harriet Nathan
in 1983

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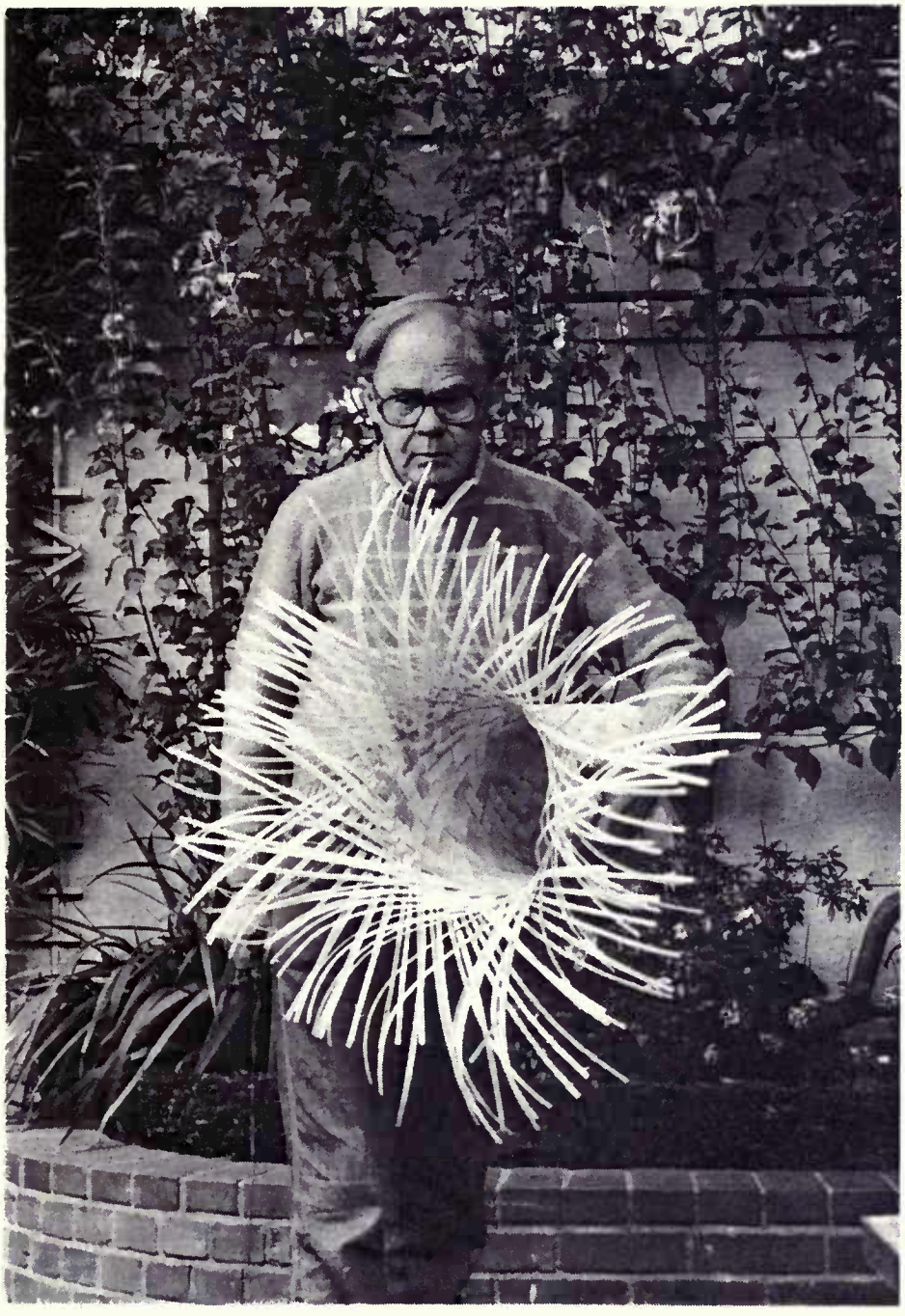

CHARLES EDMUND ROSSBACH

in his Berkeley Garden, 1983

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PREFACE

The Regional Oral History Office of the Bancroft Library selects as memoirists persons who have played important roles in the development of the western community. Since the beginning of the oral history program, artists in many fields have taken their place among the memoirists. When the art of handweaving went through an upheaval during the 1950s, fiber artists gained new recognition, and developed novel ways of using fiber as a means of individual expression in works that in Ed Rossbach's observation were new ventures "and not a reconstruction from the past." The creativity of fiber artists has won them a significant place in the complex of artistic activity, particularly in the Bay Area, and has established the importance of their development and history.

The emergence of the San Francisco Bay Area as a center for fiber arts was stimulated by a number of influences, including that of the departments of Decorative Art and of Design at the University of California at Berkeley, led for many years by Charles Edmund (Ed) Rossbach, Professor of Design at Berkeley from 1950 until his retirement in 1979. Significant leaders in the Bay Area also included, among many others, such renowned fiber artists as the late Trude Guermonprez, who taught at the California College of Arts and Crafts; Katherine Westphal, Emeritus Professor of Design at U.C. Davis; and the late Dorothy Wright Liebes, whose San Francisco studio generated innovative fiber concepts and designs for industry.

Ed Rossbach, Emeritus Professor of Architecture (into which Design was absorbed), and a major innovator and teacher, provides the first oral history memoir in the series on Fiber Arts in the San Francisco Bay Area, a series designed to include artists whose work indicates some of the variety the fiber arts movement has generated. As a scholar, Professor Rossbach's grasp includes a panorama of traditions and techniques; as an artist he deals surely with novel forms and modern materials. As a professor he has stimulated and encouraged many students including a number who have become artists in their own right.

Members of the Fiber Arts Advisory Committee have provided valuable advice in the development of the series. The committee includes Hazel V. Bray, Curator of Crafts (ret.), Oakland Museum; Gyöngy Laky, Professor of Design, University of California, Davis; Cecile McCann, Publisher and Editor-in-Chief, Artweek; Frank A. Norick, Principal Museum Anthropologist, Lowie Museum, UC Berkeley; Ed Rossbach, Emeritus Professor of Architecture [Design], UC Berkeley; Carol Sinton, Fiber Artist, San Francisco; Katherine Westphal, Emeritus Professor of Design, UC Davis; and James D. Hart, Emeritus Professor of English, and Director of The Bancroft Library.

The oral history process at the University of California, Berkeley, consists of tape-recorded interviews with persons who have been important in the development of the west. The purpose of oral history memoirs is to capture and preserve for future research the perceptions, recollections, and

observations of these individuals. Research and preparation of a topic outline precede the interview sessions. The outline is prepared in conjunction with close associates and other persons in the memoirist's field, as well as with the memoirist, who in turn may use the suggestions as aids to memory, choose among them, or add new topics.

The tape-recorded interviews are transcribed, lightly edited by the interviewer, and reviewed and approved by the memoirist. An index and photographs are added. Final processing includes final typing, photo-offset reproduction, binding, and deposit in The Bancroft Library and other selected libraries and collections. The volumes do not constitute publications, but are primary research material made available under specified conditions for the use of researchers.

The Fiber Arts series is supported by grants from the Mina Schwabacher Fund and a donation from the Friends of The Bancroft Library. The philanthropies of the late Mina Schwabacher have included support for hospital programs that serve children, as well as scholarship bequests to Whitman College in her birthplace at Walla Walla, Washington. The Mina Schwabacher Fund was a gift to the University of California at Berkeley in honor of her brother Frank, who was a loyal alumnus and supporter of the University. The Regional Oral History Office acknowledges with appreciation the generous and essential support for the project.

The Regional Oral History Office is under the administrative supervision of James D. Hart, Director of The Bancroft Library.

Willa K. Baum, Division Head
Regional Oral History Office

Harriet Nathan, Project Director
Fiber Arts Series

November 1986
Regional Oral History Office
Room 486 The Bancroft Library
University of California
Berkeley, California

INTRODUCTION

In the early part of this century, every American boy knew a rollicking song about the "bear who went over the mountain to see what he could see." Ed Rossbach is that bear, except there are lots of mountains he does NOT go over, but only goes to the top of, to see what he can see. And, if he can understand the valley below, he does not bother to "capture" it.

In an age when achievement and success have become as prominent in artists' minds as in all others, Rossbach is an enigma. In the four decades I've known him, Rossbach has not changed in this sense. There's not a commercial bone in his body; he's not a joiner; he does not exhibit beyond the sharing of insight with as small a group as possible. And yet he is responsible and real.

Peculiar to Rossbach is an openness to all influences, all materials and processes. There is in much of his work a playfulness, a sense of his amusement as to what fascinates other people, or--"that's so ugly as to be kind of wonderful." That he is inventor, scholar, teacher, author, and traveler is to his credit and our enrichment. That Katherine is so successfully housemate, workmate, and soulmate may help to explain his great body of work.

That Rossbach and Lenore Tawney, coming from very different directions, are progenitors of post-war American Art Fabric says a very great deal. Their influence was first national. It remains pivotal, preeminent, and global.

Jack Lenor Larsen

New York
October 1985

INTERVIEW HISTORY

Charles Edmund (Ed) Rossbach is the first memoirist in the oral history series on Fiber Arts in the San Francisco Bay Area. For nearly thirty years he taught in the departments of Decorative Art and of Design at the University of California at Berkeley and held the title of Professor of Design. His official designation as Emeritus Professor of Architecture is somewhat of a misnomer, reflecting the absorption of Design by Architecture.

Professor Rossbach has been saluted as the dean of fiber arts, and early became a leader on the faculties at the University of Washington and the University of California. With a flair relatively rare among productive artists, he also distinguished himself as a teacher, lecturer, and writer of publications including a variety of articles and reviews as well as four influential books: Making Marionettes, 1938; Baskets as Textile Art, 1973; The New Basketry, 1976; and The Art of Paisley, 1980.

As an artist he has maintained a productive career that includes painting, ceramics, photography, basketry, and a variety of other fiber arts. The quality and quantity of his output are attested to by a partial listing (Appendix C) of his works held in more than a dozen collections in this country and abroad and displayed in scores of one-man and group exhibitions.

Professor Rossbach's leadership was instrumental in making the Bay Area a major center for fiber arts. He attracted talented students to his numerous classes at Berkeley, and stimulated their creativity and interest in both historical and contemporary expressions of fiber art. He joined his students and other mature fiber artists in the activities of the fiber art centers, schools, and galleries that clustered in the Bay Area and served to attract increasing numbers of artists and students.

When he agreed to participate in an oral history memoir, Professor Rossbach received a tentative outline of possible topics, a list developed by the interviewer from a variety of sources. These included his own published articles, reviews, and books, University records, references to his work in books and journals dealing with fiber arts, and catalogs of one-man and group exhibits. Former students, artists, and others knowledgeable in the field filled in the picture of Ed Rossbach as an innovator who was bold in his own work, generous and accepting toward the work of others.

Professor Rossbach provided five interviews: on March 11, 18, and 25, and April 1, and 8, 1983. The sessions usually lasted from 9 to 11 a.m. The taped interviews were transcribed, lightly edited, and submitted to him for approval. He reviewed the transcript, responded to queries, and added to and amplified some of his remarks. The interviews and the memoirist's response to additional queries proceeded briskly. The final details took some time to complete largely because participants' travel schedules did not always mesh with those of production.

The interviews took place in the long, inviting living room of his Belrose Avenue home in Berkeley. The room was filled with light from windows facing west, south, and east. Walls and furniture informally displayed Ed Rossbach's works and those of his wife Katherine Westphal and others, as well as toys and artifacts collected from worldwide travels. The sessions at times would shift from one end of the room to the other when the gardener's machines proved noisy at the south end, or two well-loved dogs shut away in an adjoining room at the north end clamored for attention.

Full of curiosity, playfulness, and adventure in his work, Professor Rossbach tended to be shy and self-questioning in the interviews; his speech was at once eloquent and hesitant, reflective and humorous. He described the oral history process as both exhausting and interesting. He said the process "sets you thinking and evaluating yourself, so that there's always sort of...the third ear.... You're listening to yourself do all this, and my God, the conclusions you reach about what you're hearing yourself say."

His recollections dealt with his own work as well as that of other artists and teachers, and with perceptions of art activity in the Bay Area and on the Berkeley campus of the University of California. He spoke of the artist's joy and commanding need to create art, experiences he communicated to his students. Many of them continue to express their respect and affection for him. They speak of his invention and productivity as an artist, of his significance in their lives, and of his openness and encouragement of freedom in art. They also note his generosity as a teacher.

He said of himself, "I believe in being absolutely open and that the students could feel they could ask anything...and almost anything I would answer, and certainly I wouldn't have any secrets about my own work or how I did anything...." These attitudes have become part of his nature, shaped by experiences with family life in the Depression, efforts to earn a living as a typist, and World War II service in the army, as well as the decades of academic life that eventually followed degrees from the University of Washington (painting and design); Columbia University (art education); and Cranbrook Academy of Art (ceramics and weaving).

His memoir is studded with the names of artists whose skills he recognizes and admires, yet feels no need to emulate. Asked why an artist chooses certain paths and makes certain decisions, he recalled an occasion when a Canadian Broadcasting Company team filmed him at work. They asked why he chose to use an image of the baseball player Pete Rose. Ed Rossbach mused that to be absolutely honest, he would have to say, "I just happened to see this thing in a magazine. It was the right size. For some reason it spoke to me. I just liked it as an image, and I put it on a basket." He added that, of course, such an explanation would not persuade anyone.

Mildred Constantine and Jack Lenor Larsen, in The Art Fabric: Mainstream (1980), credited Professor Rossbach with bold innovation in the use of materials and techniques. In the 1960s he and Olga de Amaral were among the first to explore the possibilities of plaiting. He was the first, for example, to use paper for art fabric, and in this country was a leader in

understanding the potentials of plastic film. Recently, Constantine and Larsen have viewed him as probably the only artist exploiting thermoplastic methods for molding or bonding plastic sheeting; they also applauded his audacity in the use of transfer printing on yarn. As a pioneer, however, he has not turned his back on the past. The authors observed that he draws on it for inspiration, and in a felicitous image noted that "With insatiable curiosity he meanders through history, scrutinizing one aspect after another of the old techniques."

Because he avoids repetition, his work evades generalizations and his materials retain the quality of exploration. When Professor Rossbach provided a 12-basket show at Berkeley's University Art Museum (June 1986), his elements included newspaper, rice paper, other paper, twigs, spray lacquer, ash splints, heat transfers, cloth, wood, palm, foil, pliable wood, and staples. Carole Austin wrote in the show's catalog, "Because of his influence on so many generations of young fiber artists in the United States, Rossbach has often been affectionately called the dean of contemporary American textiles." It would be wrong, however, to read into that gracious statement any implication of staidness. He may well be the dean, but unpredictability is his middle name.

Professor Rossbach has observed and participated in the mutual influences of artists working in textiles and those using other forms throughout his long and continuing career. For the future, he sees fiber art as possibly being absorbed by fine arts, but said of fiber art, "I wish there would be some renaissance of interest in printed fabrics as printed fabrics. And in weaving as weaving. And knotting as knotting." Thinking back to his grandmother's years of devotion to her chosen fiber art he added, "and, I guess, tatting as tatting."

Harriet Nathan
Interviewer/Editor

November 1986
Regional Oral History Office
Room 486 The Bancroft Library
University of California at Berkeley.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

(Please print or write clearly)

Your full name CHARLES EDMUND ROSSBACH

Date of birth JAN. 2 1914 Place of birth CHICAGO, ILL.

Father's full name CHARLES ROSSBACH

Birthplace CHICAGO, ILL.

Occupation LUMBER BUYER

Mother's full name ANNA SMITH

Birthplace OSHUA, ONTARIO, CANADA

Occupation HOUSEWIFE

Where did you grow up ? CHICAGO, SEATTLE, AND TACOMA

Present community BERKELEY, CAL.

Education BA- IN PAINTING & DESIGN, UNIV. OF W
MA- IN ART EDUC. - COLUMBIA UNIV.
MFA- IN CERAMICS AND WEAVING,
CRANBROOK ACAD. OF ART
BLOOMFIELD HILLS, MICH

Occupation(s) TEACHER/ARTIST

Special interests or activities WRITING

I FAMILY, HOMES, AND EARLY INFLUENCES

The Older Generation

Nathan: Would you want to talk about your childhood and your recollections of growing up?

Rossbach: Somewhere in there [the outline] you said something about the beginning of interest in fiber when I was young. I have been thinking about that since I got that paper and I don't think there was any particular interest in my family in fiber, in beautiful textiles, or anything like that.

We moved from Chicago when I was about eight years old and we moved to Seattle. We stayed there for two years and then we moved to Tacoma. My father was in some sort of thing. It seems dumb, but I don't even know particularly what he did.

Nathan: Many children don't.

Rossbach: I don't like that. I don't like it in my father that he allowed that. He was not particularly communicative about anything, about his childhood or anything about his family background or what he did at work or anything like that. At the same time, he absolutely was totally devoted to his family. I mean to an unusual degree. His whole life was his family, my mother and the children. God, I remember he filled out a form once and he had to say what his hobbies were and he said his family. Well, this was true. This was his hobby and this was his life and at the same time I didn't know him at all, and that seems too bad to me, but so it goes.

Nathan: Was your mother more communicative?

Rossbach: Not very much. No, she didn't talk much about things. She had several sisters, my aunts, of course. They talked about the old

Rossbach: things and their childhood and the whole family. You got the whole structure of the family and I just loved that, just absolutely loved it. My grandmother came out to Seattle, too, when we came to Seattle. When we moved to Seattle, she moved to Seattle also.

Nathan: Is that your mother's mother?

Rossbach: Yes, her name was Sarah Jane Smith. We only really got very deeply involved with my mother's family and not my father's family. It's too bad. My father's father and the mother, too, had been born in Germany and they were people who had emigrated to South Dakota and failed. Now I read about it and this was just what happened to these people from Germany. I mean the railroads took advantage of them and God knows what happened to these people. They couldn't make a go of it and then they returned back to Chicago.

He was a tinsmith, my grandfather on my father's side. I've never seen anything he did and I would just love to have a piece of tin that my grandfather had worked on. At one point in my life I tried to do tinsmithing. I don't know whether it had anything to do with the fact that my grandfather had been a tinsmith, but I bought a soldering iron and tried to do this thing and never could do it, but it was something that interested me very much and I liked the idea that he went to South Dakota and it didn't work and he came back.

Nathan: Did he try to farm?

Rossbach: Yes.

Nathan: That was the dream, wasn't it, to work the land?

Rossbach: Yes, and I suppose if he was a tinsmith in some city in Germany, he had no background in farming either and it was a dumb idea that he had. He did it, but he didn't know very much about farming. My aunts and uncles on that side of the family were there in Chicago, but we didn't see too much of them. There was no friction, no difficulty in the family. It was just that our whole life was involved in my mother's family. They had been pioneers who came and what do you call it?--I can't think of the word for it where they take land.

Nathan: Homesteading?

Rossbach: They homesteaded in Michigan.

Nathan: They were from Canada?

Rossbach: Well, no, my grandmother had been raised in Michigan and then they went to Canada, so my mother was born in Canada. I think people moved back and forth across this border more easily than they seem to nowadays. So the children were born, some in New York, and some in Canada.

Grandmother's Tatting

Rossbach: But anyway, what I was going to say was my grandmother used to tat and she always was tatting. When you talked to her she was sitting there tatting away. She would ride in the car and she was tatting all the time. When I look back on this thing now, it seems very strange that nobody else wanted to learn how to tat.

Nathan: Your sisters didn't?

Rossbach: No, my sisters didn't nor my aunts. Nobody else knew how to tat. My grandmother was the only one.

Nathan: What did she do with all of those yards she must have produced?

Rossbach: What she did with them was put edgings on handkerchiefs, and she would give those as Christmas presents. My aunt that used to be so talkative, and that I valued so highly, she used to buy handkerchiefs for my grandmother and then my grandmother would add the edging. What is so really amazing, my grandmother was younger than I am now and to me she was just a terribly old lady sitting and making all of these little lace things. [laughter] I don't feel old and it's so hard to know that other people think that you are old and you don't think you're old. It's a deception that is very difficult to deal with, isn't it?

Nathan: Oh, it is. [laughter]

Rossbach: And why don't you feel old? Why haven't these things occurred to you that seem to belong to old age?

Nathan: Like certainty, for instance?

Rossbach: Yes.

Nathan: We wanted to be sure that your favorite aunt's name got on the tape.

Rossbach: Aunt Mary Jane. She liked to be called Aunt Mary Jane. We went through this period when it was sort of fashionable, it was just the time when people were beginning to call their mothers by their first names and so on and you called your aunt "Mary Jane" instead of Aunt Mary Jane. But she didn't like that and she was right.

Nathan: What was her last name? She was not a Rossbach.

Rossbach: No, she was a Smith. She was a Red Cross nurse in the first world war. She was the only one in the family that had ever been to Europe. She went to Paris and, oh, she had the most glamorous stories to tell. I knew everything about her time in France and it was all very moving,

Rossbach: but she had the ability to talk about everything. She worked in some medical office, like a clinic, and, goodness, that was in Grand Rapids, Michigan, but she would come back to where we were at the time and spend vacations and so on and Christmas sometimes. She would just tell all of the goings-on in these offices and this was the sort of thing that my father never did. You never knew anything was happening in an office or anything like that at all and I think somehow you miss that, that it's important to know all of this stuff.

Nathan: She must have loved having a little wide-eyed boy interested, too.

Rossbach: Yes, but this continued for her whole life.

Anyway, what I was going to say about these tattings. She [my grandmother] would give these handkerchiefs for Christmas and send them in envelopes to the various people that she knew and so on. I think maybe it was my first contact with textiles as being valuable beyond themselves. I think we knew at the time that these were oldfashioned and people didn't want little edgings on handkerchiefs any more at that particular time and yet you valued them because she had done them. I think that is still part of my feeling about textiles, that the work is very important to this thing and you are aware that somebody made this. But that's how that came about.

I always wondered about that, all of this tatting that she did. She would do a little row that had three little drops. She never varied these things and they were always the same. To me, I'm just curious to see what you can do with it. I mean I would do two inches of that stuff and then I would be experimenting with the next thing to see how I can do it, but she never changed the form or the thread that she was using. She never turned it into little round things or made inserts or did anything that you could do with patterns. She always just did the same thing.

Nathan: Did she knit or do any other--

Rossbach: No, no, she just did that. This was very strange to me. Anyway, not so long ago I learned to tat. I got a book and learned how to do it.

Nathan: Is there a bobbin?

Rossbach: Yes, there is a special shuttle. She had a beautiful silver shuttle and she had a needle that she would use and if you know something about this process of tatting, you know you can make a knot. If you don't get the thing turned just right, it turns into a knot that you have to take a needle and open up. Have you done it?

Nathan: No, I haven't.

Rossbach: So I learned how to do this thing and I have got some things that I

Rossbach: have made and it just seemed very amusing to me to learn how to do it. This is all part of the amusement of those things. I mean what an absurd thing; I'm an old man sitting here learning how to tat from a book! It's the absurdity of it and that's the fun of it.

Nathan: Do you make round things or do you just make edges?

Rossbach: I made just edgings. It was very hard. I had great difficulty with it. I was teaching a class in non-loom textiles at that time, all these textiles that you could do off the loom, and it was a class that I liked very much. I felt very comfortable with it. With some classes you feel very comfortable, you feel you could do anything with them and they would go along with you--you know, "He's crazy, so we'll just go along with him," and so on. A very nice class. I think of it very often. So I decided I would teach this class how to tat.

Nathan: Was this at Cal?

Rossbach: Yes. [laughter] That's a lovely question. I was never able really to teach any of them to tat. It was just a technique that I could not teach them how to do. They couldn't do it.

Nathan: And it was hard for you.

Rossbach: It was very hard for me.

Nathan: And yet you are probably all very adept at a much more difficult--

Rossbach: Yes, but tatting!

Sisters' Embroidery

Rossbach: But then, say when we lived in Tacoma, I was maybe ten or in that range, eleven and so on. My sisters used to do all of this embroidery. We were a very enclosed family and we lived very much to ourselves; I tried to figure out why that happened to us, why we did that, but we just did.

When we lived in Chicago when I was very young, we lived on the very edge of this suburb of Chicago, so we were the last house and we could look out the bedroom windows and there were just plains growing, just on the edge of things, and yet the whole thing was divided up in streets and sidewalks. It was a subdivision really, they called it, and yet there was nothing there. There was just the sensation of the plains.

Rossbach: Then finally when we moved back to Chicago again when I was a freshman in high school, we moved back for five more years (I can't remember exactly) and we lived in a suburb at the edge of Chicago and we were on the very edge of this little town called LaGrange. Again you would look out and here were all of these plains. I don't know why my family did that, so we weren't surrounded by neighbors. We didn't have any visiting back and forth with neighbors and so on and we had very few friends at school who came to our house. We were just a very self-sufficient little unit of a family with my mother's family, all of these aunts and uncles. I mean there was constantly this whole throng of people and we were all just in a close group. It seems funny to think of. My uncles were core-makers.

Nathan: What sort of core?

Rossbach: They made molds for--I don't know the words for this thing they made--sand casting.

Nathan: Metal--

Rossbach: Yes. They were very skilled technicians and I like that.

Anyway, what was I going to say? Oh, my sisters did this embroidery.

Nathan: Was that after dinner when you would sit around--

Rossbach: No, they were doing it all of the time. They were always knitting and so on. There was just a constant thing. But this was all women's work. I have thought since that this was like a primitive society where the distinction is made that women do certain things and men do certain things. In certain societies, women do the baskets and the men don't do the baskets, but the men know how to do it.

They watch this thing and they understand it completely, but they don't do it, and this was how this was with all of this embroidery and stuff which my sisters did. I did not do it, of course.

Nathan: Was it embroidery in hoops?

Rossbach: Yes. They were doing luncheon cloths which you bought stamped with a pattern. I can remember these things so vividly. My sister did one particularly that I think of, that was supposed to be sort of Japanese. It had bamboo going around this cloth with Japanese lanterns and other motifs. They followed very carefully the instructions, exactly what color was specified that you did these things in. This one had this exotic thing that they laid a line of embroidery down and then they laid another line adjoining it but of a different color. I remember it had purple and blue and you had these two colors side by side along this edge and it was really kind of pretty.

Rossbach: You think of Dorothy Liebes now. She came out with green and blue together and this was supposed to be very daring. Well, this was daring in this DMC (Dollfus-Mies & Co.) type of embroidery that my sisters did and they used to sometimes buy these sheets that had the blue patterns on them and you ironed them onto the cloth. This is exactly what I am doing now with heat transfers. It's as though I have picked up on all of this stuff that was going on that was forbidden to me. It drives you crazy to think about it. You want to reject the whole thing.

[Note, October 19, 1984, from E. Rossbach to H. Nathan.

You asked about my early contact with textiles. I described the handwork that my sisters and aunts did.

What I neglected to say is that ever since that early time I have felt uncomfortable doing anything like sewing, darning, appliqueing, embroidering. I avoid them in my own work as somehow not appropriate activity for a man. Knitting, also. Any of the textile techniques that my sisters did.

I realize that when I was a child I was very solitary (as I still am) and that I devoted much time to constructing. I had an Erecto set, a Meccano set, Tinker Toys, and Lincoln Logs. I spent great quantities of time amusing myself building. Not wildly elaborate structures like those in the catalogs, but simple constructions, over and over. I feel that this interest is incorporated in my textiles.

When we were in Salzburg recently we visited a wonderful toy museum that had some of these early building toys. I wanted them. The sensation was very strong.]

Depression Years

Rossbach: But then later on during the Depression, my father lost his job and we did this thing that so many people did of piling all of our belongings into a car and dragging across the country to Seattle again where my aunt and her husband had a house, a small house, and we just lived with them for years.

Nathan: This was not Aunt Mary Jane?

Rossbach: No.

Nathan: She was off on her own being a nurse?

Rossbach: She was, but then that sort of folded during the Depression pretty much, too, and she came out west. There is an island off of Seattle called Vashon Island. They had a chicken farm on Vashon and Mary Jane took care of the boys, as they were called, who were my uncles, who had been core-makers, and they raised chickens during the Depression.

Nathan: So you all moved in the house with--

Rossbach: With my Aunt Lou. She was married to a mail carrier and he was the only one who had a job. And there were the rest of us. My older sister was a trained librarian and my younger sister was an office worker. I don't know what I was.

Nathan: There were two sisters?

Rossbach: Two older sisters and one younger. But I mean we were all unemployed and none of us could get jobs and it was just a dreadful time. I just hate this time right now when there are so many unemployed. I think it's absolutely intolerable to think of all of these people suffering and here I am, I'm not suffering at all, and that's how it was during the Depression. There were these people who were so totally untouched by this thing and then others of us who were very deeply touched. It just did terrible things to my father.

Nathan: Did you try to do part-time jobs?

Rossbach: Oh, God, yes. I graduated from high school just before this had happened and then I went and took postgraduate work in Seattle learning typing and shorthand and bookkeeping.

Nathan: Was this at Broadway?

Rossbach: No, I went to Queen Anne High and later on I did go to Broadway and much later on I took a beginning weaving class. It was the first time I took a weaving class, at Broadway Night School.

Nathan: That's how you got to be such a good typist. You actually studied typing.

Rossbach: Yes, but in those days we learned typing in seventh grade. Yes, we all learned typing. This was just something you learned and so I was improving my skills.

Patchwork Quilts

Rossbach: But anyway, what I was going to say was my sisters took to making patchwork quilts and it seemed like we always had patchwork quilts spread out in the basement on stretchers. The family would all sit down there quilting on this thing.

Nathan: Everybody?

Rossbach: Yes, my mother and my sisters.

Nathan: Did the men?

Rossbach: No, not the men. Sometimes I would read to them. There were clear ideas of what was permitted and what was all right, but I was terribly interested in it and I still am.

Nathan: Did they ever sell the quilts or were they for family use?

Rossbach: They just sewed for their hope chests and that sort of thing and those were beautiful quilts. My sister, Ruth, who is just older than I am, wrote me before Christmas. She had exhibited her quilts at the church. For some reason they had an occasion where people could bring things they had made and showed them, and she brought these old quilts and had them on display, and that seemed terribly nice to me.

Nathan: What were the names of your other sisters?

Rossbach: Doris is the eldest. She's the librarian. Ruth is next and my youngest sister is Jane.

Nathan: Do you have any of these quilts?

Rossbach: Oh, no.

Nathan: You didn't have a hope chest.

Rossbach: [laughs] No. I did come out with a baby blanket, though, that my aunt had embroidered. She had done blocks with little scenes taken out of a child's picture book and then my name is written in it and my birth date and she misspelled my name. This was always a part of the family joke that my name was misspelled. Anyway, there was a little textile activity, but not much.

High School Art Teacher

Nathan: I wondered if there were any art teachers in Seattle, whether there was anybody there to give you a start.

Rossbach: No, but there was one in La Grange in Chicago. What was her name? Believe me, I want her name on the record. Edith Blaisdell Murphy. She was the art teacher.

Nathan: What grade would that be?

Rossbach: It was all through high school, all through high school. She was a wonderful woman and strange. You know, the sort of a person that you don't particularly approve of. I mean she isn't exactly what you had in mind.

Nathan: Did she dress eccentrically?

Rossbach: Sure. She was a real maverick on the staff and she would have nothing to do with the other teachers on the staff of this high school.

Nathan: What was so wonderful about her?

Rossbach: [pause] I don't know how I could say.

Nathan: But it touched something in you?

Rossbach: Oh, yes, and not in the way that you would expect. I don't know how to say this. There were many things that were very disillusioning about her. I mean, that was part of the complications. I seem to be saying something negative about her and I don't want to do that but, for instance, she was earning her higher degree. I guess she was working on a master's degree at Columbia at that time. (I studied at Columbia later on.) She would go to Columbia in summer sessions to work toward her degree. She wrote me that she had this assignment, that she had to do a pattern or something and would I do the pattern and send it to her? She turned it in as her own.

Nathan: So she actually submitted your work as hers? Did she give you any credit?

Rossbach: Oh, no, it was her work.

Nathan: How old a woman was she?

Rossbach: She was a woman in her forties, I suppose. She had a daughter who was in high school and she had a husband in Michigan who I think must have been some sort of invalid. I don't know. There was something

Rossbach: about the war. But this was something that I was never involved in. It was the sort of situation that she just almost let you live in the art room. You didn't go to study hall because she signed slips that you could be working in the art room and some of us were in the art room all the time.

Nathan: Were there good materials available?

Rossbach: No, but she was interested in theater and there was what was called an All Arts Klub and we used to give a play every year. She chose the most unlikely plays to give and they were just awful things for your family to have to sit through. We were so bad! [laughter] I mean everybody knew they were just terrible, but there we were.

The first one that she did was a play called The Little Clay Cart and it was translated from the Hindu or whatever and it was incomprehensible and then they had a bunch of amateurs doing it. I think it had been done at the Goodman Theater or something in Chicago. Then we did this play by Edward Sheldon--what was it called?--something like The Little Mermaid? It was The Garden of Paradise; this was a play that failed on Broadway. But it was very imaginative. She chose the plays for their costumes and settings. [laughter] And then we did an Oscar Wilde play, The Birthday of the Infanta.

Of course, this was a remarkable high school at that time. When I think back on it and what we read in literature and what we did in English and so on, my God, you were reading the best that had been written. Well, I don't think they all read Shakespeare to the extent we did in high school. It's just a wonder. I am so glad I went to that particular school.

But she was a fine woman and I visited her much later, much later. I don't know if that was a good thing to have done or not but I did it anyway.

Nathan: How did she hold up to your memory?

Rossbach: She was just the same, just the same. I don't know, she was somebody that you want to express something about, what this meant to you. But I have students do that to me and they will write me letters and say that they want to do this. But I don't know.

Nathan: You don't want it?

Rossbach: I don't want it.

Nathan: Why is that?

Rossbach: It makes me very uncomfortable. I value that they are doing it and I think how nice, how really kind of wonderful that they bothered to do this thing and at the same time I don't want it.

Nathan: That's interesting.

Exploring Chicago

Rossbach: Anyway, I wanted to say a little more about this art teacher that I had in high school. You asked me what was unusual about her. She did this wonderful thing of taking us to Chicago so that she was involved in our lives, but maybe she had no other life, I don't know, but she spent an awful lot of time with the students. She would take us to Chicago and we would go to the Art Institute and have lunch at the cafeteria and we would wander around the Institute. Sometimes we would go to lectures and sometimes we would go and have dinner at the Art Institute and then we would all go to plays or musicals. We did everything in Chicago with this art teacher and this was very wonderful.

Sometimes we would have a bus take a group and sometimes we just all went on the train, all walking down Michigan Boulevard and all. It was a very nice time.

At the same time, there was an English teacher named Kate Smith who was one who thought I could write and she was very supportive of me. These sort of older women--I don't know if I always responded--I mean older women sort of responded to me. I don't like the idea particularly but when I look back that seems to be the fact.

Nathan: But that's who the teachers were.

Rossbach: Sure, that's who the teachers were, but the younger ones didn't seem to do it. It happened at Cranbrook with Maja Grotel. She was very fond of me as a person and she was very supportive and so on.

Encouragement to Write

Rossbach: People with whom I came in contact through school did support me when I went to high school in Chicago, when we moved from Tacoma; I was in high school at that time at this very good high school, they almost instantly felt that I could write. I remember so well, shortly after I got there I had to write a little paper for this English

Rossbach: class that I was taking and, why, the teacher was just astonished that it was so good. Nobody had ever thought that anything I wrote was of any interest whatsoever. There had just been no feeling that way at all.

Nathan: Do you remember the name of the high school?

Rossbach: It was the Lyons Township High School. They had their fiftieth or sixtieth or hundredth or something class reunion recently. I was invited to go back and I could ride in an open car in a football parade with all of these oldtimers. It seems so absurd. This was nothing that school meant to me at all. But I did go back and look at the school once and just recently I wanted to go back. When I was in Chicago I wanted to go out there and walk through the halls of this building just to see what this place looked like again. I had a very strong feeling that I wanted to do that, but somehow it didn't work out timewise that I could do that. You had to take the train out there and it just didn't work, but sometime I will. I will just walk down the hall and see how these spaces look.

Nathan: How wonderful that this teacher pursued this ability in you.

Rossbach: Yes, but from then on they always felt that I could write and every teacher that I had in English felt that I could write, and the same thing happened at the University of Washington. I realize now that I don't write that unusually well. In fact, I write very poorly in many cases and I wish I wrote better. I realize the possibilities of this thing, but I didn't know at the time that I wasn't really all that good and it was very nice to have this feeling. It was a very great advantage to be able to write so that all through the university people thought that I could write. I could write a good blue book just because I could string together the words.

The Appeal of Weaving

Nathan: Thinking again about weaving, how did you get enough interest in weaving to take a class at Broadway Night School?

Rossbach: I don't know. My sister, Ruth, had bought a loom. It was a strange thing to have done. I don't know why she did it. It was available somewhere, a secondhand loom, and she brought it home. We had this down in our basement for a while; it was a very bad loom. I wove a little on it. I wove more than she ever did on the thing, but it was just such a bad loom. It was interesting, and I'd see how the loom worked.

Rossbach: Then at the end of the Depression, we got in the car and drove down to the fair at Treasure Island in California and saw the decorative arts exhibit that Dorothy Liebes had installed there. I didn't know anything about Dorothy Liebes, naturally. I saw these contemporary textiles and weavings and wrote in my diary that I would like to learn how to weave so that I could weave upholstery.

Nathan: You were out of high school for several years by then?

Rossbach: Yes, actually this happened in 1940. I was out of college.

Nathan: Right. How could you afford to go to college?

Rossbach: Finally, I got a job as a bookkeeper and stenographer in a poultry laboratory outside of Seattle and I worked for several years and saved money. I had taken the civil service exam for clerk typist for the government and I had scored pretty high up the list. You had to accept the job; they would offer you a job and you could turn it down anywhere in that Northwest area, but they would offer only three and then you were taken off of the list. The timing was just poor in all of this stuff for me and I got offered a job just when I had started at the University of Washington and I had to turn it down. Then they offered me the second one and it was in Spokane, Washington, and I thought I had to take it. This was sort of a security thing.

If you took a job and you kept this job for six months, then you could be on the list again for more jobs. You were hanging on to this security all of the time at the same time that you were trying to think of going to school. So I accepted the job in Spokane. I had taken only the first two semesters at the university or two quarters on the quarter system, and then I accepted the job in Spokane. I went there for six months and got my name on the list and I took courses by correspondence--in French of all things--while I was working in Spokane. Then I went back to the university and finished.

Anyway, then I saw this weaving and just happened to write that down in my notebook. I mean this is sort of deceptive. I didn't have this big urge to weave upholstery. I wasn't thinking of that. I just happened to write that down in my diary and I never did weave much upholstery. I wove some upholstery but never used it.

Nathan: What was your A.B. in?

Rossbach: My A.B. was in painting and design. I thought I was going to be a teacher and you had to have a minor at the same time, a major and a minor. So I took a minor in English composition; except they didn't have really good courses in creative writing, which I would have liked. But anyway, I took a few education courses which you had to take and I couldn't stand them. I just could not and I wouldn't do it, and I was not qualified to become a teacher then.

Columbia University and Practice-Teaching

Rossbach: So then I went to Columbia. I got a scholarship to go to Columbia. I was old, you see. I had stayed out all of those years during the Depression and then when I went to college I was older than the average student at school. So by the time I graduated in 1940, I was well along in my twenties, I suppose. Yes, I was well along in my twenties. But the idea of launching off to go to New York seemed very daring and it was just wonderful. God, what an absolutely marvelous thing that that happened.

Nathan: Did you get to the museums?

Rossbach: Oh, yes. I took a whole concert series of the symphony, the New York Philharmonic Symphony and it was so wonderful just to do that. I went to concerts and went to plays and opera. Well, it was just marvelous, really eye opening.

Nathan: And really on your own.

Rossbach: During that period, that year, that wonderful year that I was in Columbia University, I was doing practice-teaching. I had to do practice-teaching for a whole year, at Horace Mann School, which is this sort of experimental school, which was in conjunction with Columbia University.

Nathan: Is that a high school?

Rossbach: It was everything, yes. It was grade school and high school. I taught in classes at all levels at the time. The woman who was in charge of the art program, that I taught under, was Belle Boas. I mentioned her. She was a very urbane woman, kind of aloof and grand, very smart, and something new in my whole experience, of course.

Nathan: Very sophisticated?

Rossbach: Very sophisticated. She's from this Boas family, I think from Baltimore. I don't know much about them except they're great scholars.

Nathan: Is that name spelled with an s or a z?

Rossbach: B-o-a-s. She was very good to me. She liked me, and was very nice to me. These people all sort of take me under their wing in some way. I feel the students do that, too, to me. In a way, I think it's so wonderful, and in another way, I don't want to be that kind of a person. But there I am. You know, they talk about a movie, and they say, "You shouldn't go to that. It would upset you." Or, "You should go to this. It's nice." I don't like that. But that's the way I am.

Rossbach: Anyway, Belle Boas was very nice to me. There was a woman also doing her practice-teaching at the same time. The two of us were doing it together at this place. We were both very impressed by the painter Stuart Davis. Do you know him?

Nathan: Yes.

Rossbach: He didn't have the reputation then that he has now, but we were very interested in his work. He was a New York painter. Belle Boas said, "Why don't you go meet him?" Well, my God! And she said, "If you want to, I'll arrange it." She just picks up the phone and calls Stuart Davis, and she said, "This is Belle Boas. I have two students who would like to meet you and possibly study with you." She arranged it, and we went down to meet Stuart Davis in his studio.

He had just unfortunately fallen down the stairs shortly before and broken his leg, so he couldn't do anything about taking us as students, but we went and met Stuart Davis.

So I had these little contacts with these people. And things like this make everything seem possible. The ease of Belle Boas and the assurance to do this. Marvelous. Absolutely marvelous.

Making Marionettes

Rossbach: I want to say something about making marionettes. May I?

Nathan: Please do.

Rossbach: Okay. During the Depression years, down at Frederick and Nelson's, which is a big department store in Seattle, they used to set up little performances and various things, free. Of course, during the Depression, you were taking in everything that was free. So we went down there.

Cornish School had a puppeteer group, and they came and gave a puppet show, a marionette show. I was very excited by this thing. Of course, I had never seen a marionette show before. Then at Cornish, they gave a more extended one, and so I went to Cornish and saw this thing, and for reasons which I don't understand now, I was able to go backstage and see these things. This was almost a child going to run off to the circus. It was a whole, very exciting theatrical life. I've always been interested in theatrical--this sort of stuff.

So I started making marionettes on my own.

Nathan: How old were you then?

Rossbach: How old was I? Well, I don't know.

Nathan: Teens?

Rossbach: Very late teens. It was somewhere around that time. I'm not sure. So I made these marionettes. My sister and I worked up a performance. We would go around to various churches and schools and give these little marionette shows; my father would take us there in the car, and he would operate the curtains. My younger sister would come, too, and do certain things in the performance. It was very much a family affair.

I always had these fantasies that somehow I was going to save the family, and sort of provide a job for my father, for all of us. Well, anyway, I started writing a book on how to make marionettes, illustrating it myself. So I sent it to Harcourt Brace, which is a good publisher. They gave me a contract.

Nathan: They did?

Rossbach: It was nice. It was nice. So I worked on this thing. When I was in my first year in college, they said I had to get the thing finished. I had let the thing drag on. I got the thing finished while I was a freshman at the university, and it got published. It got decent reviews, which is nice. I was appalled by the experience, because I thought I wrote fairly good English, and there had been so many corrections in it, it just embarrassed me to think that I was so awful.

I was always very shy about this activity, and sort of didn't acknowledge it, in a way, you know, at the university or anything, where I was a student. At the University of Washington they had a puppet theater in relation to the Glenn Hughes thing. I never had anything to do with them. So they were having a puppetry conference, in Seattle, and they wrote me and invited me to speak at this conference, because I did this book.

This was just devastating to me. You know, this was a secret part of my life. There were two things, my university studies and this other thing. And of course, I said no. I didn't acknowledge that I was other than just a student there, or anything like that. A student in class said that she had read a book by--and I said, "That's my uncle." Ever since then, I have had this thing, which I don't like now. I wouldn't do that. But it was a result of this extreme shyness, and I was afraid of getting propelled into something that I wasn't going to be able to handle, I guess.

Rossbach: To that extent, all this interest that's come much later in going around giving lectures has been very satisfying to me, to feel that I could do this thing, and this was possible. At the same time, when I was in high school I was on the debate team. I was no good at it, but I did it.

I'm interested more in, I think, organizing words. To me it's a creative act to write these silly books that I write now. I work hard on them, and I think I am organizing them. They have structure and background to them. But, anyway, that takes care of the marionettes.

Then during the war, they wrote and told me that if I was willing, the plates for this book would be dissolved for metal, which is all right.

Nathan: What a wonderful adventure for a young guy.

Rossbach: Yes, it was nice. It was fun reading the proofs.

II ARMY SERVICE, CRANBROOK, UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

Teaching and Students

Rossbach: Somehow the young people that one deals with in teaching, they seem so knowledgeable and so experienced, and I think this has been my experience ever since I started teaching. From the time I was teaching seventh grade, I felt the children were more knowledgeable than I was, and they were. I was teaching in a farm community and these kids were knowledgeable about a whole range of important things that I had absolutely no knowledge of whatsoever and it was always slightly uncomfortable. I think I have gone through the whole of my own life feeling that way. I don't know enough, I haven't experienced enough.

I think this has influenced my teaching in a way because I have tended to let the students take the lead, which I approve of. I think that's okay. I look back on it and I think I was really all right, but I feel they are more into things than I am, more into what is happening and what is going to happen and so on. I just sort of follow along and look at this in wonderment.

Nathan: They must give you something back.

Rossbach: Yes, very much, but at the same time, I don't want to make too much of that because people say, "It must have been terribly rewarding to have taught all those years and to have all of those students that have done such wonderful work." It is wonderful and it isn't wonderful and you think what else would you have done.

Nathan: How is it not wonderful?

Rossbach: I would rather have done wonderful things myself. [laughs softly] Does that make sense?

Nathan: Yes.

Rossbach: I see them do wonderful things and I can encourage them, I think, to do wonderful things, but finally I feel that--and maybe I imagine this--that I had a potential for doing more wonderful things than I ever did. I suppose that is why I end up at this period of my life in sort of a mild state of confusion about what I should be doing with the time that is left me. I think I feel that I should be doing much more than I am.

Nathan: So in a sense you were thinking that teaching occupies a certain amount of time and energy and if that had been focussed differently you might have produced in a different fashion?

Rossbach: Yes, I suppose everybody thinks that. I don't know how unusual it is because I don't know anybody to talk to about it. You're very much on your own in all these feelings.

Nathan: An artist may be more alone because of being very inward, I would imagine. Is that true?

Rossbach: I think I tend to be a very solitary person anyway. I feel I just hermitize and I have always been that way. So it's just the way things are and finally I accept the fact.

Progressive Education and Teaching in Puyallup

Nathan: When you were teaching seventh grade, when was this? Were you out of the University of Washington then?

Rossbach: I graduated from the University of Washington and then I went to Columbia for one year and got my master's degree in art education. Then I came back to the State of Washington and got this job teaching at this small town called Puyallup. It was a very difficult year for me. Well, I had been trained in progressive education at Columbia and I had done a lot of practice-teaching there in very refined situations. I believed in progressive education. I really believed in it. I tried to use those methods and could not control the discipline of the class; I worried a great deal about it and I was very unhappy. Other teachers would say that they had no problems with discipline with the same children.

The classes moved from one teacher to another and they would then move to the English class or whatever and the history class, whatever they took, and they were just perfect angels. In my class they were just absolutely impossible, doing absolutely wonderful work. Again,

Rossbach: just absolutely wonderful. The art work that they did was so beautiful and they loved it and the other teachers would say, "Make them be good. They love you. They will do anything for you." But I couldn't make them--I mean there was no way that I could make them--within the frame that I believed in.

The second semester, things were better. There were a couple of continuing classes and I never did get them under control. They just went the way they had been, but with the new groups that I got at the beginning of the semester, I was firm from the beginning and that worked out all right. I knew that I absolutely had to get out of that. They told us at Columbia that always on your first job you stay for two years and this is an indication that you were okay. And I just couldn't. I didn't care what the consequences were. I would not stay the second year at that place.

The Army and Alaska

Rossbach: That was when the war was starting. Pearl Harbor occurred while I was teaching and I think at the end of April of that year I resigned from teaching and went into the army.

Nathan: In what capacity?

Rossbach: I enlisted. There was nothing heroic about it. I would have been drafted and I enlisted because I was able to get into the organization that I wanted to be in, which was the Alaska Communications System. It was a signal corps; they were headquartered in Seattle and they dealt with all of the communications, the radio communications and so on, throughout Alaska. I typed very well and they put me in a school that they had in Seattle in the Federal Building to learn tele-operating (telegraph)--dots and dashes and so on. I sat there for quite a while--weeks, months, I don't know how long, but it was lots of dots and dashes and transcribing. It was interesting because it was at a time when they were jumbling messages so that the Japanese couldn't pick up the messages. You had to try to pick out the signals through the jumble and all of this took very refined hearing, which I don't think I have.

Anyway, I got into the personnel office. They needed somebody who could type well and I was there for I guess three years and then I got sent off to the Aleutians for a year and that was that.

Nathan: Were you already interested in basketry before you went to the Aleutians?

Rossbach: No.

Nathan: Did that start there?

Rossbach: Possibly you could say it started over there, a weak beginning to say the least. My sister was a librarian in Seattle. I wanted to make baskets out of all of these grasses and so on that were around and I asked her to get me a Boy Scout Manual on basketry, but somehow this was no longer available at that time. So I didn't have any instructions at all and, no, nothing came of it except I thought about it.

Nathan: Did you see any baskets that had been made by the people of the Aleutians?

Rossbach: No.

Nathan: You just--

Rossbach: I knew they existed.

Nathan: You saw the grasses and something started.

Rossbach: Yes. We used to go on the beaches and we would walk along the beaches looking for artifacts and so on. We never found any. There was no indication at all that anybody had ever lived on these islands and it seemed very strange to me. The islands were very, very, very beautiful and I did a lot of drawings while I was there. They were more of the kind of drawing where you just came in and drew it, say, inside of the hut. You could not sit out in nature and draw.

Nathan: Was it too cold and miserable to sit outside with a sketch pad?

Rossbach: Yes, pretty much so. There were very few decent days at all, but when they were, they were so unbelievably beautiful. There was nothing like it. I want to go back and see it. I just want to see it so badly, but the island where I was, you can't visit. You have to have some sort of Navy permission to get to the base there.

Nathan: Was that Adak?

Rossbach: Yes, it was Adak. But you can go to the Pribilof Islands. I don't think they are really part of the Aleutian chain, but they are similar looking in the photographs. There is a possibility of going up there because they have all of these seals and people go to watch the seals and that seems like fun. I would just like to experience this landscape again.

Nathan: Is it a very austere landscape?

Rossbach: It has absolutely wonderful flowers and low foliage and lots of birds. It seems so terrible to me--I just feel that everything is wasted opportunities. I was there for a year. I could have observed the

Rossbach: whole cycle of birds coming and going and plants coming and all of this stuff. I was so oblivious of everything. It seems so miserable to me now, but then today I have opportunities I am just wasting, too.

Nathan: So there you were, a young man in the military.

Rossbach: [laughs] It's hard to believe, isn't it?

Nathan: You perceived the grasses and something started to happen that carried through all the rest of your life. That's not a waste.

Rossbach: No. [pause] Somehow you get so swept up in all of these other strange things that you are involved in at the time, of just surviving in an army situation that is so totally foreign to anything you have experienced.

Nathan: I was just wondering how an essentially private person, as I gather you are, how you would manage in the army?

Rossbach: With difficulty, but in many ways it was a very enjoyable period in my life; very, very enjoyable.

Nathan: What was there about it that you enjoyed?

Rossbach: This was kind of an unusual organization that I was in, the signal corps thing, because almost everybody in it had volunteered and they had enlisted for this thing, for this special operation. They were almost all college people and they were a very intelligent group of people. They were lively. I met much more interesting people in the army than I met in school. I mean there was no comparison.

We used to listen to records. They had all of this money that you could buy records with. There were all of these classical records that we wanted to listen to and they would send them out. We would go down to the PX and listen; they had a place where you could listen to the records and so on. It was just a different life, that's all, and very satisfying. And I was anxious to leave.

Nathan: Did you see much of the rest of Alaska? Have you been around other parts?

Rossbach: Oh, I wasn't then. I just stopped in Anchorage on the way home, but then recently I went up to Anchorage again to jury a show and gave a talk, and on the way back we stopped in Sitka and Juneau and Ketchikan. So I saw that phase of Alaska, too, and I would love to go back. The trouble is there are so many places I want to go.

Nathan: Where would you like to go now?

Rossbach: Oh, just everywhere. I am just fascinated by Japan, of course, and I would love to spend time in Hong Kong and Singapore and Taiwan and that whole thing.

Cranbrook Academy

Nathan: If this would suit you, would you like to talk about going to Cranbrook Academy after you got out of the army?

Rossbach: Yes, I would. Did you know that Cranbrook is having a big centennial or whatever it is? I don't know how many years they are celebrating, but they include Eero Saarinen's years that he was at Cranbrook. So they have been interviewing and trying to collect work from people who were students at that time. I happened to be a student at that time, which really came as a shock because I didn't realize I was considered one of the old-timers. I felt I came fairly recently to Cranbrook. When I was a student there, we always had the feeling that the good days had already passed when Charles Eames and young Saarinen and all of these people were around doing such exciting things and there were still the remnants of their work around. Things were not quite as exciting when I was there. But here I was really part of the old guard. [laughter]

It was so funny. I don't tend to sell my work. I just hang on to almost everything. I don't know why. It isn't that I want it particularly, but also I don't want to sell it particularly. It is a funny state of affairs.

Nathan: You are willing to show?

Rossbach: Yes, and I am willing for someone to have the work, but I feel a little bit like Mrs. Miller with whom I taught for so many years. When she died, everything she wove, I think, was still there.

Nathan: Was that Lea?

Rossbach: Lea Miller, yes, and here we went through all of Lea Miller's things and it was all there, and now I wonder what ever happened to it. It just seems that that was no good solution just to have kept all of this wonderful weaving all of this time. But she wasn't in it for selling or building some reputation where she was going to have, contracts--what do you call it?

Nathan: Commissions?

Rossbach: Commissions, all of that stuff. I'm just not interested in that.

Anyway, so here I had all of this junk and we were plowing through all of this, selecting things that they might possibly use in this Cranbrook exhibit and it seems so funny to have all of this early work being considered of interest to somebody now. Probably the later work isn't of any interest.

Nathan: When you look at your early work now, how does it strike you?

Rossbach: I liked it. I liked it very much and that surprised me because very frequently I reject things almost as soon as I am finished. It takes a very long time before I look back on them and think I really had something.

So a number of my pieces are going to be in this Cranbrook exhibit, which is funny. I feel that I am going to be a sort of a footnote to all of these important people who were working earlier and, I don't know, there is just the feeling that they are concerned really only with that few who were so good. I don't think anyone has ever investigated to find out whether there were others who were good. They just got stuck on this one period in their history. I think this was very serious with Cranbrook. You get all of the literature month after month wanting money. They are trying to survive and I feel I can't stand all of this begging for money all of the time.

Nathan: Is it a private school?

Rossbach: Yes, but all they are harking back to is the time when Eames or Eero Saarinen and so on were working, and they show photographs of these people and their work. It isn't that I want photographs of my work or of myself, heaven knows, but the world moves on and they've got all of these students that they should be concerned about. It's a school and they shouldn't just be concerned with their teachers and I think that's the bind that Bauhaus got into. You know everything that the Bauhaus faculty did and you never hear anything about the students.

Nathan: That's very interesting.

Rossbach: Yes, and it's sad. But anyway, about Cranbrook, when I was there was right after the war, it was very difficult to get materials to weave with or do anything with and so it was a very competitive little society. If you had sources of things, you kept them to yourself and we didn't share everything that we knew.

I'm just the opposite and this is what I think I was trying to say last time a little bit: that I believe in being absolutely open and that the students could feel they could ask anything they wanted

Rossbach: and almost anything I would answer, and certainly I wouldn't have any secrets about my own work or how I did anything or where I got anything. I mean anybody. I would share that with anyone and this openness I valued very much. I try and think about it. It may be because there was a kind of a closeness about my family situation, and I think I have always reacted to that and felt that I wanted things to be open.

So I didn't like that quality about Cranbrook. It was a quality that I didn't talk about when they interviewed me about Cranbrook because you kind of say only good things and that's too bad, too. You should be able to say disturbing things about it, too.

They had a very small faculty, as you know, mainly from Finland and Sweden and these people did not get along and the students were aware of that.

Nathan: The Finns and the Swedes traditionally don't get along, do they?

Rossbach: Even the Finns didn't get along with Finns and students were involved and embroiled in these faculty situations. It's a little school that is very removed from Detroit and you are all living there close together and having time to squabble. It just wasn't good in that respect at all. They had the dream that they would have a few talented students who would be able to work with each master craftsman and you would be involved in your own work and with each other and all of that. It wasn't that way at all. You never saw what any of the faculty were doing or got into their studios or anything like that. Really you didn't much get to know them personally except for Maja Grotel in ceramics.

Nathan: What was the name?

Rossbach: Maja; it's a woman. [spells name] I don't know if it's one or two l's. I'm always stuck.

Nathan: Was she one of your teachers?

Rossbach: Yes, I was working in ceramics and weaving when I was there. You had to work in two areas and I was there primarily to do ceramics. The second one was weaving, and the fact that I have turned out to be a weaver, I think, is just an historical accident. I think if situations were different I could have been a ceramist or whatever.

Teaching Weaving at the University of Washington

Rossbach: It was just that when I started teaching at the University of Washington after leaving Cranbrook, there was this opportunity to teach weaving. They wanted me to do it because weaving was in the Home Economics Department at that time and they wanted it in the art department if they could swing it. So I was on a split appointment teaching two-thirds in the Art Department and one-third in Home Economics. Of course, it didn't work that they got the weaving away from Home Economics, although it has happened since and I just noticed recently that now weaving is in the Art Department.

It was impossible to do anything in ceramics there because it was already well staffed. But I don't think I was ever quite as comfortable with ceramics anyway. I didn't feel good about all of this firing and all of the technical information that was necessary--glaze calculations and all of this. I wasn't interested in that at all. I don't know why I wasn't. I think I could be now, but at the time I just wasn't and I was definitely trying to make an adjustment from army life back to this situation at Cranbrook which was very, very different and somehow it seemed easier in weaving.

Nathan: Why did you pick Cranbrook?

Rossbach: It was just the school to go to. If you were interested in crafts, that was the place to go. I was very fortunate to be accepted. They accepted only a small number of students and so it was just marvelous to be back there for I think a year and a half.

Then I came out and taught at the University of Washington. After I had graduated from Columbia--this was before the war--I had applied to teach at the University of Washington and the man who was head of the department thought it was advantageous if I spent a year or two teaching at a lower level. I found out later that that's what his experience had been and so he was going to see that I did it, too. So, of course, I did teach in Puyallup for almost a year and then the war "intervened" as they say. It seems to me that all along the line I have met or have come in contact with teachers who were interested in me and gave me this sort of encouragement that I needed. I don't think I got that necessarily at home. I seem to be talking negatively about my family and I don't mean that in any way. My father, for instance, was an absolutely good man and my family was very close and they meant everything to me. But at the same time, I didn't get the kind of encouragement--I don't think they were able to do it in a way in these areas that were of no real interest to them or they knew nothing about. I guess some people who are very open can encourage people even so, whether they know anything about it or not, but I don't think my family did have that quality. At the same time, they were very pleased with my accomplishments. It is hard to say what I mean.

Rossbach: The time that I taught weaving at the University of Washington, that was interesting, and I think I should mention this in the tape. Jack Larsen was my assistant. He always says that he was a student of mine, and he wasn't. He was never a student of mine, although I would have been happy if he had been. But I don't want to take any credit for anything that wasn't mine.

I was teaching painting and design in the Art Department there, and the textiles were in the Home Economics Department. They needed somebody to teach one class. They had only one class. They suggested that--I think I said this before--that I have a split appointment with Art, and I would teach one class in Home Economics. The man in charge of the Art Department wanted me to do this, because he hoped some day that they would get weaving into the Art Department, and this would probably be a way of moving it over there gradually.

So I did that, and I went over to the Home Economics Department. Jack Larsen came to see me, a young student; he had been taking classes in home economics and interior decoration, and so on, and he was someone that they were very fond of over there. He got along very nicely with these people. So he had arranged that he could be my teaching assistant if it was okay with me. Well, great! Well, it was a little nonplusing finally, because he was so knowledgeable and so competent. It was almost as if I had nothing to do. He could have been doing this thing and probably doing a better job of it than I was doing. And finally I just took advantage of the situation and let him do an awful lot.

He was very good. I still think very highly of him and his work, though we don't have much contact, you know. Apparently, when he's out on the coast, he doesn't look me up. I mean, he's involved in other things, so it isn't any big friendship any more.

Nathan: People go in other directions. Could you tell at the time that his direction was going to be toward designing commercially and for industry--if that's what he does.

Rossbach: Yes, that's what he does. No, I don't think so, but he was an absolute dynamo of doing his own creative work. He was the perfect example--sort of like Pete Voulkos. He was equivalent to Pete Voulkos in ceramics, in that he had this enormous drive. He had fifty thousand things and interests going simultaneously. At the same time he was producing, and had private students, and you don't know how anybody would have that much energy. The pure energy involved! And his work had a freshness, nice color quality. It was, I suppose, a little interior decorating kind of color, which I don't think mine ever has been. I don't think my color appeals to people particularly, but his was very appealing in color.

Rossbach: He was doing things like upholsteries and materials for cushions, and so on, so he was moving definitely into the interior decorating and furnishing fabrics type of thing. I was never into that.

Then, when I came down here, he was still at the University of Washington. He graduated, and he wanted to come down here as a graduate student. I knew this was impossible. They set such restrictions on academic direction of things in our department at that time. If you were working on a master's degree, it had to be a thesis of a certain sort. They really didn't subscribe wholeheartedly to this creative angle.

So I suggested that he go to Cranbrook, which he did, and things moved on from there. He still has his drive and interest in a multitude of things. Somehow if you visit him in New York you feel like you're interfering with five thousand things that he's got going, which I admire.

Nathan: Do you feel that his style was stimulating to students?

Rossbach: Sure. Very much so. He devoted enormous quantities of time to his students. They had at the University of Washington a bunch of old, miscellaneous looms that had been given to the university, and he could operate them all. I couldn't operate them. I didn't have to bother with them; I had Jack there. He would spend endless amounts of time with the students.

Nathan: Is that program still vital at the University of Washington, as far as you know?

Rossbach: Yes. In fact, it is now in the Art Department, and I don't know when that happened. It amused me that I got my announcement last week saying that they need a teacher and that they are inviting applications.

Nathan: Well, some things work out.

Rossbach: I had this unusual experience of working with a man from Germany when I was at the University of Washington. It turned out that he had some contact with the Bauhaus when the Bauhaus was being formed. I have read about this in books since, but I didn't know it. I had never heard of the Bauhaus, of course, when I studied at Washington. He was teaching in the art department. He had been a refugee. He had been one of the decadent painters from Germany that Hitler had banished or whatever. I studied with him, I guess, a couple of years and I was sort of his protégé.

Rossbach: He was writing a book on design or whatever and never really learned to speak English and he never really learned to write English, but he was insisting on writing in English. He couldn't make any sense, just no sense at all, and so I was sort of helping him with this thing. This was a very good experience.

It's interesting. This last time when I was in Zurich I was talking to this woman who had taught at the Bauhaus and she knew Johannes Molzahn. [spells name] He is dead now, but his wife is still living in Munich. I am going to write to her and see if she will tell me what happened to Molzahn after he had left this country. He left the University of Washington (I don't know why) and he taught in a new Bauhaus when it was in Chicago. They had this new Bauhaus in Chicago and he taught there for a while and that was really the last contact I had with him.

These have been very wonderful people that I have had contact with and, of course, with Lea Miller I--well, she was my colleague here at the University for so many years.

III UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, AND THE BAY AREA SCENE

Invitation to Teach at Berkeley

Rossbach: Lea Miller had been my teacher at the University of Washington and she was teaching basic design. When I was a freshman and a sophomore she was teaching design there. Then she did this thing one summer of marrying Robert Miller who was teaching at the University of Washington. Well, this was nepotism and this was not possible. She insisted that it should be possible. She continued to teach and she came to the class after she had been fired, and there was a big fuss in all of the papers about Lea Miller. We had reporters in the classroom and photographers and all and it was a very interesting time. She was very adamant about this.

Nathan: Was Robert Miller in the same department?

Rossbach: No, he's a scientist. So they both left and he came down and was director of an Academy of Sciences here in San Francisco and she gradually got herself a position teaching in the Design Department here. [University of California, Berkeley] At a science convention that they had in Seattle, Robert Miller was the speaker and Lea came with him. Katherine was doing an installation of something at the anthropology museum* and we met Lea Miller again after all of these years. Consequently, she invited me to teach at the University of California and that's why I came down here. But everything is just friendship; it is part of the old boy thing and so on. It's so hard to advise students on how to get jobs. I mean the best way is just to know people and it's sad that this is true, that nothing is really on the basis of your merit.

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*An oral history memoir of Katherine Westphal (Mrs. Charles Edmund Rossbach) is in process.

College of Letters and Science, or Department of Architecture

Nathan: Maybe a little merit there; she wouldn't have invited you if she hadn't thought you were all right.

Rossbach: Anyhow, that's how it happened and so we had a very nice relationship all the years she was here. It was a difficult department to teach in because there was an old guard and a division really between younger people and the older people. This was all part of the problem, I suppose, but you just had this group of older people who knew how things should be. I sort of thought they knew, too, and as time went on, I realized that they didn't. This was unfortunate, that they were so unwilling to change or modify anything from the past which they revered so.

Nathan: Could you describe a little more about what their ideas were and what the younger people's ideas were?

Rossbach: They were very pleased, I mean really pleased to be in the College of Letters and Science, to feel that this discipline that they were involved in really belonged in Letters and Science. It was not vocational, it was not home economics.

Nathan: It was academically respectable?

Rossbach: It was academically respectable and we were always trying to justify our position as an academic department until finally we were told that the College of Letters and Science didn't want us any more. They had no place for us and we were given the option of joining architecture, which reluctantly we did. This wasn't what we wanted at all.

Nathan: What actually did you want?

Rossbach: We wanted to be in Letters and Science. I mean we felt that we belonged in Letters and Science just as much as art does. But these people were even more rigid about this academic thing, I think because there had been this squabble and fight over this thing all of the time. It became an obsession with these people of maintaining academic standards, and you had to have a master's degree with an academic thesis. The young people wanted a creative thing and they were trying to go in a much more creative direction with creative work being as meaningful as a written thesis. It was difficult.

Nathan: I now see exhibits of M.F.A. projects, I guess, for a Master's in Fine Arts. You can do a project and not write a thesis. Is that the way it is?

Rossbach: In art you can get an M.A. and you can also get an M.F.A. An M.F.A. takes much longer, but even the M.A. degree doesn't require a written thesis. Everything changed almost in spite of what they wanted.

I think I said last time that I sort of followed the direction of the students and I did. There was sort of a wave. You were moved along; whether you wanted to be moved or not, you were moved.

Nathan: You did not resist that?

Rossbach: No, I didn't resist it, I loved it. But you were trying to deal with people who were resisting it and they were your very good friends whom you had known for all of these years. They meant a great deal to you. Wellington was a most wonderful man and most difficult--most difficult. He was turned off from his teaching. I remember he went into this extreme depression and it all lost meaning for him. It was very upsetting to see this happen to anybody.

Nathan: That was Winfield Scott?

Rossbach: Yes.

Nathan: So the faculty had certain divisions and attitudes also?

Rossbach: Oh, yes. At the beginning when I came, there was just the old guard and the people willing to go along with the old guard and I was one of those. I respected what they were doing and it seemed the way things should be and you always put a solid front on everything. If you had a lecturer or if you had a guest or anything, the department was out in full force and you sat there in a row and let yourself be seen as a solid front of support for everything.

It was a really bad department to teach in in that respect because it was so insecure and your whole position was insecure. There was the feeling that there was nothing that you could do in your field that the University would value. It's very strange, and at the same time when I was there I got all of my advancements on time and I received a Creative Arts Grant for a year. I had research grants and so on and so on. But at the same time fundamentally there was no belief in what I was doing or what any of us were doing, and Katherine and I used to talk about this. We would just fantasize what a person could do that the administration of the University would value; and there was nothing that we could do.

Nathan: But you did a good deal of writing and publishing while you were doing the teaching, the administering, and your art.

Rossbach: Yes.

Nathan: Did your writing help at all?

Rossbach: No, no, nothing helped.

Nathan: Sometimes publication is valued by the University, so I wondered.

Rossbach: They had written this department off many, many years ago and instead of lopping it off and getting rid of it, they just let the thing drag on. They couldn't decide what they were going to do and this was the most intolerable situation.

I guess what was really one of the most difficult features of it was that this old guard didn't realize that the world had changed around them. Hope Gladding, for instance, who is still alive, is in a rest home now and in a very bad way and so on and she has sort of lost her marbles. She doesn't know where she is or anything like that. She doesn't know that the department doesn't exist any more, and she didn't know it before. I mean she could not comprehend that it didn't exist and this was the most crushing thing for all of these people. I don't think anyone can possibly understand what was involved. I am not going to talk any more about it, but anyway it was absolutely shattering to people.

Nathan: It was as though someone had judged that your life and work had no value?

Rossbach: [emphatically] Right.

Nathan: Awful.

Rossbach: It <u>was</u> awful and--

Nathan: And there was no one in the administration who had any real willingness to listen?

Rossbach: No. I developed great contempt for the administration, and this was bad, too, because at the same time I was earning my living from the University and you would think, "God, if you feel that way about it you should just leave." At the same time, you are doing your best for your students and you can't just leave because there aren't jobs that you can just--I mean when you are, say, sixty years old and so on, fifty-five or whatever it was, you just don't pick up and leave. And you're getting a very good salary. The whole thing was just so--there was no clear way of thinking about this thing.

Nathan: How did you resist becoming calcified?

Rossbach: I don't know. Other people in the department just stopped producing. Well, maybe they would have anyway. I don't know. I can't understand how they could. I mean it is so fascinating, you just have to keep producing.

Faculty Members and Teaching Styles

Nathan: You had spoken earlier about the generosity and the sharing and the openness with which teachers seemed to approach you. Did you deliberately adopt that as your style with your students?

Rossbach: That's a good question. I don't know if that was deliberate or not. No, I don't think I ever had to decide that.

This department that I came into had had a woman in charge who was an anthropologist. This was Dr. Lila O'Neale. Did you ever hear of her?

Nathan: Yes.

Rossbach: She had done some very important writing on textiles, of course, on textiles of Peru and Guatemala and California Indian stuff and so on. But anyway, she had died very suddenly shortly before I was invited down here; Lea Miller absolutely worshiped this woman. It was the most unexpected sort of admiration or whatever for a colleague because Lea Miller was already a mature woman by the time she came down here. I can imagine that happening to a younger student or something, to feel this worshipful attitude toward this great person who is in your midst, but Lea kept that all of her life.

So when I came down here, she very early gave me Lila O'Neale's publications, copies of these monographs and so on that are so important. Of course, O'Neale had done all of this work on Peruvian gauzes, analyzing Peruvian gauzes, and Lea Miller picked this up in her own work and she did gauze techniques using contemporary materials and for contemporary purposes. Really her whole life, her weaving through her whole life, was devoted to gauze weaving, which was really straight from this influence of O'Neale.

The other people on the staff didn't have this enormous respect for O'Neale. I mean they spoke highly of her, but it was more ordinary, their response. This was really most unusual in Lea Miller and so I was always interested in Lila O'Neale and wish that I had known her. I would liked to have formed my own opinion about this woman, but I always had the feeling that she had a style of teaching that I would have liked. She was sort of aloof and cool, I think, in certain ways in her contacts with other people, which I wouldn't like. I like a kind of a warmth and--you know, treating people as individuals.

But anyway, what she did, from what I gather, instead of having notes all prepared for her lecture and following a plan, if she walked into the classroom and somebody asked a question, she might spend the whole period just talking of something that got started, and this I value. I really fostered that.

Rossbach: You ask if I fostered this other thing or made a definite decision. I did make a definite decision that I wanted my classes to be sort of rambling and casual and that people would think, "This guy hasn't thought two minutes ahead of what he is doing," and that it all just pours out just on the spot.

Very frequently I did this in a very calculated way so that things that seemed that they just happened on the spur of the moment, I had really calculated and I wanted this to happen and I wanted to make a point somehow. I tried to tell all sorts of things about my travels and about things that excited me, and I think it worked. These are the things that people remember about my teaching, and they remember the most fantastic things. I can't believe it. They say, "You said such-and-such when you did so-and-so," and, God, I think, "Are they talking about me or somebody that they had fantasized?"

Nathan: How free.

Rossbach: Yes, that's what I wanted, absolutely--I wanted them to be free so that in their work they could do anything and it was okay.

Nathan: The opposite of what the University was doing?

Rossbach: I suppose; I suppose, yes.

Writing Style

Rossbach: So what was I talking about? Oh, O'Neale. So O'Neale had written these books and I always thought that this thing that she wrote, Textiles of the Guatemalan Highlands, was a good book on textiles, a good way of writing about textiles. It is very difficult to write interestingly about textiles. So some time later I was having a graduate seminar or something and I was having them read things on various ways of writing about textiles. I had them read something that was very cut and dried but very authoritative and all the facts were there. I had them read O'Neale and various other things and I thought I ought to read O'Neale again myself and see what I thought of it. I hadn't read it for years, and I thought it was deadly dull. It just seemed so incredibly dull and I don't think it had any of the feeling of Guatemalan textiles or the excitement of Guatemalan textiles at all.

So in my writing I was trying--and I am not saying I accomplished it, but this is what I wanted--what would seem to be sort of nonscholarly maybe and yet I wanted all of the facts to be there. When I was writing this first book and I sent it into the publisher.

Rossbach: I told Lea Miller that I had sent it in and she said, "You don't want to make a mistake." Oh, how terrible, how really terrible! I had to work my way through that and thinking about this. You had the whole weight of the University of California on your shoulders if you made a mistake, and the University of California couldn't have cared less about these people. These people were nothing to the University of California and yet their whole life was trying to, oh, be academically certain or whatever.

Nathan: How awful.

Rossbach: It was. So she said, "You don't want to make a mistake."

Nathan: This wasn't The New Basketry?

Rossbach: No, this was before that, Baskets as Textile Art. So someone was talking to me about her husband writing and she said, "He always says, 'You don't have to worry about making a mistake because if you make one, someone will point it out.'" [laughter] So I thought, "How great." You try and avoid making mistakes, but it stopped these people dead in their tracks, absolutely dead. Nobody could produce anything, show anything, write anything. I'm not going to name names, but anyway, there was a whole group of people who turned out to be totally unproductive because you could not risk anything.

Nathan: Stultifying.

Rossbach: It was and it finally was impossible.

Weaving Department

Rossbach: I thought I would like to say something about the weaving department. When I first came down here, we were very much associated with home economics and a high percentage of our students were from the Home Economics Department.

Nathan: These would all be women?

Rossbach: Yes, they were all women and I had very few men students in the class at all. Right after the war for a few years there in the early fifties I had a few men students, but they sort of petered out and toward the end there were very few men students. I thought this was a very great disadvantage and I don't know how you encourage men to go into this field. I guess you don't right now and for some reason, sometime maybe in the late sixties--I don't know when, but some time when we were in the College of Environmental Design--I had another rash of men students. I don't know why this happened, but that petered out, too, and so mainly it was women students.

Rossbach: I think that the home economics students were a very conservative, very nice group of people who were not basically interested in art or the art approach to things, and I think that really colored the teaching which we did at that time. I think we made concessions to what was expected of us by home economics and I am not sure that we should have done that.

Nathan: I was wondering whether they were interested in trying to make a living. Was there an economic element in this?

Rossbach: I don't think it was an economic element so much. They were kind of nice; everything had a niceness about it and they were very pleasant to deal with.

Nathan: Were they challenging to you?

Rossbach: Not so often. Some of them were remarkably good and you felt that you wished you could have them more, and they were taking this just as a requirement. You could reach them on a different level, but anyway, that was a long time ago.

Anyway, when I first came down to Berkeley to teach--I was invited down for a summer session to teach weaving--it was very interesting to go into the room that was the weaving room at that time.

Nathan: Where was that?

Rossbach: That was in a lovely old building--

Nathan: The wooden building?

Rossbach: Yes, that has been destroyed because it was in the way of fire engines getting to the new buildings. They were so eager to get this torn down. Anyway, this room was so orderly and everything was absolutely perfection in the way the rooms were arranged; each loom was covered with a blue cloth to keep the dust from it and there was nothing in sight in the way of weaving materials. It was all just so--everything was in drawers, and when the students worked, they kept everything in drawers. The materials were beautifully maintained and arranged according to fiber and it was unbelievable, but it was not an environment that I could ever create art in. It was a challenge I felt that summer that I had to keep up the standards. Of course, after they got me down here permanently everything began to disintegrate and it got very much freer. In Mrs. Miller's class also things got freer and less home economics-like and less ladylike, I think. This probably seems like an absolute trifle, but it was very, very important and these things come with great difficulty.

Rossbach: Later on in the department when we hired people to teach ceramics, people just made no concession to this ladylike sort of environment that prevailed and this old guard was really scandalized by Pete Voulkos. Somehow he wasn't really maintaining the expectations of a university.

Attitudes Toward Creativity

Nathan: What is the expectation of the University in art?

Rossbach: Well, at that time you dressed in a certain way and you acted like a University professor, and Pete didn't. They were shocked that he wore tennis shoes to class. You find it hard now to think of a time when all of these things were so important. This old guard that had the department under its control, I like these people very much, and if I seem to be speaking against them, I am just trying to say what I think was the situation at that time. I don't think it was necessarily good for the department that this situation was true.

Hope Gladding, who was the oldest member of the staff in, I guess it was 1941 when Hitler marched into Paris, declared that she would do no more creative art work. It was sort of a protest and she maintained this for the rest of her life. She neither did any creative work, nor any writing either, there was actually no production. She wouldn't even fill out a bio-bib that you have to fill out every year on what you've done, and this was extremely awkward.

Nathan: Was she the chair of the department?

Rossbach: No, no, earlier on she had been chair before I came for a while, but apparently it didn't work out. But at the same time, she was a very intelligent woman and very sensitive to what she was teaching and had a great deal to offer and this was true of all of these people. They were not sufficiently productive, so that you were not working in an environment where everybody was gung-ho producing. It was not the kind of environment that I had experienced at the University of Washington where we were a group of young people--this was our life, and this was not these people's lives. Their lives were something else; I never could understand why they didn't produce more. Work that is so fascinating and they knew so much about didn't compel them to do anything except the absolute minimum of exhibiting something each year so they would have something on the record. It wasn't this big, compelling interest.

Rossbach: Then you get someone like Voulkos who comes in and he was such an amazing figure; absolutely the creative person with total dedication to what he was doing and so productive. These people could sit on the sidelines and criticize this. I mean this just seemed appalling to me and as far as I was concerned, I was also very creative. You got to the point that you didn't discuss what you were doing or talk about where you were exhibiting and really people didn't ever see what you were doing because it was almost as though by doing anything you were criticizing them for not doing anything.

Nathan: Of course, they wouldn't ask you.

Rossbach: No, no. When I was chairman finally of this department for a couple of years (at which I was no good at all), it was a very difficult thing to advance these people because they had nothing in their record at all for advancement and yet they wanted advancement. So that at the same time that the department was under fire, I had the feeling that these people were not doing what they should have done to really make a strong department.

Then as we got young people in, like Ragnhild Langlet who was in fiber, she was another gung-ho creative person, and Don Haskins, we had a whole group of these people. Well, naturally, a certain division occurred in the department over this sort of thing. It wasn't on this basis that the department was phased out--I am not suggesting that--but it really would have helped somehow if these people had been more spirited in their approach to art.

Nathan: Did they take any part in the Academic Senate or in the administrative aspects of the University?

Rossbach: Oh, we always went as a group to the Senate meetings and so on.

Nathan: I was thinking of working on committees and this sort of thing that you do in order to get in.

Rossbach: No one was good at that sort of thing really and they were always sort of nudging me a little bit that I should be going in that direction. I just was not comfortable in that sort of thing and I was not good at all. I was useless on these committees.

But then at the same time, these people had a knowledge that was beyond anything I had ever experienced. Wellington, for instance, had this total understanding of the whole field of decorative arts and such a respect for this and you somehow imbibed this feeling and took it in. People like Lea Miller, I don't know how she knew so much about textiles. I absolutely do not know how she knew so much about textiles. You feel that there was nothing that you could

Rossbach: mention that she wasn't acquainted with and you really--well, she inspired you to do likewise, not consciously, but you were just aware that this was possible, to be interested in all of this stuff.

But at the same time, her interests didn't drive her anywhere. She just had it and it was marvelous and I don't understand that. This was just a new world for me to come into, working with people who knew so much about textile history.

Nathan: Were they able to convey something to the students' knowledge, but not the fire?

Rossbach: But not the fire, no, and it was almost as though they didn't themselves trust this fire, and this was not what a university was.

Nathan: It's all up here, in the head?

Rossbach: Yes, but at the same time, they weren't writing or doing research or--

Nathan: That's what seems so strange.

Rossbach: It was strange and--I don't know.

Nathan: How did you keep your own productivity and your own inventiveness and your own creativity going?

Rossbach: I don't know. I think it must have been very difficult because--well, it certainly drove me to a kind of hermitizing, which I have talked about before. You felt very definitely you were alone in this thing. Katherine and I were all alone, let's say, because we were both doing this creative business.

Nathan: Was this very different from what it would have been like, for example, to teach at Cranbrook?

Rossbach: I can't imagine what it would have been like to teach at Cranbrook. I was invited to teach there later and to come and take over the Textile Department, which just seemed like an appalling idea to me. It never occurred to me at the time that I would ever be offered such a thing as that, but it didn't attract me particularly. I was invited to teach at Black Mountain, too, which surprised me, and now I wonder how it would have affected me.

Nathan: You weren't getting any sort of collegial support from your colleagues. Did the students give you anything to drive you on?

Rossbach: No, no, I don't think the students are--that isn't their function.

Nathan: No, that's true.

Rossbach: I don't think they even particularly regard you too much as an individual. I mean you are there for them; you exist for them. In a way you get a lot from them and they don't know it, but they exist for you, too.

High-Quality Staff and Uncertain Future

Rossbach: Through all of this period, we were being directed to try to, oh, make a better contribution to the University somehow, to find a role. How would we fit in with environmental design, what could we offer to architecture, what could we offer to landscape architecture? It was always this one-sided thing. We were such a weak, really a weak group that we couldn't just say, "Well, for heaven's sake, what's architecture going to do for us? What are they offering to us?" So I think throughout this whole long period, we were always justifying our existence or trying to, or making statements of how we thought we fell in with Letters and Science or showing our work in the Architecture Department so they could evaluate us, and all this. It was just an absolutely constant thing, none of which I felt competent in dealing with. I mean the idea of doing a beautiful ikat or whatever and hanging it in architecture so that people, those architects, could judge that--I don't know, it was just a sick situation, I think, and it just lingered so long.

We were all so helpless in the situation and people felt it was just amazing that hope continued. Hope springs eternal. My God, you always thought you were going to be saved. Somehow you were going to be saved, and you were not saved.

The amazing part was that through this we collected the most amazing staff. The people that we had finally were absolutely terrific.

Nathan: Who were some of these people you particularly--

Rossbach: I don't like to talk about people particularly. I just thought they were--

Nathan: They were good?

Rossbach: They were very good. I don't think they could be matched. The group of people that we had I don't think could be matched anywhere in the country. They were just the top. But then you couldn't keep any of these people because they would get lopped off if ever they came up for promotion because the University didn't understand what their

Rossbach: position was going to be and they hadn't made a decision of what was going to happen to the department and so on, so they couldn't give people tenure. It was just a dumb, dumb situation.

Nathan: How difficult to watch this.

Rossbach: It was so painful to serve on committees for these good people and try and--and you know the cards are all stacked against you. No matter what the University says, they select committees to get the results that they want. You would just attend these committee meetings for people who were up for advancement and you know the decision when you walk in, and yet they put you in this terrible position of fighting for something that you believe in and knowing that you cannot win. People thought we got cynical and, of course, we got cynical. We would say, "Of course, we're cynical." There was really no understanding of what was happening to us and nobody came to our rescue.

Nathan: I was wondering if there was any other department or anyone in the administration to whom you felt you could talk and get some sort of hearing or some help.

Rossbach: No, the only person that I know of who did any fighting for us was the most unlikely person. She is a woman in the German department, Bluma Goldstein. She happened to be on a very critical committee that was concerned with whether this department was to be preserved in the University or not and I think, from what I can gather, she single handedly defended this department and got the committee to vote in favor of preserving the department. The findings of the committee were just dismissed and the administration went ahead with what they wanted to do anyway. It was interesting that there wasn't one person out of all of these friends, theoretically, whom we had in anthropology and in art, and in architecture. You could say, "Don't you see, if it can happen to us, it can happen to anybody?" I suppose if I were in their position, I wouldn't have lifted a finger either, and that's what's awful.

Nathan: How dreadful to watch this erode and to know what was happening year by year no matter what you did.

Teaching Load and Student Response

Nathan: I looked at the numbers of courses that you were teaching. How could you possibly teach all of those courses? Look at this. In '76-'77, Visual Design 121ab, Print and Textile Design 122b, Advanced Loom Textiles 162b, and there are even Industrial Textiles 240, a Seminar in Design Research 242, Seminar in Textile Research 298, a special study group in printed textile design--how could you do all of that?

Rossbach: Finally, I was trying to cover all of the bases of trying to preserve this damn fabric program. It was important and you didn't feel that you could go ahead just teaching weaving or one thing, that it had to be a more total thing. You just, I suppose, spread out--I suppose I spread myself too thin, I don't know, but it was an act of desperation and yet it was enjoyable in certain ways.

I found out gradually as time went on, I found more and more satisfaction in teaching the lecture classes than in teaching the creative classes. I felt that I could get my message over better. or I thought I could, in a lecture class. I had more control. I sort of enjoyed it, although I drove myself very much too--I didn't believe in teaching classes where you taught the same thing for two quarters, you know. It was always new and different. When I was teaching textile history, I would teach different areas of the world and different years, so that I could cover different branches of textiles. Because the field is so vast, you can dip anywhere.

I don't know how I can make it strong enough about this old guard and their feelings about Decorative Art. Younger people didn't have this feeling at all. They had no knowledge of history. That isn't what they were talking about. People like Wellington had such a total dedication to this stuff. Really, it was important to him.

When we first came down to Berkeley, Katherine and I had just gotten married. He was chairman. He rented us an apartment. It was on Arch Street. It was an apartment right across the hall from his apartment. And he would spend many, many evenings with us. He just sort of lived over there with us. If he saw an object or something--he was always going to auctions and making his collection--he would have this thing, and he would sit and leaf through all his books trying to find examples that were like it and figure out what these things were, you know, that he had found. He was just a different sort of person. But then, as I told you, he went into this state of depression. Nobody was really able to help him. I don't think we even tried to help him. I didn't try to help him.

Nathan: It's hard to know what to do.

Rossbach: You just become annoyed, because this man had everything. You know, you think of the ability that this man had, and knowledge. But students had gradually fallen away from him. They didn't particularly want to take his classes any more.

Nathan: These were Decorative Arts classes?

Rossbach: Yes.

Nathan: Had the term fallen into disuse to some extent?

Rossbach: Yes, it had to a certain extent, but not among students. They don't know, unless someone tells them. They didn't know that Decorative Art had become a bad word. I don't know why they didn't; they ceased to respond to his kind of teaching, I think. And maybe he became less interesting. I don't know.

Nathan: That's a painful judgment to experience.

Rossbach: Yes. I was so grateful that this didn't happen to me at all, that as far as I know my classes kept up, and I know students seemed to enjoy it. So I didn't have that experience, but some of the other people did have.

Nathan: You were talking earlier about how nice the original students were. Was there a change over time in the qualities of the students?

Rossbach: Yes, there was definitely a change. The students became much more difficult and much more interesting. The work became more varied and unpredictable.

Student Work and Exhibiting

Rossbach: But there was always this feeling that we were in Letters and Science, and we could only do what was appropriate to Letters and Science. So we must never allow our students to do anything that might suggest that we were producing textiles. We were only producing designs of textiles.

Nathan: Designs of textiles?

Rossbach: Yes. And, of course, as times changed, students wanted to do bigger pieces. They wanted to do things. Objects. The whole world was going toward objects, as you know, and this doing little mounted samples endlessly no longer satisfied them. This sounds like an absolute trifle, but it was an absolutely critical thing in the history of the department. The older people wanted to know, "How will you justify this--?" But sort of along with this, students wanting to make objects, after they made the objects they wanted to exhibit them. And then the question arose, was it appropriate for student work to be exhibited? After all, it was done under the guidance of a teacher. Well, the students were going to exhibit the work that they had done. This is all part of the changing thing in the fiber scene, a direction toward exhibition, and so on. This was another burning question.

Rossbach: Then, the University supplied all the materials that you were using, so that the students would have a variety of materials to work with. Because if they buy their own, they buy a few cones or something of cheap yarn, and they have nothing to work with in the way of color or fiber. So we provided it all. Well, then, if they're going to make objects, and so on, they're using our material, and should they be allowed to exhibit material that the University paid for?

It's so interesting to me to look back now. I've been reading about the Bauhaus and Anni Albers. The work that she is identified with almost exclusively is work that she did in the early years when she was a student at the Bauhaus. I suppose we could say it was student work.

But these were all issues which all got mixed up with our being insecure. We were part of Letters and Science, and we were afraid of being criticized all the time. If anybody found out that we were providing material for the students to weave a blanket, say, then they take this blanket home and use it for their baby, is this an appropriate use of University funds?

At the same time, you felt that if a student wanted to weave a blanket, and this was a perfectly legitimate design problem in fiber, she should be allowed to. I don't know. It went through a very, very difficult phase. I don't think it ever really got resolved. I think the problem just got forgotten as people retired, and so on, and the world changed, sort of willy-nilly. So...

Nathan: Did these problems confront you when you were teaching at the University of Washington?

Rossbach: No, they didn't. They hadn't arisen yet. It was too early.

Weaving to Recipes vs. Originality

Rossbach: I'd like to say something about the weaving scene when I came to Berkeley. Does that seem pertinent?

Nathan: Absolutely.

Rossbach: Okay. I told you that I didn't participate much in the weaving scene in Seattle while I was there, that I wasn't involved with these Weavers Guilds or any of the people who were doing weaving. I really didn't know anybody except Jack Larsen and my own students. I was really more involved in painting anyway, and I was moving with people who were interested in painting. I did give a lecture on weaving at

Rossbach: the Seattle Art Museum once, which was a crazy thing, because years before, before I had gone to Cranbrook--there had been a time lapse when I could go to Cranbrook and when I was getting out of the army--I had gone to Broadway Night School, I think I told you. I took this weaving course, in which we did Mary Atwater type weaving, this overshot stuff. I still have that piece that I did, which is fun, because it's such an insignificant piece, you know.

When I was in Zurich last year, Gunta Stölzl dragged out the first piece of weaving that she had ever done at the Bauhaus. She was very humble about dragging it out, you know, and not putting this forward as anything wonderful or anything, just sort of, "a nice thing, this is the first thing I ever wove." This little thing seemed totally unimportant, so I like that, too.

But anyway, the woman who had taught the class was kind of a motherly, past-middle-age woman, I suppose. By the time I was teaching in Seattle and going to give this lecture at the Seattle Art Museum--this was years later, of course--this woman heard about this and recognized me as someone who had been her student way back when, and she brought all her students to the lecture.

Well, I didn't know this was going to happen, of course, and I was really talking against this type of weaving, that weaving according to recipes, where you just leaf through a book and find out something that you want to weave, and then you follow the directions, and you come out with a result (which seemed to be the essence of how it was being taught at Broadway Night School).

Now I don't care. When I was young and weaving, that seemed a burning issue to me. You just didn't do that sort of thing. This was a creative thing. Everybody is doing something original. You know, you're not just following recipes. Mary Atwater called them recipes. They were just recipes.

Now I don't care if people follow recipes. If they enjoy it, what difference does it make? Sometimes I just get very tired of all this originality at the University. Everything was so excessively adventurous and self-conscious. "Oh," you thought, "if somebody would just play it straight and just weave a simple little overshot pattern without figuring." You know, this whole intellectual, ingenious thing, it's so exhausting.

So anyway, I gave this talk, which was unfortunate, because I hurt this woman's feelings obviously. She left with her students.

But you run into these unfortunate things. But anyway, that was my experience with the weaving groups in Seattle.

Mills College, Weaving

Rossbach: So then when I came down here, I came down on a trial basis for one summer.

Nathan: Was that in the '50s?

Rossbach: No, that was 1949. I remember that, because they were having an exhibit in San Francisco at the De Young Museum, called "Design in '49." Dorothy Liebes had a beautiful and very splashy exhibit, which I just loved, in which she combined it all with geraniums and pelargoniums, you know, and this sort of thing. The beautiful colors, all in relation to her weaving, and it just seemed to say "California." It was just so marvelous. It was absolutely perfect for coming down to California and thinking of moving to California. Here was this expression which was so nice.

Anyway, the staff at the University was mainly not there during summer session, as you know; Wellington was there. He was chairman of the department, and he took me under his wing that six weeks, or whatever it was, and took me around to the things I should know in the area. I was taken out to Mills College. They had a quite extensive weaving program in Mills College at that time. And a woman named Ilse Schultz was teaching. She still lives in Berkeley, and someone has suggested that I should call her up and talk to her, that she would probably enjoy talking to me.

I'm really not into doing that sort of thing, and sometimes I get mad. I think, "Why should I be doing all this? Why do people keep insisting that I do all these things all the time?" And then I feel guilty, and I have to do them. Why don't other people do this if they think it's important? Let them do it. I don't want to do it. That just isn't something that I do easily, and I think I have other things to offer. And at the same time, that's just another conflict. I feel it's so important to somebody that they ever taught weaving at Mills College, and that this European woman--I don't know where she was from; I think Germany--was teaching for those years there, when this was a girls' school. But I don't know.

Anyway, Ilse Schultz wasn't there, because it was summer--but the looms were there, and there was some stuff on the looms. They had beautiful big looms. Marvelous looms. I had been using at the University of Washington all these ticky-tacky old looms that had been given to the university. Jack Larsen was the only one that knew how to operate them. I felt so bewildered by all these looms of all types. It was just like a world history of looms there. I didn't know how to operate all these looms. It was so easy just to let Jack take over and get these things in working order and help the students. And at the same time, you feel guilty that, you know, that here you

Rossbach: are the teacher, and if you were put in the position you wouldn't know how to use these damn things yourself. Then you think, "Well, that isn't what you're interested in anyway. You're not a mechanic or a technician. You need a technician to help you with all these things."

That's what was wonderful about Rhode Island School of Design at Providence. It has all this technical equipment; where the jacquard was.

Nathan: Rhode Island had all the technicians and the mechanics, and they could do jacquard weaving?

Rossbach: Yes. It was important that you understand the mechanism insofar as you knew what you could design for it, you know, how it worked. If a weft had to go across and come back before another weft could go across, that was important to know, and you would design accordingly. But you didn't have to really work the equipment yourself. That was exhausting, too, working with technicians, and I didn't feel that was comfortable. I really returned to strong feelings that I liked being absolutely independent. I don't like having someone waiting for the next instruction, or anything like that, or thinking that it's too difficult, what I'm instructing them to do. That got heavy, too.

But anyway, Ilse Schultz had all this beautiful equipment there. I don't know how all this ever got assembled. But all that vanished. It's like Gone with the Wind. Sometimes you hear that they don't offer weaving at Mills College any more, and you say, "When did this happen? Well, and what happened to all the looms?" Nobody knows. That's why I should call Ilse Schultz and ask her. But I don't want to. Oh, my God.

Mills College, Music and Art

Rossbach: I want to say a few more things in relation to Mills College before we go on. Mills College had a very wonderful summer program at that time, in those years. They were very strong in music, as you probably know, and also in art, so they would invite prominent guest painters and sculptors to come for the summer. I think they had Feininger and Archipenko come and teach. And, of course, they had absolute top musicians come there. Of course, they had Milhaud all these years, too. But they had others, and they would do these marvelous inventive performances. Really, it was a marvelous school. The things that they did were just exceptional.

They had a very strong ceramics program. Prieto was teaching there. He's never given credit for what he did in this area. He was a remarkable man. He was ornery as could be, really a difficult man, I think. I didn't like him. But that's neither here nor there.

Nathan: His wife Eunice also did ceramics?

Rossbach: Yes, she is very good. She's not difficult.

Nathan: This is all at Mills?

Rossbach: That's at Mills, yes. They had this ceramics guild. But anyway, a friend of mine, whom I had met at Columbia University, used to go to Mills College in the summer. He would take the summer session there in ceramics, working with Prieto. He knew that I was interested in the painting of Max Beckman, who is the German Expressionist. I was absolutely smitten with Max Beckman's paintings. I don't know now why they spoke to me so, but those paintings really spoke to me.

Just by chance they had an exhibit once at the Seattle Art Museum. There was this gallery filled with these terrible, tortured paintings, you know, of people being dismembered and beaten, and all this terrible, terrible stuff, and then these great vistas of beautiful sky. Somehow Max Beckman really spoke to me.

It was kind of funny, because at the time--I can't remember what year this was. But anyway, I wrote to the dealer to find out how much a Max Beckman painting cost. I had no money, absolutely none. But it just seemed terribly important, at least to know that I couldn't even think about it. I forget how much this thing was. It was a big triptych that they said they were offering for a ridiculously low price. Well, it was ridiculously low. It was just fantastically low at that time. I forget what it was. $2,500, or something like that. Just a ridiculous price. Well, this big triptych has ended up in--not the Museum of Modern Art. They have a companion to it. I forget which other. It isn't the Boston Museum, either, but it ended up in absolutely a top museum, which is nice. I've always speculated on this, wouldn't it have been amusing if I could have paid a few dollars a month to buy this big Max Beckman painting. What would this have been like? An albatross around my neck all these years. What would you do with this great big triptych of such human agony?

I don't like Max Beckman as much as I did. I got over that. Some. Although I still like it. But I always look at it in a different way now. I wonder what it was that spoke to me so much about it. I loved the color, just loved the color. Now the color seems fairly obvious to me.

But anyway, Max Beckman was going to be teaching in the summer program at Mills College. If I would arrange to come to Mills College, I could meet Max Beckman. Well! I didn't particularly want to meet Max Beckman. I just wanted to see him. It was almost a sensation that I know this man exists. I suppose it's some sort of hero worship. I don't know what it is. Maybe it's like these groupies. But it seemed important to go to Mills College just to see Max Beckman.

Rossbach: Katherine and I were living in Seattle maybe. I don't know when this was. We went down to Mills College and stayed overnight in the dormitory. We ate in the dormitory, and Max Beckman came in to dinner. So I saw Max Beckman.

Nathan: What did he look like?

Rossbach: I don't know. He was not impressive. Or not unimpressive.

Nathan: Did he radiate any force or intellectual quality or passion or something?

Rossbach: Not in the dining room. [laughter] No. But there was this moment that I had seen him, and I didn't expect--I didn't want anything more. I didn't want anything more. It wasn't a matter of expecting. I just didn't want anything more. I think it's all part of this sort of barefoot boy thing, that I regard myself as naive and terribly innocent in the ways of the world. I still have that feeling. I feel that my students and the people that I know are living in a different world from the world I was taught to live in. I'm not disturbed in any way by what they are, but I am bewildered. I don't even know how to explain this. It's such a different thing.

I think we're living in a world that we weren't—I can't even express it. It's different standards. I'm not shocked by what people do. It isn't that. It's just, that isn't what I do.

Ceramics

Rossbach: The ceramics program at Mills College continued to be very exciting under Prieto. Of course, Voulkos was a student there for a while, and Arneson, and Harry Myers, who I thought was very good. Various people. We used to always go to their graduate shows. We were much more involved in the ceramics that was going on in the area than with any weaving in the area.

Nathan: This was when you had already come down to take a job at Berkeley?

Rossbach: Yes, I was teaching here then. This was in the early '50s.

Nathan: Did you do any ceramics at Mills?

Rossbach: No. Katherine had started taking courses at the California College of Arts and Crafts in ceramics. Then we both went to night school at Arts and Crafts doing ceramics.

Nathan: Who were your teachers? Do you remember?

Rossbach: I remember, but they really weren't my teachers. We were there to use the equipment and to have a place to fire our work. Later on, Katherine got very heavily involved in ceramics, and she worked with Edith Heath there. Katherine became extremely knowledgeable about ceramics. She is now, in a way that I never was and never would be. She understands all this business about glazes and decoration, all this stuff that I would never know.

We were much more involved in what was happening in ceramics in the area than we were in the whole textile scene.

Nathan: Am I right in thinking that there was nothing similar at Cal?

Rossbach: Right. There was nothing.

Nathan: Nothing at all in ceramics?

Rossbach: No. That was an interesting thing, too; when we finally did get Voulkos to come to teach, our department, the Decorative Arts Department, brought him. He was teaching at Los Angeles at the time. We knew each other. I was sent down by the University to interview him and talk about the possibility of his coming and teaching in the department. Which we did, and finally we brought him to Berkeley.

Somehow that whole period in history has gotten changed. It's so interesting to see how history can get rewritten. If you read articles about how Pete Voulkos happened to come to the University of California, he was brought by the Art Department, and he was brought by Erle Loran.

Nobody ever clarifies that, and then I think, "What difference does it make?" But in a vague way, it does, and it's scary to think that history can be rewritten that way. Maybe these people remember it incorrectly, of how Pete happened to get here, but it all seems strange.

The Local Tour: Dorothy Liebes, Pond Farm

Rossbach: That summer Wellington had me in tow. He took me over and introduced me to Dorothy Liebes in her studio.

Nathan: You had known a good deal about her before you met her?

Rossbach: You'd think so, wouldn't you? I'm not sure. And that interests me: why didn't I? But I was not following that, what was happening.

Nathan: Ceramics was still your primary interest?

Rossbach: Well, yes--I don't know. No. I was doing both, but I just wasn't involved with weavers or with textile people at all apart from the University, you know, with Lea Miller and Mary Dumas. We always had the reputation, I think, of being very aloof and feeling very superior to the rest of what was going on in textiles in the area.

Nathan: Let's see, Wellington had you in tow.

Rossbach: Yes. He took me to the Dorothy Liebes studio. He seemed to be on very friendly terms with Dorothy. She had been a student in the Decorative Arts Department, but I don't know exactly when Wellington knew her. She knew all the architects in the area. I don't know exactly how this identification with the department and Wellington came about, but obviously, they knew each other well. We went there and she had this ritual that they went through of having coffee hour in the mid-morning out in this little patio that they had behind the studio, and all the weavers sat in this large circle, and every time there was anybody important or any guests or anything, she would have I suppose the equivalent of Danish and coffee, and you would all sit by her in a circle and talk with weavers.

Nathan: How big a circle was this?

Rossbach: Well, it was a circle--I suppose it included fourteen people maybe. It was a good-sized circle.

Nathan: Seminar size?

Rossbach: Yes, seminar size. It was done in a nice way. It wasn't as though Dorothy Liebes was holding court. I thought it was extremely nice. It seemed very sophisticated to me, and Dorothy Liebes seemed very sophisticated, and, of course, she didn't evince the slightest interest in me or who I was or why I was there or anything like that. (It seems like such a joke to me now that I'm writing articles about Dorothy Liebes.) Not that there was any reason why she should have. It's just the way things turn out. It's funny that she couldn't know at that time that I was going to give her some publicity after she was dead.

I feel the same way about this Marianne Strengell at Cranbrook. She couldn't have cared less, either, and could never had predicted that I would ever have written or looked at her work carefully, or anything like that. It's very interesting how these things come about.

Then they arranged to take me out to Pond Farm, which was the sort of new and experimental thing that was started--you know where it is, up near the Russian River somewhere. They had just finished

Rossbach: building this part that was called Hexagon House. The students and faculty had their meals, as I remember, in this Hexagon House. Then they had the studios around--I don't know what it was patterned after. Something in Germany, probably. I don't know.

Trude Guermonprez was there teaching weaving. She had just come there from Black Mountain, a college, and Victor Ries was teaching metalwork. Marguerite Wildenhain was teaching pottery. It was really Marguerite Wildenhain that had attracted us there. The woman who took us, Lucretia Nelson, who also taught in the department--she's the one who arranged this little thing--was very smitten with Marguerite Wildenhain's approach, which is the antithesis of what I believe in now. The absolute antithesis.

Nathan: Was this a formal approach?

Rossbach: Very rigid and authoritarian. I hate authoritarian approaches to things. This woman knew, she knew. It's marvelous that people know anything.

Nathan: Yes.

Rossbach: And she had these ideas that you threw, and I don't know how many years or months or whatever, you threw, and you threw, learning to throw these certain--well, they're really traditional forms, although they've become identified with the Bauhaus as Bauhaus forms.

Nathan: This is all on the potter's wheel?

Rossbach: Yes. She was there, a very vigorous sort of earthmother type of woman. You probably think I'm pushing this too much, but I just felt like an innocent moving through this scene of sophistication and--what? It's more than sophistication. It's different moral standards. I think nowadays the young people would move through this much more easily, and I think probably in my time most people would have, too, but I just didn't. I was just agog, you know, at everything I was seeing.

Frans Wildenhain, her husband, was there at the time, and he was a very lively, vigorous man, just very hale, and he had this wine jug, which he lifted onto his shoulder in some way and poured the wine off his shoulder. I'd never seen anything like that. My family didn't drink wine. My God, I marched in a parade against--what's that?

Nathan: Demon rum?

Rossbach: [laughs] Yes, demon rum. Yes, I was in a parade for that.

During Roosevelt's time, what did they try to do?

Nathan: Repeal Prohibition?

Rossbach: Yes, they were against Prohibition. I mean, they were trying to ease up on Prohibition.

Nathan: Was there a little flamboyance in all of this at Pond Farm?

Rossbach: There was a stridency about it. I think it was lovely. It was a great experience. I was very uncomfortable in it.

Trude Guermonprez

Rossbach: So Trude Guermonprez was there. She was a very shy woman. She was shy, just as I am shy. We never really hit it off in any way because of this. We just sort of tried to assume our positions. That's wrong. That isn't what I mean. It wasn't a one-upmanship or anything like that. No, it wasn't that. But we were--I can't tell what we were doing. But she was there. I think she must have arrived at that school, and they just didn't have any equipment. But she just had a handful of students. My God, it could be an amputated handful of students, there were so few of them. And they were working on little looms. She had had her students inventing the loom. The theory behind this was, you would understand the mechanism of a loom if you were inventing it.

Nathan: They were actually inventing it?

Rossbach: Instead of being told, "bring the weft back and forth," you experienced putting a weft through and then another weft through and another weft, and then you saw what happened to the textile if the warp threads move out, and so then something has to be brought around to hold that in, and you understand the reason for the continuity of the weft, how it holds this. You know, all this stuff, this structure, all comprehension of a loom. I thought at the time it was absurd. I still don't know how I feel about it. It's an interesting idea. But my experience with students is that at that point they're not remotely interested in comprehending how the loom works. They want to get on with it to do something with the loom.

Nathan: Had they yet produced anything on the loom when you were there?

Rossbach: Yes, there were little things on the loom, little samples, like experiments of weaving. It turned out--and this seems like a curious twist--that there was a young woman, young student, from Cranbrook, who had been brought there as Trude Guermonprez's assistant, and the two did not get along. So this girl from Cranbrook was in this awkward position of being up there in this remote, Godforsaken place.

Rossbach: She took me aside, and she wanted to tell me all her troubles, all the difficulties. Well, it was just the difference of approaches to weaving. At Cranbrook, the idea of comprehending the loom first crack, no way. They probably never comprehended the loom the whole time they were there. You could weave, but you didn't have to understand how it worked.

Then when I was teaching here, they were trying to organize the craftsmen in this area. They really weren't at all organized. It was being done through the American Crafts Council. Prieto was big in this, Marguerite Wildenhain, and Trude Guermonprez. Lea Miller was in it sort of a little bit. I always try to avoid any organizations or any involvement in this sort of thing. Katherine and I did go to one of these meetings, and it was just awful, just terrible. These people were trying to formulate all the rules and get this thing all cut and dried and organized. It was the most authoritarian thing that you can imagine. We didn't ever go back.

Nathan: What did they want to accomplish by the organization? What were they organizing for?

Rossbach: Well, I suppose they were going to have exhibits, and work with the museums. You know, crafts have been in a lousy position in this area. San Francisco is a hostile environment for the crafts.

Nathan: Oh, really?

Rossbach: Oh, I think it is. Just terrible. It's always been. But now I just ignore it. I think--nobody cares what I think.

Nathan: I care what you think. Tell me. I'm interested.

Rossbach: I guess I really think San Francisco is pretty phony. I mean, its pretensions of culture seem very phony to me. They fall for the right thing.

We really had almost nothing to do with Trude Guermonprez. She was teaching at Arts and Crafts here, and the schools were so close together, you would think--and Katherine and I were going down and taking ceramics, and Katherine was doing very much ceramics for years at Arts and Crafts. But we had no contact with the weaving that was going on there.

Maybe it was a snobbish viewpoint. Maybe we were being aloof and thought the University was superior to Arts and Crafts. I mean, there is that feeling. I don't think we thought anything about it. It was just, we weren't interested.

Rossbach: Katherine and I served on a panel. I forget when it was. Trude Guermonprez was one of the people. There were four of us to discuss what was happening in textiles. Guermonprez was off, as always, on designing for industry. That's all she could think of. This was her main thing. We were not interested in that approach to things at all. We were just not compatible in our ideas at all. And it seems very strange to me now, because when I look at the Guermonprez retrospective show that they had at Oakland, they're not exhibiting her designs for industry.

Nathan: Not at all.

Rossbach: That whole phase of things, you wonder what in the world all that was. Had she just parroted what she got from the Bauhaus? Is this what she thought was--? I don't know. And nobody is ever going to tell us, because nobody knows this. When she, toward the very end of her life, got into doing expressive weaving, it was wonderful, and surprising.

Once we were at the World Craft Conference in New York. We were housed at Columbia University, and they had sort of a suite of rooms. Guermonprez and her husband were in one room, and Katherine and I were in the other, and we shared a common bathroom. Well, you'd think these were opportunities to get to know each other, but there weren't at all. I mean, if I say anything to anyone about that, they say, "Well, you and Katherine are just as bad as she was about being private." And I'm sure we were. I don't blame Guermonprez at all. But I don't know why we should have to be compatible. Why?

Anyway, the end of this lovely story. When Trude Guermonprez died, American Craft, or Craft Horizons, whatever it was, called and asked if I would write a short obituary for her. So I did.

Nathan: Yes, I read that.

Rossbach: It wasn't good, but it was all right. I had enormous difficulty getting any facts about this woman. I went down to Arts and Crafts and got the stuff that they had in the file, and then I began telephoning people who knew her. I telephoned Kay Sekimachi and various ones who had been friends of Trude's.

I wanted to know if Trude had ever studied at the Bauhaus, which seems absolutely critical.

Nathan: Yes.

Rossbach: Nobody knew. Her husband didn't know. Nobody knew. I mean, nobody knows anything about anybody. It's just so cuckoo.

Nathan: Yes, isn't it?

Rossbach: And really disturbing. But in the course of calling these people, I called this one woman who had been a very good friend of Trude, and she was just outraged. She said, "You're the last person in the world who should be doing this."

I was so taken aback, because I didn't know there was this feeling, that anyone felt that there was this--because I hadn't felt it myself. I had not felt any enmity. We were just going our own way, that was all. We just had different ideas about what weaving was. But apparently the perception of the situation was that Trude had been badly treated by the University group who, you know, hadn't been nice.

Nathan: Interpretations can be so odd.

Rossbach: I know. But in this little world of fiber activities, there are all sorts of things like that. Well, at that time, getting back to what's happening in the fiber scene, there was that.

Influence of Dorothy Liebes

Nathan: I wonder if I could ask you one thing. You were taken over by Wellington to see Dorothy Liebes's place. What kind of impact did that have on you? Did you pretty much describe it in that article that you spoke of?

Rossbach: No, I didn't pretty much describe it. I don't know what impact it had on me. I think you go into these situations, and you think, "Could I identify with this kind of life? Could I work here? Would I be happy working for Dorothy Liebes? Is this a kind of a comfortable thing?" I still do that about everywhere I travel. I think, "Could I live here? Would I like to live here?" Other people travel without that going through their heads at all. I don't know whether it's a restlessness on my part, a real basic discontent, or what it is. I mean, oh, God, it would be marvelous to live in France, east of Paris--the landscape is so lovely, just so beautiful. You go to Brittany and, ummm, the skies in Brittany! All these things.

So, I don't know, I imagine that was part of looking at Dorothy Liebes. Her work did influence my work. I did a woven screen several years afterwards that I'm sure was definitely influenced by what I saw that day, although I wasn't aware of it at the time. I just look back on it now, and it was influenced by Liebes.

Rossbach: Liebes, of course, was associated with William W. Wurster, the architect Wurster. So when Liebes came to the Bay Area, she knew him. They had just built a new College of Environmental Design at Berkeley, and so Liebes came to see the building, or to visit Wurster, whatever the situation might be. Somehow Lea Miller, I think, had lunch with them when they were there. I was in the building, and I looked out, and I saw these people coming across through the muck, and picking their way through this unfinished landscape, and it was Dorothy Liebes and Wurster.

This made a tremendous impression on me, because I felt very much an outsider. It seemed reasonable that I would have been included in these contacts with Dorothy Liebes, but I never was, by anybody. I had nothing particularly to say to Dorothy Liebes anyway, and in a way, it was a relief not to be involved. I have that feeling in association with Dorothy Liebes, too, that I was not a person of any importance to her, but she was important to me in a funny way.

Well, I felt that very frequently at the University of California.

Individuals and the Creative Impulse

Nathan: I was wondering if this is indicative of the University's way of doing things.

Rossbach: Yes. Dr. Anna H. Gayton, who taught the history of textiles for so many years while I was there, had all these ties with anthropology. And when Junius Bird would be here (who was a man important in Peruvian textiles and wrote this authoritative book), I was never introduced to Junius Bird. I knew I had nothing to say to Junius Bird, and there was no reason why I should be introduced to him, but it would have been nice to have been.

Years later, after Gayton had died, I did meet Junius Bird, and it was a funny thing. It seemed kind of by chance, in that I was giving a talk down at San Jose, and he came to my talk. I met him before the talk, and then he stayed for the talk. He was very friendly to me and invited me to stay with him in New York City. You see, there was something.

Nathan: Obviously, yes. But if you don't meet, there isn't a chance to explore that.

Rossbach: No. You feel about the University, that there are so many things like that that happen to you, and I suppose you do the same thing to other people.

Nathan: There is a narrow focus, so that perhaps thought is not given to widening the circle?

Rossbach: Yes. On the other hand, Lea Miller was extremely generous about this. Anyone she knew who came, anyone of any importance--she had these Japanese friends who'd come up who were important in Japanese textiles. She also had friends from Europe who were important. When they came through, she always made it a point of seeing that you met them and had lunch with them or something.

I guess the baffling thing about these people was that you felt they had all this knowledge--well, it was almost as though--I don't want to seem pretentious by quoting something, but T.S. Eliot in his Murder in the Cathedral play said, "doing the right thing for the wrong reason." They did the right thing. They always did the right thing, but for the wrong reason.

I feel different about creativity and creative work. You're not doing it for a University record. Or for a raise in salary. Or whatever prestige you get out of having done this piece, which is in a show, or something like that. You do it because you can't help it. And they could help it.

Nathan: Very neat.

Rossbach: So that when they retired, for instance, they never did another thing. Lea Miller's loom was never touched again.

Nathan: So we have the loom standing there.

Rossbach: Yes, and now it got dismantled. But there was no incentive to do anything. When Dr. Gayton retired, she moved down to her home in Santa Cruz, and she never did any more research. Someone said, "Aren't you going to continue?" She said, "That's what retirement is all about. You don't have to." This is so bewildering. These people all absolutely stopped and never did another thing.

Nathan: This in a way is very strange, because many people who are truly academics, let's say, not artists, still love to do their work.

Rossbach: I know. How is this possible? Then when Gayton died, and we had to write her In Memoriam for this journal, the list of publications that this woman had was absolutely astonishing, the variety and the number of these things. What this woman had done: I had had no idea of this at all. I thought, "Heavens, this is a really remarkable woman." And then you think of what happened to her, and wonder what was she ever doing in the first place, you just don't know.

Rossbach: I think that it's all part of this thing that I was talking about before. I feel sort of I'm the last Puritan, or I've got this work ethic or ethos, whatever you want to say, which drives me. I don't know why I do this. Why don't I stop?

Nathan: But artists don't stop, do they, usually?

Rossbach: I don't know. Some do, I guess. But you try and think, what is it that compels you to do this thing?

Nathan: Have you ever tried stopping?

Rossbach: I don't think so. No, I don't think so. I can't imagine what you'd do if you stopped, and these things all seem endlessly fascinating. But why weren't they endlessly fascinating to Lea? She knew so much about gauze weaves, the complexities of these things. Think of being retired and having all this time, and she could have--And that's what I say, this is the last Puritan. I look at all these people, and I want them all to work.

Nathan: Of course.

Rossbach: It seems a waste, and I can't stand it. And they probably couldn't stand me, so....Mary Dumas, she was so talented. She meant as much to me as anybody, in influencing what I did and how I thought.

Nathan: Was she a weaver?

Rossbach: No, she was a printed textile person. She was interested in all these techniques of batik and stencil, and so on. She didn't run with the herd. She was a real maverick. She used to have the most outrageous ideas. More and more, I agree with Mary Dumas. I just feel, as time goes on, I'm on the same wavelength with Mary.

I don't know why she didn't produce anything. She didn't.

Nathan: She did not produce any artwork or any writing or any anything?

Rossbach: Any anything.

Nathan: She was a presence with ideas?

Rossbach: A presence with ideas, great ideas. Great think-tank person she would have been. She just sort of tossed out one thing after another. She took her teaching very seriously and was very discouraged by it and very depressed by students who wanted the fashionable thing.

Rossbach: I was disappointed by the students, too. When she died, I thought that--she virtually died in class. You know, not quite, but almost. They had a retrospective of her textiles in Environmental Design in that poor space that they had for it. I had hoped that the students would sort of rally and make some comments or statements about how wonderful this woman was and what she really meant. They didn't.

Nathan: Your admiration and support must have meant a great deal to her.

Rossbach: Well, I guess so. Her approach to things was really important to me.

But then we had a man in the same age bracket approximately, Willard Rosenquist, who was teaching there. He was teaching light and motion. I feel that his career in the University was really interesting in the sense that only toward the end of his life did he fall into what was really right for Willard, and it wasn't within the University. The University didn't offer this thing that was really right for Willard, of sort of a group activity.

This exciting exploration, a group of men working together--they were mainly men, although that wasn't necessarily important, I don't think. But they were all off on television and experimental television. He got involved in this, with this experimental work that they were doing at KQED, and this became his life in the most wonderful way. To see this whole unfolding--and maybe this could have happened to the other people. I don't know. I just don't know; but the University did not unfold them.

Willard loved textiles, too. These people all loved textiles. You were in an environment of people who responded to textiles, who knew textiles. They had this whole collection of old textiles there, which we could use all the time. We just had a fragment of a Paisley shawl, and I had this fragment, which I had been showing my class. I was walking down the hall with it, and I said, something about--I don't know what I said. It doesn't matter. Something about this beautiful Kashmir shawl, to Wellington. And he said, "It's a Paisley." I said, "Well, the catalog says it's a Kashmir." He said, "I don't care what the catalog says, it's a Paisley." Now, how he knew the difference between a Paisley and a Kashmir shawl I don't know. I didn't know at that time. Textiles weren't his field.

These people were all just astonishing in the things that they knew. It was enough to quiet you forever. But they didn't do anything.

Nathan: They knew it, but they didn't act?

Mary Dumas, and Appreciation of Textiles

Nathan: What was there about Mary Dumas's approach that spoke to you?

Rossbach: I tried to write something about that, and it's very difficult, very difficult for me to do. She felt in her teaching that you taught for one person, that you aren't going to reach a class of students. If you reach one person, that's all you can expect. That never seemed enough to me. It didn't seem that that was right. It means that all the other people are existing in your class, just for the sake of this one person who is going to get the word. The rest are just spending their time.

But now I kind of agree with her. You don't really reach very many people, and the things that you're trying to communicate, they're not what they want. You can't teach people what they don't want. They have to be receptive in a very real way, or nothing happens. That doesn't make sense, what I'm saying, but anyway--

Nathan: It does. Either the door's open, or it's shut.

Rossbach: Yes. And mostly it's shut. She was very depressed by students who just wanted to do the fashionable thing in silkscreening and this sort of textile.

Nathan: What did she want them to get out of her class?

Rossbach: She valued more of a folk art, a folk textile, nonpretentious, a genuine thing. Just the opposite of San Francisco. It's the real opposite of San Francisco to me.

Recently I've been looking over the printed textiles that we used to use when we taught. We had a collection of printed textiles, and I've been photographing them. I think I told you that.

Nathan: Yes, I wanted to hear about that.

Rossbach: It's kind of interesting to look over them, because I can tell which ones Katherine and I bought for the collection, and which ones Mary Dumas bought for the collection. Katherine and I bought the things which were sort of fashionable, what was being shown with the new architecture, and the things that the Museum of Modern Art was pushing, and all that, so that we had examples of that. Mary Dumas would go to a department store and buy a lot of crappy little things, really crappy. It was almost a statement she was trying to make. She was trying to buy the most mediocre thing as a reaction against all this other stuff. And so she would buy quaint little flower

Rossbach: prints, and so on, that she would think she liked, or she approved of the idea of it. It was just a reaction against this other stuff. She just reacted against this whole scene of environmental design, of this fashionable idea of environmental design. Incidentally, Davis is now instituting a program of environmental design. I mean, the fashionable word. You know, you can just tell which words are going to be picked up. Mary had just contempt for that viewpoint.

She had contempt for all these people who—well, they just bowed and scraped before the fashionable people, you know, the right people.

Nathan: Does this have a political implication?

Rossbach: Oh, yes. She toward the end became so negative finally. I told her that once. I shouldn't have done that.

Nathan: You wanted to protect her a little?

Rossbach: I don't know. I thought it was harmful. She produced the absolute minimum. There was no sense of ever working together with her, because you didn't know what she was working on, if she was working on anything. And then if a show came along that she had to have something for, out this thing would come. Mary was scarcely part of an environment of artists working together. Similarly with Lea Miller. I virtually never saw her loom. She never talked about what she was doing, but then it would appear.

Nathan: I was thinking of your description of all of these beautiful gauzes stored somewhere in her basement. Do these things deteriorate if they are not cared for?

Rossbach: I suppose they will. I don't know. That I don't know. Certainly a museum like the Art Institute in Chicago would take beautiful care of them, and they would not deteriorate, but certain other museums have no facilities for taking adequate care of textiles. All these wonderful textiles that we had in the collection in the Decorative Arts Department finally went to the Lowie Museum. And they're just terrible. The conditions under which those things are stored are so painful. Really painful. Well, it's scandalous.

I had the feeling that a group of us who used this collection ought to sort of get together maybe and talk to Frank Norick and see if we couldn't volunteer our time or something and get this thing whipped up, and maybe create a space or something in that great volume--I mean, just out of a sense of decency for these textiles, or respect for them. But then, I always think, "Well, why should I have to do that?"

Nathan: What are the priorities, and what is the most important to you to do?

Rossbach: Yes, it's very difficult to establish your priorities, because the other things keep nagging at you. They don't go away.

IV FIBER ART AND A PERSONAL VISION

Basketmaking

Nathan: You were saying something about a Canadian team and fiber art. Was this for Canadian TV?

Rossbach: Yes, they wanted to make a program on fiber, an hour-long program which is going to be on Canadian broadcasting and they expect then to sell the tape, although they haven't any advance sale on it yet. They have a large grant to do the whole craft thing; they did one on glass and they ran it in Canada and then Japan bought it for transmission over there and they expect to sell it in the United States, too. So they've just been running all over taping fiber people and talking to them.

Nathan: Very interesting. Is it mostly in the Bay Area, do you think?

Rossbach: No, no, for some reason they got interested in the idea of basketmaking and that sort of surprised me. They did go to New York and interviewed John McQueen who is perhaps the outstanding basketmaker. Well, I shouldn't say that; one of the outstanding ones, certainly. He certainly has the greatest reputation right now. Then they have been interviewing native Indian basketmakers. I can't see how they are going to get this all in an hour, but that is what they propose to do.

Nathan: Did they photograph any of your baskets?

Rossbach: Yes, but it seemed a little corny to me. I had to be holding the baskets and looking at them and it seemed terribly contrived. I don't know how you avoid that sort of thing, but that's what they did. I had to make a basket for them and I didn't know whether I could do that.

Nathan: What did you make it out of? Was it a newspaper basket?

Rossbach: No. Some man had made splints for me, some man in Connecticut had made splints--of course, they wanted to know what tree they were from and I couldn't remember. I have it in correspondence somewhere. He had sent me these splints a long time ago. When I had been back there, I had met him. The splints seemed too precious to use. Then when this team was here, I decided to risk all; I would just use my beautiful splints and I didn't know if I could even use them. I had never used splints and I didn't know whether I could work with them or not.

Nathan: Are they long strips of wood?

Rossbach: Yes, they go on the grain of the wood in a wonderful way. So then I got excited about splints after that and I ordered some from a store in Connecticut that sells splints, but these are splints that are just sawed into these narrow strips. Anyway, I used my splints and I liked what I did and I felt okay about it.

Nathan: That's really art as performance, isn't it?

Rossbach: Yes. It took all of my concentration. I didn't have to think about the team; I don't think I was too self-conscious about it. Of course, most of this will all end on the cutting room floor, but they were taking enough footage of everything so they can have enough for future programs on whatever subjects they think will come along.

Nathan: Are the splints flexible?

Rossbach: Yes, I soaked them for several days before the team came and they were very flexible. Unfortunately, I picked up splinters in my fingers, slivers, and my fingers are very tender. I had that experience once before when I was using vegetable material and I had to have surgery on them and had to have all those things removed from my fingertips. I didn't want that again, so I was kind of concerned about that aspect of it.

Nathan: Was it possible to use these materials wearing gloves, or do you have to feel them?

Rossbach: You have to feel them, that's the catch! So the last time I used splints, I had just taped the ends where I had picked up all of the splinters and I had them covered with adhesive tape and that worked pretty well. Now I have another pan of splints soaking, and I am going to make more splint baskets. They are a very wonderful material, you know, a very traditional material, and I keep up a correspondence with a woman in Nova Scotia. I have never met her, but she became interested in baskets and began corresponding with me. She had seen these splintmakers, the Micmac Indians there, do baskets out of splints. They are native splintmakers. She said that their hands are like leather, their hands are so tough. I think it would be marvelous to have your hands so tough that you could do these things.

Nathan: I read somewhere that you did not feel that the artist necessarily had to do all of the preparations in order to turn out the work of art.

Rossbach: I think John McQueen would feel different, and the nature of his work is that he does prepare his own stuff. He doesn't only gather it but he prepares it. I imagine if he were using splints he would really make the splints and learn how to do it. I was interested, too, that this team had just been talking to John McQueen and had interviewed him and a couple of interesting things came out about it.

He had just made his one hundred and third basket. When they were there he had made his one hundredth basket and was celebrating, and then he made three more. So now he has made one hundred and three baskets. I can't imagine having counted how many baskets you made. I would have no idea how many baskets I made.

The other thing was that he makes drawings of his baskets before he makes them; he sketches them. Then Lillian Elliott told me the other night that in an article on John McQueen he said that he makes a mock-up out of cardboard before he does it.

This is so absolutely contrary to any way that I work. These people kept asking, "Do you know what the basket shape is going to be? Do you know how it is going to bend? Have you thought this out?" Of course, I hadn't. I just let the thing develop as it goes along and I keep making these decisions during the process. So there are different ways of working.

Lillian Elliott, for instance, doesn't make sketches and doesn't make decisions either, and they just are made during the process.

Nathan: You know when it's finished?

Rossbach: Yes.

Nathan: When it's big enough, or the proportions are right?

Rossbach: Or you are running out of material or whatever. Very frequently, you wish that elements were longer. You would like this thing to be bigger, but you've come to the end of the elements and it means you have to add new elements to get the thing up higher and that's a hassle that you don't want to contend with. So the baskets tend to be of a certain size. These newspaper baskets that I made quite a few of, they really are in relation to the size of a sheet of newspaper. When I fold these newspapers and they come out that long--

Nathan: Your hands are what, about a yard apart?

Rossbach: Yes, an open sheet of newspaper. So then the baskets come out to be 12 inches or 15 inches high. I have forced it and increased the width of these newspapers by attaching several pieces together so that I would have long elements and I got bigger baskets, but I don't like them. There is something about this size that just occurs out of the sheet of newspaper and seems very natural and very right, but I don't suppose anyone looking at it would see that.

Nathan: Particularly the ones that I saw at Fiberworks. I can't really imagine them bigger; they did seem right. I couldn't tell you why.

Rossbach: When they're bigger, they're not good.

Nathan: I wonder if you are now in a sense working the way a primitive or early basketmaker would. The grass is so long and that's what there is to work with.

Rossbach: I would admire that relationship to material, that you are very responsive to it--all involvement with material; I mean size more than anything else and the thing results from that.

But then I also admire people who go sort of almost against the material and they really force this material to do whatever they have in mind. They can see this thing and they make the material do that. That just doesn't happen to be the way I work.

Fabric Designs for Industry

Nathan: Some time in the past you, I gather, had done some designs for industrial productions.

Rossbach: M-hm.

Nathan: Now, that is another question of materials, I guess. Were these fabrics?

Rossbach: I was doing printed fabric designs for industry and Katherine and I had an agent in New York. We would do the designs and send them to the agent and he would sell them, and we sold quite a few. I thought it was very much fun. I really enjoyed that thoroughly. We didn't know necessarily to whom our designs were sold. The only way was, we just watched fabric counters and saw our designs appear and saw people wearing them.

Nathan: That would be fun.

Rossbach: Yes, it was very much fun, and I thought it was terribly satisfying. Katherine had one of her textiles, her designs, in a Sears Roebuck catalog and she liked that very much. That appealed to her very much.

In this research I was doing on Dorothy Liebes, she went in the direction of industry and got away from this one-of-a-kind thing. She said something to the effect that she liked doing things for people who bought out of Sears Roebuck catalogs or something like that and she felt she was having an impact on those people by offering them her designs. They are available to those people. I don't know if I feel any great social thing about this, but it is just terribly satisfying to see your designs being used and worn.

Nathan: For this sort of design your planning is far more formal than say in making the baskets?

Rossbach: Not really, no. No. For most people it would be and most printed textile designs are figured out on paper and they are terribly accurate in the repeat. We didn't do that. We did all our designs on cloth, so that we were working really in batik mostly. You really have to be working on cloth to get the batik effects, if you want the crackle effect that happens in batik. They weren't an accurate repeat and there were people in New York who could put them in accurate repeats. These just had a semblance of a repeat and they could make the prints from that design. There are people who can do that sort of thing.

Very frequently after we had eaten dinner, we would go down and turn out some textile designs and we might turn out several in an evening. We would just measure out the size of the repeat maybe. For dress fabrics it would be say fifteen inches or seven and a half inches, whatever was the size of the roller. I think we sold one of four designs we did, which was very high.

Unfortunately, the agent retired and we never were able to work out another agent. What was nice about it was that it was all done by mail, so it was all conducted by airmail. This was before people used the telephone the way they do now and they didn't fly back and forth across the country so frequently. So we weren't bothered by this agent. We scarcely ever saw this man and we scarcely talked to him ever, but there were all of these special delivery letters that came.

When we were doing these panels a couple of months ago down at Fiberworks for some reason I was talking about this, of doing all this by special delivery letter, and it was always so exciting to come home and there would be a special delivery letter at the door waiting for you. This happened very frequently and I said I sort of

Rossbach: missed having these special delivery letters. A couple of days later, a special delivery letter came from someone who had been there at Fiberworks. It was such a nice idea of anyone thinking of doing that. I didn't know what it meant at first. It took me a while for this to dawn on me why she sent me a special delivery letter. But I love that. I like that sort of playful imaginative sort of thing that people occasionally do.

Nathan: You were saying that you would go downstairs after dinner and the two of you would have fun designing. Do you often collaborate?

Rossbach: We didn't collaborate. We just sat at the same table.

Nathan: Were you each working on your own?

Rossbach: Sure.

No, we really don't collaborate on things. We do our own thing and we are different, I think, but the amusing part is that sometimes we'll look at these old textiles that are still kicking around and we don't know who did them. We don't know whether Katherine did them or I did them.

Playfulness and Simplicity

Nathan: Your use of the word "playful" suggested that that is important in your own work.

Rossbach: Yes. I wish as I grow older it would get more playful. I read a review of a Dubuffet exhibit and how his work is changing as he grows into old age and so on. Somehow it didn't occur to me particularly that things should change as you move into these different time periods of your life and I thought, "Why can't I be more playful at this point in my life and do more exactly what I believe in?" You'd think if I'm going to do it now would be the time to do it, and it is still difficult.

I like things to be so simple and so innocent and so direct that you just look at it and you think, "A child could do that; I mean think of an adult doing that. What's in it?" And this is what I believe in, but I can't allow myself to do those things or offer them for exhibition very much because they just don't seem enough and I don't feel that people understand what I am doing. I want to be understood somehow and I don't particularly like for these things to be rebuffed. It's a funny bind that you are in, but it does seem that at this point I should be able to do it. [pause, laughs]

Nathan: Of course, simplicity is the hardest thing to achieve, isn't it?

Rossbach: Well, I just love it.

Nathan: If you could do exactly what you wanted, that pleased you, would you work in basketry or--

Rossbach: I don't know what I'd do. That's part of the job. I really don't know.

Nathan: It is an interesting problem, to find the essence of what it is you have to say now.

Rossbach: I don't know whether I would work in fiber at all. I think over the years one builds a sort of reputation and an expectation of what you do. You are invited to exhibit in fiber shows and so on, and you have a certain very limited audience, but at least there is some audience that recognizes your name and pays some attention to what you are doing, I think.

Say, if at this time in my life I would decide I just want to paint and I don't want to do fiberwork any more, I wouldn't have any opportunity to exhibit painting. I cannot start over again at the very beginning and enter competitive shows and all of these things that you do when you are young and maybe all this isn't necessary. Maybe if I wanted to paint, I should just paint at this point and forget all of this exhibiting or what any critic thinks about it or anything else, but this is very difficult for me to do. Some people, I think, would be able to do it. People are always asking me, "What are you working on?" If I am writing, and I write very slowly, if I say, "Well, I've been working on my writing," but then they say, "What are you really working on?" In other words, "What type of art work are you doing?"

I heard a man on television singing. He was sort of a--I don't know what you call these things--a jazz singer of some sort. Somehow he just appealed to me. I kind of like the slightly sentimental quality that the music had and it was really nice. So I bought a record by this man and I never buy that kind of a record. I played this thing and when I came to the end of it, the last song he sang was a modern interpretation of a piano piece by McDowell called "To a Wild Rose." [laughter]

Nathan: Yes, I know what you mean.

Rossbach: I thought, "I can't stand it. I can't listen to this record." This is a piece that my sister used to play when I was a child. My oldest sister played "To a Wild Rose" and my next sister played "To a Water Lily." I thought, "Why don't I just devote my life now to playing

Rossbach: the piano and learn to play "To a Wild Rose" and "To a Water Lily" and these things that have this sentimental meaning for me, and this would be absolutely, purely for me. It wouldn't be for any audience whatsoever and it seems like a very pure, simple thing even to think of doing, but I don't do it.

But I got so I can listen to this thing without being upset by it.

Nathan: Do you remember the singer's name? I am just curious about who it was.

Rossbach: Kenny--I'll think of his last name. He came and he sang in the Venetian Room about two months ago. I saw this announcement that he was going to be singing in the Venetian Room and I thought, "Gee, this is what I really want to do. I want to go to the Venetian Room and hear this man sing." But I didn't know how to go to the Venetian Room. I have no experience in that sort of life. I am just like somebody from the backwoods. Now, how do I go to the Venetian Room? I wouldn't even know how to go over there in the first place. How do you get over there and what do you do when you go in?

I told this to my sister a couple of weeks ago and she said, "Well, you just go in and pay the cover charge and order a drink and sit there." But this all seemed insurmountable to me. It's easier for me to think of going to the Bayreuth festival or something. I feel that there is a whole world of things in our modern life; I don't know how to even think about them. I mean I don't know how to do them.

Nathan: Maybe that's why you can be an artist because you sort out what is really close to your heart and you do that, and you don't worry about, "How do I make a reservation in the Venetian Room?"

Rossbach: But I want to do this other thing, too, and I feel I've missed it.

Nathan: It's not too late.

Rossbach: Yes, I can still go to the Venetian Room.

Nathan: You can still go to the Venetian Room and lead as dissolute a life as you want to.

Rossbach: I didn't expect to say <u>that</u>.

A Current View of Fiber Arts Activity

Nathan: Thinking of your affinity for writing, and your feeling that it is very hard to document what is going on in this artistic field, are you tempted to do something about the history of weaving or trying to catch up with weaving and textile activities in the Bay Area?

Rossbach: No.

Nathan: Does that appeal to you?

Rossbach: No, it doesn't at all. I feel someone else can do that.

Nathan: I wonder if there is anyone else who knows as much and can write? It is not a usual combination.

Rossbach: No, I don't think it will be done.

Nathan: Do you feel that many of these shows are getting reviews? Are they taken seriously enough?

Rossbach: No, they're not. They just come and go.

But this is a big movement that is almost unacknowledged. I think there is some meaning behind it if we could divine it. There are all these little galleries that couldn't possibly be reviewed. Having shows in them has big meaning for people.

Nathan: I note that you have been a juror in a number of shows, and on one occasion there was a comment that everything was very competent, but not necessarily exciting or innovative. Does that comment carry over into other aspects of the field, or was that just the one show you were commenting on?

Rossbach: I guess that was just the one show. Sometimes I think there's too much innovation and too much wild creativity. I mean, as though that's the name of the game right now. And that's just part of it, really.

Nathan: Some tradition or some core, as you say, may be useful?

Rossbach: That sounds stuffy, though.

Nathan: It might be true?

Rossbach: I don't know. I guess if people want to be so innovative, that's great. I think that's part of the times, too. I mean, in the '50s, I don't think we felt that we had to be innovative at all. We just had to be good. It sounds dumb, but the problem was there, and you were finding a good solution to it, okay, then there would be new problems.

Rossbach: Nothing seems clear any more about what this field is or what it's trying to do. I think that's the excitement of the thing right now. I would think it would be a very liberating time to be working. Maybe it's a scary time. I don't know. Maybe a lot of people wouldn't feel comfortable working in this particular time. The things they want to do are not recognized as of any value.

Coptic Textiles, Imagery, and Scale

Nathan: This scattering that you described reminded me that you had gone back to do some Coptic figures--the rabbit, and others.

Rossbach: Yes.

Nathan: Why did you go back to these old sources?

Rossbach: Well, I had done some other Coptic things, too, that I never really exhibited very much. But I got interested in the idea of these Coptic textiles--well, we went to Egypt, and I thought it would be fun when we were in Cairo to buy a Coptic textile. Whether these were available, I had no idea. So we found an antique type store, and indeed they had Coptic textiles. They dragged out this enormous stack of Coptic textiles, and we went through them one at a time. We couldn't believe that there are so many Coptic textiles in existence, and so beautiful. So we bought one, and then there was another one that we were trying to price, to decide. It was a very beautiful one. We had no idea whether we could afford it or not. So the man wouldn't set a price. He said, "How much will you give me?" with this bartering business, you know. Well, we had no idea. I said, "We don't know. How much is it?" "Well, how much will you give?" Neither of us would say anything. So we made no deal. I mean, if I had just said $20, and if it was outrageous, he could have blown his top. But instead of that, we had just reached this impasse. I always think of this textile. It was a very beautiful textile with dancing girls in purple.

Anyway, I was intrigued by the idea of why these little, tiny Coptic figures are so expressive, how they achieve this expressiveness, what there is about them that is so good. I found out that the De Young Museum had a collection, very poorly maintained, of some Coptic textiles that were given to them. So I borrowed these Coptic textiles, and I had them photographed under magnification so that I could blow these things up big and look at the structure of the thing and see what the images would look like large, whether they lost the quality large, or what happened to them. Then I began to use these images and made them enormous.

Nathan: And did they lose the quality?

Rossbach: They did in mine. Yes, they did. They were not the same when they got bigger. I remember I showed these photographs to Lillian Elliott once, and her reaction was so startling to me, of, "Why would you want to see them large?" It seemed the most normal thing in the world that I would want to see them large. I'm interested in scale. I'm interested in what happens when things get bigger, smaller, or so on. She immediately saw that they were of much less interest when the scale had been changed. These people had worked with the correct scale, and she knew that, and that was it.

That's why I was working at first with Coptic imagery, and then after a while, I was treating it more playfully, even the rabbit things. I was really serious in my efforts to try and understand something about the scale of this thing. Not heavily serious, but this just seemed like an interesting thing to pursue, and to see what happens to the individual threads. Instead of weaving these little things with these dinky little threads, if I used big elements and did the same things big, what would happen to them? I suppose you can just project them large and look at them. I don't know.

Nathan: You don't experience it in the same way?

Rossbach: No, you don't.

Nathan: The whole question of scale is really something that you are interested in?

Rossbach: Yes.

Nathan: There's a picture of you holding an enormous basket; in basketry is scale also crucial?

Rossbach: Yes. I liked that basket that I was holding. Oh, I had the experience of dismantling the basket, too. I watched it burn. I felt I would like to have taken a photograph of it burning. It was very beautiful as it burned.

Nathan: What was the substance?

Rossbach: Paper. Newspaper.

Nathan: Why did you decide to dismantle it?

Rossbach: Well, it sat around here for an awfully long time and kept getting yellower and poorer looking. It was nice when it was fresh. I didn't see any point of keeping it after that.

Nathan: Do you think if it had been of another substance, would you have had the problem of wanting to dismantle it and burn it?

Rossbach: No. But there's always a storage problem with this stuff, too, you know, and finally it just gets heavy having all this stuff around to store and trying to deal with it. Sometimes a photograph of these things maybe seems enough. It's like these exhibits that come and go. They have occurred, and that's the end of them.

Selling to Museums

Nathan: I did want to ask you about a few of the purchases of your artwork, that you thought might be particularly interesting or important. There was one in the Trondheim Museum, in 1960, and one in the Museum of Contemporary Crafts, 1967. There are undoubtedly others. Possibly also your view of these various congresses of craftsmen, the Stedelijk, "Structure in Textiles," in '76-'77. Would there be some of these purchases and exhibits that you saw as interesting or rewarding or stimulating in some way?

Rossbach: It's really very difficult to say. I feel kind of ambivalent about all this stuff. I've really never pushed selling my work at all, even to galleries or museums. In a way, I'm very pleased that they have them, or that they would want to collect them. On the other hand, I'm never exactly sure that--it sounds like boasting, but I hope they appreciate in my work what I think is its quality.

I suppose I can use an example here. It's all right. The Art Institute in Chicago wrote and wanted to acquire, to purchase--acquiring and purchasing are two different things in this racket, you know. Many people contribute their work to these galleries.

Nathan: I didn't know that.

Rossbach: Yes. And then the gallery, the museum, has to decide whether it wants to accept this thing. If they do, then it's done in various roundabout ways. Either someone else will give this to the museum and use it as a tax write-off in some way, or the artist will give it to the museum and be able to say that he or she has work in the Metropolitan Museum, or whatever the case may be. This is all a very complicated and cut-throat business. It all seems so mild, and it really isn't. I don't like those other aspects of it particularly, although sometimes I think I have the quality that is in there hustling, too, in sort of an innocent way, you know.

Nathan: I see.

Rossbach: But anyway, they actually initiated this thing, and they wanted to purchase something. Okay, the woman who was curator of the textiles--this was a couple of years ago, and I never could bring myself to even bother sending them photographs of what I had that was available or what I was willing to show. I just didn't feel like bothering.

So the woman who is curator now of textiles is coming out in May, I think, and I presume she will want to be looking at things that they might aquire. Well, I don't think they're going to want to acquire what I would want them to acquire. You'd think I would be willing to stand on all my work, no matter what, if I've done it, then it's okay that they should acquire it. But on the other hand, I feel certain work is much more typical of what I really believe in. I can be as phony as everybody else, in the sense that I can produce weavings or whatever, textile objects, that are going to be popular. I don't choose to do it mainly, although occasionally I do.

Similarly in writing, I can say things that I don't particularly believe, but I know people like to read sort of cozy things about the crafts, really things that I don't believe. I sometimes find myself falling into saying those things, not that my writing is ever popular. I don't know why I do that. I don't consciously try to curry favor with this sort of approach, but I can see the possibilities in it, and I'm as guilty, I suppose, as anyone else of this thing.

Except I don't think it seems so apparent. Some people seem very obviously hustling.

So I would want the Art Institute to have something. I would give them anything that I have. I don't want to sell it. I would just give it to them. Absolutely anything that I've got here, they could have; but in some funny way, I would like them to have something that I particularly liked. I have rather strong feelings about the Art Institute, you know, from my childhood. I was invited to go back there and talk maybe three or four years ago. I don't remember. This seemed very important to me. It turned out to be quite, I thought, disastrous. I wasn't at all pleased by the way it turned out.

But anyway, I had moments of thinking, "This is wonderful," before it happened. I was pleased by the whole idea that somehow I would be doing this in this very building where I had gone as a child, and this had--maybe I'm saying one of those phony things I'm talking about--I mean, two minutes before. I can say sort of things like this that maybe are phony. I don't know. It's a very bewildering state of affairs.

Nathan: It may be a little mixed. Maybe there is both the real truth and then the other thing.

Rossbach: Yes, I think so. I think that's the problem. So anyway, I don't know what the outcome is going to be when she looks at these things. I feel I respect this woman greatly.

Nathan: Is this Christa Thurman?

Rossbach: Yes. Do you know her?

Nathan: I wrote to her about--I'll talk to you about that later--about the Cranbrook effort. Anyway, I was just curious whether it was the same one.

Rossbach: She's very scholarly in her approach. I would really trust anything that she said, but I think she is rather conservative, and maybe that's good for a museum. No, I'm not sure that it is. I wouldn't say that. I think she's invaluable for the institution, but I don't know that she is going to collect the wildest things from this particular time slot. I don't particularly want the most conventional things.

Nathan: Is she then focusing on a particular time period when she comes to see your things?

Rossbach: I don't know. But when she was working on this Cranbrook exhibit, she came out and looked at textiles that I had left--I told you that, I think--left from the time I was a student there, and from the years immediately thereafter. I had the opportunity, really, I thought, to observe what she responded to and what she didn't respond to.

The Cranbrook exhibit is going to travel. It's going to be at the Metropolitan Museum sometime and the Detroit Institute, and sometime it's going to Sweden. It's going to be in the Decorative Arts Museum in Paris. And I think it's going to be in the Victoria and Albert Museum. It's going to the whole range.

Well, it's very much fun to think of your work being in these various places. But then it's work that I did when I was a student and immediately thereafter, and it is not in any way representative of the direction that I have gone since, and that really is what I think I'm all about. Don't ask me what that is. But anyway, that's how I feel about that exhibit.

I'm terribly pleased that it is appearing there, and that it is in conjunction with Cranbrook. That sort of amuses me, because in certain ways, in weaving I was not the typical Cranbrook student. I would be suprised if Marianne Strengell, the teacher, even remembers

Rossbach: who I was. I was beginning to be sort of a maverick there before I got through. For a while, I was just going along, you know, doing what everybody else was doing, and gradually I began to see possibilities in this thing that were going off in other directions. Which didn't exactly please her.

I did a textile at that time--I was not acquainted with textile history or textiles at all, so that things I did were original as far as I know. Now I look back, and there were precedents for doing these things, but I didn't know the precedents, and nobody else there seemed to know the precedents either.

Nathan: So it came from your own ideas?

Rossbach: Right. I was painting the warps. Well, this was certainly not what Cranbrook was about. We were doing other things completely. Marianne was quite brusque with me about getting this loom cleaned up and getting this off the loom. Now that particular piece is in the exhibit representing Cranbrook, and it seems odd. Isn't that a turn of the screw! [As it turned out, this particular piece was not included in the final selection.]

Nathan: Absolutely. But there was something prophetic about what you were doing, in a way.

Rossbach: Well, it isn't particularly beautiful now. I see how I could have solved what I thought I was solving much better. But anyway, I did it. So there is that.

Nathan: When Christa Thurman comes out again, she will be looking at the whole range of your work?

Rossbach: If I show it to her. Sometimes I get coy, and I won't show them anything. It embarrasses me to show my work, and I don't want to do it. I did that a couple of weeks ago. I just wouldn't show them anything.

Nathan: You couldn't just go for a walk and let Katherine show them?

Rossbach: No. Katherine would be very good at it. She would tend to push--I mean, if something has to be pushed--push the sorts of things that I like best.

Nathan: Perhaps it's easier for someone else to do it than for the artist.

Rossbach: She can do it about her own work, which is amazing. I just sort of stand back and watch what she's doing. I can't believe it, this sort of hustling of your own work. I just don't want to show anything.

Rossbach: When I am sending work out to an exhibit, I equivocate. I can't decide what I want to send. Should I send something that I think will be more acceptable, or something that is going to really annoy them and make them wonder whether they should really include it? Gallery directors do that, too. Katherine is always for sending the thing you like.

Some years ago I did a large raffia piece. Do you know what raffia is?

Nathan: Yes.

Rossbach: I worked on that thing for a very, very long time.

Nathan: Was that a wall hanging?

Rossbach: Well, yes, I guess you'd call it that. It was done on a frame, which I expected to be part of it. I thought the frame was going to be part of the thing. When I had the thing finished, the tension on this raffia was so strong that it pulled the frame in, and there was no way that I could force that frame out again. The thing had an awkward shape, which I didn't like. So I made this bold decision, that I would just cut this thing off the frame; no matter what happened, I was just going to cut this thing off the frame. You know, it was like risking all, really, because I'd worked so long on this thing, and it was really one of the major things I had done for months and months. And then I was just going to take a knife and cut this thing off, which I did, and it changed the thing very much.

Then it was just a flexible piece of raffia, and I liked it, and I was pleased that I had done this. This was when we were sending to the Triennale in Milan. I was trying to decide what I would send, and Katherine said, "Send that." I couldn't imagine sending that. I mean, now it looks very conventional, and you would wonder, "Why would he ever think that was daring, to send that?" So I sent that. Then subsequently the Museum of Modern Art bought it.

Nathan: Was that the New York Museum of Modern Art?

Rossbach: Yes, but they put it back on a frame again, which is amusing to me. And of course, now the frame is all right, because they had a new frame, and the tension wasn't as it had been. So theoretically they had it the way I originally thought of it.

Rossbach: You know, it's a funny thing. A friend of mine who is an extremely good and prominent weaver--I'm just being cagey about naming her, because I don't know how she would feel about it--had pieces in the Museum of Modern Art collection. She wrote me a couple of days ago and said that one of her pieces was being moved over to the American Crafts Musuem from the Museum of Modern Art collection, and she was very upset over this, because she wanted the Museum of Modern Art to have this piece. I think maybe this is probably something that one has to expect to happen. I may hear today that they have decided to transfer this piece over somewhere else. It was very nice knowing that this was in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, and it still is, my piece is, as far as I know. I've never seen it there, and I've never seen it exhibited there, but other people have.

Nathan: Does it have a name? Do you give names to works?

Rossbach: No. It's in Jack's book, [Jack Lenor Larsen] though. A very lousy photograph of it. The thing has no value contrast at all. It's just all raffia color. So you can't see much of what's happening.

One Artist in a Flow of Activity

Rossbach: But I think you realize that--this is one of these dumb statements, but something that I really feel, without any doubt--that what you do is really not making any impression in the long run, that you're just one of very many, many, many people who are doing things now, and it's all a big flow of activity that's happening. The individual who is going to rise out of this thing--well, there just is not room. It just isn't going to happen. It's a mistake, really, to expect it or, I think, even to want it to happen.

Nathan: I wonder whether there is anything in this notion of transmitting to the right receiver. Some student will come along and see a hundred things, and out of those hundred things, one thing triggers something. And it could be yours.

Rossbach: Yes.

Nathan: Maybe it doesn't matter whether or not a hundred people understand it, if one does?

Rossbach: Are you suggesting that that should be enough, then?

Nathan: I would think it would be wonderful.

Rossbach: Yes...

Nathan: I would want all the hundreds and the thousands to have that opportunity, because there's no way of knowing in advance who is going to be the one.

Rossbach: Right. I think as time goes on, one becomes humbler and humbler. I mean, it's not just that when you're young, you think you're going to set the world on fire and do something important. You've known for a long time that you're not going to. But I don't know. I think you learn to respect more what other people are doing. You see your own work in a bigger context. It's humbling, that's all.

Nathan: It's better than getting all puffed up and pompous.

Rossbach: [laughs] I guess so.

Industry vs. Teaching

Rossbach: In one of these things you suggested a possible topic, of why I chose to go into teaching instead of industry or something like that. I think to a large extent, it was easier for me personalitywise to go into teaching than to go into industry. I didn't have the push, and the kind of--what? Well, I have drive, goodness knows. I hate to use Jack Larsen, but he seems to be the one that we know about. He's got great drive and a great pushy quality, which is just appalling sometimes to observe, and yet I know that's what it takes in industry.

When I was a student at the University of Washington, I was very interested in designing printed textiles for industry. The idea seemed very appealing to me, something I would like to do. We had a man there who had come to teach, named Robert Iglehart, and he was one who helped me to get the scholarship to Columbia. He was a young man and very New York. He was a friend of Belle Boas, with whom I worked later. He just felt I should go to Columbia, and he pushed me. He had all these aggressive qualities, too, that it takes to survive--I'm sure in New York City. I don't know if some other types can survive. I just don't know.

Anyway, he had designed textiles, printed textiles, and he also had done these little drawings for the New Yorker, these little sort of--

Nathan: Little vignettes?

Rossbach: Right. So I would do those and send them to the New Yorker, and they sent them back. Then I designed printed textiles. This was at the time that Empress Eugénie styles were popular.

Nathan: Yes.

Rossbach: And so I did Empress Eugénie textile designs and sent them off, and of course, they all came back. So that when I finally went to Columbia, I had a portfolio of printed textiles, which I had made specifically and I was going to take these around to manufacturers, or whatever they were, who buy textile designs, and see if I could sell them.

I took my portfolio, and I got as far as the entrance to the place, and I could not go in and sell my work or show my work. It was just impossible.

It was just easier to go into teaching. I could do that, although it was difficult, too, and I was forced to do a multitude of things which were extremely painful to me, at the University of Washington, and here, and everywhere along the line. I was just being shoved and pushed to do things which were not comfortable for me, and people always thought I had potential, you know. I would be a good chairman of the department. I could do administrative work. And in a way, I could. In another way, I couldn't. I was very lousy in certain aspects of this thing. They felt I should socialize with more important people in the University, and they arranged meetings for me, and I had nothing to say to these people. I was extremely shy and very embarrassed.

So that even in the teaching situation, I wasn't rosy or comfortable most of the time, much of the time. I felt at Berkeley that I was very ineffective--that's the word--on University committees. I agonized over these things. I really agonized over them much more than I should have. I don't have headaches since I retired from the University. I don't know how I got off on that. But that's why I didn't go into industry.

Industry is very appealing to me. When it got to the point that we had an agent in New York City to sell printed textiles, and we could just sit out here at our little table and turn out these things, cranking them out, I absolutely loved it.

Nathan: And they did sell.

Rossbach: They did sell. They were not very good, but they sold.

Nathan: Could you characterize those printed designs?

Rossbach: We were definitely designing to sell, so that when textiles from India were popular, with Indian motifs, we did that. We did Hawaiian things. We had to look up Hawaiian motifs and look at all the artifacts from Hawaii.

Nathan: How interesting.

Rossbach: It was interesting. We did groups of textiles which were sold as from South America, South American designs. You know, this is all a bunch of baloney, this PR that goes on about these things. You're so surprised that, here you are, you've never been to South America. [laughter]

Nathan: You're authentic.

Rossbach: Right. And so on. We did a lot of floral things, which people find very boring, but Katherine did some beautiful floral designs based on the things in our garden, eucalyptus and various--geraniums and all these things. She did very beautiful ones in this batik technique. I look at the textiles that I did at that time; I don't see how I did such bad and ugly things. Ugly. As they say on television, "Ugleee." [laughter] But they sold, and we were told what was acceptable and what was not acceptable. You don't have birds on them, or you don't have elephants with trunks down, or you don't have--you know, the various things that you don't have, that are taboo because they're bad luck, or whatever. You have these limitations which you work in. In a way, you're censored; it's a form of censorship. You're not absolutely free to do whatever you want to.

Freedom, Standards, and Reality

Rossbach: I just read this article--I don't know if you ever read the New York Review of Books--but anyway, they were talking about censorship in Russia and how people learn to write and avoid censorship or circumvent it in various ways. Through sort of forms of doubletalk they say what they want. Well, I think that happens everywhere. I mean, who does not censor? I'm censoring what I'm saying now. I censor everything I write and everything I draw. I cannot imagine a situation where I was not censoring it for one reason or another.

I did want to get this crack in. When I said I was the last Puritan, this doesn't mean that I don't go along with what is happening now, this freedom. I envy it so. I think, how wonderful to have lived in a freer society. No, I absolutely go along with this one hundred per cent. But that doesn't mean I'm still not saddled with the old--and I don't know how that happens, that I can intellectually accept all these changes. I love it with my students: this freedom. When I think how different it was when I was a student, I just think things are better.

Rossbach: I feel that all my standards of what life was or what life was going to be, were formed by the movies of the '30s, or something, and I'm still stuck with that. I still think that life is like a movie of the '30s. All the evidence to the contrary, I still in some vague way have the same ideas of right and wrong. Oh, I don't know.

Nathan: Could you say whether, with this freedom that appeals to you intellectually, the work is basically different than it was under the more structured or controlled system?

Rossbach: Yes, I think it is. But it seems to me that I really can't judge that, because my time in the '30s, or whatever, I was such a limited individual that there were, God knows, free souls all over the place in the '30s, too, but I didn't know them, and I didn't know it was possible. And it's strange that I read--and I read a great deal--and I read good things. I wasn't reading the equivalent of movies of the '30s. I was reading literature of the world. They present a different picture, I think, of life, than movies of the '30s, but still I think you can read all this stuff, and somehow you don't believe it.

It's a created world, that is not reality. And the '30s movies were reality for me.

Nathan: You wouldn't--or would you--be willing to say whether the students' freedom produces better or less good work than students produced in a more rigid or controlled environment?

Rossbach: I don't think you can put it on a goodness or badness basis.

Nathan: I was afraid of that.

Rossbach: You have to be careful. No, I look at certain things that I did many years ago, and I like them very much. I think from this vantage point of time, you see all the direction--this Y effect that they talk about, that you might have done this, and you might have done that, and you see seeds of possibilities in your early work that, for some reason or other, you didn't pursue. I think it's interesting. I feel that about students, that they have all these potentials, and I didn't even feel finally that I was directing them toward fulfilling their potential. I was just allowing them to--trying to make an environment, or whatever you want to call it, so that it would be possible for them to accept what they were doing. So that I accepted it, uncritically, mainly.

Nathan: You were not obliged to give it a grade?

Rossbach: Give it an A.

Nathan: The University must have rocked on its foundations.

Rossbach: You don't know what direction people want, what they have to say. I really think it's like children. You just create an environment where it's okay. Let it flow, and the stuff that happens is absolutely astonishingly good.

It's funny. You remember what the students did, and it's very funny how you remember that. You know, the individual pieces that students did.

Nathan: How interesting.

Rossbach: Even children in seventh grade, from when I was in Puyallup. I can remember what they did. It was kind of interesting. I had taught in Puyallup before the war, as I told you, and then I went into the army. After I came out of the army, I was at Cranbrook, and then I came back to teach at the University of Washington. This whole, long thing. I was on the main floor of this room where students register for signing up for classes, and I saw this young man, and I thought, "My God, he was one of my students in seventh grade." I went across, and the table was so that I could be on one side, and he was on the other. I looked to see what he was filling out, and indeed, it was Donald Ashby. I thought, "Shall I, or shall I not?" So I introduced myself, and I said, "I think I was your teacher at Puyallup," and he said, "I don't remember." He backed away from it.

Nathan: How interesting.

Rossbach: I'd embarrassed him. I didn't mean to.

Nathan: That seems like a strange response.

Rossbach: I know. But that's the only one I ever saw again of the children.

Nathan: Children can be very self-centered.

Rossbach: Yes. Maybe he did forget that I'd ever been there, but I couldn't imagine that he would forget. It was such a traumatic time for me. Goodness!

One of the interesting things about that was that I had a girl in class who was Japanese, and of course, at the time of Pearl Harbor, this shocking thing happened. This girl had to come in class, and she sat at her desk with her head down. Sachiko Nowicki. Then after I had left, she was taken to one of these internment, or whatever they call them--

Nathan: Relocation centers?

Rossbach: Relocation centers. They had it on the fairgrounds there in Puyallup. One of my students, one of the girls that I'd had in class wrote and told me this, and that she had gone out to the fairgrounds to see this girl. It was a very nice thing of Susan to do.

But anyway, I think so often of that. I was so inadequate. I was so unable to deal with the situation.

Nathan: I think we were all in that spot.

Rossbach: I don't even know how I felt about it, whether I was absolutely aghast that they had taken these people away. I don't know how I felt, and this is basic.

Nathan: It's hard to reestablish the context.

Rossbach: You can't, can you?

Nathan: I don't think so. I don't think you can reestablish who you were at that time and what you were hearing and seeing all around you. It's receded all the way down the tunnel.

Rossbach: Yes.

Trying Techniques and Materials

Rossbach: I got the impression that you thought it was unusual, or something, that I had worked in so many different kinds of textile techniques, and also that I had taught such a mish-mash of courses. This is absolutely basic to me; this is me.

When I came to Berkeley, I had such a limited knowledge of textile techniques, and I was thrown into the situation where the students knew so much more than I did. They were taking classes from Dr. Gayton at that time, and there would be these displays in the hall where the students had to analyze, from looking at these specimens, all these questions that they had to fill out, and the students would be there figuring out these things, whether this was double cloth, triple cloth, whether it was--well, whatever. I didn't know these things myself, and here I was teaching these students. I had to learn. I had to learn fast.

Rossbach: I found out in reading about these techniques, I had to try them myself. I couldn't understand the techniques unless I really did them myself. I would do these techniques, and then I felt it was important to try and do a piece in the technique; not just understand the technique, but actually produce something in the technique.

So I tried all these various netted and knotted and all these things, this multitude of techniques. I just moved from one to the next. Sometimes I spent years on one technique, and sometimes I would do one piece of, say, knitting, or one piece of knotless netting, or whatever it would be, something like that. I did a lot of knotless netting, actually. I liked that.

It seemed that I was flitting from one thing to the next in a way that--I suppose, just offhand, I wouldn't really admire in someone else. It looks kind of flighty, but it was all okay for me. There was a consistency about what I was doing. There wasn't a consistency of using the same technique, but the consistency came, I think, through various techniques. I felt the same way about materials. I wanted to try everything.

Fantasies on Teaching

Rossbach: I don't think, on the whole, there was much response to this quality in my work, and this to me is the essence of my work. That's where teaching a lot of classes, I said was an act of desperation. The desperation was more than the fact that there were these students here and no classes for them to take, that you wanted to give them a total textile education if you could. It was fun to teach all these various things. I really--I've had the idea that you can teach things that you're not a specialist in.

Mary Dumas, who was teaching printed textiles, I always thought it would be wonderful if she would teach weaving. She didn't know a thing about weaving. She could have had a teaching assistant teach students how to set up a loom, but what she would have encouraged her students to do would have been mindblowing.

So if I seemed to teach a great range of stuff, I had also taught at the University here for many years. I went for years teaching the same thing over and over until I thought, "You know, I've taught the same class twenty times in succession, or something like that. How is this possible even though you teach it differently each time."

Rossbach: I always thought it would be fun if the world were such that you could teach writing, or teach literature, or teach people who don't know any English, teach them English, teach typewriting, because I have ideas how these things should be taught, how I could teach them. And I fantasize very much on teaching people English and the fun of going into a--well, we had this experience in Rome.

Nathan: You were saying that you lived in Rome, but you didn't speak Italian?

Rossbach: No, we didn't speak Italian so we went to this class. This was just at the time of the Suez crisis. People were fleeing from Egypt and coming into Italy, so that you had people arriving in Rome who spoke no Italian, and they were frantically trying to learn Italian, too. So you had the most amazing mixture of languages, of people who spoke Portuguese and Spanish and Egyptian, whatever the language is in Egypt. You felt that everybody in the room spoke a different language, and the only language that you had in common was the language that nobody spoke, Italian. It just seemed like the most wonderful opportunity for a teacher to teach. Our teacher was a remarkable woman, who was very fluent in many, many languages. She would say something, and then she would translate it into English, Egyptian, Spanish. It was just impossible.

So you fantasized, now how could you teach Italian in this situation? Well, I think it would be fun. I think teaching should be fun. It should be stimulating to the teacher. I often think, maybe all this just exists for the sake of the teacher. Maybe all these students are just there to stimulate the teacher.

Nathan: Maybe.

Trying to Understand

Nathan: Can I go back to one thing? You were talking about developing facility in understanding different techniques, so that you would learn a technique and produce something. And then you started to say, "This is the essence of my work," and I thought maybe you were going to state that essence.

Rossbach: Oh, you want the whole--! Well, I think the essence of me in my work is trying to understand, and sometimes it drives Katherine crazy. You don't have to understand everything. You don't have to understand. I mean, just accept it. So you try these techniques, and what are they? What do they do? What's different about them? What do they want to do? You explore, of course, how they've been used historically. Then you try to understand how they have meaning for you or your time, what they look like done in plastic, or what they look like.

Rossbach: I use Mickey Mouse as an image very frequently in my work, almost because these things require images. If you're doing knotless netting, you need an image, or I want an image. What image do you put in nowadays? Sometimes the images were there for you, certain religious images, and now in our culture, what images do you put in? So you put in Mickey Mouse, and it's a statement about that, too, I think. I like Mickey Mouse. I think it's partly because it's a defensive attitude on my part, that what people think very much is Mickey Mouse. They refer to the classes that you teach as Mickey Mouse classes, and everything is just dismissed as, "It's Mickey Mouse." Somehow this is very damaging. So I put a Mickey Mouse on baskets and the most elaborate textile; I wove Mickey Mouse in double damask. [laughter] I did him in ikats. I've done a lot of Mickey Mouses.

And Mickey Mouses sell.

Nathan: Even today?

Rossbach: Sure. If I will do a textile with Mickey Mouse in it, I can sell that, and that isn't why I want to do it.

I like kind of playful things, too. I did a very complicated thing. It was netting with pile. You know, you do these things, and who is your audience? Who is going to know that you've done netting with pile? Maybe it's not important that anybody should know that this is netting with pile.

Oh, I did scaffolding textiles according to a Peruvian technique. Well, then it just turns out to be a textile. Who knows that you scaffolded this thing and did all this stuff? It couldn't be achieved any other way, but who knows enough about textiles to know that it couldn't be achieved any other way?

Nathan: Does that mean that you had to build a scaffold in order to produce it?

Rossbach: Vaguely, yes. They put them on looms. I wasn't doing it on a loom, but there is a scaffold which holds threads. Anyway, I did this piece, this little piece of netting with pile. I was really basing it on a Coptic head. You know, they did these little Coptic portraits?

Nathan: Yes.

Rossbach: And I did this little Coptic head in pile. It didn't look anything like a Coptic head at all, but it did look like the woman across the street. It just looked like this lady across the street. She had the sort of look that she had when she would get up in the morning and pick up her paper, wrapped up in her bathrobe. Her name was Mrs. Cross, and so I called this textile "The Early Cross." It just delights me to think that anyone might try to find a religious significance. [laughs]

The Role of Photography

Nathan: As one way of extending the expression, I keep coming back to what you've done with photography, if you want to think about that. You were saying that the raffia picture in Larsen's book didn't have enough contrast, or shadows, or enough correct lighting to show it.

Rossbach: Yes. Maybe it was impossible to photograph it well. I don't know. I tend to like a lot of contrast in my work. Sometimes I think I am doing things that will photograph well. Katherine avoids contrast, and I try and photograph her work, and it drives me crazy that she will not use a contrast of light and dark or anything like that. It's all evasive. It doesn't want to read as a photograph. It wants to read just as itself, which is right.

I'm quite willing to make something that won't photograph well.

Nathan: Are there other art forms as dependent on photography as fiber art?

Rossbach: I think so. We just got an announcement of a drawing show, on which the drawing on the announcement was so beautifully photographed, you'd think there is no way the drawing could be as beautiful as the photograph, no way at all. I feel that way about much of the fiber work. Everything depends on a good photographer now. You can make something really mediocre look very good in a photograph, and you can make something good look very mediocre.

I do my own photography, and I have a darkroom in the basement, where I sometimes print the pictures, enlarge them, and so on, but recently I haven't been doing that. I've just been taking the photographs, and go down to the library photoservice and have them enlarged, which really isn't the same thing. There is something wonderful about printing them yourself and getting the degree of dark and light that you want, and it's nice that it happens fast, that you can just go down there and do it. You don't have to wait for a week. You wonder what in the world they're doing for a week.

I like to photograph other things than textiles. I think photography is absolutely fascinating and absolutely satisfying. Then you tuck all those away, and you feel that your whole life is all this stuff that you've done, which is just put away. There's usually no audience for it, and yet you value it, and at the same time you have the feeling, what have you done with your life? You could have done so much more. You wonder, well, I've said that before. Why didn't I do more adventurous work, or something like that? It would be nice to know the answer to that.

Measuring Productivity

Nathan: Curiously enough, I have this sheaf of pages listing many of the things that you have done, and many of the things that you have written, and the variety of media that you've used. It seems to me quite dazzling, and I wonder why it doesn't seem so to you?

Rossbach: It doesn't. I mean, I'm perfectly honest; it does not.

Nathan: Against what are you measuring yourself?

Rossbach: I don't know.

Nathan: That Puritan conscience is never going to give you an inch.

Rossbach: [laughs] No. No, I think I measure it against musical output, what someone like Wagner can turn out. I listen to these Wagnerian operas, and oh, they're so wonderful. They are just so wonderful, this outpouring. How could anybody do it? How is this possible?

I'm very fond of Proust.

Nathan: Have you read the whole Remembrance of Things Past?

Rossbach: I read the whole thing. I've read the beginning many, many times. Have you read Proust?

Nathan: I read Swann's Way. I didn't know there were six or seven volumes. It tended to discourage me.

Rossbach: I guess I didn't know there were these other books, either, when I read Swann's Way.

Nathan: What is it about Proust that is satisfying to you?

Rossbach: I can't tell you.

Nathan: If it makes you feel any better, you know, he was in his bedchamber. He wasn't teaching. He wasn't doing anything else. He was totally protected from the world, so he could do his work.

Rossbach: Yes, but there's more to it than that.

Nathan: Of course.

Rossbach: But I feel that about Dvorak. I don't know how to pronounce his name. When I was young, I was taught to say Dvorzhak, but--

Nathan: So was I.

Rossbach: And now I notice they don't say that any more. I don't know where Dvorzhak dropped along the way. Anyway, this big outpouring. I mean, how he can do this flow of stuff, which just seems so remarkable to me.

I think Proust has a tremendous impact for me finally. You should read the last books too.

Nathan: I'll take it under serious consideration.

Rossbach: It seems to be reaching the same conclusions which I reach in many ways, and it's very comforting to have Proust reach these conclusions. It seems to make things all right somehow. The fluidity of everything. What was up is down. What is important is unimportant. It's just all these reversals and unexpected--his insights into the way the world goes. Sometimes you read along and you don't even know that you are being impressed by these insights; then you think about them later, and it all adds up to this big, mind-blowing sort of thing. And the sensitivity, of course, to everything. It certainly makes you look at the French landscape differently, from having read Proust.

We were on the Normandy coast and in Brittany last year, I guess it was, and now that I'm reading Proust again, why, no other descriptions of the sky and the beach can compare. You just see things more perceptively from having read Proust.

Well, it's the same thing if you look at a painting by Van Gogh, and then you go through Van Gogh country, and it all looks like Van Gogh, or Cezanne, or whatever. Everything looks like Proust, and you know he was speaking truth.

Nathan: If you speak truth in your heart, that sustains it?

Rossbach: Yes.

I guess I probably shouldn't say this, but I think the question always arises whether doing something in fiber is as important as doing something in oil paint and whether I can say what I want to as well in fiber as I could have if I had concentrated on painting. I don't think I was any great shakes as a painter, but I don't think that matters particularly. I've done some drawings that I think have this communication quality. I have felt that I could express things in drawings that I have never been able to express in fiber. There is a whole different range of things that are possible to express, and I think you can express them in words, too. But then I have sort of avoided more expressive kinds of writing. I suppose one would have

Rossbach: to go into poetry or a novel in order to do that. So there's always this feeling of, have I really been able to express what I really might have expressed? Maybe this is all--I don't know--an illusion, that I had anything to express. You just don't know. But you reach this point in life, and you are evaluating the whole schmear and you wonder.

Art out of Trash, or Odds and Ends

Rossbach: I think I was making art out of trash quite a while ago, but not in the same flamboyant way that people are doing it now. It was very restrained and almost downpedaling the fact that this was made out of trash, you know, out of old plastic boxes. I was cutting them up and transforming them into new material that I then wove. It didn't have the quality of trash necessarily, which I think a lot of this stuff does, when they just assemble a lot of stuff--like in Simon's towers--where he takes broken pottery and all this stuff and just assembles it. You look at it, and you know at once that this is just a big bunch of junk which has been assembled. But mine didn't have that quality.

Nathan: The Rodia towers?

Rossbach: Yes. Have you seen that?

Nathan: Only in pictures.

Rossbach: You should really see the thing. It's an experience. It's fun in relation to its entire environment. It's kind of threatening at the same time, but it is threatened as much as you are threatened. It's an interesting thing.

Finally in one of these pieces, I found a child's old airplane. It had the wings snapped off, cardboard, probably something that came with breakfast food or something like that. I just inserted this thing whole in it, and that's as close as I ever came to this sort of assemblage of junk

Nathan: What did you insert it into?

Rossbach: I inserted it into a plastic tube, which I then wove. All this plastic was inserted into plastic tubes. You know, these little trays that you get meat on at the supermarket. I was cutting those into strips and creating color out of these things, so if I had blue ones and white ones, I'd alternate blue and white and get light blue. All this. I was creating color out of these things, as well as texture, and then weaving them.

Rossbach: But I don't know. It seems if you exhibit things like this, there's absolutely no reaction. Nobody observes it, or if they observe it, it's of no consequence. I feel this is very much the tone of exhibiting things in this fiber area. There's no response, period, and really not particularly any recognition of what a person is trying to do.

I think it's largely because there's no criticism in this area. No one writes seriously about it and looks at the work in the same way that they would look at a painting or a piece of sculpture and come to conclusions about what the artist is trying to do. That just doesn't happen in perhaps the whole fiber movement.

Nathan: Is there a way to stimulate this sort of interest and attention in the reviewer?

Rossbach: I don't know. I don't know how you would do that. Sometimes I think you just ignore the fact and go on from there, but that doesn't seem satisfactory, either. It certainly isn't satisfactory to the artist.

Nathan: Not at all. Thinking of other basketry materials, grasses and beads and others, in a sense is much basketry made with materials that are not intrinsically of particular value?

Rossbach: Yes. I feel that in Lillian's baskets--and I speak of her because I know her work better than I know most people's work. I have followed it. She used to teach in the department, as you probably know, and I've known her for a long time.

Nathan: This is Lillian Elliott?

Rossbach: Lillian Elliott, yes. She just seems to use very much odds and ends of materials, and you don't feel that she is seeking out any particular material or waiting for it to come at its right season, you know, and harvesting it at the right time so that it will have the right flexibility. She just picks up what there is around and somehow bends it to her will. The work has that quality.

I think Alan Meisel in a review said it looks like it might spring back to what it was originally, and it does have that quality. It's just held very temporarily in its position. It's very powerful; it's a very moving thing.

Time and Basketry

Nathan: Is this a quality that you prize?

Rossbach: I prize it in her work. It's nothing that I try to achieve, but I admire it. When I taught a workshop in Connecticut, I think it was, I had the students do this sort of thing, and it was a marvelous thing to do in a short workshop, because we could gather whatever material just happened to be there and use it in this way. Nothing had a wild finish to it. I'm not saying that the results were great, but at least it was a way of letting students do one kind of basketry. If you're teaching them to do coiling or something which is an extremely slow process, the stitching process, which goes on endlessly, they could sit there for the five hours or whatever it is of the session and come out with a couple of inches of coil. Maybe that was terribly valuable, I don't know, but nowadays people want a quick result, and they want something that they can take home with them.

That really seems to characterize very much the movement. It's very spontaneous--and yet some of the people who are doing the most important work are working very slowly. You look at these things, and it just boggles the mind that you know how many hours have gone into this thing. I know you're not supposed to think of the hours. You're not supposed to say, "Oh, my God, how long that must have taken to do." That offends people, because that isn't what they think they're doing, but it's still part of it.

I was just seeing Fern Jacobs in the new American Craft, and these coil pieces that she does--they're almost exhausting because you know how long they took to do. I don't want my work to be exhausting. I may spend this quantity of time at it, but I don't want you to look at it and think, "Oh, dear!"

Somebody took a movie of Lillian Elliott making a basket. This was Marilyn Hulbert. It was just a black and white short film. She thought since basketry was such a slow process, that instead of photographing continuously, she would do the time-lapse photography. So she just did it over--took a frame every few seconds, or whatever it was, minutes, thinking this was going to show the whole process; but instead of that, what it did was speed the thing up. It was like a Charlie Chaplin cartoon, so that all the movements were very jerky, and Lillian was just putting together this basket in this wonderful way, and it was so expressive. It was exactly what you feel about her baskets. They just have this quality. I loved the movie.

Nathan: You were quoted somewhere as relating basketry, music, and time.

Rossbach: You know, I did that quite a while ago. I said that--I don't say those things any more. I believe in them, but I don't say them.

Nathan: Why?

Rossbach: Well, I don't know. I just don't. I don't want to take positions that I have to defend particularly. I don't want to argue about these things; if these are silly ideas, I'll just keep them to myself.

Nathan: They're stimulating in a way.

Rossbach: They're stimulating to me, too.

Nathan: I was struck by this awareness of time involved in the creation of the basket, and whether the basket would be a permanent object or not; also that one could feel time, the passage of time.

Rossbach: Yes. Do you know what ikats are?

Nathan: Yes.

Rossbach: A long time ago I was working on ikats, and I was taking these bundles of yarn and tying them to resist the dye. Each bundle was tied at a different interval, so that some of them had the intervals very fast, some of them had them very slow, and then I arranged all these bundles into a warp, and wove them, so that you had these stripes with these intervals of ikats going up, all at different rates. I felt that there was a time quality to them, of some moving fast and some moving slowly. It reminded me of a ballet that I had seen where all these figures were moving across the stage, and some were walking very slowly, and some were moving very rapidly, and this whole thing was going on at once. I tried to get that in a textile. Well, obviously, I was the only one who had the slightest conception of what I was trying to do. I don't know if it was important to have done, but at least that's what I was trying to do in that thing.

Travel and Staying Home

Rossbach: I think when I was talking about going to the Venetian Room, I really don't even want to explain that particularly, but I feel maybe I am more comfortable going to Venice than to the Venetian Room. I can go to Venice. I feel I know how to act and I know what is expected of me when I go to Venice.

Rossbach: That's the difficulty about living in the Bay Area. I think it is an impossible place to live with this relationship to San Francisco. Everything is going on in San Francisco and you are running back and forth across the bridge all of the time to participate and yet it is something that is there. It's easier to think of going to an opera in, what?

Nathan: Milan?

Rossbach: Milan, anywhere, than to think of going to the San Francisco Opera. It isn't that I think less of the San Francisco Opera. Here there is a whole range of considerations of how do you get over there, what do you do with the car, how do you--and I talked about this to Katherine and my sister when we were together a few weeks ago and she said, "It's simple, you just take a taxi over there if that's what's keeping you back." I don't want to drive over myself and I don't know why, it just seems that it's easier to do things somewhere else.

Nathan: Do you like to travel?

Rossbach: I love to travel, but then I love to come home at night. I don't like to leave my dogs and that's a real consideration right now. It's very hard to leave the dogs and it's very hard to leave the house. The people next door just go and leave. They leave the house for a week or so and nobody's there and it doesn't seem to bother them at all. I couldn't do that now. I think I have got burdened down with possessions. It isn't that I am afraid of these possessions being stolen. I don't know what it is. It's hard to say what it is, but you get tied down by these things.

Sometime back Katherine was talking about the possibility that we should move into Rossmoor. We should just go to Rossmoor and we could close the door and we could go off the way we used to in the old days when we used to throw the dog in the back seat and off we would go. Here I feel that I am having this retirement that I have looked forward to and yet it isn't the sort of thing I see elderly people doing--you know, just fancy free. And we're not, we're absolutely not, we're just tied down, but we're tied down by the things that we have created ourselves of our own values. I value the dogs so I couldn't think of putting them in a kennel for three weeks. I just couldn't do that.

So really it's to the point--I mean it's absurd, I might as well say it, but I would rather stay home than have them subjected to that. If I go to a restaurant I like to bring them some food that we have had. I would rather bring it to them than eat it myself. It's a dumb state of affairs, but that's the way it is.

Rossbach: I have opportunities to travel, to go and jury a show somewhere or go and give a lecture somewhere and these things came too late in my life. I don't know why this didn't happen to me when I was younger, but it didn't and now it's too late and I don't want to be traveling around all of the time. Yet every time we travel somewhere, it's so stimulating.

Space Museum

Rossbach: At Washington, D.C., the Space Museum was so wonderful. It was absolutely astonishing. We went a couple of times while we were there. Here we were in the midst of all of these wonderful art collections and we went to the Space Museum. If you'd tell that to people, they'd think you're crazy, but anywhere you go, something happens or something is so stimulating. But it has the disadvantage that when you come home your whole orientation is off on another line of interest and so on.

Nathan: What was it about the Space Museum that spoke to you?

Rossbach: It just seemed wonderful, I mean this space thing.

Nathan: It's an open exhibit?

Rossbach: Oh, yes, and it's all expressed somehow in this great volume that they have and somehow you believe it because you are actually seeing these machines that went off into space. Here they are. You would see them on television all of these times and here they are in the museum. It was really a very moving thing and very much fun.

Nathan: Did it carry over into any artistic expression?

Rossbach: It did for Katherine. It didn't for me. I started some things, but then I didn't go on with that. A long time ago I did a weaving that was an homage to John Glenn, and I had written "Homage to John Glenn" in doublecloth. It's kind of a lousy textile, but anyway it was fun to go there and see all of this space stuff.

This year we have been housebreaking this puppy, so I have to go out in the middle of the night in the backyard and the stars have been so beautiful, so beautiful; I just feel so ignorant--all of this stuff and I don't know anything about it at all. It is just so incredible that you can live all your life with a thing and you don't know anything about it and you have no curiosity about it. You have never lifted a finger even to identify Orion's Belt. All you know is the Big Dipper for sure. You know?

Nathan: Yes, I do.

Foreign Cultures vs. Bay Area Culture

Nathan: You were talking about the difficulty, the details of going to San Francisco and back, and yet if you are traveling, you make these efforts and it is part of the lark, part of the fun.

Rossbach: Yes, and I can't really understand that.

Nathan: I don't understand either, but I know what it is.

Rossbach: When we were in Japan we went to Kabuki several times and we managed to buy tickets on our own and get to the theater on our own and sit up there with all of these Japanese people speaking Japanese and it was so wonderful, and you felt so elated that you were able to do this thing.

We went to Noh plays out in the remote parts of the city and very specialized audiences. This was not a tourist trap in any way. This was the most refined sort of Japanese culture, I suppose, and you are able to do that. This thing about the Venetian Room isn't just some fluff that I can write off as a joke or anything. I don't feel comfortable. I feel that I was never trained or educated or whatever to move in the society that I have lived in.

Nathan: But you have no trouble with the most refined Japanese event, which is far more formal.

Rossbach: No, I know, but there is this thing down in Berkeley across from Shattuck Square where they have jazz concerts, Keystone. I would love to go there. I don't know how to go there. It isn't just going across the bridge or anything like that. I just don't feel I would be comfortable there and it isn't that I'm old. I think people are very tolerant of having old people mixed up with young people and so on. I think it's very amusing. Often now I will go places and I realize that I am the oldest person there. I go to social events, and it's all right, isn't it?

Nathan: Yes, to realize that you are not the young ones invited to liven things up. It is, it's okay.

Rossbach: Yes, it is, but it's almost as though I don't belong there in this jazz thing or the Venetian Room. Herb Caen will write flippantly in his column that it's so amusing that the Queen of England would find it exciting to eat at Trader Vic's when this is something that any of us can do. I've never done it, and yet I am sure when I have been traveling in Japan or wherever, I have eaten at places that are equivalent. I don't know why this is about my own culture.

Nathan: Do you think there is some sort of an American snobbery that gets built into us when we are very young, maybe during the Depression when we didn't have enough money to dress properly and, therefore, didn't go to places where everybody would be better dressed? Is it something as silly as that?

Rossbach: Well, I think it could have something to do with it.

Nathan: But now, I don't think people really care.

Rossbach: No, of course, they don't.

One day I was talking to this class--and I had very wonderful classes at the University. If it sounds just like baloney that I am giving out that I had wonderful classes, I did have wonderful classes. They were people that I liked.

Nathan: And they found you somehow.

Rossbach: Yes, they were just good. I was telling them about a time during the Depression when I was walking down the street and a little dog came and bit me on the leg and tore my pants. The man was very concerned and he said, "I will replace those pants." I could go down to Rhodes Department Store where he had a charge account and buy a new pair of trousers and, of course, go to a doctor and he would pay that and so on. All right, so I'd go down to Rhodes and buy this new pair of corduroy pants and get the thing home and I wonder whether this is what I want most of all in the world or whether it would really be cricket to return these pants and get something else that I wanted with it and mend the pants and wear the mended pants. But you didn't wear mended pants. Now, I wouldn't care if I was wearing mended pants. It wouldn't matter to me at all. But the students were totally bewildered by this.

Nathan: Yes, of course: I understand this very well.

Rossbach: Recently I wrote a series of articles on weavers of the forties, fiber in the forties. I had given a lecture at Fiberworks some years ago on these four weavers that interested me--Anni Albers, Dorothy Liebes, Mary Atwater, and Marianne Strengell. I called the lecture--I can't think of it now, but it was by the first names of these women; you know, "Mary and Dorothy," the four women. Anyway, Lois at the American Craft magazine said wouldn't I write that into an article? So I wrote it into an article and then got the idea of expanding the article--I don't know if it was her idea or mine--and I would write a separate article on each one of these four, which I did. So there were five articles altogether, the introductory one and then these separate ones.

Exploring Printed Textiles

Rossbach: Then she said, "Wouldn't you be interested in writing one about printed fabrics of the same period?" So, of course, I am interested in printed fabrics, too, and so we had all of these textiles--when I taught in the Decorative Art department--that we had bought in the '40s and '50s. They were part of the teaching collection. So I dragged some of these home and I have been looking at them again and photographing them and now I want to spread it to two articles on printed textiles. It's very difficult to find any information about it in the books because it hasn't been written about much at all.

Nathan: Interesting.

You do have your own darkroom at home.

Rossbach: Yes, but I haven't really used it much. I have been just using commercial services, but I do have my own darkroom and enlarger and I am very interested in that.

But anyway, what was I going to say about these printed textiles? It seems like a whole area that I would just love to explore now and yet at the same time I don't want to. It means I would have to go to Chicago because these early people, Angelo Testa and Ben Rose, were in the Chicago area doing this silk screening. This is more of this feeling about traveling. You could devote your whole life just to running around doing this research and it would be very exciting, terribly exciting, but you have a home and garden and dogs and so on. I really resented it last time. I was gone when my gladiolas bloomed, which seems idiotic, but I watch each one of these gladiolas open up and they are so wonderful when they first come out and it does not seem decent to me to plant these flowers and not be here.

Nathan: When they present themselves to you?

Rossbach: Right. And I know the flowers don't care, but I care. So I don't know how you deal with these things at all.

In this coming August, I think, we are going to Europe. We are going to Northern Europe this time. I think I told you that I was interested in these Wagner operas that they were doing and I thought, "Wouldn't it be fun to go to Bayreuth?" Didn't I tell you this?

Evaluating the Bauhaus Influence

Nathan: I don't know that we've said it on the tape. You want to go for the whole Ring cycle?

Rossbach: Well, I would like to, but I'm not going to.

But anyway, we found out when the Wagnerian operas were being given at this festival. Of course, they are not all Wagnerian operas like the Ring operas. We didn't know how you even went about getting tickets. This is all part of the thing. We can deal with getting tickets at Bayreuth. So I called the German tourist office in Los Angeles and asked them about this and I said, "How do I get tickets?" He said, "What year?" [laughter] I said, "This year, the summer." Well, it had been sold out for a long time. So we decided that we would try to go to Bayreuth anyway just to see the place and walk up the path toward the thing and see Wagner's house. If there are some scalpers around selling tickets, we will just go to something; you know, play it by ear, and if we don't go to anything, it doesn't matter. We will have been to Bayreuth and maybe some other year we will actually get in.

I think you try all of these things a number of times before you are successful and the reason that this seemed possible was that I wanted to see the Bauhaus archives in Berlin. We had been going to see them the last time we were in Europe and my sister got sick and so we cancelled that part of the trip. But I want to look at all of the weavings from the Bauhaus that are preserved there. I have a vague feeling that I want to see all of the Bauhaus weaving that I can that is scattered all over the United States and Europe. It's just something that interests me.

Nathan: It would be interesting. This reminds me, when you were at the University of Washington, apparently, Trude Guermonprez was leading some seminars. Did you meet there?

Rossbach: Oh, no, we didn't meet there.

Nathan: I see. I had the sense that she was there part of the time that you might have been there as a student, or as a teacher.

Rossbach: No, I don't think so. I didn't know she was ever there.

Nathan: For a season; she was apparently invited for a short time and she conducted some seminars and gave some lectures.

Rossbach: No, I had never heard of her.

Nathan: But now on this Bauhaus interest of yours, are you interested in what Bauhaus trained people do in the United States?

Rossbach: Yes, also, but--

Nathan: Do you read German?

Rossbach: No, that's part of the problem. It's very difficult, but as I mentioned I did meet in Switzerland the woman who is in charge of the weaving program at the Bauhaus, Gunta Stölzl, and it had always disturbed me that in the United States, nobody knows about her. Very few people know about her, but everybody knows about Anni Albers. I feel that this should be understood, why we know about Anni Albers and why we don't know about Gunta Stölzl, whose work paralleled Anni Albers.

Nathan: Anni Albers was at Pond Farm, wasn't she?

Rossbach: No, she had never been at Pond Farm. Trude Guermonprez was at Pond Farm.

Nathan: Right. Anni Albers--oh, she was at Black Mountain?

Rossbach: Black Mountain, that's right.

Nathan: And has Gunta Stölzl been in this country?

Rossbach: No. But if you are going to judge the Bauhaus, you don't judge just the examples in this country.

I feel that this whole Bauhaus thing was sort of a collective thing and you give collective credit. One person doesn't take credit for the whole thing and that I think is what has happened here and I would like to understand why.

Nathan: Do I feel an article coming out of this?

Rossbach: No, no. There is no possibility for anything like this to be published. I don't see much point in writing it unless it is going to be published at this point in my life. I have written a lot of stuff which I knew would never be published, but now I feel my energies I want to go into things that are going to be published if I would take time to write them.

Nathan: Would any of these good craft magazines be interested?

Rossbach: No. I thought I would like to write about this interview that I had with Gunta Stölzl in Switzerland. It was very interesting, but very difficult because she didn't speak good English at all and we spoke no German. But we learned some things and there is nowhere I could get it published, so it is no use writing it.

Nathan: Well, there is use in writing it. You can deposit it with your memoirs. I am perfectly serious about it.

Rossbach: Yes.

Nathan: It doesn't have to be all polished, but write it down and it will be available. It's a way of capturing it.

Rossbach: I feel it must be captured somehow. This woman is not going to be alive much longer and that's an interesting idea. I took notes after I had talked to her and I wrote down everything that I thought she said and so I suppose something like that could be preserved.

Nathan: Absolutely. That's wonderful because you did capture something, so let's be sure that it is made available.

I'm interested in this notion of the "critical mass" of artists; no one person should keep credit for all of it.

Rossbach: I don't think any of them did as good work after they got away from the Bauhaus, but that is just my personal evaluation. Gunta Stölzl's recent stuff didn't interest me and I don't think Anni Albers' has been all that great. But when they were all working as a group something happened.

Nathan: Is that generally true, do you think, of fiber artists? Do they do better when they are in touch with each other?

Rossbach: I don't know.

November 16, 1984

Dear Harriet,

We went to the exhibition at Mills College--structures by Lillian Elliott, Nance O'Banion, and Susan Martin--Katherine and I immediately decided that we are working too small. At this particular time, work must be larger. Why? To be in the mainstream of what is happening in fiber (as well as in other mediums). We both envisioned our work larger--and almost at once thought of the storage problems which at the moment are driving us out of our minds. It wasn't long before we had rethought the problem, and had decided to continue working as we are, in sizes which seem right for us, no matter what is happening in the mainstream. Yet it is tempting to move with the herd, to be part of the contemporary scene. And of course it is satisfying to solve the problems implied by larger pieces--perhaps changes in techniques, materials, I don't know what. But significant changes would be necessary. And I suppose that what is being said changes too. In a way, movement with the mainstream is limiting and unsatisfactory, while refusing to move with the mainstream has its unsatisfactory qualities. I suppose a person always harbors the feeling that he could be doing larger pieces (or smaller pieces, whatever the case).

I have had a special interest in Gunta Stölzl for many years, from the time I first saw a little publication in German showing early Bauhaus weaving. This was the first time I was aware that Anni Albers' work, with which I was familiar, fit into a pattern of work that was being done at the Bauhaus, and that there were other weavers there who were doing work that seemed as interesting as Albers'. I tried to check this out, to find out whose work came first--who was the initiator of this look in weaving. Difficult to do, especially without speaking German. I did learn that Gunta Stölzl had been in charge of the weaving workshop. I saw some of her work at the Museum of Modern Art, and Busch-Reisinger in Cambridge. And I asked Jack Larsen about her--he was personally acquainted with her. Finally I visited her in Zurich, only to be frustrated miserably by the language barrier. Much of her work was then on exhibit at the Bauhaus Archives in Berlin. It had a freshness and spontanaiety that seemed lacking in much of the other weaving.

The gallery project was in January or February 1980--although it seems much longer ago than that. It was the last of several lecture/performance evenings that I gave, in which I used manipulated slides. The first involved "the new tapestry" which was a sort of playful imagining of the lengths to which tapestry might go (at a time when weaving was getting bigger and bigger). Then I did an evening combining slides, lecture, and an exhibit, involved mainly with crumbling edifices in Egypt and Morocco--called structure through disintegration. Or some such. I was very very interested in these projects.

CONCEPTUAL ART. Ideas presented by artists not by tangible, visually formed objects, but through other stimuli for creating a mental image: photographs, specifications, formulas, videotapes, speech, etc. Mostly a British and American phenomenon, it originated in the mid-1960's. (The Pocket Dictionary of Art Terms)

CONCEPTUAL ART, CONCEPT ART. Art of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s which is created according to one or more of the following principles: 1. That art consists in the basic idea, which does not have to be embodied in a physical form. 2. That language becomes the basic material of art, and the barrier between art and art theory is breached. 3. That artistic activity becomes an enquiry into the nature of art itself, and any result or embodiment must be regarded simply as an interim demonstration of the general conclusion reached by the artist. Among the artists associated with Conceptual Art are Lawrence Weiner, Sol LeWitt, Joseph Kosuth and Bruce Nauman, though some of these are also categorized as MINIMALISTS. (The Thames and Hudson Dictionary of Art Terms.)

Good wishes,

Ed

V THE ARTIST AS WRITER, LECTURER, JUDGE

Book on 18th Century French Brocades

Nathan: Are you thinking of going to Paris or other parts of France for that book on brocades?

Rossbach: No, I finished that work. I think I finished it two weeks ago. I got all of the photographs put together and just sent it off. I was so glad to get this out of here and I hadn't even asked for a return receipt. I just sent it and then I didn't know it had ever arrived and I kept listening to see if any airplane had crashed with my valuable manuscript. [laughter] Finally, the publisher said it had arrived, but you know at this point I am not even particularly concerned whether they choose to publish it or not. I just finished it, it's finished, and I can think of other things.

Nathan: Did you do the photographs?

Rossbach: I took many of the photographs, yes, but I bought many photographs, too. I should never have launched off on that particular project. I was sort of out of my depth, if that's the expression. I think I was in an area of specialists and I'm not a specialist on 18th century French anything. I just have the feeling that I loved these textiles. I absolutely am so crazy about these textiles, and I felt I have to write something about them and say what I think is so wonderful about them. But then I get bogged down in the historical aspect and how the patterns changed from one year to the next and this kind of a background and that kind of a background and, oh, it got heavy finally and I didn't want it to be heavy. I don't know if it will be published or not.

Nathan: Is this Van Nostrand?

Rossbach: Yes, but if they don't want it, I won't send it to anyone else. I'll just put it in a box and forget about it.*

Nathan: This intrigues me because I don't think of French brocade as being essentially simple and childlike.

Rossbach: Oh, they're not. They are most terribly complex and beautiful. Oh, they are just so wonderful. A lot of people don't know that they are so wonderful. We don't like this rococo stuff right now. It isn't good taste and it's a corruption of all the beautiful textile traditions that preceded it.

It's such an exciting time and they are going into patterns that are three dimensional. I mean here they are making textiles with very painterly effects--you know, three dimensional roses, all of these familiar flowers, and how you related this stuff with the background. You can just see over the years how they have worked on relating three dimensional forms to a flat background and it's just an absolutely great period to be studying.

I think the flowers all have some sort of sexual symbolic meaning--the rose and all of these various things. I had to go very lightly on that, not that I could go very--[laughs] because I don't know much about it myself. But even what I did know, I had to be very delicate about it because Van Nostrand isn't going to publish anything that seems slightly erotic. They don't want the erotic qualities of these textiles pointed out and yet that should be pointed out. It's terribly interesting. So I sort of soft-pedaled all of that and I am always sorry about everything that I soft-pedal. I guess that's the message of what I am saying today.

Nathan: Maybe to follow your own vision?

Rossbach: Yes, and it's very difficult to do, very difficult for me to do. Some people seem to do it and I really admire them. God, I think they are so wonderful.

Nathan: Are there any names that come to mind when you think of someone who has listened to the inner voice and not to any others?

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*(Memoirist's later editorial note.) Van Nostrand Reinhold returned the manuscript as too costly to publish for the limited market it would enjoy. Textile books are not selling. They suggested I try to publish it through the Textile Museum in Washington, D.C., or through a university press. I put the ms. away in a drawer. But recently I revised it, eliminating about 1/3 of the illustrations, and some of the text, and I have just had it typed to make a decent presentation. Now I have to take the next step.

Rossbach: No. [pause] Katherine has this quality much more than I have and I've learned a lot from her. But I don't think it always brought great satisfaction for her either. Having this quality--

Nathan: There must be a cost to this?

Rossbach: Yes, right, there is a cost to her personally and sometimes I think I avoid that cost, and I don't like that quality in myself. Is this too heavy?

Nathan: Absolutely not. You are saying things that many people feel and perhaps are not able to state and it is important for an artist and a teacher to point out. To some people your life would be idyllic because you are doing creative things.

Rossbach: I know. That is what is so terribly disturbing about it. I mean you think it should be idyllic, too. You wonder, why isn't it? Why you have all these reservations and misgivings and heaven knows what.

Book: Baskets as Textile Art

Nathan: In that early conversation with Lea Miller, about publishing books with possible mistakes, were you referring to Baskets as Textile Art?

Rossbach: Yes.

Nathan: It did get published.

Rossbach: Yes, it got published, but I had difficulty publishing it. Nobody wanted to publish anything on baskets unless it was a how-you-do-it and I didn't want to write how to do it. But finally something happened through the American Crafts Council. (They published Craft Horizons and were changing the name--now it's called American Craft). The woman who was in charge of the educational program there believed in this thing I had written and she took it around and found a publisher. The American Crafts Council got part of the royalties for doing that and they sort of sponsored the book so that it says in the front something about that. But that's how that happened and from there on that didn't happen.

Absence of Reviews or Criticism

Nathan: How was the book received?

Rossbach: Well, who knows?

Nathan: Was it reviewed?

Rossbach: No, I don't think so. We're off in an area where there is no reviewing of anything and there is no criticism. This is one of the things that is so disturbing, that there just is not this. But anyway, they had some old books in the library that were called Chats on Old Silver, Chats on Old This [laughter] and I thought, that's what I'm doing. I'm just writing chats on all of this junk.

I would like to be recognized as having something important to say if I had something important to say, I suppose, and in a way it is sort of a joke with me that I am writing "chats on old silver" or whatever.

Nathan: But there is an enormous amount of scholarship and art experience behind them. They are very readable, but hardly chats.

Rossbach: Anyway, I was trying to write on textiles the way that I thought that textiles should be written about, but then I realized all of these possibilities. If you want certain information, you wouldn't go to my book. You would go to a book that just gives the facts.

The Audience

Nathan: For whom were you writing?

Rossbach: For whom was I writing? I haven't the slightest idea. I just wanted to write.

Nathan: Did you have in mind that you were writing for your peers, for other artists, or for people who didn't know a whole lot about art?

Rossbach: None of the above.

No, I have no idea who would read this or why. I feel that particularly about this book on French brocade that I just wrote. People who are in the textile field don't read. Very, very few people read anything.

Nathan: That book on paisley [The Art of Paisley] had a very enthusiastic review.

Rossbach: Well, it didn't sell very well. I was surprised that it didn't sell well. It seemed like such an interesting topic. I just think it's terribly interesting but anyway, that's what happens.

Nathan: Did you consciously avoid technical terms in your writing?

Rossbach: Yes, sure.

Nathan: So you were really writing for a nonexpert?

Rossbach: Yes, I was really writing for a nonexpert and I found that very troublesome. I feel I am always starting at square one. It's like teaching and you always have this batch of new students who don't know anything and then in the next quarter it's another batch of new students, and you are always trying to put yourself at this level. You feel you wish you could start at square two and assume that somebody knows something and not have to explain what a complementary color is.

I felt that very much about this book on French brocade and I decided when I began it that I was not going to explain what brocade was and was not going to do any of these things, and I realized there was no possibility of it being published that way. There is no audience for it.

Nathan: There is no informed community?

Rossbach: No, right, and the people who are informed aren't going to be interested in this. It is a funny sort of thing and yet you have all of this enthusiasm for these textiles and you want to say something that stimulates people to look at them. So I haven't heard about the French brocade book. I'll be surprised if they publish it, and it's sad because I have some of the most beautiful illustrations.

Nathan: Are these photographs that you took?

Rossbach: Yes, some that I took in Lyons. They are beautiful textiles, that's all. You said because I like simple things, I shouldn't like French brocade; that isn't true. I admire the most complex and the most intellectually refined work, too, but I also like absolute simplicity and directness that is childlike. But I respond to the other very much, too. I include the whole gamut.

I had a couple of things that I wanted to say. Shall I just throw them in?

Nathan: By all means.

Rossbach: In relation to what we had talked about last time, the man who sang "To a Wild Rose" was Kenny Rankin.

You asked me how I was able to afford going to the University of Washington after the Depression. I told you I had worked and saved money, and it was very cheap to go to school in those days and I also got a scholarship through Phi Beta Kappa.

We were talking about embroidery and how my sisters used to embroider all of these luncheon cloths and all of this stuff following the directions, and I wanted to say that Katherine's method of embroidery is so different and so refreshing. She just takes a hunk of cloth and draws a few little suggestive lines on it and then she starts out and there is no plan. It is a totally creative thing and this whole way that Katherine has of approaching her work is the thing that was totally absent from all of my schooling.

Nowhere that I went to school did they have this sort of confidence in creativity that you just sit down with a sheet of paper and draw, or you just do anything. If we were drawing, we were always drawing from a model or something like that. This whole imaginative quality was not allowed and it wasn't allowed in writing either. People don't trust that sort of approach and that is Katherine's approach and it's wonderful to act on.

Fiber Art as an Urban Movement

Rossbach: Fiberworks is having an exhibit. It is sponsoring an exhibit of people who have won NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] grants in the last two years in fiber and it is going to be held in the airport in San Francisco. They have got money from NEA to print a catalog; also from Mervyn's and the Airport Commission, various sources. They invited me to write the introduction to this catalog, which I just have written and that's finished.

In the course of that, I discovered that of the people who are qualified to be invited to this show, the winners of NEA grants over these two years, half of them came from California and New York and the other half from all the other 48 states. Now, that is just an astonishing thing. I tried to point out in this thing that it suggested that the fiber movement was an urban movement contrary to what people might expect and that it is connected with art centers.

Nathan: Fascinating.

Rossbach: I think that is really interesting. I wrote one very nice paragraph in this. I just felt I wanted the beginning of this thing to say, "Don't despair, the last paragraph is good. Any reader, dear reader, stick with it or just go directly to the last paragraph."

Nathan: What does the last paragraph say?

Rossbach: The last paragraph--well, they're having this in this airport with this moving sidewalk or whatever it is. Here this work is exhibited on the inside and in this thing you move down this moving sidewalk with all of your luggage and junk and you look out and here is this fiberwork. Okay, I talk about government-sponsored art, which is what NEA really is and during the Depression years it was identified with murals and post offices. When you go to mail a package, you confront art at a time of great tension and so on which post offices inspire. And here it is now that you go to an airport, which is a tense situation, and you are confronted willy-nilly by fiber art.

But then I was able to compare it to this marvelous thing that happened to me in New York at the World's Fair when they put you on a moving sidewalk and you all just floated along on this thing. You confronted Michaelangelo's Pietà that they had brought to this thing, and here was art. And I just loved that, that here you just are drifting in this impossible situation and here is art.

Lecturing

Rossbach: You asked me earlier if I had gone to Trude Guermonprez's seminars, or whatever she had, when she was in Seattle. That was a whole different world that I was not involved in. She undoubtedly was there, but I didn't know it. It would have been done through the Weavers Guild in Seattle, and I had nothing to do with Weavers Guilds. I was involved in painting, and with people in painting. My life at that time was in painting. Although I was teaching this one class in weaving, this was not where my big interest was. I had a loom at that time and was turning out a few pieces, but not this absolute constant weaving.

Weaving takes a lot of time, as you know. Gradually it's gotten so that it doesn't take so long. People are weaving bigger and bigger things. It all happens faster, but still, it takes time. You can't do everything. I can't. I was involved in painting.

I feel that Weavers Guilds have a whole different viewpoint on things, which is probably not true, because there are certain people who would have the same viewpoint as I have, but they happen to be in Weavers Guilds. But for a lot of them, it's sort of housewifely activities, you know.

Rossbach: I have gone out and lectured fairly recently. If I'm talking to a Weavers Guild, it's not nearly as interesting for me, or for them, as it is when I'm talking to another kind of group. And I can almost pick out in advance whether I'm going to be happy lecturing somewhere, you know, by the group.

For instance, when I have lectured at a Weavers Guild type thing in New Orleans, it was an absolute disaster; and similarly in Salt Lake City and various places. They just are not remotely interested in the things I'm interested in.

When I talk in Boston, for instance, it's lovely. I have the most stimulating, wonderful audiences. The big cities. I think that sounds awfully snobbish, but somehow I think it has to be said. It's just a fact.

Sometimes this lecturing can be wonderfully stimulating. Not only because people ask questions, but just the process of speaking to people who are paying attention so happily. As I said, this happened kind of late in my life, that I got into this business of going out lecturing. I've found it very stimulating. I feel I'm finished with it now, but it was good while it lasted.

Nathan: Did you bring slides or visual things?

Rossbach: Yes.

Nathan: You must have a wonderful slide collection.

Rossbach: Yes, we do have very many slides.

I heard a lecture once by Charles Eames. Do you know Charles Eames?

Nathan: Yes.

Rossbach: He was at the University. And, for some reason, when he came to give his lecture, a slide lecture, they had the wrong kind of projector. It wouldn't take his slides. Here the poor man was stranded with his slides, but he couldn't project them. He was just furious and really at a loss what to do. I always felt I didn't want to be in that position, that I don't want to be tied so much to a mechanism as that.

Once when I was in Boston, just before they started projecting the slides, they dropped the slides. These things splatted all over the floor.

Nathan: Did they break?

Rossbach: No, they didn't break. They were just all out of order. So I said, "It really doesn't matter at all. Just put them back in the caroussel, and I will give the lecture by referring to what comes up next." I liked that idea very much, and it worked.

But I had the feeling there for a while that I wouldn't have slides, I wouldn't show slides; I would take a few examples and have the people experience seeing the actual things. Then I thought, "Well, I'm not going to do that. I'm going to see if I can just talk for an hour without showing them anything." Then I got it to the point where I would talk for an hour without using any notes whatsoever, absolutely no notes, although I would have a structure of the talk in my mind, naturally. But just see if I could get up there before a group of people and just talk for an hour about this thing that's important to me. It worked. I've done it only once, but at least I tried it. I had that experience.

They've never invited me back. This probably wasn't what they had in mind. I think you can treat these lectures as just creative acts, that's all. You organize them as you would organize a novel or anything else. You try to conceal the organization as much as you can.

Spontaneity and Judgments

Nathan: Why would you conceal the organization?

Rossbach: Because it's nice if something happens spontaneously. If there is a sense of ease and--You could get up there and follow an outline, but that loses some of the spontaneity right there.

Nathan: Is this also true in art, that you don't want the organization to show?

Rossbach: Right. I want it to look easy. I said before, I want it to look innocent, and you would wonder why anyone would do that. A child could do that, and yet you know that a child couldn't do it.

Nathan: This makes me think of Chere Lai Mah. Is there a relationship in the sort of minimalist things that she does--is that related to what you're talking about?

Rossbach: I think hers are more genuinely spontaneous than mine are. I don't know. I think she's absolutely remarkable. She amuses me. Nothing seems too serious. I think it would be hard for some people to think there was anything there at all. I like that feeling.

Rossbach: You don't have to try to reach everybody in what you do. It isn't that you feel superior to anybody, you know, as though they're not up to understanding what you're doing or anything like that. It's just that everybody isn't going to respond to everything.

I have the confusing feeling that any judgment that I make about anything--if I make a really emphatic judgment about it, I can be sure that in a short time I will have switched completely, that I feel totally the reverse about it. And that's crazy. If I say, "I really don't care for this. I just don't care for this at all," in time I will like that very, very much.

Nathan: Does it work the other way? Some things that you thought were wonderful, you will find less wonderful as time goes on?

Rossbach: I imagine so.

Nathan: It suggests that art and your response to it is a living thing. It isn't static?

Rossbach: Yes.

Bauhaus Painting and Weaving

Nathan: Are there any examples of things that you can think of that at first you would reject, and later find that you did like and did respond to? Don't feel that you have to answer that if it doesn't particularly interest you.

Rossbach: Well, I think I'm more interested in Bauhaus painting now than I ever thought I would be. I really hadn't seen much Bauhaus painting, this group of Bauhaus painters, although I've seen Paul Klee. But he doesn't particularly interest me. There are other painters of the Bauhaus; we so seldom see their work. That's why I think you have to travel around so much to see things.

When we were in Zurich last year, we saw some Bauhaus painting, and the color is hard to take. I had felt that the early Bauhaus weaving had this color that's hard to take, and it obviously derived from these painters.

Nathan: Was this expressionist--?

Rossbach: No. I don't know what you call it. I really don't know. It's a very hard kind of painting. Nothing seems fresh or spontaneous at all. It just looks as though everything is calculated, and everything is shaded, say, from red to green for a reason, you know; there's a reason behind everything that gets done. They are almost overly composed.

Now I like them.

I wish I could understand my relation to the Bauhaus. I feel that I talk against it all the time in pointing out what I think is wrong with it, and yet at the same time, it seems to fascinate me. Maybe I'm really in tune with the Bauhaus and can't accept the idea. I don't know.

Nathan: Is the influence still pervasive?

Rossbach: On me?

Nathan: Not only on you. I was thinking of the Bauhaus influence, let's say, on artists. Is that still a factor?

Rossbach: I don't know. I think that's hard to say. Well, Anni Albers, for instance, the Bauhaus weaver--let me try and think, what is her influence? Is she an influence today? This is really an important thing. It would be nice to come up with some clear feeling about what her contribution is, or is she influencing our weavers today. I think about it a lot, but I don't really reach any big conclusions. You know, I can talk rather superficially about her and say, "Well, she said that weaving could be an art," and that's very important now. But then we'd just have: "Of course." So, what next?

It's very hard to sort of match up what she says with what she does. She talks about all this experimentation, but her work can look so totally unexperimental.

Presence or Absence of Influence

Rossbach: It would be nice to understand this whole period in history, whether she has any influence at all, and whether she ever has had. Who knows?

Nathan: Of weavers active now, that you know of, can you identify any influences to which they are responding? Magdalena Abakanowicz or Jagoda Buic, or American weavers? Is there a line that you can follow, and say, yes, this person's ideas are now influential?

Rossbach: No, I don't think so.

Nathan: That's an important answer.

Rossbach: We heard Abakanowicz talk this past year. She was in Banff having a big show of her work. Beautiful. So she gave a few lectures, and we heard one of them. We just happened to be there at the same time. She was talking about when she was doing these things, these great hanging things, that she called Abakans, and she was talking about how everybody then was doing Abakans, and she had to turn in some other direction. Someone said, "Who is doing Abakans?" I couldn't think of anybody that I know who had done an Abakan. Did she deceive herself somehow in thinking that this had been such a terrific influence, or what? Or did I miss all the people who had done Abakans? I just don't think that kind of influence exists.

"Weavers of the Forties," and Artists' Collections

Rossbach: I brought this magazine. I wanted to say a word or two about this.

Nathan: Good. This is American Craft?

Rossbach: This is the new issue of American Craft. The article that I wrote on Mary Atwater is in it.

Nathan: This is "The Weavers of the Forties?"

Rossbach: "The Weavers of the Forties," yes. They did Dorothy Liebes a month or so ago, and now Mary Atwater, and next time there's going to be Anni Albers, and finally Marianne Strengell. There are these four. In a way it seems like an awfully good idea to have these four representing the period, and in another way, there were a lot of other people working at the same time who are totally ignored. The implication is that these are the weavers of the period. Of course, I'm now very aware of all the people that are not mentioned. I would like to write many more articles that would include all these other people, but I'm not going to do it. I just have the feeling very strongly.

Anyway, it was very difficult to get photographs of Mary Atwater's work. She has not received much publicity for her work. Her books have received publicity, and her ideas, but she herself wasn't known particularly for original weaving. At least, I don't think so. There is a collection of them in Los Angeles. I was going down to photograph these things in Los Angeles, and for some reason it was impossible. Someone had to be down there, you know, to get the things out of storage. It just got too involved at the time.

Rossbach: So American Craft hired Gail Natzler, who lives in the Los Angeles area, to go down and do the photography. She is not a weaver, but she took this very seriously and did a beautiful job of photographing the Atwater textiles that had been selected for her by the people who keep the collection, you see.

Nathan: You did not make the selections?

Rossbach: No, I'd never seen the textiles. So then she sent all of her slides to me, and then I selected which ones I thought would be good illustrations for what was being said.

Nathan: In what collection was this kept?

Rossbach: It says, "The collection of the Southern California Handweavers Guild." As I understand it, it's housed in the University of Southern California, which seems strange to me. Apparently they got Mary Atwater's books and her weaving samples when she died.

Nathan: So she was western--?

Rossbach: She was western, but she was much more associated with Montana and Utah, Salt Lake City. I would have thought Salt Lake City would have gotten them, because they have the Mary Atwater Guild there and so on. They are very loyal to Mary Atwater. I don't know how that happened. I think it's interesting what happens to people's work when they die.

I think the University of Tennessee got Dorothy Liebes's library. They bought it. This was put up for sale, and they bought it. That seems so strange to me.

Nathan: What would you have preferred?

Rossbach: I think what I would have preferred was that Dorothy Liebes would have decided where she wanted this to go, and she would have declared it in a will, and it would have gone there. I don't believe in this stuff being put up for grabs. It all seems to come down to money finally, I think.

Nathan: So the estate would benefit?

Rossbach: Yes. That didn't seem the name of the game to me. Dorothy Liebes had wanted all her stuff, everything, to come to the University of California at Berkeley, and she wanted all her samples, all her equipment, the looms, the whole works that she had in her studio back there, and she made this overture to our department when I was there. But she stipulated that it had to have maintenance, you know, and decent storage space. Well, the University was not about to do that at that time. So, as it was, this whole collection got fractured

Rossbach: after she died. The people who had worked in her studio divided this work up. Some of it was sent to our department--we have a nice collection of samples; and it was sent to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, various places. So, in a way, it's nice that her work is in very many places. If you want to see a whole lot of Dorothy Liebes's work, you would have to travel all over the world.

When Mary Dumas died, she left a number of her textiles, so they were given to the Cooper Union in New York City. I think the Cooper Union requested that a certain amount of money be given with this for cataloging her collection. It was that sort of an arrangement.

As far as I know, nothing has happened to Lea Miller's collection--she did all these gauzes over the years. It was at the time when everybody wove three-yard lengths. That was just what you wove, a three-yard length, so she has all these three-yard lengths of gauze constructions. When she died, of course, all these things were just in her basement stored. I really panicked over this, because I didn't know what the family would do with these things. I tried to advise them that they should give them to Cooper Union--you know, that's part of the Smithsonian--or somewhere like that, that would take good care of these things. These are important examples of what was happening in that period. I'm not sure that they ever did that. I don't think probably anything has ever been done with them. That bothers me.

But anyway, I was able to borrow them all, borrow this whole thing, and I photographed them all as well as I could. So I have photographs of all this work. I would really like to be able to write about Lea Miller. She said that I was the only person who knew what she was doing. Well, it's nice to have one person that knows what you're doing. And in a way, it's sort of a responsibility that I feel, that since I did sort of know what she was doing, it would be nice to write it, and so I have all this material for illustrations, if I ever find that I can do this thing.

I feel the same about Mary Dumas. I would like to talk about her, because I feel her contribution was quite unique and quite unrecognized. I think in both these cases the work was unrecognized. I think a peculiarity of these times is that certain people get all the publicity, and it's nice; I have four people, so I give them all the credit for the '40s and the '50s. That's wrong. It's absolutely wrong. You don't tell how Henning Watterson and Trude Guermonprez and all these other people were doing work that was so

Rossbach: similar and important. I don't know how you recognize all these people. You feel that they're all going down the drain, down the tube, as I said. But who's going to remember them?

Maybe it isn't important that they be remembered. I haven't the slightest idea about that. It bothers me, though.

Photos of Weaving: Which Way Is Up?

Rossbach: But anyway, what I wanted to say about this article: they sent Gail Natzler to photograph them, and she did a beautiful job.

Nathan: This is about Mary Atwater?

Rossbach: About Mary Atwater. And they put the photographs in the magazine all sideways. This drives me absolutely crazy.

Nathan: Did they not let you see any proofs?

Rossbach: Oh, no. They never let me see proofs. They edit these things without letting me see them, and they add things. I don't see these at all. That really is upsetting, too. It isn't a nice feature at all. It's always interesting to see what they choose to eliminate, what they excise. So it's always sort of exciting to have the thing come and see what they've done with it under your name.

Nathan: In a horrible sort of way?

Rossbach: Yes. A textile should always be--except for tapestry--should always be illustrated with the warp running up and down and the weft going across, so that when you look at this thing, you know instantaneously which is warp and which is weft, and you can understand the structure. You can understand how this came about, which is part of the appreciation of the thing. So this thing, which is a very beautiful example of a wrap weave, if I look at it this way, it makes sense. If I look at it <u>this</u> way, it makes absolutely no sense. That's silly.

Nathan: Yes, I can see that.

Rossbach: Because, of course, when you actually look at a textile, you look at it sideways or you look at it any way, but there is a way of looking at it in a magazine or a museum. People are not sensitive to that. This just drives me crazy, to have an overshot weave, where the pattern is created out of the weft, and then to have the weft running in the direction of the warp. In this one, I don't know from the photograph which is warp and which is weft. In a sense it doesn't matter, but in another sense it matters very much. Because maybe if

Rossbach: I knew enough about this little spot weave here, I would know which had to be warp and which had to be weft. I mean, it isn't such an obvious thing as it is in this overshot weave.

Then there is a typographical error in it. They're very good about correcting, and I know everybody has typographical errors which bother them. You really deplore them, and even when you've had the chance to read these things ten times first, they still get through. But this is a particularly insidious one, in which I said, "the joy of creating," and it got in there as, "the job of creating." [laughter] Which tended to turn the whole thing into work instead of pleasure, and then, who is going to know that? You read it, and it makes perfectly good sense, "the job of creating."

Nathan: Anyone who knows you would know that's not the right word.

Rossbach: I feel that in presenting these four people, I've tried to present them so that you don't know which one I particularly like, whose ideas I really most approve. I tried to be fairly generous toward them. I think probably the tone comes through that I'm knocking Anni Albers down, which in a way I am. But she is so high that she can fall quite a ways. You know, she has achieved such eminence--Eminence? Yes--that it's kind of fun to build up these lesser known figures a little bit at her expense. But still, I might really value her more than the others, or less. I'm not saying. But--I'm not trying to be cagey with you. I don't know how I feel myself about it.

Ideas vs. Ideas

Rossbach: When I gave a talk at Fiberworks a long time ago on these people, I had a tape made in which I had the ideas of Anni Albers set against the ideas of Mary Atwater, and I turned it into a conversation between these two women using quotes of what they had actually said. It was a wonderful tape. I think you do these wonderful things, and they just come and go. And who cares? You know. It's so funny.

Nathan: Do you have that tape still?

Rossbach: Yes.

Nathan: Could we have it transcribed and put it as an appendix? [See Appendix B]

Rossbach: Sure.

Nathan: That would be wonderful. It's an exciting idea. Let's do that.

Rossbach: I have some little drawings I would like to deposit with this thing, too.

But anyway, we got a woman with a middle west twang to read the things of Mary Atwater, and a woman with a German accent to do the Anni Albers things. So after we had done this, I had the audience vote on whether they went along with Mary Atwater's ideas, or whether they went along with Anni Albers's ideas. It was a silly idea, but I did it anyway. It was sort of an audience participation, and something they had to decide something about. It was just about 50-50. It was amazing. You would think that everybody would have gone along with Anni Albers. You know, she's sort of the spokesman of the age for what has been happening in fiber. But the audience split, which I thought was nice.

Nathan: I was wondering whether--having written these four articles on the weavers of the '40s and '50s--you were interested in moving along in time and doing anything with the '60s and '70s?

Rossbach: No. I don't feel that I understand the '60s and the '70s, and I wish I did. Some people seem to feel that they do, what was happening in that period. For some reason, I don't feel that I understand what was happening then. I know that I was part of it and working in the--what?--contemporary vein, or whatever it was. I was doing it, too, whatever it was we were doing. But I don't understand it sufficiently, and furthermore, I don't want to write about anybody who is living. I have found that is difficult. I don't want to get involved in that again. Someone said you should never write about anybody until I forget how many years back. Well...! I just feel that when this article that I wrote about Anni Albers comes out, she's probably going to sue me. I just don't want to get involved in any sort of hassle. And how do you write about things if you can't write honestly how you feel about them?

Nathan: There is concern about accuracy and fairness.

Rossbach: Yes. I don't know what I want to write. I'd like to write something, but-- I always wonder if you wrote a novel, if you would feel freer, if that's the great advantage of a novel, the freedom. If you don't have to justify or account for every word that you say. And I suppose you're dealing with a truth, a different kind of a truth, and of course, then it would be judged on whether that truth has been met.

Nathan: You don't have to have footnotes in a novel.

Rossbach: No, you don't have to have footnotes. That would be nice. But I think about all the things I would like to write, and I feel I would like to start on something else. I would really like to have been able to expand, though, on the work of the '40s, and written in

Rossbach: more detail about these people, and included more, and included a lot of other people who were working at the time. But, as I said, I don't believe in writing anything that I can't get published now. That's a dumb thing.

Nathan: No; you write to communicate.

Rossbach: Yes, you write to communicate. And it's hard. I think writing is very hard.

Nathan: Yes it is.

Rossbach: And maybe that energy could go into something else, if it isn't going to get published.

Nathan: You've had a relationship with American Craft magazine over a good many years.

Rossbach: Yes.

Nathan: Do you negotiate with them about what you are interested in writing, or do they approach you?

Rossbach: Both. This idea of writing an article on Dorothy Liebes, you asked me what my reaction was to having visited her studio. I wrote an article a long time ago, years ago, about Dorothy Liebes. I've written two articles before that were not acceptable to them. They're not going to accept anything that's critical, you know, and at that time I didn't know that, and I thought that this woman was too commercially oriented, that she was scarcely an artist. I mean, she wasn't really solving art problems. She was solving commercial problems. I still think that sort of happened to her. So they didn't want those articles. But that must have been my reaction to the visit to San Francisco, because that was my only contact with her.

Techniques and Influences

Nathan: Do you have the sense that there are different influences on the west coast, than, for example, those at Columbia or at Cranbrook?

Rossbach: Yes.

Nathan: Is there a different milieu here than in other parts of the country?

Rossbach: I suppose there is. I feel that my life has been so different in each place that it's hard to compare them at all.

Nathan: Are you aware of, let's say, an Asian influence here, Japanese basketry, that sort of thing?

Rossbach: Sure, very much so. And Japanese textile techniques and printing and dyeing.

Nathan: Is ikat an eastern technique in general?

Rossbach: Yes. Indonesian. I mean, the word is, but the technique has been used a lot. Yes, I think those influences are very, very strong. The last printed textiles that I exhibited were influenced by Japanese things and by Paisley shawls. They fell into two groups.

Nathan: I saw the term "heat transfer." Is that a technique that you use?

Rossbach: Yes. You know how color xerox works. You can have it made into a heat transfer, so you iron this thing on, and it irons the image onto the cloth in reverse.

Nathan: When we were walking around the room, did I understand you to say that there are no especially great colorists working in weaving now?

Rossbach: I don't think you would describe anybody as a colorist. I think maybe--this is just a personal view--that Neda Al-Hilali would come closest to my idea of a colorist, of a strong colorist. But she's strong in other ways, too, so that she doesn't just stand as a colorist. You don't feel that this is her one compelling interest.

I think in the '40s, for instance, Dorothy Liebes was a colorist, and you thought of Liebes color. She was shocking and innovative, in the use of color. She wasn't interested in structure particularly, and the color came through her structure. It was the color that dominated. It was really Liebes.

I don't think there's anybody like that now, and I do think that perhaps Jack Larsen had the potential of being that. But, of course, you never can say what a person could have been, or you have regrets, or any such thing. It's really idiotic. But I remember him as someone who really responded to color, and there was this sort of exuberant kind of color in the early weaving that I remember. I feel that over the years that I was teaching, I saw less and less interest in color. People were off in other directions. So that instead of putting up beautiful warps of color, you know, people made warps of a single yarn, often interesting in fiber or texture--but not a yarn of a certain color reacting with a yarn of another color.

Rossbach: Lea Miller was really strong in color. I think of someone like Lenore Tawney, for instance. Everybody is familiar with her work and is interested in her as a woman and her interest in religion and all this. It's all part of the whole fiber scene right now. But I don't know how this has directly influenced people. I think when she was doing these tapestries that were very loose, loosely beaten, almost falling apart, in a way I think other people were influenced. Partly because it seemed all right to do that kind of thing.

I think sometimes when teaching, you have students who are obviously influenced very directly by somebody, and you feel they have almost lifted a photograph out of a book You've seen pieces where you know where it came from. And that's okay. I mean, why not?

Nathan: You don't feel you have to liberate them from that?

Rossbach: No. If they're comfortable doing something like that--why, I think the whole history of textiles has been repeating and repeating. And nothing is ever repeated exactly as it had been before. I think it's important that they know where the influence came from. I feel that in all these things. It's really important to know what you have been influenced by, if possible, and I like the idea of giving credit to it, to the person or thing. But otherwise, it doesn't bother me particularly.

I think Anni Albers, for instance, her work has been reworked a thousand times--you get the idea of this thing, and you rework it. I think that's great. You might just call it "homage to Anni Albers." Why not? I mean, it was an interesting intellectual problem for her, and it is for a student, too, or for anyone.

Nathan: You were saying a little earlier--I think it had something to do with influence--that speaking to a group in a more remote area was not the same as speaking to a group in a cultural center, like Boston or New York. Is there an element of proximity that's important for artists? Does it matter that there are a lot of other people interested in what you're doing, and you're interested in what they're doing? Does that make a difference?

Rossbach: I think it does. I think it makes a great difference. I wonder how these people in relative isolation, in small communities, where they don't have a large support group of people also interested in fiber, how they manage to do such interesting work, as they sometimes do. I think in this area, for instance, we enjoy such a richness of all this fiber activity. I think recently it has been astounding, the number of lectures on various phases of fiber art, and exhibits, the number of invitations to exhibits and openings that are floating around. You can't believe that all this is happening.

Nathan: Is this new? Has it not been like this before?

Rossbach: No. I don't think it's been like this before. I think it's extremely lively right now, and yet it doesn't seem to have any particular core to me. I don't know, that sounds like a dumb thing to say, but it doesn't. There's all this--many, many, many people producing and all exhibiting and all wanting to talk about what they're doing.

A few years ago this didn't seem to be the case to me. But a phase always comes and goes. All these lectures are given, all these exhibits are given, people have produced all this work, and it's here just for an evening, or whatever, and somehow it's gone. There is so much of it. I feel maybe there are a very few real highlights that are going to be remembered.

When you were asking me if I saw Trude Guermonprez when she was talking in Seattle, I didn't, but I presume this was a highlight of the cultural life of Seattle, people interested in fiber for that year. That was it. Here, it's so varied and so numerous. How do you say what is happening or who is going to remember that anything happened, or who's going to write the history of this time? Nobody, obviously. How are they ever going to find out what the history was in this time? You realize the only thing is to live through it, to experience it yourself. People influence you, and things will change, but somehow, it's not going to be part of recorded history the way that researchers would like it to be.

Well, I'm trying to do some research on the printed fabrics of the 1940s, and I feel that I can't find out anything about these people, because there was just a whole group of people doing these fabric designs. They did a few, and they were produced, and then these people did other things. You know, some of them, like Dorothy Liebes, continued for her whole lifetime in weaving, and everybody knew Dorothy Liebes. But these people just did a few, and then they were gone.

All these people having fiber shows, what happens to them next? You become terribly involved; what is happening in the world at this point? What does happen to these people? In order for them to build up a reputation at all in fiber, it takes devotion for many, many, many years. Just by being around for so many years, you get so your name gets known. You develop some sort of a reputation. But if you just do a few splurges of shows, and you're off onto some other phase of activity, change, change, change, it's different. I think you see some of the most significant work that just appears and disappears, and you've seen it.

Nathan: Is another pattern possible, in which the weaver stays with weaving, and does not go off into another direction? Is it possible to be consistently creative in one technique, in one medium?

Rossbach: You'd think it must be possible, but I don't know who is doing it.

Nathan: Is there a way to encourage this kind of continuity, if it's a good thing?

Rossbach: I don't know that it is a good thing.

Nathan: I see. I thought maybe you were implying that this is a little too scattered.

Rossbach: No, I don't think it's too scattered. It's something different. It's a different time. I think it's all part of a new freedom in many phases of your life, of people's lives.

Well, I have a nephew who has become a lawyer. I would say he's been a lawyer for a year. Now he doesn't want to be a lawyer. Well, this is unthinkable to me. If I was studying to become a lawyer, and I finally became a lawyer, I would just automatically think I'm a lawyer. But I don't think people think so much that way any more. If they don't particularly like it, or they see its disadvantages very early, there seem options to do something else. Don't you think so?

Nathan: I agree, and I wondered how this is for artists. Thinking of the different techniques that you've enjoyed and the things that you've done--marionettes, ceramics, ceramic sculpture, woodblock, photography, slide kits, basketry, textiles, design, painting and drawing, handwoven and hand-printed fabric...[laughter]

Rossbach: I feel like a prime example.

Nathan: But there is a core to what you do.

Rossbach: Yes.

Nathan: That's perhaps what you're missing in the current scene or the scene you observed.

Rossbach: But maybe there's a core that we don't observe, that we don't--I don't know.

Jurying Art Exhibits

Nathan: Thinking again of your wanting to establish an environment in which students could be free, and your willingness to accept and teach them to accept, how was it for you when you were a juror, judging people's submissions for an exhibit?

Rossbach: I don't think I liked that very well, because I never feel that I'm quite willing to judge on the basis of what I think. I think there are always considerations that other people are going to look at this show and say, "This is what he chose." Or, you know that the gallery director is trying to get a show which is going to attract certain people to it, and you have to accept a number of works so that there will be a variety of stuff when someone comes to the show. So it isn't absolutely pure. You're not just looking at all this stuff and saying, "This is what I like." You make all these compromises, even if you're the only juror. Somehow I don't want to make these compromises.

I haven't been invited to be a juror on too many shows. Some people seem to devote their lives to moving around the country acting as a juror, and I think it's rather remarkable. These people become the taste-makers.

Nathan: Is there pay for this?

Rossbach: Yes, sure. Terribly influential. They tend to be mainly gallery directors. So that Paul Smith, from the Museum of Contemporary Crafts, or the man from the Renwick Gallery, and so on, they do a lot of this judging. I think they wield an awful lot of power. Then I think, "Well, I don't want to do it, so how can I criticize the situation?"

I have this experience which I kind of would like to get into the tape. Sometime early in the '50s, I think it was--I'm not sure, but maybe about then--I had been weaving ikats, and I was very interested in ikats for a long time. I was never really able to control them as well as I wanted to. I don't understand why I wasn't, but I wasn't. I see people doing ikats now, and they can control them beautifully and make them do what they want them to. I think any quality that mine had as ikats was because I couldn't control them. I didn't intend them to be so cuckoo as they turned out.

Nathan: Were these warp?

Rossbach: Yes, these were--at that time they were all warp ikats. Later on I did some weft ikats, but at that time they were warp.

Rossbach: They were having a large exhibit in, I think it was, Minneapolis. Anni Albers was going to be the sole juror. I thought, "Gee, what a wonderful opportunity. I really respect Anni Albers. They've got this good person to be the juror. I will send my most beautiful pieces." I think you could send four pieces. So I sent four beautiful ikats.

At that time, the juror had to make a small statement or rating of why he had accepted this. You frequently run into that, and it's just a pain, really terrible. I don't believe in it at all. But she had to rate the things on the basis of design and technique, I think. Well, she rejected all four of these things. On the rating sheet, she rated them as top in technique, the highest number I could get for technique, a ten or whatever and the lowest in design.

I was absolutely appalled, of course, at that time. I tried to persuade myself that, well, it was nice that she thought the technique was good. I can take care of the design myself, of what I think is good design, so it doesn't really matter, but it really bothered me at the time. It bothered me for a long time.

Shortly thereafter, she came out, and she gave a lecture at a craft conference--they had a craft conference at Asilomar. I think it was the first one that they ever had. I didn't go to it, but the talk that she gave has been published, and it appears in her book. In this talk she said that she had just come from juroring this show in Minneapolis, and she was appalled by all this work that came in that had no meaning, and so on and so on. And I thought, "Here my four beautiful pieces had no meaning." She could make a statement like that about them.

I learned from that thing. You don't say things like that. Maybe things don't speak to you, and maybe this was a limitation on the part of Anni Albers, that she didn't like ikats, or the looseness of my ikats, because they were loose. They weren't controlled the way they might have been. And maybe they were poor design, if someone can decide that.

I always vaguely wonder--and this is funny--whether that's why I feel I have to sort of argue with Anni Albers all the time. You know, I've never met the woman and never will. I read all the stuff she writes, and then I argue it in my own mind, whether she's right or wrong, and whether I'm still going over this terrible thing, that she rejected four of my beautiful textiles. It's absurd. You would think someone would have sense enough to get over it. But I think it's possible. I still cherish these feelings of disappointment, I suppose.

Nathan: If someone really doesn't like ikats, maybe she should disqualify herself from judging something she knows she doesn't like, and let somebody else do it.

Rossbach: Well, I don't think Anni Albers would do that.

Nathan: It's very perceptive of you, though, to look back and see the root of an attitude. I think it's human to want to defend something you have done that has value to you.

Self-Publishing

Rossbach: I'm just trying to throw in all these things that I thought of that I wanted to say here.

Nathan: Good. Please do.

Rossbach: I don't think I ever said specifically that Lillian Elliott is one whose work I greatly admire--and who has influenced my work and my thinking about textiles. I guess I admire as much as anything her independent judgments--her integrity. How lucky that she is in this area.

I didn't mention Sheila Hicks--I don't know why this happened. An old piece of hers that is in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art has been a real inspiration to me.

Since we're sort of winding this up. I had the idea that I would like to be able to publish my own book, and I felt that there was a certain limitation in doing books that are publishable, that you have to censor, you know, I mean, to use that word loosely. Or you have to make concessions, which I didn't want to make. And I thought, "If I could publish my own book, I could write anything I wanted." Then I was trying to figure out how I could publish this thing. I didn't want to do a vanity press type of thing, that sort of thing. I thought I should publish it myself.

Nathan: Had you a manuscript ready?

Rossbach: No. Heavens, no! That's part of the problem. [laughter] I went down to learn to use the UNIX. I took two classes in UNIX.

Nathan: Where did you go?

Rossbach: At Berkeley. I thought it would be fun to set these things up in type myself and do the whole thing. Well, the first thing, UNIX was much more complex than one imagines. You have to have access to this equipment all the time in order to do it. It just wasn't possible for me to do it.

Rossbach: But anyway, part of the problem then was, well, what do I want to write? What do I really want to write that I can't write and get published in ordinary channels? What is this thing that I'm so concerned about? And then I figured I don't know what I want to write. You know, what is it that I could only have published if I published it myself? And is it really so rewarding? This has really concerned me for quite a while now.

I do these little sort of books that I just do on the Xerox machine, and I make these statements. So I publish these little handbooks. So I've done, oh, maybe three of these little things on weaving. I say things that I think are sort of playful and silly. I think they're humorous, but I don't know if anyone else would. Humor is an awfully difficult thing, you know.

Nathan: Will you be sure to deposit these with your transcript?

Rossbach: Well, I might.

Nathan: People would read them. It would be there for people to read and consult, and they won't disappear.

Rossbach: In a way, they say things that I really believe in, and some that I don't believe in at all. That whole thing that drives me crazy: why I say things that I don't believe in.

Nathan: Does this satisfy your wish to have an unfettered opportunity to write?

Rossbach: No, not at all.

Nathan: How do you distribute these?

Rossbach: I don't. That's the problem. Who's my audience for these things?

Nathan: I would love to read them.

Rossbach: You probably are thinking of something grand, and they're not grand at all. I have taken slides of them page by page, and in lectures that I've given, I've gone over page by page and read them to the audience.

Nathan: How did they go over?

Rossbach: Beautifully, I thought. That seemed a very nice way of doing it. But there are only special places that you would do that. I could do that in Boston, and I could do it in Berkeley, and I did it in Colorado, which seems strange, but there was a conference of the whole area there, and that was a lively, wonderful conference. People were so stimulating. I did it there, and I thought it went well. But then I've done little books on other things. It's hard to say what they are on.

Rossbach: Katherine does little books which are more pictorial things. But I feel I want mine to have writing in them, and I want a written message. So all mine have writing in them.

Nathan: Are there also drawings?

Rossbach: Yes.

Nathan: They sound wonderful, like a little personal journal.

Rossbach: Yes. I did that when I was in Japan the last time. I wrote haikus all the time, and then I made a little book of these silly haikus. I thought of various ways of dealing with this, that I would--Well, it doesn't matter here, but of ways that you could print this on almost a poster size thing with all the little individual things, and then people could cut these up and make their own little books, staple them together, something like that.

It just seems that there have to be more options of what one does. I get all excited about them, and then finally they just end up in a shoebox upstairs. You know, that sort of thing. I like the idea of, say, doing this as just a poster type thing, sort of make your own book, and just pass them out at a lecture, do it on the cheapest kind of paper--people love to have something given to them. And I like to give things, too.

I don't know. I have all these fantasies about writing a poem and publishing it and standing down on Telegraph Avenue just giving it to people.

Nathan: Or even going to one of the craft fairs that the City of Berkeley puts on, where people come because they want to see; to have something to hand out would be very nice.

Rossbach: Yes.

Nathan: Part of it is the need to communicate?

Rossbach: Yes, right. Down at Pacific Basin--you know Pacific Basin?

Nathan: Yes, I do.

Rossbach: A woman who is the wife of, I think, the chairman of their board--

Nathan: Pat MacGaw?

Rossbach: No, she isn't chairman of the board.

Nathan: No, she's one of the directors. I have the names of the board members, but I can't think of the one we want. I can check it for you.

Rossbach: Anyway, she does beautiful calligraphy, very beautiful calligraphy. She is Virginia Larue. Her husband is Al Silbowitz. She got the idea that she wanted to do in calligraphy a quotation of something that I've written. I had to write a quote, you know, for this thing. Have you seen it?

Nathan: No.

Rossbach: Okay. I didn't know what I was getting into in the first place. I thought it was going to be a lot of people from the Bay Area, textile people were going to write quotes, and it was all going to be together. But it turned out it was just my quote.

I wrote this thing finally. It's just a sentence. It's amazing how you labor over these things.

Nathan: An epigram is hard to phrase.

Rossbach: Well... And finally, of course, they come out so self-conscious, seeming that they don't have this oomph that you would like them to have. They just want to seem so easy and so straightforward. Instead of that, they come out self-conscious and cute, which I didn't want at all. But anyway, I did it.

So she did this in calligraphy. She turned it into a big poster. [gestures]

Nathan: About a yard square?

Rossbach: Yes, right. It seems funny to have that statement--you know, these posters then are being sold. I can't imagine who buys them.

Nathan: Do you remember what you said?

Rossbach: What I said? It said, "Warp over weft, Weft over warp, Only this, To create the flowers of Versailles, And the cosmology of China."

Nathan: You were into brocades for sure.

Rossbach: Right. I was into brocades, and Katherine was into Chinese embroidery. [laughter]

Nathan: I like that.

Rossbach: You know, these Chinese robes have the whole plan of the world around them, the water and the mountains , and all of this, this whole structure, this whole cosmology. Well, I wanted to use the word cosmos, the cosmos of China. I read it to Katherine, and cosmos was a flower. You know, cosmos?

Nathan: Yes.

Rossbach: And coming after--you know, the flowers of Versailles and the cosmos of China. [laughter] After much looking through a dictionary we got "cosmology," which means the same as cosmos. But then it sounded like--what's this thing that they do to skin?

Nathan: Split or slice?

Rossbach: No, no, beauticians. What are those? Cosmetologists. They do cosmetology.

But how you labor over these damn things, and then you wish you had something important to say. I have this feeling of doing this for Canada for this television thing. It was just a beautiful opportunity, and you wish you could say something profound. I feel that about this. I wish I had something profound to say. God, I have spent my whole life over textiles. You'd think I would have something really--not startling, but so simple--so that it could just be put in the most simple terms. I don't know.

Nathan: I think it's in there.

Rossbach: Well, I hope it is, but... I think this whole experience is exhausting. I didn't know it was going to be like that. I think it's been very interesting. But it sets you thinking and evaluating yourself, so that there's always sort of--what do they call this?--the third ear. You're listening to yourself do all this, and my God, the conclusions you reach about what you're hearing yourself say!

Nathan: If you just did it off the top of your head in a superficial way, it wouldn't exhaust you so much, but it wouldn't have the quality that this has.

Rossbach: That's a nice way of looking at it.

Nathan: I truly believe that.

Rossbach: It seems like you want to be perfectly honest within the possibilities of being honest. Because otherwise, what's the point of doing this?

Nathan: Then it's just an ego thing, if you don't really get down to the basic questions, and there really aren't answers to most of them. What difference does it make that I have done this? What will the consequences be? Maybe there is no answer. But has it been worthwhile to you to do it?

Rossbach: Yes.

Nathan: It's certainly worthwhile for me.

Fiber Arts, Communication, and the Future

Nathan: Suppose that a student came to you who had capabilities in painting and in fiber, and asked, "What is better for me if I want to express what I have to say?" Would you have any advice?

Rossbach: Well, I think I would have to say painting. I think we are trying to make fiber more expressive and--well, it's certainly more expressive now than it was when I was a student, with what we are doing. Not that in history it hasn't been an expressive medium. But I think I get more inspiration, or whatever you want to call this thing, for my fiber work from reading journals and books on painting and sculpture.

I don't know. I don't know that I'm saying the right things here. I'm just sort of thinking about them, and I'm not sure that I accept that that's true.

Nathan: Let's say a goal for fiber art is to be more expressive. How could it be made more so?

Rossbach: I guess expression to me would come through imagery. Well, let's say Lillian Elliot does a basket out of these branches. This is an extremely expressive form. The vitality of this woman, strength, and so on, are all expressed in that basket. That isn't what I want to express myself. I mean, I want that quality, but there's a different kind of a communication, more specific, or something. I don't know. And it seems to me that this is possible, not through abstract expressionist paintings--they don't have this communicative quality to me. They communicate the same kind of communication that I think a basket by Lillian Elliott has, this abstract-- You know, the power of a line or a mass, and the juxtaposition of these things, whatever it is that communicates this.

But I think of a--oh, this is very difficult. I certainly don't think of imagery through tapestry weaving or anything like that. Heavens, no. I'm not into that at all. But I guess that's partially why I like these heat transfer things that I slap onto fiber work: I'm getting sort of a painterly kind of communication. But I don't even know what I'm communicating. And I will say things that aren't true. If someone asks me what it means, I will say what it means, but that isn't what it means.

When they were interviewing me on this thing for Canadian Broadcasting, and I was holding some of these baskets with images on them, they said, "Why did you use the imagery of this baseball player, Pete Rose?" Well, I think if I were being absolutely honest, I would say, "I just happened to see this thing in a magazine. It was the

Rossbach: right size. I liked it. For some reason it spoke to me. I just liked it as an image, and I put it on the basket." That doesn't persuade anybody. So you have to think of some reason that will be more persuasive.

Of course, Pete Rose has been on these television ads of someone with gray hair who is competing in a youth-oriented society, and so he uses some hair tonic, and his hair gets darker again, so he is a young man. It is this older man sort of in a youth-oriented society surviving. Well, it's very persuasive. So that's why I used Pete Rose, and I like the name Rose. I like the idea of a Rose basket, but that really had nothing to do with why I really used it. I really used it because I saw this image. It was lying around here on a publication or something that we had, and I tore it off and saved it. But I don't know anything about Pete Rose, and I don't care anything about baseball. It was confusing, because when I put the heat transfer, things were reversed, so that if he was a right-handed batter, he turned out to be a left-handed batter. I don't know if he is right or left-handed.

But the same thing: I used John Travolta, a heat image of John Travolta. Well, why did I use Travolta? I used Travolta because I suddenly wanted to put an image on this piece of cloth. I just felt this had to have an image, and in the paper that day there was a picture of John Travolta which was the right size, and I colored it and made a heat transfer of it and put it on. I suppose someone would say, "Well, there, you may not know why you put it on, but there was a reason why you put it on. Why did this appeal to you?" Well, I don't know. Certainly I've never thought much about John Travolta, except that I saw him on an airplane, that movie--what?

Nathan: Something about disco? "Saturday Night Fever?"

Rossbach: "Saturday Night Fever." I saw it on an airplane, because I don't go to movies. I just thought the man was wonderfully lively, energetic, just marvelous, and I liked this quality, this youth. So sometimes I say that's why I put it on there, but it was just almost like choosing Mickey Mouse. It's just Mickey Mouse. There it is. What else do you do?

Nathan: So it doesn't have to have been planned originally as an intrinsic part of the item?

Rossbach: [laughs] It certainly wasn't. Of course, lots of people would have things planned. Certain things that I do I plan very, very carefully. I render them over months. That isn't so much fun for me now. I want things to happen faster.

Nathan: Maybe the creativity is a little more playful.

Rossbach: Yes. And somehow when I used the word "innocent" earlier on in these tapes, I think that's kind of a misconception in a way. I don't know exactly what I mean by innocent. I like the innocence of childhood. The world is wonderful and fresh and new and exciting. That is great. I also like sophistication. I don't want to be innocent. I want to be sophisticated. You know what I mean?

Nathan: Yes. I think you want to keep the spontaneity--

Rossbach: Yes, I do. I just love that freshness of, well, a puppy looking at this world. My God, he can just move through the back yard, and every blade of grass is so wonderful. You don't want to be jaded. On the other hand, I think innocence beyond a point when a person should be innocent is just despicable. It's a quality that I almost feel you have a responsibility not to be, not to be innocent.

Nathan: You must grow up?

Rossbach: Yes, you must. So that, if I say I admire innocence in a work, it's confusing. I felt I had to clarify it a little. I don't think I've clarified it much, but a little bit.

Nathan: It can't be like a chemical formula. There has to be some ambiguity in what we're discussing. That's fine. But you seem to have been able to retain a certain freshness. As a reviewer said, you are always fresh. So maybe you have resolved some of these competing values. [long pause, followed by laughter]

You don't have to say aye or nay to that one, but it struck me that maybe it looks easier from the outside than from the inside.

Rossbach: Sometimes even printed textiles seem more communicative to me than constructions in fiber. I think--oh, I'm on very shaky ground when I say that. But I like using imagery, and somehow it seems easier to do it in a graphic technique.

Nathan: Maybe that almost reconciles some of the values of drawing and painting with some of the values of textiles?

Rossbach: But I don't think in a textile you can go far enough. You almost have to paint. But then if I--well, I've been doing these little geometric paintings lately. That isn't even what I'm talking about. I mean, that isn't going far enough. That's no different from what I do in weaving. But it's all dreams of what you think you would like to do; for one reason or another, you don't necessarily allow yourself to do it, partly because you don't have the skill. I don't mean that I have paintings in my head, if only I could put them down. You know, people say they have this novel in their head, they just haven't bothered to put it down yet. It isn't that sort of thing at all.

Rossbach: This impact that I felt when I first saw a Max Beckman painting... If I could ever achieve that in a painting--boy, look at that! It just about knocks you down, it's so powerful. You don't even necessarily have to know what it's saying. It doesn't say it to me as much any more as it did. But every once in a while, you see a painting that has this quality. It's strong, and it's overwhelming. I think some of the figurative painters from this area--well, Bischoff and some of the others--sort of achieved this quality that seems so desirable to me now. Just occasionally it comes through in their work, and of course, they've turned from it, and they're off onto something else completely. Apparently it wasn't wholly satisfying as something they were just going to keep doing their whole lives. They have a romantic flavor mixed with very strong statements.

I would like to make strong statements in fiber. I think Abakanowicz makes very strong statements in fiber. I think to look at an exhibit of Abakanowicz's recent work is very, very moving. It's very emotional. You can't pinpoint it and say specifically what it is that you think she's doing, or what is relates to, but it really has it.

Nathan: Yes, I see.

Do you have any notion of what the future of fiber art is, what direction it might take?

Rossbach: I'm very poor at things like this, speculating about where things are going. If I were going to be reasonable about the thing, it just seems reasonable what should happen. I think that this whole fiber movement is moving more and more toward painting and sculpture. It's going to be absorbed into painting and sculpture, and there's going to be a whole renewal of weaving as weaving and things like that, that have been totally ignored in this whole time. I don't know how this will come in, what this will be. It's almost a rediscovery of the loom and the wonders of weaving. This interest that I have in brocade--it just seems so wonderful that you can manipulate looms to do this, the structure of these things. They became so complex. They were solving such complicated problems, not only of structure, but of the relation of images to backgrounds. That whole thing has been overlooked in our time.

Nathan: Are you thinking of the jacquard technique?

Rossbach: Well...

Nathan: Or is that only part of it?

Rossbach: Yes, that's only part of it. I don't think necessarily it means that weaving might return in a complicated form. It might return in an incredibly simple form that we can't even envisage. I had a friend who did geometric paintings, and when all this abstract expressionism came in, this free painting, she just stopped painting, and she knew that geometric painting would return. In a matter of time, there would be a balance. Well, of course, what she didn't know was that when it returned, it would be something different from anything that anyone--you can't just sit and think you're going to pick out the turn of--

Nathan: The wheel?

Rossbach: Yes. But I don't think that fiber is going to be recognized as on a par with the other fine arts. I think it's becoming absorbed. It's going to become part of this other.

Nathan: Then it influences the other arts, do you think?

Rossbach: I think it influences it, and it is sort of used by fine artists who are not textile artists. It's a funny distinction. But then I think, maybe the qualities of weaving, and so on, will be rediscovered. I don't know. It would be nice to think that they would. You sort of have these hopes, so if you're speculating, you're really expressing your hopes rather than probably what's going to happen at all. I wish there would be some renaissance of interest in printed fabrics as printed fabrics. And in weaving as weaving. And knotting as knotting. And, I guess, tatting as tatting.

Nathan: Yes. Your hope is appealing.

You have spoken of many forms of art and their value, and shown how you practice the rare arts of candor and thoughtfulness in your own work, in teaching, writing, and speaking, and in appreciation of the art of others.

Thank you for the insights and generosity of these interviews.

Transcribers: Sam Middlebrooks and Michelle Stafford
Final Typist: Michele Anderson

Appendix A

ED ROSSBACH: MUSINGS ON A GALLERY PROJECT FOR FIBERWORKS
December 31, 1979.

[No interviewer was present when this tape was made. These are the comments of the artist thinking alone and aloud.

The color photo "Slide from the Gallery Project," is on side A of the collected photos.]

Rossbach: I like the idea of working in a gallery. It's just the idea that I like so far. I haven't done it yet; I'm just sitting here thinking about it. Somehow anything that you do in a gallery turns instantly into a work of art. It's all instant works of art. There's nothing that you can do that does not become a work of art. So that if you set an old chair against the wall, anyone coming into a gallery would look at it no longer as a chair but somehow as something that an artist set aside and decided was a work of art.

As soon as you put anything on the chair, I presume it is a more complex work of art. It has additional meaning, so that if someone just happened to walk through a gallery, I presume, and happened to put a piece of paper down on the chair, someone else might walk through and decide it had deep meaning. I suppose if it were a newspaper, that someone might see words or a picture on the newspaper and think that that had some significance. Or if there are no words or pictures noticeable, I presume that might seem significant; anything odd seems significant. If you would have this newspaper lying on a chair, it might suggest that someone had been sitting there and had gotten up and left the newspaper, the way you see them scattered around in waiting rooms and so on, tucked underneath chairs and all this sort of thing. And it has sort of a sense of departure and an emptiness about it that recalls, in a way, Van Gogh's painting of the chair.

No matter what is done, it can recall something else in art, some experience, something which perhaps no one ever intended. If a work of art has to have an idea, maybe there's no idea here, but it's the person, the observer, coming in who imposes the idea

Rossbach: on it. Of course that happens very much in works of art in which the artist has an idea, but an observer comes in with a completely different idea which he or she imposes on the work.

I suppose everybody has noticed that if you go into a gallery and are looking at a series of sculptures or paintings, the light switch or the fire-fighting hose and reel or the fuse box or anything like that becomes not only noticeable but important, and you look at it in relation to the works of art and ultimately you look at it as a work of art. This is all a bewildering thing because it does make you wonder exactly what the nature of art is and how artificial some of these ideas about art are.

What I propose to do in the gallery, I suppose is a legitimate work of art. It is not just going to be a series of found objects or things which are going to be interpreted as possibly works of art, but I have a vague idea of what I'm going to do. As I proceed along I'm going to make artistic judgments and I hope have a lot of fun in creating these particular things.

What really gave me the idea was the availability of this particular gallery, this empty space with very white walls, and I was thinking that I would like to see some of my stuff in this space or have a chance to photograph some of my stuff in this space. The more I thought about it the more I thought of actually creating things rather spontaneously in the space really, not even so much in relation to the four walls and so on, but just in relation to the whiteness and the airiness of the place, and the possibility that the light quality would be good for photographing.

It isn't even that the slides are supposed to be works of art, they're just a documentation of works of art, and I suppose the works of art are rather evanescent and nobody but me will ever see them. I don't know how that fits in with the idea of a work of art either, but I certainly think that any artist, as he goes along, watches his work in a number of transitional stages. Often he likes some of the early stages better than what happened to be the final stages, and I think he's remembering these things, and sometimes he documents the process as it goes along. He has a series of slides which recall, but I don't think he thinks of these slides as works of art either, although maybe they are. It's a very confusing time; you never know to what extent the slide is the work of art or the documentation is the work of art, and so on.

The space was available, and I wondered exactly what I could do in it that would be kind of fun. I didn't want it to be a long, extended thing; I wanted it to be terribly spontaneous. Sometime before I'd made a series of sort of plaited cubes. I

Rossbach: had a whole number of these things, and one day when I was by myself I began setting them up in different arrangements and photographing them from one position and another. I kept adding more cubes or subtracting cubes, and so on, and came out with several rolls of film. They weren't particularly interesting films, and I found that I was making a selection of which ones were best and I thought I could use the slides to show the cubes.

But that isn't the idea I have here. I'm not trying to show the cloth or the twigs or whatever the case may be. The totality of the thing is the important thing, and all the slides in succession are important, so that all the slides are necessary to this idea. It is not that I am going to select the good ones and all the pretty ones; I am going to show the whole works.

I could imagine doing, not that I would want to do it, but I could imagine somebody doing this sort of thing in front of an audience, not as a demonstration but just as a sensation of witnessing a creation of, quote, "a work of art." I think in the past there have been exciting times when pianists improvised before an audience or dancers improvised. It wasn't so long ago that people used to improvise speeches and improvise poems and improvise stories. Maybe people still do that--nobody that I know does it--but this sense of having a creative thing evolve before your eyes gives you a different feeling, I should think, about the nature of creativity and the nature of the creative person.

So many situations that you watch, in televison documentaries and so on, where an artist is working, it's selected and prepared and contrived, necessarily, in a funny way. You are very aware of all the cameras and lights, which are probably making it possible to someday have this documentary appear on television.

I think of something more innocent. This is the word I guess I ought to use; innocence seems terribly important. If this creative thing could occur just spontaneously, sort of sweetly, and meaningfully, I think it would be a great and wonderful thing. So I decided I would just take a few sort of random objects down to the gallery and begin manipulating them in front of the camera. Then I thought, "Well, I will just have the camera in one position so that these things will just occur in front of the camera and the camera will snap and so on."

Then I thought, "Well, why not do it with two cameras?" It would be kind of fun to have these photographed from not necessarily two positions, but in a kind of different way. Each camera would be doing its own thing, and this would be emphasized by the fact that one camera would have black and white, and the

Rossbach: other camera would have color. Of course I didn't have film to make black and white on slides, so it means they have to be black and white negatives which will then be converted into slides if they're of any interest.

It's always hard to tell if anything is of any interest or not. Certainly the scale of the thing in its finished projection is so important that looking at a proofsheet doesn't seem to have very much relationship to looking at a photograph after it has been enlarged to its proper size. At least I'm not at all skillful in looking at a filmstrip--I don't know where filmstrips come in; I scarcely know what a filmstrip is--or a proofsheet. I think it would be marvelous to be able to really skillfully read a proofsheet the way people say musicians can read a score just by looking at it. I suppose this can be developed, but I don't have it.

So it's going to be difficult for me to know whether these black and white negatives are really worth converting into slides, which, when I show them, I think of alternating with the color. And then I gradually thought, "Well, they shouldn't just be sort of identical, a black and white and a color, this gets kind of boring." So I think maybe the black and white could be a little bit the process of--it's sort of contrived, really--setting up this thing, and then the color would be the finished set up. So that's really where I stand. I want the black and white maybe to have some sort of movement in the figures, some blurring in the figures, and the objects themselves would be in a very fixed position, so there would be the sensation of movement and activity around this thing.

Well, down at this gallery, they have a number of old chairs here and there, I've seen all these derelict chairs. I decided I would select one of these chairs in which I would make my arrangement. I didn't want the thing to get pretentious, and I didn't want it to get campy, and I didn't want it to get contrived. I knew everything that I didn't want it to get, and I don't know whether I will be able to avoid all these "don't wants" or not, but this will be apparent in the finished thing, whether it did or not. I probably won't avoid them.

But anyway, I thought of setting up this chair, and then I began to think, "What can I arrange on it that might be vaguely provocative or not too unexpected, kind of ordinary? I just don't want it to seem clever." I had just been out pruning a couple of fruit trees we have in the back yard, and I had all these branches which were lying in the way, sort of in the path in the yard. My dog likes to run down this path, and I was afraid that she might run into one of these twigs and poke her eye or do some damage.

Rossbach: This kind of worried me, and I thought it would behoove me to get the branches out of there, although I had nowhere to put them at the time, and didn't exactly feel like working outside because it was cold. But anyway, I did. I took all the branches and put them on a little table we have back there, and I began snipping off all the pieces off them so that I could make them into a sort of a possible bundle to put out with the garbage.

Of course I got interested in just the process of clipping these things, and I felt like one of these early basketmakers gathering grasses and so on and holding them all neatly in her hand in perfect order and sorting them out according to size and all these things. So I began to sort them into big and small piles and had all the ends in one direction, and they became very neat sort of bundles.

So I tied them up. I didn't want to do any fancy tying. I just took a string and tied it around the thing. I especially didn't want it to look like I was trying to do something fancy with this bundle of twigs. So I had these two large bundles of twigs. I thought I could take the smaller of the two down and use it as one of the elements in the thing. Well, it's a very personal sort of thing: I am extremely fond of bundles of twigs. I could just have any number of bundles of twigs wrapped in various ways, just sitting unpretentiously around or on the wall. I like that idea very much.

So I had the idea of a chair and a bundle of twigs. Then I thought it would be fun to see a textile in relation to these things. We'd been to Indonesia about a month or so ago, and I think one of the main things that I observed there, was constantly aware of, was that they combined sculpture and textiles. All these stone carvings sitting at the ends of bridges and around temples and everywhere--there's sculpture absolutely everywhere--pieces of checked cloth and colored cloths of various sorts were tied around the figures, almost like aprons or bindings around the bodies. Of course these were combined with hibiscus flowers or whatever they were, frangipani, whatever, all tucked behind the ears. So you had the sensation of foliage and textiles and stone.

At first I thought this was marvelous because we don't usually see textiles in this relationship, and I thought the textiles would be the sort of temporary, fragile, disintegrating thing and the stone would be the permanent sort of sense of forever, solidity, and of course the flowers were even more wiltable and destructible. And you had these three steps in the process of disintegration. Of course it didn't turn out to be that way at all because the stone was extremely soft and it

Rossbach: seemed to be disintegrating right before your eyes. You had this odd sensation that the textiles were probably going to last longer than the stone.

Recently I noticed that they're casting these traditional sculptures in concrete, so I suppose the whole effect will be different. But at the present moment in Indonesia there is this marvelous sense of disintegration and time. Of course you begin to wonder again about the meaning of all this stuff. Certainly they don't expect it to last forever; I don't think they ever think of these things, yet all of these things are certainly works of art with considerable impact and very great meaning.

So I thought I would combine a textile with the twigs, maybe in the process of constructing this. I haven't thought too carefully how I'm going to combine these things, although vaguely I have thought about it. Cloth could drape over it or tie around it, or somehow really relating to this Indonesian thing, but it would be a very personal sort of relationship; nobody but me would sense what in the world I had in mind.

I tried to think what kind of textile I could have that wouldn't seem too pretentious or too unpretentious, that would be persuasive. So I thought, "Well, why not just my old denim jacket?" I could just imagine it lying across this bundle of twigs. My wife had sewed a Harley-Davidson emblem on the back of it, and I could imagine that used in some way, but immediately it sort of got a little campy and a little self-conscious, and yet it isn't campy and self-conscious as far as I'm concerned.

So then I had these elements. It was going to be a chair and a bundle of twigs and this cloth, this denim jacket. And I thought I could stand one more element. At home I have a bundle of twigs that I have hanging on the wall. I just have a newspaper wrapped around the center part of it, holding them all together. So I thought, "Well, newspaper would be nice too." I'm very fond of newspaper and I've used it a lot in various ways. People think it has some sort of meaning and read things into it that I don't intend in any way.

Well, I love all this mixture of things that people might interpret in various ways that I didn't intend. I think it's sort of amusing to have people misunderstand things and take things seriously that you mean not to be serious. Of course I don't persuade myself that people think much about these things at all; I think they just sort of pass before their eyes. Maybe somebody will think a little bit about it, but I don't think anybody is very concerned about what in the world I think I'm doing or what the meaning is of what I'm doing.

Rossbach: I think it's very unusual for people to look seriously at what someone else is offering as a work of art. You're very much all by yourself, and in a remarkable way you're just doing it for yourself. And I suppose that's the essense of what I'm doing, what I propose to do with my two cameras and these various objects which I'm going to arrange.

It's almost as though the camera is the audience, and this is sort of a deeply disturbing idea. But that idea just came to me when I was talking into this thing, and I guess I believe it.

Appendix B

SIMULATED DIALOGUE: ANNI ALBERS AND MARY ATWATER

[The tape was prepared by Ed Rossbach in Berkeley, in the early 1970s. Narrators read excerpts from the writings of the two artists.]

Albers: Today handweaving has degenerated in the face of technically superior methods of production. Instead of freely developing new forms, recipes are often used, traditional formulas which once proved successful. Such work is often no more than a romantic attempt to recall a "temps perdu." If conceived as a preparatory step to machine production, the work will be more than a revival of a lost skill and will take a responsible part in a new development.

Atwater: I've met this quaint notion before: the idea that handweaving is of value only for making samples to be reproduced by machinery. One might as well argue that the only reason for making an etching is as a preparatory step to taking a photograph.

Albers: The teaching of handweaving has to lead toward planning for industrial repetition with emphasis on making models for industry.

Atwater: On making of models for industry. I fancy industry would consider this a big joke. Models such as those exhibited can have no value or use in industry. A pleasantly designed rug was shown me as having been made as a model for industrial production, and later I saw the result lying in a long, narrow hall. There appeared to be a quarter of a mile of it, and the relentless and exact repetitions were so exceedingly painful that they were calculated to give a sensitive person the jim-jams.

Albers: The teaching of weaving should be the development of structures, from the elementary weaves to more complicated derivations rather than the passing on of patterns for weaving. An elementary approach will be a playful beginning and responsive to any demands for usefulness, an enjoyment of colors, forms, surface contrasts, and harmonies, a tactile sensuousness.

Albers: For more advanced work, consideration of utilitarian purpose arises, although for the beginner the thought of practical usefulness has more a constraining than animating effect. Conscious deliberations on function and useful objective are in a later stage stimulating.

Atwater: Mrs. Albers thinks playing with materials at the loom has an educational value. No doubt this is true, but in this day we rather discount the notion that one learns one thing from doing something else. If we learn to weave, we are educated in weaving, and if we do not wish to weave, this bit of education is wasted effort. A loom can be persuaded to do a great many things if one happens to know how to use the loom. Some things a given loom will do, and some it very definitely will not. So that in the end, if you want to achieve anything you must permit the loom to dictate. Indeed you must.

Albers: If handweaving is to regain actual influence on contemporary life, approved repetition has to be replaced with the adventure of new exploring. Civilization seems in general to estrange men from materials in their original form. If we want to get from materials the sense of directness, the adventure of being close to the stuff the world is made of, we have to go back to the material itself, to its original state, and from thereon partake in its stages of change. It is here that even the shyest beginner can catch a glimpse of the exhilaration of creating. Creating is the most intense excitement one can come to know. The form emerges as the work progresses.

Atwater: I do not altogether agree that if handweaving is to regain actual influence on contemporary life, approved repetition has to be replaced with new exploring. New exploring is exciting and is highly desirable if the explorer happens to be equipped with the technical knowledge and the ability to take him somewhere. But the new exploring of one not so equipped is no more than a clumsy fumbling, unlikely to produce anything of value. But there are tremendous values in approved repetition. Suppose in music every musician were to play his own composition. The result,I fear, would be very distressing to the ear in most cases, and we would long for the approved repetitions of Bach or Beethoven or Strauss or Wagner.

Albers: Hand and machine weaving are fundamentally the same, handweaving the slow, and machine weaving the fast method of the same process, contrasted only in velocity.

Atwater: A handwoven textile has certain qualities that do not carry over into machine production, and it is these very qualities that give it charm. Machine weaving has its own excellent qualities which are different and are obtained by means far more elaborate than those available to the handweaver.

Albers: The much-discussed difference in quality of performance in favor of handwork is nonexistent.

Atwater: Each of the main divisions of the textile arts, handweaving and machine weaving, has its own particular ease, requirements, and range of possibilities. Though, as Mrs. Albers says, they are fundamentally the same, they're also divergent and each will achieve better results by developing along its own lines than by aping the other.

Albers: Like any craft, weaving may end in producing useful objects or it may rise to the level of art. Any material can be made to convey meaning, even though for so long we had been led to believe that it took oil paint or marble to permit the designation "art" or even "fine art." Handweaving can go both ways. To become art, it needs nothing but its own high development and adjustment in all its properties. To become utilitarian it needs today the help of machines if it is to be more than a mere luxury. My woven pictures are useless, of course, in any practical sense.

Atwater: This sounds like the old and long since discredited principle of art for art's sake. A free-form textile so casually constructed that it will not hold together is really not a fabric at all. And certainly I, for one, should not think of calling it art. To divorce a fabric from usefulness deprives it of one of its main charms and also of all its reason for existing.

In my opinion, a fabric that will not stay together a reasonable time after being taken from the loom and that will not serve some useful purpose as an honest fabric should, would be a waste of time and material, no matter how attractive it might be in momentary effect. I prefer an honest fabric, that is handsome on both sides and that is solid enough to do its bit of work in the world. Essentially, we weave because we like to do it, and in a secondary way because we like to have our own beautiful textiles made with our own hands for the greater comfort and seemliness of our lives.

We like to throw the shuttle, we like to beat the batten. Doing these things gives us a pleasure of creating, the artist's pleasure, the good craftsman's pleasure. Why we enjoy these things is a different question. Weaving gives an escape from the distresses or the humdrum detail of our daily lives, and the value of this fate in the hard and cruel times like the present can hardly be overestimated.

Albers: Life today is very bewildering. We have developed our receptivity and have neglected our own formative impulse. It is no accident that nervous breakdowns occur more often in our civilization than in those where creative power had a natural outlet in daily

Albers: activities. But more important to one's own growth is to see oneself leave the safe ground of accepted conventions and to find oneself alone and self-dependent.

Appendix C

PROFESSIONAL SUMMARY

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Biographical Information

Born: Chicago, Illinois 1914
Education: University of Washington, Seattle, BA in Painting and Design, 1940
Columbia University, New York City, MA in Art Education, 1941
Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, MFA in Ceramics and Weaving, 1947
Teacher: Puyallup Jr. High School, Puyallup, Washington, 1941-1942
University of Washington, School of Art, Seattle, 1947-1950
University of California, Berkeley, Professor of Design from 1950 to retirement in 1979
U.S. Army, Enlisted Man, Signal Corps, Alaska Communication System, 1942-1945

Works in Public Collections

Museum of Modern Art, New York City
Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam
American Crafts Museum, New York City
Renwick Gallery (Smithsonian Institution), Washington, D.C.
Trondheim Museum, Trondheim, Norway
University of Illinois, Urbana
University of Nebraska, Lincoln
University of Indiana, Bloomington
California State Fair, Sacramento
Women's College, University of North Carolina, Greensboro
Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn
The Council House, Int'l Conference Center of S. C. Johnson and Son, Inc., Racine, Wisconsin
Cranbrook Academy of Art Museum, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan

One-man Exhibitions

Museum of Contemporary Crafts, New York City
Nordness Gallery, New York City
Museum West, San Francisco, California
Oakland Art Gallery, Oakland, California
Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio

One-man Exhibitions (Cont'd)

Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle
Fiberworks Gallery, Berkeley, California
University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida
University of California, Santa Cruz

Group Exhibitions

The New Classicism, Museum of Modern Art, New York City
Structure in Textiles, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam
Fiber Works - The Americas and Japan, National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto
Fiber Constructions, Textile Museum, Washington, D.C.
The Dyer's Art, Museum of Contemporary Crafts, N.Y.C.
The Art Fabric/Mainstream traveling exhibition
USA Today, Washington, D.C.
Nouvelle Vannerie, Musee des Arts Decoratif, Lausanne, Switzerland
Jacquard Textiles, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, R.I.
Wallhangings, Museum of Modern Art, N.Y.C.
Fabrics International, American Federation of Arts, N.Y.C.
The Object as Poet, Renwick Gallery, Washington, D.C.
United Nations Exhibition, San Francisco Museum of Art, San Francisco
Brussels World's Fair, Brussels
USA Section of the Triennale, Milan, Italy, 1964
Directors' Choice, Philadelphia Museum College of Art
Objects USA traveling exhibition

Publications

Books: THE ART OF PAISLEY, Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1980
THE NEW BASKETRY, Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1976
BASKETS AS TEXTILE ART, Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1973
MAKING MARIONETTES, Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1938

Articles and reviews in Craft Horizons, American Craft, Handweaver and Craftsman, Fiber Arts, etc.

Fellow of the American Craft Council (Honorary)

Top left: Detail of damask weaving, 1980. Synthetics.

Bottom left: Bonded plastic, after a Peruvian tapestry, 1970s.

Top right: Plastic constructions for exhibition at Nordness Gallery, New York City, 1970s.

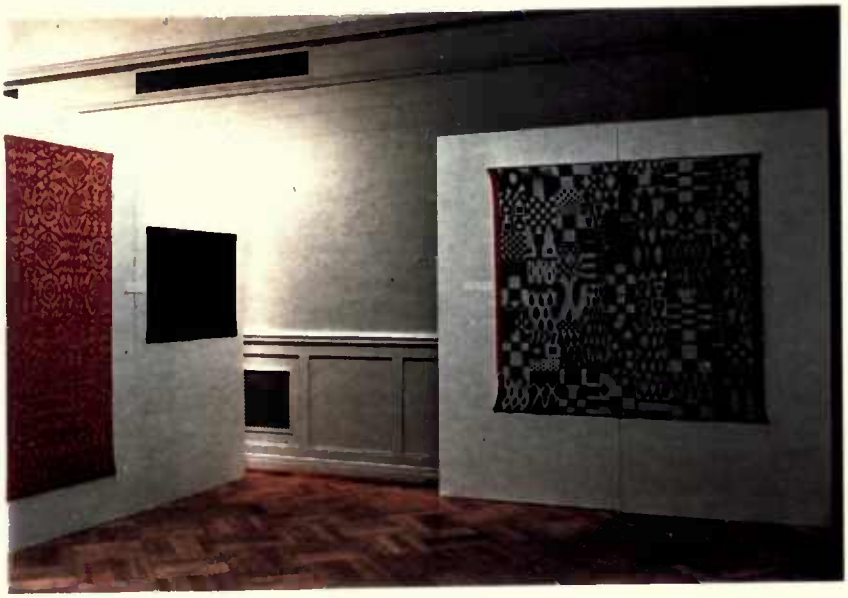
Middle right: Stencilled, resist-dyed textile, 1980. Exhibited in a show called "Textile Impressions," at University of Illinois, DeKalb.

Bottom right: Slide from the Gallery Project, 1980.

Top: Ed Rossbach in his studio working on a plaited paper construction, 1972.

Middle: Brocaded silk with heat transfer of Mad Ludwig. This is one of a series using this imagery. Late 1970s.

Bottom: One-man exhibition at Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington. The black and white piece is a linen doublecloth woven in the mid-60s. It is in the collection of the National Museum of American Art (Smithsonian), Washington, D.C. The red and yellow piece is a doublecloth wool floor mat, woven at about the same time. This exhibit was in the latter part of the 60s.



INDEX -- Charles Edmund Rossbach

Harriet Siegel Nathan

Graduated from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1941 with an A.B. in Journalism.
Was assistant women's editor and managing editor of The Daily Californian, then known as the Monarch of the College Dailies.
Prepared President Sproul's biennial report to the legislature, 1942-44; wrote advertising copy; edited house journals; served on local and state boards of the League of Women Voters, primarily in the fields of local and regional government and publications.
Returned to U.C. for a Master of Journalism degree in 1965.
Wrote for the University's Centennial Record.
Now doing research, writing, and editing for the Institute of Governmental Studies, U.C., Berkeley.