CRAFT AND FOLK ART MUSEUM
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW OF NANCY WYLE ROMERO

by Joan M. Benedetti

Nancy Wyle Romero
March 6, 2010

BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY

Nancy Wyle Romero was born in L.A. June 4, 1945 to Edith and Frank Wyle. She had two siblings: an older brother, Stephen, and a younger sister, Diana, who passed away in 2002.

Nancy's mother graduated from UCLA (B.A., English) and she became a painter, studying with artists, including Rico Lebrun. Nancy's father founded Wyle Laboratories in El Segundo in 1949. It provided engineering, scientific, and technical services to the Defense Dep't, NASA, and commercial customers,

Nancy attended Warner Ave. Elementary and Emerson Junior High in L.A. She and her siblings then went to Verde Valley School in Sedona, Arizona. There they had immersive cultural experiences, living with Navajo families and traveling to live with Mexican families.

In 1959, Nancy's parents bought 400 acres in North Fork, California, near Yosemite. They built a retreat designed by John Rex and furnished with Sam Maloof furniture, eventually owning 4,000 acres with houses nearby for their children, grandchildren, and several friends. Nancy has had a house there since the 1970s.

Nancy lived in Spain,1964-65 and visited Peru. The Egg and The Eye gallery opened November 1, 1965. It was an instant success. Nancy loved it—it was "a happening place." She went to Sarah Lawrence College (B.A., 1966) and worked at The Egg and The Eye gallery before going to the U. of Pennsylvania for post-graduate work in anthropology. In 1968, a grant from Stanford took her to Oaxaca, Mexico, to study women's work groups. She lived there for a year and then quit anthropology.

Nancy became a designer, then an artist, but says, "She [Edith] was the artist." In the 70s, she worked in the Bay area as a head designer and founded several companies. From 1997–2004 she freelanced in L.A. in graphic and product design. She made paintings for the L.A. River Project and the L.A. Sierra Club. In 2003, she designed an animated film for Alta Video.

Nancy has a daughter, Rosie, born in 1972. In 1973, The Egg and The Eye gallery became the nonprofit Craft and Folk Art Museum (CAFAM). Nancy met artist Frank Romero when working on the Artesanos Mexicanos exhibition at CAFAM in 1978. She and Frank prepared school materials on L.A. Hispanic folk art traditions and did many art projects together. Nancy assisted with the Murals of Aztlan show, curated by Frank in 1979. Nancy and Frank married; their daughter, Sonia, was born in 1980. Frank has a daughter, Colette (aka Coco), from a previous marriage. Nancy and Frank divorced in 2002.

In 1989 Nancy began to exhibit her paintings. She has been in 18 group exhibitions and 10 solo exhibitions. In 2002, she curated a CAFAM exhibition, "Toy Mechanics." Nancy says having CAFAM in their lives added a great dimension to the family.

INTERVIEW HISTORY

Interviewer: Joan M. Benedetti. B.A., Theater; M.A., Library Science, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana. Related Experience: Milwaukee Public Library Decorative Arts Librarian, 1967 – 1968; CAFAM Museum Librarian 1976 – 1997. From 1998 – 2012, Benedetti worked to process the CAFAM Records, 1965 – 1997, which are now part of Special Collections at the UCLA Young Research Library. From 2008 – 2010 she conducted oral history interviews with seventeen former CAFAM staff and trustees; almost 60 hours were recorded and transcribed. She is the author of several articles on folk art terminology and small art museum libraries and the editor of *Art Museum Libraries and Librarianship*, Lanham, MD: ARLIS/NA and Scarecrow Press, 2007.

Time and Setting of Interview

Place: Nancy Wyle Romero's home in Altadena.

Time of day, length of sessions, and total number of hours recorded: Two sessions were recorded on the same day, Saturday, March 6, 2010. The first session took place in the morning and was one hour, thirty-eight minutes, and twenty seconds. The second session took place after lunch and was thirty-two minutes and twenty-one seconds, for a total of two hours, ten minutes, and forty-one seconds.

Persons present during the interview: Nancy Wyle Romero and Joan Benedetti.

Conduct and Content of Interview: To prepare for the Romero interview, Benedetti reviewed Nancy Romero's resumé, the CAFAM timeline, and the CAFAM exhibition lists. She also re-read the transcript of the interview of Nancy's father, Frank Wyle, done for the CAFAM Oral History Project in 2008, and the transcript of an interview of Nancy's mother, Edith Wyle, done for the Archives of American Art in 1993. Nancy balances the story of her parents' lives (with a focus on the start of The Egg and The Eye gallery and the transition to the Craft and Folk Art Museum) with her own. The narrative is very roughly chronological with frequent detours.

Editing: Wyle was given the opportunity to review the transcript and to supply missing or mis-spelled names and to verify the accuracy of the contents. Benedetti added full names and opening dates of CAFAM exhibitions where appropriate and she added information for clarification and deleted some back-and-forth comments that did not add to the reader's understanding of the narrative. Time stamps have been added to both the table of contents and the transcript at five-minute intervals; the time stamps make it easier to locate the topics in the transcript that are mentioned in the table of contents.

Table of Contents

More about 1990 move into May Co. Nancy and Frank Romero living half time in Taos; weren't much in touch with L.A. **[20:00]** May Co. store closed end 1992; CAFAM vacates. 5800 Wilshire leased for offices and library. Assumed it would be purchased; all plans based on that. Gala re-opening in 1995.

Patrick Ela, after 21 years, resigns June 1996. New director, Paul Kusserow. **[25:00]** Staff begin to be laid off. Final attempt to buy 5800 Wilshire fails. Library goes to LACMA, archives to UCLA. Museum closes end 1997. March 1998 permanent collection auction seems like end. But Patrick Ela has plan with Al Nodal for City to partner for ten years with CAFAM. Edith Wyle able to see museum re-open April 1999. Traumatic times: several different directors before stabilizing.

Wally Marks now Chair. **[30:00]** Maryna Hrushetska director. Nancy says having CAFAM in their lives added a great dimension to the family. Joan points out Nancy is having a renaissance in her career as an artist. **[32:21]**

CRAFT AND FOLK ART MUSEUM ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
INTERVIEW OF NANCY WYLE ROMERO

Session 1 (01:38:20) Saturday, March 6, 2010. Interviewed by Joan M. Benedetti

JB: Today is Saturday, March 6, 2010. And I'm here in the beautiful home of Nancy Wyle Romero in Altadena, California. Nancy is the daughter of Edith and Frank Wyle, the founders of the Craft and Folk Art Museum. And she's an artist, and an anthropologist. And my name is Joan Benedetti. So, let's start at the beginning--and by the beginning, I mean your beginning, which was, I believe, before the birth of the Craft and Folk Art Museum.

NR: Yeah, rather.

(laughter)

JB: So where and when were you born?

NR: I was born in Los Angeles, 1945.

JB: Can we have your birth date?

NR: Six, four, '45.

JB: June 4, '45?

NR: Right.

JB: There must be some astrological significance to the six four five. Or six, four, four, five.

NR: Six.

JB: And you had siblings.

NR: Yes, I have an older brother, Stephen, and a younger sister, Diana.

JB: So, tell us what it was like growing up with Frank and Edith Wyle.

NR: Wonderful! We had a very busy family. My mother was a painter. Studied with Howard Warshaw, Keith Finch, and Rico Lebrun later on. And my father was very busy starting his business up--engineering in the space industry--jet propulsion and space industry. [Frank Wyle was the founder of Wyle Laboratories, headquartered in El Segundo, California.] And we three siblings were very close. It was--as my mother got more and more involved in her art career, we saw less of her, because she had her own studio. But she did give us—me--art lessons when I was 12, which I just loved, with a friend of mine, Barbara. We went on lots of trips. We had a lovely home. And as I said, she was kind of a solitary soul in the early--in those days, and loving to be in her studio, painting, and she had a very, very close relationship with Rico Lebrun, who was a Neapolitan artist who settled in Los Angeles. And he had a very strong humanist focus on

the human figure, and . . . classical training. He had studied in Orvieto--studying the Signorelli murals, and other places. And he brought a really different focus to the L.A. art scene, that was grounded in, as I said, in the human figure. And the beauty of the line. And mom had a--you know, loved him dearly, and they became very, very close friends of ours. Their son David, who's now a filmmaker, was--grew up with me--and we were the same age, and went to high school together also. Dad was very supportive of [Mom] as an artist, but they both were very involved in their own careers. When Rico got cancer, there was a time when they were designing their new house in Zuma Beach, and he was very ill, and [their] house wasn't finished, so . . . he moved into our house . . . until the last two months of his life . . . .

JB: And how old were you when that was going on?

NR: I was in college.

JB: Oh, you were--oh, I'm going to pause.

[Break in tape.]

NR: . . . . Anyway, Rico stayed in our house during his illness, which was--it was kind of like a wake, you know, all of his people that admired him and studied with him were all congregated around. It was very depressing. I was in college--I missed that part. I did see him just before he died, on Christmas vacation, and he died like a month later. By then, he had moved into his [new] house in Zuma. But his death had a profound impact on my mom, and I realized that it was really a guru, guru-y relationship--as well as very close friends—[and] that a lot of her inspiration and motivation to be an artist was locked up with him. And when he died, she really floundered **[05:00]** in her own career as an artist. And it was around that time that they had become friendly with Betty and Albert Chase. And Albert was a doctor. Betty was bored as a doctor's wife and looking for something meaningful to do. And mom had built her own little studio in the backyard, and was trying to paint in there with--

JB: Tell us where their house was at this time.

NR: 555 Woodruff Avenue in West Los Angeles.

JB: In West LA, OK.

NR: So she built a little studio in the back. They had gone on a safari in Africa and gotten in a terrible accident there because my dad forgot that they--which side of the road to drive on. You know out in the bush--

JB: I hadn't heard about this.

NR: --and they got flown to a bush hospital. Right--they got a little beat up. Anyway, she came back and did these really kind of marvelous, large paintings of lions, that sort of--she very [much] identified with lions.

JB: Yes, I noticed she had a collection of lions.

NR: Yeah.

JB: I thought for a long time that she was a Leo, but--

NR: No, she just liked lions. My dad was a Leo, so maybe that--I don't know what the connection was--but that was her last [art] work. And she . . . thought . . . you know, a little gallery would be good. And at that point of time, the art world was being kind of driven into two different schools. What she had been trained in was a classical way of painting--you know--you put in your years of student-hood, learning--you know--studying the different masters, drawing from them, working from models and all that. And suddenly--you know--it's--pop art came in, and that was really iconoclastic. And these people with no art training were doing these--you know--works of art all about popular culture. And I think my mom felt very disassociated from that whole world, and was really--she kind of lost her thread with her own art, and this world was--which [was] where the art world was going, she didn't--on a visceral level--relate to.

And what she did relate to was crafts and folk art, because she felt those were real, the people who did them had a very strong cultural and historical connection to what they were doing. And so she kind of said, "Well, why not do something with craft—crafts people?" She liked crafts people. And so they thought OK, and then the other thing: she was learning to cook omelets, I think, about that time, and she thought--she didn't cook much--we always had cooks, right, so when she went into the kitchen, it was always to perform something, you know? So—omelets--or something she loved. And so that's kind of how this all happened. She wanted to do something for Betty, basically, [to] give Betty something to do, and . . . [then] she was going to really continue with her painting. But as they got--approached dad--and tried to figure out how to do it right, he was, "Well, we need to find some investors." And this kind of started--you know--growing into a whole other thing where they had, I think, 30 or--

JB: Shareholders?

NR: --shareholders that would put in some money, and they found a place, and she got caught up in the whole idea of it, right? And as she was going, she was inventing what it was, and that folk art, which--because [she] and dad had traveled a lot through his business, and also through just enjoying traveling. So they'd been to Japan several times, and I think through his business, they--he had started diversifying his business into other things--in Africa and Ethiopia and I don't know [if] she could have been to Peru yet--but I don't think so. But anyway, she was--

JB: Well, one of the World Craft Council meetings [was in Peru]--

NR: Yeah, but she wasn't in that world yet (overlapping dialogue; inaudible). Yeah, she wasn't there yet. This was a very humble beginning. . . .

[Break in tape.]

NR: All right, it--we're still talking kind of a narrow definition of what this gallery was going to be. For-profit--

JB: A commercial gallery.

NR: A commercial gallery. And they found the spot, and--but she had met Sam Maloof at the [L.A.] County Fair.

JB: Yes, it's a great story.

NR: It's a great story. And that had a lot to do with what was happening, and also other--at the ranch, she'd met **[10:00]** Hans Sumnf in--who had a sort of architectural pottery in Fresno, or Madera, I think it was Fresno. [The Hans Sumnf Company was in Madera, California.] And that's where the [Egg and The Eye balustrade] columns . . . [that] sort of look like *raku* stacks of rocks . . . [came from]. I think he made those. [The artist who made the balustrade was Stan Bitters, who had worked for Hans Sumnf.]

JB: Oh, I'm so glad that you remembered his name, because I've been--I knew that Guy Moore designed the interior, and I asked your dad, and he couldn't remember the name of the artist [who made the balustrade].

NR: I'm pretty sure that's who that was. It was an architectural pottery.

JB: Spell his last name, as far as you can remember?

NR: S-U-M-N-F, Sumnf.

JB: S-U-M-N-F?

NR: P-H-F, I don't know. Sumnf.

JB: Sumnf, OK.

NR: Hans Sumnf--it sounds--you know, what? Dutch or German or something--all right. Anyway, he did like adobe, architectural adobe, like, you know, what they call "stabilized adobe" . . . pavers and those hose pots, you remember those big hand-thrown hose pots? That was his thing. And I think he did those columns, that were the banister [for the mezzanine of the gallery].

JB: Well those were gorgeous.

NR: They were gorgeous. Oh it was a small . . . the gallery was just downstairs at that time, and on the--looking south as you go into the gallery . . . they just had one half of the building, right?

JB: Yes, I want to--do describe that.

NR: On the bottom floor, yeah, was the gallery, and then there was an office in the back and a little storage room. And then you went up [a central staircase] into a mezzanine, and that was the restaurant. And Rodessa Moore--they found Rodessa Moore, who was a real character, who was head of the kitchen. And she performed omelets--

JB: There was sort of a little stage that--

NR: There was a stage where--it had a white arch, and she stood in that arch, and [it] had two burners, and she would make omelets, and I don't know, [the menu] had 30 or 40 omelets.

JB: So let's just--just to--I want to try to clarify: there was a whole other person who leased half of the building.

NR: Yes, yeah.

JB: There was--I guess--a separate entrance for them.

NR: Not only the other half, but the upstairs.

JB: Yes, on the third floor.

NR: And I think it was a theater company--I'm pretty sure it was a theater company.

JB: Yes, well, it was Madame Oleska's Theater of Art.

NR: OK, there you go.

JB: So The Egg and the Eye was--

NR: Was simply the . . . bottom floor--

JB: It was 5814 [Wilshire]--

NR: And the mezzanine.

JB: And the mezzanine.

NR: Right, that's what it was.

JB: And I actually have a picture I found in the archive [at UCLA Special Collections] last week that very clearly shows 5810 [Wilshire], which was Madam Oleska's, and 5814, which was . . . the Egg and the Eye. Well, thank you. That's been a little unclear. So--

NR: So anyway, the Gallery--it drew in all sorts of interesting families, right? And I . . . know [this] very peripherally because I was, you know, in school.

JB: You were in college by then, weren't you? This was 1965.

NR: Yes, I was in college. In fact, I was in Spain for--in '64 to '65. So--

JB: Did you come back for the opening? Were you there for the November First opening?

NR: I'm pretty sure I was there. I'm trying to remember. Yes, there were so many openings.

JB: I have a lot of pictures in the archive of you at openings--

NR: Oh yeah, I went to a lot of openings.

JB: --but I am not sure--and I think I saw you at--in the [first] opening.

NR: I think I was. I know that it--I don't even--what was the first show, do you remember?

JB: Well there were actually, let's see. There were several.

NR: Several first shows?

JB: Yes, yes. Well I--as you probably remember--there were very few times when there was only one [artist] shown . . . .

NR: No, well it was--yeah, right.

JB: There were several [artists featured] at the same time. And I think that--I know that one of them was the Inuit, or Eskimo show.

NR: Right. And then there was the American Indian, the Kachina show . . . took over the whole place.

JB: Yes. I think that was a little bit later, but--

NR: OK, right. Well yeah, they always had featured jewelers, and featured ceramic artists, and maybe a furniture piece or something. **[15:00]** So yeah, it was a small space really.

JB: Yes.

NR: Think about it! But I worked there for--during the--

JB: Oh, you did.

NR: --between college and graduate school, I just couldn't--I had been in Peru, and I just couldn't get my head around going to graduate school yet, so I took a semester off, and I worked in the gallery. And Betty was still there, so anyway. We can get back--that was an interesting--so Betty and my mother were--my mom finally decided she wanted to work in it, and she gave up her artwork, and devoted herself to the gallery with Betty. They ran it together.

JB: Yes. Well she--let's see, you mean she gave up her studio before--

NR: No, her studio was in--that ultimately was in the back yard of the house. And she had--you know, after Rico died--of course, [she] gave up the studio that was alongside his studio in Brentwood. But she no longer devoted time to painting. And she never got back into it after that, even though Frank (my husband, Frank Romero) and I lured her back into painting, because that's what we were doing, you know, giving her materials and stuff, and she never got back into it.

JB: Well, I remember even, you know, into the ’90s, when I [would] visit her there [in Brentwood] where they still have their house--she would point to the studio and say, "I’ve got to get back to that one of . . . ."

NR: [overlapping dialogue; inaudible] She was doing quilting and other--but every time --they had a show, and there was some interesting technique, she wanted to learn it. You know, like papermaking was a big one, she really got--tried to do that, but it’s like, it’s just too many riches, right? Where to focus your attention. So mostly needlework was her interest in--

JB: Well, I was just about to ask about that, because I know that she was a very proficient seamstress, and--

NR: No. No, no, no, no. She was not a proficient--but she had an artist’s eye of what she wanted to do. So she set herself projects that were immensely complicated, but she--I mean she couldn’t, like [overlapping dialogue; inaudible].

JB: She didn’t make your clothes.

NR: She made a couple of dresses, á là Joanne Lopez. Joanne Lopez was a designer of clothes using ethnic materials. So she made several pieces for herself, and she and Ruth Shireson also used to make tunics and things out of beautiful materials and stuff. But she didn’t really sew very much. She made appliqued paintings, she did a few needlework things, but she never followed anybody else’s rules. She always made her own designs, so in that sense she was painting them, and the same sensibility as painting, she brought to her sewing. But she wasn’t--I mean she didn’t know how to tailor or anything like that, just--she could embroider, and she--you know--she has an incredible library of embroidery books and other things, but a lot of that was kind of “wannabe,” she never really had time for it. She was in the museum 24 hours a day--in her head. And it took up a lot of psychic and emotional and physical energy, so--

JB: Yes. Well, it must have been, I would think, a little bit hard on her children. I know you were grown up by that point, but you still want your mom or dad’s attention once in a while. And--

NR: Oh I don’t think it was like that at all. I loved the museum in those days--I thought it was the happening place.

JB: Well, it was.

NR: It was--it was fun--and I liked participating, but in my way. I mean there was a definite pressure to be involved a lot more in the museum, which was so much a part of our world. And I resisted that, because my mother and I were very close--we think very similarly, and in order to distinguish myself as a young woman, I had to pull back from that somewhat, and follow my own path. But there was always the welcoming pressure to get more involved, let’s put it that way. Which sometimes I did. And sometimes I didn’t. And I found it easy to do when I was doing something

with Frank [Romero], my husband, where we did projects together, **[20:00]** and they were limited in scope rather than just being on the board, or being on this or that committee, and all that stuff. I didn't want to get involved in any of that stuff--so.

JB: Well I think you were probably very wise to do that, although Frank Romero did get on the board at some [point]--

NR: And my sister [Diana Munk, who passed away in 2002] was on the board, too.

JB: Oh that's right, yes.

NR: I'm just not a board gal.

JB: Yeah. Well it can be pretty dreary.

NR: I felt the lure of it, because you know the direction the museum was taking for a while was very alarming, and it seemed to really move away from Mom's vision, and--which I thought was still valid--and so I could have gotten in there and fought for her, but I didn't.

JB: Well you did other things.

NR: I did other things, right--so.

JB: Well, let's back up just a little bit. I remember, Edith--in some ways, of course your mother and dad were very private people, and I'm speaking from a staff point of view. But every once in a while, she would drop some, you know, bit of information about her childhood, or whatever. And I also, of course, have read the interview that Shan did for the Archives of American Art, and she talked a good deal about her family. And she had said that she felt very dominated by her parents, especially her mother. And I'm just wondering--you said earlier that you had a picture that had belonged to Rose Robinson, and what do you remember of your grandmother?

NR: My grandmother? My grandmother, I remember her as a--

JB: Well she was such an influence on Edith--

NR: Influence. I'm trying to think of her as a whole person. It's very hard because she's my grandmother. . . . She was a wonderful grandmother. She was--I have two very different grandmothers, and I have to talk about both of them [overlapping dialogue; inaudible].

JB: Yes, I wish you would.

NR: --because one, my mother's mother, was Russian. She was the first of her family to be born in this country. Her sisters were born in Russia. And they were very intellectual--they were anarchists. They were humanist idealists, and my grandmother always thought on a global scale, which was--it could be very irritating, but also very far-seeing, and she really liked--she was very--what's the opposite of prejudiced? Very open-minded.

JB: Tolerant.

NR: Very tolerant. But it was always with an -ist on the end, or an -ism at the end of it, you know? Like humanism, and this and that. And for a long time she was in love with Stalin--you know, in the early--

JB: Oh well, she wasn't the only one.

NR: --because--and then was just devastated when information started coming out about what he had done. You know--so she had her--Paul Robeson—God--that was God to her, you know? And he was like, of course, a real radical. Well, she comes from a radical background, they were all--as I said--they came to this country as anarchists, set about to disrupt the system, and fortunately, they were not ones that were put in prison, but they lived with those various anarchists that were put away for having tried to shoot Frick, and Carnegie, and all that kind of thing. So--and they were also believers in "Cult-sha," with a capital C. So, she--my grandmother--was trained as a pianist from--she was a real child prodigy. She was called on to perform for the union meetings. She was on stage as a little girl playing rousing union songs and things like that, and--

JB: Now she lived in San Francisco?

NR: No, New York.

JB: Oh, New York.

NR: In New York, right. And she studied with an older man who was her mentor, Alexander Lambert, who was shepherding her to the stage as a performer . . . in piano when she met my grandfather, who was a violist, or violinist. And nobody wanted them to get married. They were very young, and they were very much in love, and so she pretty much gave up her career to marry my grandfather. And they moved to San Francisco.

JB: Then they moved to San Francisco.

NR: Yeah, after--Mom was born in San Francisco. And he was a violist, or violinist. I think he did [play] viola, but he played violin in the symphony, and then in the--was it the opera? I think it was [in] the San Francisco Opera, he would play **[25:00]** and he was also studying dentistry, because he felt that he could not--

JB: Oh yes, I remember hearing that.

NR: --support the family just on musicianship. And he was to always have the dual career. He played in--when they moved to Los Angeles--in the studios.

JB: Oh, in the movie studios.

NR: And he also had his career as a dentist, so his name as a violinist was Rovinsky, and as a dentist was Robinson. (Laughter) I always loved that.

JB: That's great, yeah.

NR: Perfect adaptation.

JB: Yeah.

NR: Anyway, so my grandmother was a pianist, and continued teaching piano. And she was very exacting, I know. But of course the grandchildren, she was all about love and giving, and fun, and she and my mom had a very abrasive relationship. All the way to the end. My mother--

JB: Did your mother learn piano, or did Rose try to teach her piano?

NR: [overlapping dialogue; inaudible] Oh yeah, she was like--we all sort of failed in the music department, I'm afraid. But we dated a lot of musicians.

JB: Ah ha!

[laughter]

NR: But no, she failed in that, but they had a lively cultural thing. She had lots of musicians come to the house. She grew up in music, and she had a profound love of music. And all our lives, we--at the ranch and everything--where we really listened to music intensely, I learned to love music through Mom's love of music. And as I said, a lot of incredible musicians were in the studio system in LA, all these refugees from Europe, right?

JB: Yes, yes.

NR: And they all--they were--they played chamber music together, and she grew up with all those people. Plus, my grandfather, he was the violinist for all the Charlie Chaplin movies. He was the maudlin violin, and he was friends with Chaplin, and he would clown around á là Chaplin in there. There's lots of wonderful photos of him, you know, being very theatrical and he and my mom kind of were a unit, I think. And then there was her mom. So she was an only child, so she got all their attention, and it was difficult. But of course--and when she became a painter, an artist--they were right behind her in that. You know, that was equally valid, that was in the arts, right? Doctors or arts, that seemed to be--you know. They were Jewish, but they had rejected Judaism for--they were total atheists. We had no cultural connection to the Jews, unless they were artists really.

So her meeting Dad was, you know, an interesting combination, because he comes from--his family were German more or less. They were adventurers and shop keepers, and I mean they had a very colorful history, but they came [to America] before the Civil War, and they had stronger connections to Europe. And they were very grounded, down-to-earth people, you know? Who, you know, I'm sure they went to hear music and stuff, but they didn't have that [fervor]. This [music] was [my grandparents'], their world and their passion. It was very different. But my dad had a--so he's a very pragmatic kind of guy. He had a lot of visions, but he's like--I always think

of Dostoyevsky's *Notes From the Underground*. There's the guy that's sitting on his hands because he sees so many possibilities that he's actually paralyzed by it, and the other one that has blinders on and sees in one direction, and goes barreling ahead and is the man of action, right? That's my dad, he's very--when he sets his sights on something, he goes for it, and he's not deterred by the thousands [of] other possibilities that could occur to him, so he just--

JB: That's how Wyle Laboratories came about.

NR: And all the other projects in the museum. Let's say, his energy helped move it ahead. He engineered its birth. And how to structure it, everything. And he has been the engine behind it ever since, I think. Even 'til perhaps now.

JB: Well, it's hard to imagine it without his support, absolutely.

NR: It's not just support, I think my--you know when couples live together, they become part of each other. And my mom certainly learned managerial--her whole ability to run the museum from constantly discussing it with my father, and his input was critical, and she really valued his opinion, and listened to him **[30:00]** occasionally. I mean, she had a lot of her own ideas. She was very strong-minded. But she would absorb a lot of what he had to say. And he took on a love of art in an extraordinary way, and became a craftsman himself. He, you know, built all the cabinetry and things like that in their house, and the stairway, and the doors, I mean he--

JB: And they're beautiful.

NR: --and they're beautiful. He--that was--and jewelry-making was another thing he took up. So yeah, you know, they really influenced each other, so.

JB: Well that's interesting, because I have to say then, at this point, that Edith one time said, "You know, when we're not here at the museum, Frank and I hardly ever talk about the museum." So that wasn't true, I guess.

NR: Oh no, no, no. My mother had [the] museum on the brain.

JB: Yeah, it would be hard--

NR: I think that they discussed it a lot, but it was a joint interest--though definitely more hers than his--but he always was willing to listen. He's a pretty patient guy. And of course the whole ranch life was, you know, a place to let go, let it go. So--but the ranch was a beautiful house with beautiful crafts, objects, a lot--all the Sam Maloof furniture and everything--so it was her place to live the craft life, you might say, in beauty and in nature, and I think it was a place to defuse all the stress--so.

JB: And there were quite a few Native American tribes that live in that area too.

NR: One, Mono.

JB: Oh, only the one?

NR: Well there's the Mountain Mono, and the Valley Mono, and there's different Mono groups, but they're all the Mono Indians. Oh, of course if you go to Yosemite, there's other--you know.

JB: But there were some that she got to know quite well, yeah.

NR: Yeah, neighbors.

JB: Now that property was purchased in 1959, so you were just 14--is that right?

NR: Yeah, I was in high school, yeah.

JB: And were you able to go to see it--

NR: I didn't appreciate it until college.

JB: Yeah.

NR: Because I was in the country, I was in Sedona, Arizona, which was not as it is today. It was a--we were in the Red Rock country, outside of the village. The village was one road. I mean--

JB: Now what I heard was that Stephen had had the idea that all of you should go--

NR: No, Stephen didn't have the idea for all of us--Stephen had the idea for himself. He didn't like the idea of going to Uni High, which was the L.A. high school, University High. He didn't fit in, he wanted something else. So he's the one who initiated the process to look for a--

JB: But that was for himself.

NR: For himself. I was very popular in junior high and had no intention of going to a boarding school until I went and visited him, and then I was overcome with the school. I was overcome, and also there was this really cute guy that came out to dinner with us, who said I was a great conversationalist--

JB: Oh Nancy.

NR: --and I thought somebody thinks--is not looking at the way I look, but thinks I have an interesting brain? This is really great. And I was sold on the place right away, and couldn't wait to get there, and I followed him a year later. So--(laughs)

JB: Let's just get down where you went to elementary school first, just for the record.

NR: Warner Avenue School.

JB: Was that a private school?

NR: No, a public school, just down the street from us. I could walk to school. I went to Emerson Junior High, which is a public school. And then Verde Valley School in Arizona, then Sarah Lawrence in New York, then the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia.

JB: Well, tell me when you first--you said that your mom gave you painting lessons, I guess?

NR: Yes, she did.

JB: And when you were 12--

NR: Drawing lessons, yeah.

JB: Drawing lessons. So at what point did you begin to think about--you know, to take art seriously, and--

NR: I had refused to be an artist. Because my mother was. This is--you know.

JB: Yeah, of course.

NR: We're very clear. We're both very strong-minded people. So she was the artist. I wanted to be a costume designer as a child. That was--I designed endless costumes for my sister, who was a ballerina. And I had tried ballet, [but] she was so much better than I was, I gave it up. You know, she studied with Carmelita Marachi, who was quite the figure in L.A. And so Diana ended up following **[35:00]** a career in dance. And I was very happy to come up with great costumes and to dress her, and do all that. And I did lots of drawings of clothes and stuff like that. And did it at Verde Valley. You know, I took ceramics and I always drew a little bit, but I didn't--you know, I always knew I could draw.

Mother would drive us crazy at Verde Valley, because it's one of the most stunning places in the world, with the red rocks, and she would come and visit, and she'd say, "Look at this, look at this. Can you--this is the most beautiful place. Can you see that? Are you looking at this? Are you looking at this?" And we'd say, "Mom, you know, we live here, no big deal." And that--but it was a big deal. And what it did is cause us to really look at things, and also through just growing up with her and Rico Lebrun--who was like my second father--but my artistic father--he would say, "Look at this beautiful avocado. Look at the lines, and look at the color. Hold this--oh, what a color." You know, he would--he caused us to really focus on things, and I think learning to look and see is more than half the battle of becoming an artist or a drawer. And I tell people now who say they can't draw, I say, "Learn to look first, and then the rest will come." Because all it is, is looking, people don't really look. So both of them worked on me, and--from the beginning--so anyway. Yeah. [Inaudible] This is really good pie. [Nancy has served them pie.]

JB: And later, you had a home up at the ranch. There's a story that I heard about how you got the house.

NR: Well I've got the house--you mean my own house?

JB: Yes.

NR: I had a boyfriend who was going to build me a house up there, and I'd got--it was going to be an adobe house, because that's--I always wanted an adobe house. And then I broke up with him. [But] I already had the plans, and right at that time, Tom Wheeler--

JB: Was this after you had graduated from college, or?

NR: Oh yeah, I was living in Berkeley--or Oakland. And Tom Wheeler, who was the manager at the ranch, called me. He says, "You want a house? Drive down here *now*." So I drove down there, and there were six houses that were located at the PG&E Dam down below, where the reservoir is below our ranch. Not connected--on the road to Auberry. And they were--they wanted to get rid of them. And they were--anybody who wanted to move them could sign up and get one, and there was a garage and a house, [a] three-bedroom bungalow built in the '40s. And he said--Tom said, "I want the garage, but you can have the house." So all of us made a deal with the moving company, and for $2,000 they moved the houses. They cut them in half, loaded them on semi's, and then brought them to the ranch. And the only trouble is that the site I chose was down in the canyon, and it was very sharp pin turns--

JB: Yeah, your dad said it was kind of scary.

NR: It was scary. They had to load them--you know, anchor it with a huge tractor to get traction. Anyway, they got one down, one side down, and they were put on stacked, you know, raised up. And then the other half got stuck. (Laughter) Like--I don't know--500 feet from the house--where they should have been, and it was stuck there for almost a month until they could fix the rig. So anyway, we stuck it back together, and then lowered it on the foundation, and I had a house.

JB: Well that must have involved a lot of work to just get it--

NR: Well I was--it was the '70s. I was into do-everything-myself, period, so I had this very slightly--quite inebriated, Indian guy, Gordon, helping me. He was the carpenter, and I did all the plastering, and he did the carpentry, and I did the tile work, which is really bad, it's still there to this day. I decided I could do it, and at Berkeley they give you a little, you know, how-to sheet of paper, where you go buy your tiles, and so I--you know--got all the materials and set myself up and tried to do it, you know? So--with varying results. (laughter)

JB: Do you stay in that house when you go up there?

NR: Oh absolutely. It's been remodeled a few times. Dad's allowed me to--helped me out--to redo the bathrooms. And you know I did--like here--I made it into one huge room, a big family room, and then subsequently we built—Frank [Romero] and I built a studio, a big barn, which is now Rosie's house--so.

JB: Yeah, there's a whole compound really of friends and relatives that live either on the ranch, I guess, or--

NR: Or adjacent.

JB: **--[40:00]** or adjacent to it. Yeah. So you--do you still spend a lot of time up there?

NR: Oh yes--I do, I do.

JB: So--let's see. We've covered a lot of ground here, and I just want to look and see if there's anything in the early days that I haven't asked you about. I think that I have. Oh, I wanted to find out when your interest in anthropology started, and you didn't say in your resumé what your major was at Sarah Lawrence. Was it in anthropology?

NR: We didn't major at Sarah Lawrence.

JB: Oh. So what kinds of courses did you take there?

NR: Well, I went to Sarah Lawrence so I could study with Joseph Campbell. I was hooked on him as a teenager.

JB: He was on the faculty there?

NR: He was on the faculty. He had one course, and you had to be a senior, and so I had to, you know, go to the school and work my way up to it. And Verde Valley school got me interested in--I wasn't interested in anthropology, but it had a very anthropological focus. The school went--as a whole school [we] went to Mexico every year in trucks; we all . . . camped out all the way down. They placed us in families for two weeks.

JB: Had you been to Mexico with your family before that?

NR: No.

JB: So that was the first?

NR: Every year we went to Mexico, I--it was absolutely fantastic.

JB: When you were at Valley Verde.

NR: Verde Valley.

JB: Verde Valley, yes.

NR: Yes, we were—[we] lived [with] families there--and then I learned to speak Spanish. It was the way Spanish became vivid and real to me. And we also stayed on the Indian reservations each year in a different place, and learned what that world was all about. [They stayed on Navaho reservations at Shiprock and Chinle in Arizona and Aneth in Utah, among other places.]

JB: Oh, great.

NR: And I think--I started collecting folk art when I was 12. I have my--a [Mexican devil] mask in there that I got from Ralph Altman; he had a gallery on La Cienega [Boulevard]. I had $40 that I saved

up from my allowance, and I went and bought myself a mask. So--you might say that I led my mother into it (laughter), because she wasn't that interested in crafts in the early days. I got--I brought her stuff from Mexico all the time, so--

JB: Oh, that's really interesting.

NR: It is. I think--well I knew (I don't remember growing up) she had a very--a very profound interest in Japanese art, from very early. . . . A lot of it was because they had--Dad had--business in Japan. And so I think she had a very keen appreciation for the Japanese aesthetic. Our house had beautiful Japanese prints. We had--well we had Chinese furniture from [Chinatown].

JB: Well even the--I don't know--I guess I was in the house that they had before they had the present house, but only briefly, I think for [a party]

NR: But that was a rented house.

JB: It was a rented house.

NR: It was [an] awful, big old mansion in Hancock Park, yeah.

JB: But the house--

NR: They never really moved into that house.

JB: No. But the house in--I guess it's in Brentwood--the current house, the current house.

NR: Oh yeah, yeah. Oh it's totally Japanese. Oh yes--and so is the ranch. The ranch house, which was built in like '60, I guess, is based on the castles in Kyoto, all the stonework there. They took pictures of the walls, and they just fell in love with it. And that's--and so they only approached John Rex, who was the architect. They came armed with these pictures. Wood and stone.

JB: That's really--that's interesting, because I would not have guessed that. I was there [at the ranch] only once briefly, but I've seen lots of pictures, and I was--you know, I assumed it was a sort of [a] modern take on . . . lodge architecture.

NR: No, it was totally based on Japanese feudal architecture. The marriage of beautiful woods and glass, and [the] view--the idea of the outside coming inside--it's [a] very Japanese aesthetic. It's like a Japanese house. Built by a guy who's used to building high rises--so you've got--you know--kind of a meshing of the two views.

JB: Did you--you must have been to Japan at some point.

NR: I went with--well I had a business in Japan. I was doing commercial house wares design, and I worked for a man who **[45:00]** was an importer, who had designs made in all these different countries. And the ceramics were all made in Japan. He was half Japanese. Half Dutch, half Japanese. Anyway, Nagoya was where they made some of [them]. I still have a few of those cups, those blue and white cups. So I had business in Nagoya, which was--and Mom was

leading a craft trip in Japan, so I hooked up with her. . . .

JB: Do you remember what year that was? I think she went in ’73.

NR: Oh she went like many--

JB: She had been before though several times.

NR: --many times, many times. This one, we visited Hamada, and we visited [Eishiro] Abe. And she was feted by Abe--it was really a fabulous trip. And we went to Bizen [and Tamba] and--I’m trying to think of another--I’ve forgotten the names of the pottery villages. So we were visiting kind of national treasures, and seeing the traditional arts. She had an "in" everywhere there. It was fantastic--fantastic.

JB: Yes, she was really treated like a queen, I guess.

NR: Yes, [inaudible].

JB: So you were with that--with her on that trip.

NR: But she had been many times to Japan. I mean she’d gone with my dad in the ’50s quite a few times, two or three times with him. And she’d gone--then when she started leading trips, this wasn’t the first trip. She’d led at least one before this one. And several after this one--so.

JB: Well before I forget, I want to follow up on this--on your buying this mask. And do you mean that she really didn’t know very much about masks, and did you sort of--

NR: She didn’t know anything about folk art, except I think she liked it. But I don’t remember her buying any of it.

JB: Well I’m just wondering if--

NR: I’m just trying to think . . . [of] what we had in our house. I mean--she was in the world of fine art, you know what I’m saying? But she was still a painter in those days, and that was her focus. And the only things that they purchased were Japanese art, pretty much. Or they had some paintings by Howard Warshaw, and Keith Finch, and you know, [inaudible] go from that.

JB: But she hadn’t really started to collect Japanese folk art.

NR: Not folk art, [overlapping dialogue; inaudible]

JB: What about textiles?

NR: No. Other than a kimono or two, I don’t think [so], no. I think this is something that-- You have to realize that there was a confluence of events that made this whole museum [i.e., the gallery] thing happen . . . . OK, what I wanted to say was: the museum didn’t--I mean the gallery--didn’t just happen. But it was a process of learning about what was out there. So--once the focus kind of got decided, then the world opened up to show what there was, right? When you change your

focus--because Mother had been a very, as I say, private person in her studio. And shy in a way, and [when] she suddenly was working in a public--you know--arena, she changed.

JB: Frank mentioned that--that she had not really had much experience in public--

NR: Nothing. She was very happy painting in her studio, and being with her friends and stuff. I mean she wasn't retiring, she was--she liked to be alone. And we all knew that as kids, you know? "Where's Mom? She's in her studio." Not that--I mean we were—[we] had a wonderful upbringing. I'm just saying--we were lucky as kids. It's a very nice family to grow up in. But she knows--that was her business. And anyway, they started meeting crafts people, and learning about the kind of whole *gestalt* of being a crafts person--this being connected to your work, and producing something honest and real--and with a history behind it. And another person that was very important in Mom's early years was Beatrice Wood, who lived in Ojai, and she was a very good friend of my grandmother's [my dad's mother].

JB: Well your grandparents, your dad's parents, lived up there at that time.

NR: In Ojai, right. And so **[50:00]** I remember as a kid--she made pottery with my drawings on it. I have a Beatrice platter with my awful little child's drawing on it.

JB: Oh, fantastic.

NR: But we used to visit her in her exotic house, and she spent a lot of time in India, and she--first she was dressed as a Peruvian Indian for years, and then she discovered India and became devoted to India. But--you know--we used to go visit her and see her beautiful work, and my grandmother had several pieces. So I think that was one of the artists that early on were very connected to the [development of the museum].

JB: Well and Beatrice Wood had a very large folk art collection, didn't she?

NR: She did, fantastic. Her house was wall to wall. I remember I loved to go visit her. So I was saying that [she] and Sam [Maloof] were two really key people at the beginning. Other people, Lee Mullican is [one]--there were several people. [For some of them], it wasn't folk art, but they were "ethnic" collectors. They called it "ethnic art" in those days. That was like [the] Ralph Altman [Gallery] and the Stendahl Gallery. People my mother knew who collected ethnic art, like--

JB: Yes, the Ethnic Arts Council.

NR: The Ethnic--I don't even know if that figured in her life in any way in those days.

JB: But the terminology was prevalent.

NR: They were collecting American Indian, and like Oceanic art, or African art. So those--she knew people like that, but we didn't have any of that stuff in our house. But that was--and I don't think

that was the world she was interested in going into. It kind of evolved. And--but Lee Mullican was a very important person in the beginning in helping define the [scope of The Egg and The Eye gallery]. He [and his wife, Luchita Hurtado] collected American Indian--and everything--wonderful art. They had an incredible collection. So she met them, and so anyway, the people that started--were attracted to this idea--broadened her view, and she started learning about it. And she was a great student. She learned all these different traditions and aesthetics. And she started traveling and so she became very knowledgeable. But it was--it started from not knowing at the beginning. She didn't know about anything [regarding folk art].

JB: But it was a natural evolution.

NR: It was--as I said--and as the time is [evolving]--also the world was opening up to hippies. The hippie evolution of people traveling to all these--you know--as far away as you could get from Western culture.

JB: Nineteen-sixty-five, [which was the year The Egg and The Eye gallery opened] was really--I mean the timing was--of the [opening of the] gallery was impeccable.

NR: Right. And she didn't--and it was only as these travelers started bringing back extraordinary collections, and then they were for sale, that she began feeling that we're letting these extraordinary things fall through our fingers, you know, without being studied. And . . . this was when they were starting to talk about the Fourth World, and all that business. [Some scholars were saying] that was not authentic folk art and crafts, but rather crafts made for the tourist market. And that was a whole--you know--argument that was going on in those days, right?

JB: Yeah, well actually, that continued into the [Craft and Folk Art] Museum days and especially in the late '80s and early '90s--there was a lot of interest among the [CAFAM] museum staff in you know, cross-cultural influences, and the whole issue of what is "authentic," and so on.

NR: But she was saying in the early days, they were--she was getting very authentic pieces that she felt were doomed. And that unless they--that was the real motivation of making it into a museum, so that they could be studied, and they wouldn't have to be for sale. And also, other collections could be showcased . . . .

JB: But she never had the funding for the right kind of storage and conservation of those.

NR: Well she did what she thought was good. I mean they--the shortcomings weren't immediately evident--and they never intended at first to create a collection, but it became like a fire under her after a while, and that became like she was on the hunt from then [on] . . . for stuff for the museum. . . .

JB: Well I have to say that when the--you know I'm really getting ahead of myself here--but when the auction happened in 1998--I went to that auction--were you [there]?

NR: Me too, yeah, it was [overlapping dialogue; inaudible] very sad.

JB: Yeah I know, it was more like a wake than [an auction]--but **[55:00]** what I found really interesting was in the preview days, the day or two before the actual auction, everything was out on display. For the first time--*everything* was out on display. And some of it looked kind of crappy, it was not very clean, it hadn't been displayed very well--but I was amazed. I thought it was just amazing, the breadth of the collection. We had never had space or time to show it [all], more than just a few selected pieces from time to time.

NR: It's hard being a small museum. I mean that's kind of an oxymoron, because you know, you always need more space. You just always need more space.

JB: Yes, but I--

NR: And money.

JB: --think that--I think that if the museum had had a proper place to--at least a proper place to store that collection--so that it could have been shown with some pride, the reputation of the museum at the end would have been much higher. It was a very mixed set of emotions to . . . [see] that--

NR: Well it was awful. I mean--my sister and I ended up buying all these *huipils* because we couldn't stand for them to be--

JB: Yeah, we bought a few things too.

NR: --to be--my dad bought back--I mean some of the northwest coast stuff that—[inaudible] some of the big masks, he--

JB: Yes, he's got--in his office now--he has a few pieces. I bought--Beny and I bought the big Mexican papier-mâché and wood figures, the devils, and [the Judas figure], the one that was on the cover of *American Home* magazine, there's a wonderful image of her with that devil at the forefront. [The photo of Edith Wyle with the Judas figure is not on the cover; it's on p. 46 of the July 1970 issue of *American Home*.]

NR: It's the one with the firecrackers on it?

JB: Yes, yes.

NR: Oh yeah, that one's good.

JB: They're [the firecrackers are] still there, [the figure's] gotten very fragile.

NR: I bet.

JB: After being moved several times--but it's in a very prominent place in our house. So you said--there was a confluence of things that had happened, and it's interesting to me to realize that Edith turned to folk art, not, I gather from what you were saying, out of a need to reject abstract

expressionism or whatever--

NR: It wasn't—"reject's" the wrong word. She just didn't relate to it.

JB: Right. But it--

NR: It wasn't speaking her language.

JB: Yes. But I gather that the motivation--her motivations--were much more positive toward this new--

NR: Oh yes.

JB: --world that she had discovered.

NR: She became wildly enthusiastic. And found that she had a lot to say about it. I mean as she went along.

JB: There were a couple of people associated with what eventually became the Fowler Museum, Pat Altman and Chris--

NR: Caroline West.

JB: --Caroline West, and Chris Donnan, is that his name?

NR: Oh yeah, yeah. He was--

JB: He taught a class, I think, which was--

NR: I had a class--

JB: --maybe you were in that class.

NR: Yeah, I was in some class of his at UCLA. He was an anthropologist. . . . Yeah, I remember him. [Christopher B. Donnan also served for a time as Director of the UCLA Fowler Museum.]

JB: And he taught a class, I think at the Egg and the Eye--or actually, I think it was during that transition between when the Egg was just turning into a museum--and that was very influential for Edith. She--I think she wrote--some of the best things she wrote . . . about the mission of the museum . . . when she was taking that class.

NR: Well I think she became an ambassadress of [folk art and crafts]--as she met other women from . . . what was his name . . . what was the name of the wonderful wife of the Egyptian president?

JB: Oh, Jehan Sadat.

NR: Yeah, Sadat, right. She met people from different countries who were [also interested in traditional crafts and folk art].

JB: The woman from India--

NR: . . . . [Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay.] Yeah, **[1:00:00]** she met these women who, you know,

represented their countries, and the craft movement, and she felt like she was almost an equivalent, speaking for the crafts movement of the United States, you know? She was asked to speak so much about it, it became--she became the position [a spokesperson], more or less.

JB: Yes. Now, I know that sometime after she first met Sam Maloof, he took her to New York and introduced her to the American Craft Council people [and] to [Aileen Osborn] Webb.

NR: . . . . I remember who she was, yes, I met her.

JB: --we'll fill that in on the transcript. [Aileen Osborn Webb was the founder of the American Craft Council, America House, The Museum of Contemporary Craft, and the World Craft Council.]

NR: OK.

JB: And I'm just wondering--I think--I had the impression that [Edith] had very mixed feelings about the American Craft Council. That she didn't feel that--you know--she thought they represented East Coast values, and that they were not as accepting of West Coast artists, and so on. And I'm just wondering if you heard her talk about that at all.

NR: I'm sure I did.

JB: (laughter) OK.

NR: I don't recall specifically, but as she made a name for herself in the organization, she got more comfortable. So she's always--you know it takes her a while, but she got on her feet, and felt she had an impact, and I think she--that was important to her. She always was trying to be heard.

JB: Yes, yes.

NR: Yeah, it's a struggle. A lot of times it was a struggle. You know she had a struggle with the Museum and the gallery to say OK, this is valuable material here, it should be shown and appreciated the same way that fine art is exhibited and appreciated. And even if it's made out of a piece of paper, it's equally valid aesthetically, and I think that was a really novel kind of view [at that time].

JB: Oh, yes, well it was [at the time the gallery was founded in 1965].

NR: --and that was kind of the basis of the gallery even--was that these things needed to be showcased. Given some--

JB: Well, and it--I think the thing that was really different was that an art museum started to value, to show these objects as art objects. Later on, there was a kind of backlash against that. And I think most museums do show those kinds of objects in more of a cultural context now, but--

NR: Well I remember, Proctor Stafford was--case in point, had an extraordinary collection of pre-Hispanic art, mostly northern Mexican art. And we were--she was, you know, acquaintances, friends with him, and we used to go see his--he used to live in La Brea, Park La Brea. Had an

apartment there, and he always had a show on in his apartment. [Park La Brea is a large development of town homes and mid-rise apartments just east of CAFAM and LACMA built in 1941.] And this is before he gave his collection to LACMA [the L.A. County Museum of Art], right? And he was absolutely adamant that his pieces should be viewed totally devoid of cultural context, just as sculpture. [Stafford was on the CAFAM board for a while.] And I always felt that it was missing something, because the—you've got a whole other dimension. OK--so you put them on a pedestal, that's featuring them, [inaudible] [but] the context was so important, you know, that was my upbringing. So I--that was a raging argument in those days.

JB: Oh yeah. Well, I think it still goes on to a certain extent. And I guess LACMA right now is going kind of back the other way. I hear from Bernard [Kester] that the--Mike Govan--[the current LACMA director] wants all the walls painted white and so on. But I agree with you--

NR: After he did that beautiful job of color? I think it's stunning, his rooms—God! [Bernard Kester was an exhibition designer for LACMA for many years.]

JB: Bernard's [designs of the LACMA galleries]--yes, oh yes. . . .

NR: I think I . . . have to take a pause for a minute.

[break in tape]

JB: Well, now I want to talk a little bit more about the beginnings of the museum. And I'm wondering where you were when--when did you first hear that your parents were considering **[1:05:00]** turning the gallery--what had been at least ostensibly a commercial gallery--into a non-profit museum?

NR: Give me the year framework.

JB: Well, I found documents that go back as early as 1967 when there were discussions about the possibility of starting a folk art museum. You know the gallery started in '65. But it seems like--at least Edith--had in the back of her mind that, you know, a museum [was what it should be]. You know—she, I think, really thought of the gallery enterprise more as an educational and aesthetic opportunity. She didn't seem to be very interested in making money. She wasn't opposed to it, but her--the focus of her attention was more on the display, the collecting and display of the objects, and learning about them. I mean there were many--there was this whole Egg and the Eye Association that sponsored [many educational programs at the gallery].

[break in tape]

NR: I'm OK now. Sorry.

JB: So, in other words, the gallery, as wildly successful as it was in every other respect: socially, culinarily, aesthetically, it was never, I understand--I wasn't there, but from what everyone--including your dad--has told me, it was never a success commercially. And she was always very

interested in programs of all kinds: lectures, workshops, you know, pretty much every kind of thing. Puppet shows.

NR: Yeah, I think the Mask Festival, you're forgetting that.

JB: Well yeah. I mean that started--

NR: Because I'm the reason for that.

JB: OK--well I want to get to that, and I just wanted to set the scene. Because it was a process of several years to turn the gallery into a museum. It had the--she went to Washington to lobby for it. And you know, because the IRS had to determine that this was not just a tax dodge, but that, you know, it was going to have an educational purpose [so] that . . . you know--making it a non-profit enterprise was [legally] appropriate. So that took--in 1973, they got their [501(c)(3) status] or whatever it was: the non-profit status from the IRS. But then it took another couple of years to form a board, to find staff--you know--to do all those things that do make it [a nonprofit organization].

I just--I just said that the museum really wasn't that different, but of course there were some big differences. You had to have some professional staff, and you had to have a mission, and you had to have a board of trustees, and so on. So, the museum did not start to have exhibitions that were advertised as Craft and Folk Art Museum exhibitions until 1975. And at first, it was the "Craft and Folk Art Museum incorporating the Egg and the Eye." They rightly wanted to use the great reputation that The Egg and The Eye [gallery] had, you know, before [completely] changing the name over. The restaurant remained, but took on the name of the Egg and the Eye, which I thought was brilliant. And so that was 1975. And then sometime in that period of time, before the first manifestation of the Festival happened, which was October of '76--and that was primarily a parade--I guess there were a few performers--that's what I'd like you to talk about. How did that whole idea of the Mask Festival come about?

NR: Well I was living in the Bay Area, the north Oakland/Rock Ridge area. **[1:10:00]** And there was a parade, a mask parade up there. I think it was in Tilden Park or something. It was just a small thing where they—it's hailing, look at the hail! It's hailing!

JB: I'm going to pause for a second.

NR: Look--

[break in tape]

JB: Yes, the Mask Festival. OK, we had a little bit of a cloud burst.

NR: Yeah, it was just (laughter)--just the wild Altadena weather. OK, so I told her [Edith] about this parade, and I thought, you know, LA has so many different ethnic neighborhoods, wouldn't it be great to, you know, try to involve them in the parade? And you could be the center of it? And she

caught that idea and went running with it. I mean, of course, my mother--you give her a little idea, and pretty soon it's a big idea.

JB: Yes, yes, every aspect--

NR: So she was so galvanized by this whole idea, and thought OK, the school children, let's involve the school children. Then we could have maskmaking workshops, we can get all the ethnic groups to, you know, exhibit their masks and stuff. It wasn't at the beginning of the idea—performing--but mostly just us recognizing the ethnic contributions of the city. She always thought in terms of the city, and its environs, and trying to get everybody to--I mean I had no thought of--I was just this--we were just this little--just a little mask parade, [whoever thought] that it would ever become the Mask Festival [that it became]. I mean that--

JB: Oh, and how could anyone have? And it happened so fast.

NR: It happened so fast. Well, Willow was the key person in that.

JB: Yes. Well, Shan was the first, but Willow assisted her for a couple of years, until she got her--

NR: Her degree.

JB: --bachelor's degree [in World Arts and Cultures from UCLA], and then she took over in '79.

NR: Oh, is that when it was?

JB: Yeah, yeah. Seventy--well '76 was the first. It was mainly a parade, and then '77 and '78, and between '76 and '78, I have a report that Willow wrote, I think for a grant proposal or something. And she shows that it was just--it grew exponentially. It started out with something like 15 groups, and then grew to 60, and then, you know, over 100, and then 200 or 300.

NR: [inaudible] Anyway, it's marvelous, it's my favorite part of the museum, I love it.

JB: So tell [us] again what this parade, the mask parade, was that happened in Oakland, that was the inspiration.

NR: That's all I remember about it, except it was in Berkeley, and people paraded with masks on that either they made, or that--they were ethnic masks. And from that, I thought well, this would be something great for Los Angeles, which is such a sprawling metropolis. It never had an identity as a city in those days, it was like many, many small townships and small cities, sort of in a loose relationship, but it never felt like a city. And this was one way to give it some kind of, like, cultural identity. A multi-cultural center, this was my mother's thinking, and see--this is like my grandmother's thinking [of] that larger context--where she got this ability from [she got it from her mother, Rose].

JB: And it was about that time in the--probably '74 or something like that--that Mayor Bradley had a commission that studied the ethnicity of the city. I don't know if it was for the first time, but there

was a report that came out about that time that, you know, made clear how many different [groups there were]--at that time. He said there were more different ethnic or immigrant groups in Los Angeles than in any other city [in the U.S.], and that was a big shock, because everyone had always assumed it was New York City or Chicago that had the most. But we had so many more from Asia and the Pacific area. So, I know Edith would quote that often--and that kind of became--and I think to some extent still is--the identity that you say L.A. did not have before. Yeah. Well, you came to many **[1:15:00]** of the Festivals.

NR: I got--yeah. [inaudible] I moved back to LA in 1980 [overlapping dialogue; inaudible].

JB: And you had Rosie with you at that time?

NR: Rosie was born in ’72, and then Sonya was born in ’80. So, and Coco was already--Colette, my stepdaughter, was--she’s three years older than Rosie, so she was 11.

JB: And when did you and Frank get together? You--

NR: Seventy-eight.

JB: Seventy-eight, OK. So probably just before the Artesano’s Mexicanos show.

NR: No, it was because of [that show that we got together]. [Artesanos Mexicanos/Three Folk Artists from Mexico; opened June 26, 1978]

JB: Oh, OK.

NR: It was because of the [overlapping dialogue; inaudible]--

JB: Now did you know Judith Bronowski?

NR: No, we had no idea. What happened was that--I can’t remember his last name--Kerry somebody [Marshall]. Somehow, I don’t know how mother got in touch with this guy.

JB: He had a company called Egg Carton, I remember that.

NR: Yeah, something. Anyway, he lived in the Bay--he lived in . . . . He lived in like Orinda, or Walnut Creek. And he somehow became chosen by Mom to apply for an NEH grant to do accompanying material for the school system that would go in conjunction to the Artesanos Mexicanos show. And he wrote a grant, and it was turned down. So she called me and said, "You’re the anthropologist"--which I’ve never actually been an anthropologist--I studied anthropology. I did field work, but that doesn’t--to me--qualify--

JB: I don’t know, from what I hear from--

NR: --you as an anthropologist. In my mind, anyway. [So she said], "You’re the anthropologist," you know, "help him rewrite the grant." So I did, and we got it. So then--the idea was to [create]--supplemental materials to supplement the show. Judith Bronowski had taken--made three films

on three different *artesanos*, artisans from Mexico. And the show was these movies in different areas of the museum, and then displays of the crafts that were related to this. . . . and . . . the three artists were being brought by Judith Bronowski to L.A. for a week. And--

JB: Now, how did you find out about Judith, or had she come to the museum?

NR: I didn't know anything about her, but mother--

JB: She got together with Edith, OK.

NR: She was already--it was already scheduled. So, Judith didn't know about us, and she was infuriated that we would have anything to do with her Indians, and--

God, look at it just going.

JB: Oh my gosh. It is pouring.

NR: It's pouring.

And that, you know--she felt we were interfering in her domain. Nevertheless--what the grant was--what they wanted us to do was to follow these three artists around L.A., and somehow create a program about that for the school system, so that the kids could give it more of a--related to L.A. in some way. I thought that was pretty shallow grounds for any piece of work. And I said what we need to do to--well I don't know if it was me or Kerry and I together--thought there must be a way of relating it to what--is there an equivalent in Los Angeles to this folk art tradition of Mexico? Do we have a Hispanic folk art tradition here? And someone said, "Well, there's this guy named Carlos Almaraz, you should call him, because he knows all about it." So we called Carlos, and Carlos says, "You don't want me, you want Frank Romero. Frank Romero has been documenting Hispanic folk art in Los Angeles for years as a part of Simon—" There was another guy [Seymour Rosen], who also documented folk art in LA. But Frank specialized in Hispanic folk art. I said, "What is Hispanic folk art in LA?" I had no idea.

So we called Frank, and he said, "Well, if you want to meet me, you have to see a movie about me." So we met Frank at Jim Tartan's office--and Jim Tartan's the filmmaker who had made the film *Los Four*. So Frank said, "I want you to know what I'm about." So we watched the film *Los Four*, and it was fascinating, because Frank's work is very involved with Hispanic iconography of Los Angeles. So that was our introduction, and then we thought, "Well this is great." So Frank then took over this part of the project, and he led us on a tour **[1:20:00]** of East LA. And we saw--we met all the low riders, we went to the low rider clubs. We saw all the tattoos, we saw all the gardens--

JB: "We" was you and Kerry?

NR: Kerry and I. We saw the gardens, which are these sculptural gardens in these small little East L.A. houses that are really like little Disneylands--they're outrageous. Usually shrines, but with all

this fantasy and other stuff collaged into it. And anyway, there were different areas of folk art, and then we also came to know about *Los Four*, and the Chicano art movement. And anyway, Frank and I fell in love in this--at this time--and we decided not only did we want to do this for the trunk [we were assembling for taking to the schools], we also followed the three--then [the exhibition] opened at this point, and the three artisans came up, and we got to know them, because we followed them around for a week, and we decided we really wanted to visit them in Mexico on our own, and do a slideshow about them in Mexico. So, without Judith knowing it, we went to Mexico and we stayed with [Manuel] Jiménez, and [Pedro] Linares, and . . . Sabina Sanchez. And we photographed them in their houses, and became friends with them. We got very friendly with Jiménez, and I used to visit him--we visited him for years after that, and his sons. And we also asked them to give us samples of their work in stages, so that we could use them as teaching tools for this trunk we were assembling.

So we ended up making three slide shows. One on the--we called it "Pueblo," which was about what artisans are like in Mexico. And we did one on the equivalent reality of Los Angeles, so the kids could see that. And then we did the slide show about these artists arriving from Mexico, and being walloped by a huge cosmopolitan city, and one of the most moving moments of that was Jimenez seeing the ocean--he'd never seen the ocean. He was an extremely spiritual man--not even spiritual--mystic. He's a natural mystic who had this total epiphany on the shore of the ocean. It was an incredibly moving moment. Anyway--so we did a little slide show about their trip.

JB: But Judith had already made the films about these artists.

NR: Yes, but we couldn't take those into the school system, so we just ended up making our own show.

JB: And she didn't know about this?

NR: Well she knew about it.

JB: Oh.

NR: But part of our being in love was that we got so excited about this project that we kept amplifying the boundaries of it. So then we made--

JB: The "Edith syndrome."

NR: The Edith syndrome. Well it was also so much fun to work together--we did these cards that were organized around projects for the classroom that utilized these crafts, and other aspects of--this is the anthropologist in me--I couldn't help it. And Frank and I illustrated--

JB: And the teachers I'm sure were grateful, yeah.

NR: We illustrated them, and so we did something like--there would be a card for foods. Guacamole,

or chocolate, or how to make a *huipil* [traditional garment worn by indigenous women in Mexico and Central America] or *enredo* [a wrap-around skirt] or all these artifacts that were from the culture of Mexico. And then the cards that had to do with different celebrations, so there was Dia de los Muertos, or how they celebrated Christmas, or how they--what they did for, you know, Cinco de Mayo, whatever. And then how you could use these celebration cards, and then make all the foods and the crafts that were associated--

JB: I think there were recipes, too.

NR: Yeah recipes, how to do--put on the whole shebang in the classroom. So that's--that was--I was very proud of those.

JB: So the cards, all of that, by the way, is at the UCLA library in Special Collections.

NR: OK, oh good I'm glad it's not lost.

JB: No, not at all.

NR: They were really, really cute, and yeah, that was part of our courting.

JB: We took the slide--oh, that's nice. Well, so the cards went into the trunks--

NR: Into the [trunks]--the cards, the slide shows, and then the examples of their work. So Jiménez did, like, six stages of carving, from a piece of a log to the finished product. Not painted, but all of the sculpted part of an animal. Sabina Sanchez had the drawing of the--of an embroidery, [inaudible] the color, and the sleeves. And then one partly-embroidered, then a completed one. And Linares gave us--which is a hysterically funny story--he gave us **[1:25:00]** a--the form, a plaster form of a skull . . . which was what he used as the form for putting the papier-mâché on. And then he gave us the papier-mâché shell, cut in half, so you could see how it was layered on, and then opened up. And then one that was painted, a small one. So that was all in the trunk. When we got to Customs, Frank had a huge beard and stuff, and of course they stopped us, because we had this huge *canasta* [basket] of--we used to buy so much folk art when we were there. So we looked--and I had probably three or four [*huipils*] on, so I wouldn't have to pay customs on them. We looked like a circus, I'm sure. We got stopped by Customs, and they looked at that plaster skull, and they went, "I'm sorry, we're confiscating this. It could be concealing drugs." And they drilled it in half, and we sued them essentially, and got money to repair it back together, but it was--of course, all it had in it was newspaper, you know--but they couldn't tell from their primitive X-ray. They thought it had something--it had a hollow inside.

JB: Yeah, oh boy.

NR: So . . . it was ultimately repaired, but--

JB: What an adventure.

NR: A funny story. No, we had a great time--that was fun.

JB: So that was your introduction to Frank, and it was--

NR: And I ended up moving in with him virtually after that.

JB: And then a year later, you worked on another CAFAM show, the Traditional Toys of Japan [opened April 30, 1979].

NR: No, that wasn't--that was much later.

JB: '79. '78 was Artesanos Mexicanos.

NR: Really?

JB: Yes, yes.

NR: Oh, because we did a lot of mural painting.

JB: Well, I want you to talk about the mural show too.

NR: No, not the mural show. We did murals as part of the display of--let's see, what show? The Greek show--we did a mural which--Geri Kavanaugh curated that show. [The Greek Ethos: Folk Art of the Hellenic World; opened February 18, 1979; curated by Basil W.R. Jenkins; Kavanaugh designed the installation.]

JB: I remember that mural.

NR: And there was one of the Romanian--we did something for our Mexican show where we did [Los Voladores] in the background. We used to paint murals for a lot of the backdrops--that was a lot of fun. So that's kind of how we participated. Plus, the Japanese Toy show, which was the--yeah, OK, I totally lost the sequence.

JB: It's hard--oh I would not remember it if I didn't have all these lists of things. Well, yeah. And that's another one that we have a lot of the--you know--the slides for. That--well you tell about it.

NR: So the technology was so primitive that by using two slide projectors, you could key them so they'd look like one slide merged, or became another one, you know. So it was pretty primitive.

JB: So it was an animation show, a show--

NR: Yeah sort of vaguely--

JB: --showing how the toys moved. And it was lovely. So that went on a continuous loop in the [projector].

NR: When it worked, yeah. (Laughter) NR: I had technical difficulties frequently.

JB: Yes. So--well let's see. Do you want to go ahead and talk about the murals, the Murals of Aztlan? [overlapping dialogue; inaudible] Were you involved with that? [Murals of Aztlan: Street

Painters of "East Los"; opened April 28, 1981.]

NR: Did you talk to Frank? Of course.

JB: No, I have not yet.

NR: Yes, we'd been married I guess a year by then. And part of it is, you have to understand my mother's enthusiasm, right? So, here I was, married to an artist. First of all, she was always impressed by artists--across the board.

JB: Oh yes, great respect for them.

NR: When I went out--I used to date Karlheinz Stockhausen when I was 21, you know, he was my lover for years, and she was appalled at first because he was so much older, he was what? 17 years older than I was.

JB: Wow, I didn't--

NR: But then she was also impressed . . . because he was so, you know, high in his profession, right? And so Frank, she was charmed by Frank right off the bat. You know he was--

JB: And it must have been kind of funny having the two Franks--

NR: [It was] mutual love. Oh yeah, the two Franks. And you know, Frank was--he could hold his own. He had a big enough ego for me. You know, I needed someone [like that].

JB: Frank Romero, . . . yeah.

NR: Yes, he did. And so, he and my dad, they all hit it off really well. So his enthusiasm, he really had been documenting murals [in L.A.] since they started, and so of course he was right in the middle of the whole Chicano art movement. And so the idea was--here I am--I was kind of a West Side girl **[1:30:00]** you know. What about bringing all this rich tradition into the view of, you know, the rest of L.A.? That was kind of how it happened.

JB: So that was really your idea.

NR: Not mine, it's ours. You know, I mean Frank's. All of it was just getting to know each other. Mother [was]--learning about this whole world--and she probably met Carlos, who was also another charming person at that time.

JB: Well they all were.

NR: Yeah, everybody was delightful. And they were. of course. tickled to death to have the exposure. Everybody was, so Frank just chose the people, and it wasn't much to do. I mean with Judith Hernandez and Gronk, and Willy Herrón and then the East Los Streetscapers. That was the group. And they--we had a blast, and the idea was that you could see how it was done, because it was open from the day one. So people could come in and see the progress of the painting.

JB: So, it started with blank canvases.

NR: They created a canvas to fit the shape of the [gallery] walls. And everybody had their zone, right? A wall. So on the bottom floor it was--on the street side, it was the Streetscapers, they were [David] Botello and [Wayne] Healy, that was just the two of them at the time. And then on the west wall, it was Judith Hernandez, and then Frank [Romero] was--no, Carlos [Almaraz] was also on the stair side, and then Frank was sort of on the stair side, wrapping around to the back. So they were the [ones] downstairs, and then upstairs, oh, John Valadez had the north side, and then Willy Herrón and Gronk kind of had a--Gronk had this huge, long wall, and then Willy sort of seguéd--they sort of merged theirs together.

JB: [John Valadez's] was at the head of the stairs, so you saw that as soon as you came up to the third floor.

NR: . . . . That was John Valadez, who did projection--very--yeah, yeah.

JB: Oh yes, yes, yes.

NR: So, that was fun, and they had, you know, of course mariachis [at the party, which was held after the murals were finished], and at that time, the guy who ran the restaurant wasn't Rodessa, it was this--I'm trying to think of who it was, it was a Hispanic guy, he was really fun. I don't know who--

JB: Yeah, I--there were several different managers over a period of time--

NR: The different people--yeah.

JB: --before Ian Barrington started.

NR: Anyway, it was a blast, and then, of course, Jim Tartan made a film about it. [Murals of Aztlan, an exhibition produced by the Craft and Folk Art Museum, Los Angeles, 1981, curated by Frank Romero; filmmaker, Jim Tartan, Bronson Films, 1981. 23 minutes, 16 mm.]

JB: Yes, that's a wonderful film, a wonderful film.

NR: And it was. There was a critic who used to drive us crazy named Shifra Goldman. Oh my God. Who said it was not authentic, because it was taken out of context, and therefore it was not authentic. Like, so much bullshit is that, you know. And she wrote these scathing articles about us, it was so ridiculous!

JB: Was there more than one article? I know there was one in *Artweek*. [June 20, 1981, 3-4; then a few weeks later *Artweek* published a response from Judith Hernandez and a reply from Goldman.]

NR: I don't know. Whatever it was, it was stupid. It was stupid, and also, [inaudible] like--it started with Carlos, he was the first one to emerge from the East Side by having a show--you know he got the--it had to do with the Arco Center for the Arts in downtown [that] gave him a show there,

and it was Fritz Frauchiger, who was the director, and also, I'm trying to think of the other gal who was--not Eudora Moore--but somebody important had it before--set it up. He was--he took over, gave Carlos a show. Carlos sold so much--he got so much attention that Jan Turner took him up, and she was a, you know, important midtown gallery. And then Frank got an opportunity to have a show there, and that started his career. They both got launched from Arco, and then Robert Berman took him from there, and that was the beginning of his showing. So they were already, at that time, the timing--showing on the West Side, so it [the Shifra Goldman critique] was all a stupid thing. You know, they became integrated into the L.A. art scene, not just marginal artists. You know, which is what she wanted to keep them as, and it's ridiculous. You know--anyway.

JB: Well yeah, I thought there was a--I mean there may have been some personal things that I wasn't aware of, but I thought her main point was that if--that the mural tradition was a street tradition, and if it wasn't done on the street--

NR: It's an ephemeral one.

JB: --it wasn't authentic.

NR: Right. Ephemeral, it's an ephemeral art form.

JB: I mean that really brought up the whole issue of "authenticity" again. Which, you know, I didn't agree with her and, you know, I thought it was interesting, obviously, all of these quite authentic muralists--

NR: Like Magú [Gilbert Lujan] didn't do a mural, and I'm wondering if he was asked, and I don't know. He is a person--he was the social conscience of the *Los Four* group, as the one who was, you know, trying to be strictly Chicano, **[1:35:00]** and it--and like the ephemeral quality of the mural was important--because it was like the newspaper of the community. He was more--I don't think the others ever intended to be "ethnic" artists, they just were interested--they were consumed by art, period, and they'd all lived in New York and worked there, too. It's not like they were homeboys or something, they were educated and men. I mean--you know.

JB: Right. Well, the question was an interesting one though, it was sort of like--the fact that Edith Wyle put folk art on pedestals, in an art gallery, you know—yeah, you can find things wrong with that, the cultural context was missing perhaps.

NR: No, no, she--that was not her thing though. She always included the cultural context.

JB: Yeah, yeah, she did actually, of course. But I mean the idea of making the visitor see these pieces as art pieces, and therefore valuable, and be able to see them up close, and examine them the way you would examine a piece of art, as opposed to being in a market. Well, that was--I--from my point of view, I can see that as a transition kind of thing for--you know--let's face it--for people from the West Side who up to that point--

NR: Didn't want to go to East LA.

JB: Yeah. Well, and--but actually, part of the Murals of Aztlan programming was to take tours of people around [to East L.A.—and elsewhere where there were murals in L.A.].

NR: Oh yeah, we led several tours, so.

JB: But there were many people [who came to CAFAM to see the Murals of Aztlan show] who saw murals up close for the first time, and certainly had never seen murals being painted. And so it was a kind of a transition for a lot of people.

NR: It was a learning experience for everybody. And it was fun, I had lots of fun.

JB: It was great fun, and Tom Vinetz documented [it]; every week he came in and spent--did you not know that? There are--

NR: I don't remember, I mean Tom was in and out of our life so much in those years, I don't know.

JB: Well there are hundreds. I mean I think there probably are over 1,000 slides that he took of the whole progression of those--of all of the murals individually, and then he took shots of, you know, each floor. He took shots of, you know, audience members, visitors to the museum interacting with the artists.

NR: Yeah, I'd love to see some of those [inaudible].

JB: Oh yes, you would love it. They--he was a wonderful photographer. I don't know, I haven't seen him for years, but he's--he is a wonderful photographer. And so that show was thoroughly documented, plus, of course, Jim Tartan made this fabulous film. Which is also, both the film and video copies of it, are in the archive at UCLA.

NR: Excellent! Good, good, good.

[End of Session 1: 1:38:20]

[Joan and Nancy take a break for lunch.]

CRAFT AND FOLK ART MUSEUM ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
INTERVIEW OF NANCY WYLE ROMERO

Session 2 (32:21), Saturday, March 6, 2010. Interviewed by Joan M. Benedetti

JB: So in 1984, Frank Wyle retired, and Edith retired.

NR: ’84? Huh?

JB: Yes, ’84--I know. What I wanted to ask you . . . they gave her a big send-off, she--I don’t know if I went to that or not . . . .

NR: Reluctantly retired.

JB: Huh?

NR: She *reluctantly* retired.

JB: Well, I was wondering if Frank didn’t twist her arm.

NR: No, I don’t think it was Frank.

JB: No? Oh.

NR: No. You mean her husband, Frank, my dad?

JB: Yeah.

NR: No. No.

JB: Well, Patrick, of course, was really chomping at the bit.

NR: Yeah, he was.

JB: But then, of course, she had lunch with him every Wednesday, as long as they were [both] there--where the Egg and the Eye [restaurant] was. [The Egg and the Egg restaurant closed forever June 30, 1989; CAFAM staff moved temporarily to 725/727 Curson July 31, 1989; the first CAFAM exhibition at the May Company opened November 21, 1989; most of the staff moved to the May Company June 28, 1990.]

NR: Yeah, she--you know—[CAFAM] had occupied her mental space for so long, it was very hard to retreat. She wasn’t--she still had a lot of energy.

JB: Well, that--I was going to ask you if you noticed any differences in either your dad or your mom after they retired.

NR: My father? No, because he was always extremely busy. Though he did take a lot more time with the family, and really [did] get involved in all his grandchildren and great-grandchildren’s lives. They both did. They were, you know, great family people.

JB: Spent more time at the ranch?

NR: Yeah. My dad always spent more time than my mom did at the ranch. But, you know, as I said, they were involved in all their kids’ and their grandkids’ and their great-grandkids’ lives. But, like, [I'm] sorry, my mom didn’t really get to know the great-grandkids, because she died. Let’s see... Rosie was pregnant when she died--with Sophia. And Alex had just given birth to Devon, so those were the first, so she knew Devon.

JB: Doesn't seem possible it's been that long.

NR: I know. I get confused. But my dad was--had so many boards he was on--and the ranch he ran, that he had ongoing business. Kept him busy full-time, anyway. And his investments, and all that. But my mom, I think she had a hard time. She was a little bitter.

JB: I remember her saying that someone had told her--she said this as if this was somebody else's idea, but I thought to myself, I wonder if it was her idea, too?--that she should've, in the renovated building--that she should've had an office set aside for herself.

NR: Well, I'm sure she would have liked that. I don't know if she said it or not. But she really felt that she was the--you know--the person who kept everything on track, the track that she set out for it, for the museum to follow. And that without her--her vision--it might not continue as it had before. And she's right, of course. It doesn't. Because each new director brings their own--his own or her own--personality to bear on it, and the focus changes. L.A. changes, too. I think that she felt bad that she left it at a low point. And I can't remember exactly when she retired, but it doesn't--

JB: 1984. Actually--

NR: Was it back in the new building?

JB: --I think that was at a high point right then.

NR: Was that before they moved to the May Company, or after?

JB: Oh, before, yeah.

NR: Oh, before, OK. Then she left it in a good point. Because that May Company thing was a fiasco. She was so excited by the architects that were going to do the [renovations].

JB: Hodgetts + Fung?

NR: Uh huh.

JB: Well, I wanted to ask you--

NR: But I never liked their design at all.

JB: You didn't like the Hodgetts + Fung design? Everybody seems to love it or hate it. It's pretty but it's not very practical. **[05:00]**

NR: It's not. It's a waste of space.

JB: Although getting the elevator in was wonderful.

NR: Oh yeah, no, I'm not against the elevator. I just--it's a very disjointed space. . . . And the fact that they didn't put a restaurant in was the death of it. Because the restaurant was the only revenue they could count on, and it also made it a place for people to go on a regular basis. So they never could attract the people in there, the way they could when they had the restaurant.

JB: Well, I certainly believe now, in retrospect--I don't think any of us--maybe you did--but I don't think any of us on the staff really appreciated fully how important, how really--I think--integral to the whole concept, the restaurant was.

NR: The restaurant was *buzzing*. It was full. It was always packed. And even if you didn't care about art, you saw it, because you went to the restaurant. So, it brought art to a lot of people that wouldn't otherwise have seen it.

JB: Well of course at the beginning--

NR: And it was intimate. And small. And it was a jewel, you know.

JB: It really was. [But] I did hear Edith and others say that it made them mad to realize that lots of people came in to eat, who were not aware that they were in a museum at all.

NR: Ah yeah, well. She was always trying to let people know how important it was.

JB: Well, there were a whole lot of reasons why the restaurant didn't happen. And I have found letters and memos that indicate that they were still hoping and planning to have a restaurant in the renovated space--what eventually became the office space there. But, you know, the fiasco--the *real* fiasco--was not getting that building on the corner. Which your mother wanted to [buy as soon as it was available]. [There is] a wonderful memo from her, from [April 17] 1975, that is [written] to the whole membership, and it says, you know, "We're starting this museum, and the building on the corner is available for $350,000, [actually $300,000] and we just have to raise that."

NR: And then the next owner just played on them mercilessly--made it so--

JB: Oh, Ventress? I never did understand [why he was so stubborn about the price]. Maybe you could shed some light on it.

NR: I did not get involved. I don't know.

JB: Because it seemed like it was more than just a financial matter. It almost seemed--he was so hard-nosed--that it just almost seemed as though there was some personal reason why he would not back down and negotiate in a reasonable way.

NR: I don't know, but that's all I know. That he was very hard-nosed.

JB: So, I mean, the fiasco was that that was built into the plan for the renovated building . . . the merging of those two spaces. [And in the end, they were not able to buy the corner building.] So, we had all our offices, and the library, and storage space, and a gallery in the 5800 building. And the way the 5814 building was redesigned . . . you know, it was either going to be offices--and not very big offices--or a restaurant. It couldn't be both. And there wasn't, you know, any storage space to speak of. There was sort of a little place in the back that they called the Education or Program Room. It was named after someone, was that the Ahmanson? Anyway--

So--and even the parking was . . . [attached to] . . . the big building on the corner. The little parking lot that we had [originally] was what became the courtyard. But that seemed OK at the time, because we had the huge parking lot out in back that belonged to the 5800 building. So it was a big shock to everybody **[10:00]** when . . . [the merger] couldn't happen. [It happened—the merged facility opened in May 1995, but when the purchase did not go through, and the lease

was up at the end of 1997, the corner building had to be vacated and that was when the museum closed.]

NR: Well also-- is it Ratkovich--is that his name--the developer?

JB: Well, the Museum Tower [project] was Ratkovich, yeah.

NR: And that whole fiasco, so--

JB: Yes. Although, Nancy--and I know that [situation with the financing of the Museum Tower falling through] was a big disappointment to everyone--when that didn't go through--but there were some of us [on the staff] that were really worried about how in the world we would ever maintain that much bigger space. You know, that would have been at least three or four times the space that we [had] had [in the original building], and--how would we have even provided the security for it? Let alone any of the other staffing. [So, the Hodgetts & Fung design seemed much more reasonable.]

NR: I don't know. I was not involved in any of this, so I have no input, I'm sorry.

JB: Yeah. I know. And that's partly why I thought . . . maybe we would end this fairly soon. But, you know, it does have . . . a happy ending, so I just thought we'd go through to that point.

NR: I did a great show, my Toy Mechanics show.

JB: Oh! . . . . Tell about that.

NR: Patrick was not the director anymore, but he was sort of forced to be--during that period.

JB: Oh, this was after the re-opening of the museum. I don't think I saw that show.

NR: It was great.

JB: Well, tell about it.

NR: It was--I, from all my travels--found that what gave me [the] most pleasure collecting was toys. And what I got most enthusiastic about were toys that were made out of just whatever was lying around people's houses. Like, you know, just--anything. Just flotsam and jetsam, and how people put them together and made these ingenious toys. And so I collected them, and I also started trying to learn how to make them myself. Because they were very simple mechanisms that I was trying to--for me, they weren't simple, because I have no engineering training. But I learned to make some of them, and thought, "This is great."

And I started making art toys with them, using certain--sort of animating my art with these mechanisms, and I thought, "This would make a great show." And I was going to call it Toy Mechanics, and the focus would be on the mechanisms, rather than the toys. [Toy Mechanics; opened 2002] Simple things like wheel toys, or things with cranks. No industrial toys, in other words, that had to have springs or anything like that, or turn with a key; that's way too advanced. It had to be very simple stuff. And so I went around [to] all the collections in L.A. and collected moveable toys. And I went to the Fowler, and to several private collections, of which many of them were members of the Folk Art Council, [that] I went to. And I'm forgetting everybody's name

now. Ann--what was her name? Anyhow, various people that--there's some great collections in L.A. that--

JB: Ann Morgan?

NR: Morgan. . . . Yeah. And there's a great collection in Pasadena; this woman has toys all over her house. So what we did with this show, because the toys—like [with] the Japanese Toys show--

JB: Yeah, I was thinking of the Japanese Toys show with those toys with those wobbly heads--

NR: --we made a movie of the toys moving. And that's my son-in-law's department--

JB: Rigo [Saenz, Rosie's husband].

NR: So he gave me his cameraman, named Vince. And we went around and made all the toys move. And then we made a movie of it that was on a loop. And we had--someone donated a large flat-screen [TV], and we had it running so that when you went into the exhibit, you'd see all the toys, but you could also see what happens when they move. And moving is what makes them become--I mean, makes them wonderful. And it was a delightful movie, which we then decided to market on its own, because it was so much fun for children. Ah, but it's bogged down in Rosie and Rigo's business, it never got off the [ground] . . . because the music we had set it to--which was so great--was actually not in the public domain. So . . . they had to redo the soundtrack, and--anyway, it got bogged down. That's another story. So anyway--it was a great--**[15:00]** I did that show from start to finish myself. Curated it.

JB: So was that during the time when Patrick was Acting Director? After Joan de Bruin had gone on sick leave, or. . .?

NR: He was Acting [Director]. Reluctantly.

JB: But he was paid by the city for a year while she was on sick leave. [Joan de Bruin was on sick leave from April 2001 – April 2002; Patrick Ela was Acting Director during that time.]

NR: He was there, but not there very much. In other words, he didn't come in all the time. And the city--it was when the city had taken over everything. And it was really difficult. Everything had to get--go--cycle through downtown and come back again. So getting money for anything, getting permission for anything, was like such red tape, it was impossible. And they had, like, oversight on everything you did. [Phone rings] It's all right, whatever.

JB: Well, I just wanted to kind of reset the scene. We had to move into the May Company; we had to find an alternative space to be, because the city was insisting that 5814 be earthquake-proofed. As it turned out, that was really good, because a few years later there was the big earthquake of 1994, and it survived very well. But anyway--so it was at that point that we looked at a bunch of different places as possibilities, and then suddenly we were offered all of this free space in the May Company department store. So that's where we ended up going. And I wanted to get your take--because it was somewhat controversial--as you know.

NR: I thought it was a disaster.

JB: Well, explain. Why?

NR: Because it wasn't visible. Period. If you don't have street visibility. . . . [For example], I was trying to help my son-in-law buy a building for his business, and I was saying, "Look at this one, look at this one, this one." He says, "No, no. You have to have--I want it [to be] where street traffic is. I want visibility from the street. Without that, I won't get any off-the-street traffic." And [in the same way], as soon as the museum moved into the May Company, it was hidden. Nobody knew about it. Nobody--you wouldn't say, "Oh yeah, I haven't been there for a while," because you don't see it, it wasn't there. And it lost all its momentum. And a place needs to build up a momentum and stay fresh in people's minds. And no amount of sending notices through the mail--or whatever we did in those days--is gonna get the clientele to come back.

JB: Well, there were people also who really thought the May Company had declined, that it was kind of shabby--

NR: It was shabby.

JB: --even as a department store.

NR: Yeah, it was a mess. So I know it was like treading water, being in there, but meanwhile, everyone on the boat had left, you know. That's my [take on it]. . . . (laughs) You know.

JB: Yeah. Well, I think you're right. We were kind of insulated from that, on the staff, because we were very, very busy when we first moved into the May Company. We were still planning to move into this Museum Tower, you know. The reason that the earthquake-proofing didn't happen right away is because--

NR: You were gonna build the Tower.

JB: Right, right. So we were busy making plans for that. I had started this [adjunct] program called the Center for the Study of Art and Culture, which was supposed to be an [R & D] fellowship program [in the Museum Tower]. That didn't materialize, but we got a lot of money from the Irvine Foundation to build up the library and computerize it, and develop this National Advisory board--which your mom and Patrick attended [all] the meetings of. And that was really, really interesting, because they [the Advisory Board] had some things to tell us about what we should be doing. And we did begin to involve people from the L.A. community more in the shows that were developed. It wasn't just, you know, taking already constructed collections and displaying them. It was more involving people who had actually either made the objects or been involved culturally with the objects. So that was--that was interesting. That was the early 90s, and that was a very traumatic time. That was, you know, the [time of the] Rodney King videotaping--

NR: Frank and I were, you know, **[20:00]** living half the time in Taos, and we weren't really in touch with it.

JB: You were not aware of what was going on?

NR: No, I was aware. I just chose not to be involved.

JB: Yeah. Well, you're right about the street presence. We tried--we had been promised by the May Company people that the windows on the street--and they're big windows on that street!--that

those would be available to us to advertise the shows. And that only happened a few times. They just--you know, in retrospect, you can always see things very clearly. After the fact, I realized probably the only reason that we were given that free space, all of that free space--it was a huge amount. . . . . The fourth floor, is where the gallery was; the library was on the mezzanine; and we had all those offices on the fifth floor, right by the rooftop, [which we were able to use for parties]. It was wonderful, from the staff point of view.

But probably the only reason we were given that is because the May Company department store was on the decline. You know, we didn't think of that at the time. I don't think anybody did. So, you know, it shouldn't have come as such a shock when the May Company Corporation told us, at the end of '92, I guess it was, that they were closing down the building. And that was when we went into the building on the corner and--the 5800 Wilshire building--and the plans for the merging of those two buildings began. [The Museum Tower project had fallen through at that point.] And the assumption, from the staff point of view all along, was that that [corner] building was going to be purchased. That's what all the plans were based on. So [when Ventress began to balk], that was really the start of the problems. And it was kind of a house of cards. So the museum closed, then, at the end of 1997. We had [had] this grand re-opening in '95. Did you come to that, when we had the party [in a big tent] out in back, to celebrate the [re-opening]?

NR: I don't remember.

JB: It was great. I mean, I think if 1984 was a peak, then 1995 was also, was [another] peak--

NR: Was that to open the new building?

JB: To open the renovation, the merging of the two buildings. The new, the renovated, Hodgetts + Fung design.

NR: Mhmm. But not both buildings?

JB: Yes, oh yes! [It was both buildings.] They designed this renovation--that was the two buildings [5800 and 5814 Wilshire] merged with a courtyard [where our parking lot had been]--

NR: Oh, I do remember that, with the screen going across the front. Right, right, right.

JB: Right. And there was a huge gallery in 5800, a beautiful gallery that we had. One of the opening shows was a history of the museum. Edith brought in the [screen] door that was the Egg and the Eye door, and that was part of the show. And I put together a slide show, over 300 images from all of the--

NR: Right. I guess I was there. Can't remember. Musta been.

JB: . . . So, you know, and then it was like, that was the peak, and then--whoosh! We went off the precipice after that. And within a year, Patrick had resigned, and this fellow, Paul Kusserow, had been hired [as Executive Director], and [that] was a huge disappointment. I don't know. I mean, I--he didn't really understand the running of museums. He was a businessman. And he had worked for the Williamsburg Foundation, but in their marketing office, not in--or their finance

office--not having anything to do with the museum [collections or exhibitions]. So in less than a year, the museum was--you know--was in terrible, terrible trouble. And so it closed, and the library was given to LACMA and the archives were given to UCLA. They were gonna be tossed out. All of [the staff files were]—everything was gonna be tossed out.

Martha Drexler Lynn, you remember her. She was a [Decorative Arts] curator at LACMA, and she was hired by Paul Kusserow to be the curator here, at the museum. **[25:00]** [Marcie Page was laid off so that Martha Lynn could be hired. And the rest of the staff began to be laid off—this was before the decision was made to close the museum.] And she [Martha] had this idea that the library could--half of the library could go into the different offices. And of course I had been laid off by that point, so, you know--I could just visualize everything being packed up and disappearing. So I got on the phone and called every--all the art librarians [in L.A.] that I knew. [And we formed a staff/board committee to decide who to give the library to.] And we got eight proposals in writing. Wally Marks was on that committee. Elizabeth Mandel was on that committee, as well as your mom. She didn't want to get rid of the library, but Elizabeth convinced her that if she wanted the library to continue to be used, that it needed to continue someplace else. So--we all thought the museum was gonna be closed forever. You know, the restaurant wasn't there any longer. And so it [the museum] was closed [at the end of 1997]. And then we had the auction of the permanent collection, and it seemed like, you know, that was the end of it. But within a year, this wonderful surprise happened.

NR: Well, Patrick did it.

JB: Yeah.

NR: He did it. He got it back with the city. It's a different animal, but it's still alive.

JB: Yes, yes, it is a different animal. And it certainly went through some traumatic times with a number of different directors before getting to the stage that it is now, which is relatively stable. But I was very happy that your mom was able to see the museum re-open. That seemed . . .

NR: That was important.

JB: Very important, at the time. So--I'm glad to hear that you did have something to do with the museum after that.

NR: I did. I did.

JB: And Frank continued--Frank Romero continued on the board for a while.

NR: I think--I don't know if he's still on it. . . . I mean--I don't think he's been going [to meetings] for the last several years, but he stayed on even after we broke up.

JB: And your dad has gone into a new phase. He stepped down as chair a year and a half ago.

NR: Finally. He wanted to step down a long time before.

JB: I know. I know.

NR: But no one else was there to take over. Finally he said, "Wally, take it on!" A very good person to lead the board.

JB: Very good. He's very easy to work with. The experience I had on that committee with him was very good. But he is a businessman. But a very--with a very humanistic touch.

NR: And he's young enough to give some energy to the place.

JB: Exactly.

NR: That was the trouble with it. Now, where was I? I was, I went to--somebody took me to the Southwest Museum to a lecture, and I looked around there. Everybody was in their 80s. And I looked at the [Craft and Folk Art] Museum and everybody was my parents' age. And I thought--and the same thing with the Symphony. The Symphony was all these ancient people. I said, that was the generation that believed in supporting public institutions. And the new generation [would] rather work on their computers. You know, they're not--it's not the same thing. And they don't believe in going or--except for MOCA [the Museum of Contemporary Art], which has a hip edge, and I must say LACMA has managed to re-invent itself--but by and large, most of these institutions are having a hard time.

JB: Well Maryna has really worked--she certainly has gotten a young staff, who have really good ideas, I think. And she's working to, you know, really attract a younger audience. And that has to happen, because there's just too much competition for everything. Not just other museums, but everything in the world.

NR: Right. Well, the same thing is with art, you know. People used to buy art and now they buy computer parts, you know, or cameras. So the same money gets spent for that. . . .

JB: It's a different world. **[30:00]**

NR: Yeah.

JB: Well, Nancy, is there anything else you'd like to say about your experiences with **[30:00]** the Egg and the Eye and the Craft and Folk Art Museum or your mom and dad, or. . .?

NR: Whatever—I'm better when you ask me questions. (laughter) You know, it was a lot of fun. It was enriching. I'm glad I participated in all those events. And, you know, it added a great dimension to our family. And fulfilled my mother in a number of ways, and also frustrated her equally. And, you know, I wish it had more of that energy now that I miss. But the world was different, so. Ever since they sold the collection, and dispersed everything, it kind of lost its guts for me.

JB: But in the meantime, you have had a kind of renaissance in your career, I think, starting in the '90s. You started to have regular exhibitions, and you're still painting a lot.

NR: Still. I just had a show in August; it was lots of fun. Hard work. [Romero's exhibition was held in September 2010 at the Folktree Gallery in Pasadena.]

JB: Well, I treasure the Nancy Romero painting that I have.

NR: You have one?

JB: I have one that I bought quite a few years ago.

NR: Excellent!

JB: It's of New Mexico, and it's a beautiful landscape. A small one. But I have it up in my office, along with the poster that [Shan?] did for that New Mexico Space and Images [opened November 26, 1979] show, you know, that long one?

NR: Oh, that long one, oh yeah, that was nice.

JB: So I have those two to always remind me of--where I am now [Joan moved to Santa Fe, New Mexico in 2009], thank goodness.

NR: OK, good. I hope . . . [I] answered enough questions for you, filled in some holes.

JB: Absolutely, you did . . . the story of the origins of the Mask Festival was a real gem . . . and many others. Thank you so much for taking the time on a Saturday to meet with me and participate in the history of the Museum.

NR: My pleasure. My pleasure.

[End of Session 2: 00:32:21]