

INTERVIEW WITH MARGUERITE WILDENHAIN
LOCATION: Artist's home, Guerneville, CA
DATE: 14 March 1982
INTERVIEWER: Hazel Bray

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TAPE RECORDED INTERVIEW WITH MARGUERITE WILDENHAIN
AT THE ARTIST'S HOME AT POND FARM
GUERNEVILLE, CALIFORNIA
DATE: MARCH 14, 1981
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MW: MARGUERITE WILDENHAIN
HB: HAZEL BRAY

HB: Marguerite, since your biography as a potter is so well known, and you have written three publications, I think we will dispense with the usual biographical questions and go to something that will give us a chance to just talk.

MW: I think that's a good idea.

HB: So my first question is going to be a general one. At some point in your early life you had many choices in the arts. What led you into work as a potter?

MW: Well, I have to start pretty far back, actually, because when I was fifteen and sixteen, I thought I'd become a doctor. I had a very good natural history teacher and a book with all the drawings of the innards and the inside of the ear and the brain, and that so fascinated me that I could draw those all practically out of memory. And first I thought this was what I was going to be, a doctor. Then I found out that actually it was the drawing that influenced me, not the ear or the brain.

HB: How did you find that out, that it was the drawing that was more important?

MW: Well, I could draw this all out of memory, and then it stopped being so exciting for me. And I saw that it was those shapes that interested me. Well, but then I was seventeen and I was nearly thrown out of the school because I told the teacher that he was unjust, that he was punishing a girl who hadn't done anything wrong, and so I went out of the school when I was about seventeen and went to art school in Berlin, and there I learned to draw first, and then I learned to sculpt, the first elements of sculpting. Then I was a year in England in a boarding school. My parents wanted me also to speak English properly -- my mother was English by birth -- and so we all went to England. But when I came back from England was just when the First World War started. I had to decide now what I would do and I decided to go to art school. And at art school, at the Berlin Academy, I learned to draw and to sculpt, and I sculpted after old plaster molds, from plaster models, that's how they did it.

HB: Do you remember some of your instructors?

MW: No, they have not made a dent in my mind, you know, not one of them can I remember. I also know that I didn't do it terribly long, because I was bored with it. And then I wrote to try to find a job where I could be independent of my parents. I was only about twenty, or nineteen, and I found a job in a porcelain factory in Rudolfstadt, in Thuringia. And there I saw for the first time how the things were fired in the factory. I made the designs. There were two older girls and I was, so to say, their

apprentice for a while, and then later I did my own design. And we made the design for the factory, that means we painted some "beautiful" things, you know, in color.

HB: Pretty things?

MW: "Pretty" things, yes, pretty things on the plates. And then the girls in the factory made a thousand copies of whatever it was. And there for the first time did I see, as I moved through the factory, a man sitting at the wheel and kicking the wheel and making models. And I was so fascinated by this that I went into that room and asked him to tell me how that worked. And he said, "Well, I can't tell you, I can show you." And so he threw for me, and from then on I was caught. I thought, that's it, that's it! That's not the stupid little paintings I'm putting on there but that's it, the making of those pots. And he showed me a few things, but there was not a lot that I could have learned from them, also because he only worked for the factory. But I used to go on big hikes every Sunday when we had the day off, and on one of those Sunday hikes I went to Weimar where there had been an academy and during the war it had been closed up because the man was a Belgian director and had been in the war. And when I arrived at the Weimar Academy Gropius's program was nailed on the wall, and I read it. I stood like hypnotized in front of it, and I thought, well, that's it, and I saw "the cathedral of the crafts" and so on (I have the book here) and that decided me into going into the crafts. Before that I didn't know a craft or art or what,

I had never really thought about it. And, also, what do you know when you're twenty-two? No, it's really true, you only think you do.

HB: There was, and we all know, no other school like the Bauhaus.

MW: No, but the Bauhaus had not started.

HB: It hadn't.

MW: It had not started yet. They had only put that big sign up there, "the cathedral of the future," and so on and so on, and I was so fascinated by this proclamation of Gropius that I thought, when it starts I'll be there. And it was maybe three months later.

HB: I see.

MW: I was the first potter at the Bauhaus.

HB: The first potter there.

MW: Yes, there were only a few anyway. There was no class bigger than ten or twelve students at the Bauhaus. There were only sixty students in all.

HB: So you began work with the -- at the Gropius school, his program then, about 1918-19?

MW: 1919, I think.

HB: 1919.

MW: Yes, it's a little while ago.

HB: Just a little.

MW: When people ask me now, "I guess you've done that a few years," I say, "a few years...I started in 1919." And at the Bauhaus we had to register for the whole course. First of all you had to go through an examination. That means you were six months a trial student, so to say, before you

were accepted. They didn't accept everybody. And when you were accepted you had another six months trial in whatever workshop you were choosing.

HB: At that time, did they have the basic first-year program?

MW: No.

HB: That came in later.

MW: That came all much later. It came when the Bauhaus became known and all the students came, many from the United States. All at once we were flooded with American students. Oh, they were going to Europe, you know, like this. And that's when Gropius said, "Hey, we have to do something. We can't just have everybody just come like this." And this full course came, as I say, about a year later. So we were all accepted more or less on our good looks. I don't say good looks, but on our capacity for work, let's say. We had all drawn and sculpted and done something. And then there were two masters, the art teacher, let's say, the art master, and the craft master. He started that then, you see, that you had to be accepted by both. Every student was on a trial period, and if the craft master said, "Well, he has just absolutely no talent with this; he's not a craftsman," you know, you could see if a person has some abilities or if it's odd on him or awkward on him, and if the other master, the art master, would also say, "Well, he has no talent," then he was not accepted. They had both to agree that he had both the hands and whatever else it needed.

HB: Tell me something. This is an important point. The craft master, was this a person who was a potter or a weaver?

MW: Yes, that's right.

HB: And there was a different craft master for each --

MW: For every workshop. And they were all craft masters from outside, not one was from a college. They were all craftsmen of their own. Krehan, my master, his father and grandfather and great-grandfather had all been potters. The workroom in which I learned was marked 1770 and was all for pottery, you see, the family had all been potters. And the same with the weavers. So there was a background of a craft behind it, not an art school. This is always what annoys me here. You see the difference.

HB: I think this is a very important point.

MW: I think so, too.

HB: Well, in the -- the master for the arts approval, what kind of person was that?

MW: That was Gerhard Marcks, and Klee was for the weavers and Feininger was for the glassblowers and Moholy-Nagy was for the metal and so on. But we all had to go first through the six months' trial period. And both of those masters, I mean the art and the craft masters, had to say, "Yes, he has some talent, we can take a chance on him." But if one of those didn't agree, then he was not accepted.

HB: This was a very small school, and deliberately.

MW: There were only sixty students all in all.

HB: Sixty all together, in multi-discipline.

MW: Yes, and all of us were actually grown-up men and women, because it was after the First World War, you know. Many of those were fellows who came with their military outfit --

that's all they had -- completely poor, destitute of anything, you know.

HB: Mature beyond their years, I would say, by the experience of being in the war.

MW: They were also older on the whole. When was that, 1918 -- I was twenty-two, you see. But there were some in their thirties and even near their forties. And the atmosphere was very serious, although we had a grand time with the facilities, too, when we let loose.

HB: Aha. I know this is beside the point so I don't want to take too much of this interview, but I want to talk with you later on about what it was in Gropius's mind that made him seek out a different form of professional education that was so different than any of the previous academies and so forth.

MW: Well, he had seen that all those academies in Europe and in the United States were on a dead end because the people started making art, thinking they could paint and so on without knowing a craft behind it, while formerly they knew their craft and if they were very good they became artists. It wasn't the other way around. Here everybody who goes to art school calls himself an artist. Yes, and it's crazy -- they aren't, you know. But if they said, "I'm a potter but sometimes I sculpt," you know, or "I'm a wall painter but sometimes I paint a picture," or whatever it may be -- that's honest, and that's how it was, and Gropius thought this is how it has to come again. We have to go back to the crafts, and he said, "We have to build a cathedral of the future,"

that was always his saying, "the cathedral of the future," where every craftsman had a part in building that big cathedral, and everyone was a first class craftsman. The master craftsman could say, "You fellows, you make all those capitals on those columns, and you, you make all those glass windows," and they could make it, while we couldn't, you see. And this was the idea of Gropius. And we all went for it with fire because we thought -- I remember when I read this first announcement of Gropius before the Bauhaus started, as I said, I'd been hiking around and I came into Weimar and saw this big announcement there. I nearly swooned, I was so excited. I thought, well, that's it, when it starts I'll be there. And at that time I was working for the porcelain factory but I was there when "it" started.

HB: It's amazing, the circumstances.

MW: Well, exactly. And you see, what is so strange is you or I, we don't have it in the hand. Why did I just walk in that day when that thing was there on the wall?

HB: Amazing. Well, that led you to pottery, but it also led you into sculpture; it was the Bauhaus.

MW: Yes, you see, Marcks is a sculptor, and we used to draw with him once a week and he would always, like a sculptor, correct from the point of view of form, not color or anything like that. With Feininger it would have been different. But the fact that we were only six or seven there in Dornburg and that we were all potters, that was because we had a sense of form. The potter is the one who has that.

HB: So the Bauhaus was not centralized. You worked in Dornburg where the pottery was.

MW: And I'll tell you why. Because the other Bauhaus was centralized in Weimar, but when Gropius contacted Krehan, the master potter, he said, "I leave this place to teach those kids there. Then they'll be telling me what to do," and so he said, "No, I'm not going to Weimar." And so Gropius was smart enough and he said, "Well, we'll send the kids to you. What about that?" "All right, then they're my apprentices and then I'll train them in my shop." And that's what happened. So we five or six potters, we moved to Dornburg where there was an old building of the grand-duke of Weimar who had, during the Revolution, been deposed, and so it was all empty. And there were the stables and above the stables had been the living quarters of the stable boys. There were about eight rooms. And this was just perfect for us. So we each got a stable boy's room, and the stables were made into a workshop, and Krehan, the master, had a kiln built there and so on, and that's where I was seven years.

HB: And Marcks came there.

MW: He was glad not to have to live in the city, and he had a family of a couple of kids and you could live free in a way, and it was very important for all of us, because first of all we were not dependent on the city, so we all learned something else than city life, you know.

HB: That was quite a change for you, having a rather sophisticated --

MW: Yes, for me not so much, because I was actually born in the country, although my parents had a house in the city, but I was personally born in the country for my parents had also a house in the country. And both my parents were very much outdoor people, so I knew quite a bit about nature, but not in the same way as I do now. I know when I came here that I didn't know one tree from the other, and I felt very uncomfortable because that never had happened to me.

HB: All right, so we have you working in -- I would call that an ideal circumstance and environment.

MW: Well, ideal circumstances are always there, only people don't grab them, I think. I mean, hundreds of people could have been in the same circumstances but they would say, "Oh, I don't go in that little village," and that was actually the case. When the pottery was first started, it was just a part of the Bauhaus in Weimar. And when it was decided that it would move to Dornburg and that you had to register for three years for that little village, I was the only one who did, of twenty students at that time. You see, the others didn't want to leave the big town and go into the wilderness and have nothing, no comfort or nothing. So you see, that makes a difference, too.

HB: But the possibilities of working, learning, and staying with clay were your deciding point, I take it.

MW: Well, I don't think I analyzed it at that time. I am, what shall I say, I'm sort of spontaneous, I don't analyze a thing and then do it on the whole note. I mean, if I had to write a letter to the government, I do, but not -- in my

living, I do what I think is right, let's say. And at that time, I thought, that's it, that's it, outdoors, and with a master who has been there for oh so many hundred years, learn pottery and -- I don't really think I thought too much.

HB: When did you begin to feel that you had a way of handling clay?

MW: I think that came already before that, because when I first was at the Academy in Berlin, or rather the School of Fine and Applied Arts -- it's not exactly the Academy -- I was doing woodwork, and for a year and a half I was a woodcarver. I still love to carve wood, I still love it. I pick up wood on the coast all the time and chisel with a big or little knife, you know. I have several of those things, even here. So first I thought wood would be it, and for about a year and a half I took a course at the Berlin Arts and Crafts School there in woodcarving. But then I found that my temperament just wasn't satisfied with that, I mean, I analyze it now like this, I didn't analyze it so exactly then, but I realized that I'd be chiseling like this on a face and all at once the nose would be cut off by mistake. And then I found it would take me two hours or four hours to replace that little piece of wood and re-glue it and re-cut it and so on. And little by little I found that this was not my material, although I still love to carve it. And I think it was in that porcelain factory, where I saw those men making pots, that I decided that was it, because it went fast, and somehow that fit my temperament, you know. And also that it wasn't too intellectual. You see, I'm not

intellectual. It doesn't mean that I'm dumb, or that I can't think, but I'm not intellectual by character.

HB: You want your hands on.

MW: Yes, my hands, my feeling, and everything, but my head, too, I don't say that. But I don't start with the head, I go through the landscape like this and pick up a rock maybe. And I go like this, or somehow -- that's all with the hands.

HB: In your three years there at the pottery, what kind of process did you go through?

MW: Well, we first were with Max Krehan, that was the potter, and he was an old-time potter, and we learned like he would have taught an apprentice of his, right from scratch, from the beginning, you know. And we would have to make a hundred of this sort and a hundred of this sort and five hundred maybe of this sort. And he would go around and say, "Well, we'll keep that one and that one, the rest you can throw away." But that was as a learning process; and after a little while when you were good enough, then he'd say, "Well, we can use them all." When we knew our craft well enough that we could do that easily, then we were free to do whatever we wanted, and that's when the real creative part started. And that's when Marcks started coming in, because before that, at first, he would only draw with us once a week, but he didn't criticize what we were doing in the pot shop because there was nothing to criticize from the point of view of art. And -- oh, I don't have it here, it is on my traveling show -- I have actually a pot from that time, that's the only pot I brought with me from Europe.

HB: The one with the inscription?

MW: Yes.

HB: Yes, was that inscription repeated in the catalog for that exhibition?

MW: He wrote it very well in English, and then he looked a little more closely and said, "But make the foot a little stronger. "Fuss etwas ["]kräftiger." And I've always kept that because this is really quite an unusual pot; it could sometimes be a very valuable pot.

HB: Well, it has a very important meaning for you. We noticed that in the exhibition.

MW: I told my students and they all looked, they all found it. Because this shows also that Marcks had a wonderful way of not hurting our feelings but saying the truth when he would criticize: "Yes, it's all right," he said, "but the neck is a little too big and this could have been a little narrower and if you had pulled it in a little more, and maybe the foot had been -- but the way it stands on the table, it's pretty nice." So he had torn it all apart, and made us attentive to different points that were not good. But he didn't want to hurt you, so he said, "The way it stands on the table is pretty nice."

HB: Well, he built it back up again, but he didn't leave you totally satisfied.

MW: No, we didn't feel hurt. This is also how I criticize, because if you say it's good, the kid gets so conceited, and if you say it's bad, he gets disappointed, and both are wrong, because there's always something that's not too bad, in even

the worst pot. No, it's really true. And there's always something that's not too good, even in a good pot. And if you can explain to those students, and my students see that now, that it is not a personal criticism -- I don't say "You're stupid," or "You don't try," or so -- it's a pure criticism like if you said "two and two is five," and you say, "No, it's four," you know. And since they understand that, I can criticize very hard. And sure, they sometimes are shocked because they think it was good and it was not that good. But then they learn little by little that there are many different possibilities, you see, between an excellent pot, a very good pot, a good pot, and a passable pot and a bad one.

HB: Let's go back in sequence. We'll come on to criticism again in some specific kinds of instances. You were at the Bauhaus working --

MW: It was in Weimar, not Dessau, you realize that.

HB: That's right, this is the first Bauhaus, before the new buildings and all that and the move from Weimar.

MW: We always thought that was the only Bauhaus. The Bauhaus after that we thought was a bad imitation.

HB: Was it too diverse, or what?

MW: No, on the contrary, it became so -- Moholy-Nagy -- everything mathematical and everything abstract. Before that, the people were much freer -- Klee, Feininger and so -- they did what they wanted. And we, to a degree, were free to do so -- no, we thought the Bauhaus stopped when they moved to Dessau.

HB: How much contact did you have with a person such as Klee, or with Feininger?

MW: We had -- how shall I say -- the Bauhaus students were very divided. Sometimes we fought over the whole night, we'd get together to fight -- whether Klee was right, or Feininger, or Kandinsky. There were two main divisions, I would say. On one, were all Kandinsky and Moholy-Nagy and sometimes Klee -- Klee was sort of in between. That means there were those that were more mathematical and more abstract and those that weren't, and that was the big division. And that's why we fought sometimes, as I said, the whole night through. And Klee was liked, but always remained sort of distanced from those students. He was a very special man, though, and we admired him. But we were not all for his art. Marcks was more naturalistic in that way, so he had more understanding, and Feininger also in a way was more naturalistic, though he was not naturalistic ever, you know, the differences are quite small, actually. It had a lot to do with whether it became a theory or not. If the man was free like Klee, to let you do what you wanted, we didn't count his theory against him. But if Moholy wanted everybody to think like Moholy, that we didn't like, because later that can't be it, there can't be only one way of doing it, you know. And Moholy was a very kind man, and if one of the students didn't have a place to sleep, he could always knock at Moholy's door and get a couch to sleep on. In that way we liked him, but we made fun of him -- we didn't take him seriously, not a bit! It was later, after he came here to -- that he was --

HB: Well, he's considered as a theoretician today, if not as an artist.

MW: Yes, but here they talk about the Bauhaus and they always talk about the Chicago Bauhaus -- well, that was never the Bauhaus! After all, the Bauhaus had Feininger and Klee and all those people -- not only Moholy, Moholy was only one.

HB: The Chicago Bauhaus had an interesting curriculum, though.

MW: Which Bauhaus?

HB: The one in Chicago, the School of Design.

MW: But that had nothing to do with us any more. And it is like -- let's say, if you call me the Bauhaus -- sure, I've been at the Bauhaus ten years, but I'm not a Bauhaus, because meanwhile you evolve in a certain way. If you have Marcks talk about the Bauhaus, he's awfully sharp and awfully critical of it, because so much has been spoiled there also, you know. I mean by forcing it in Dessau like this into one direction instead of opening it up like it was in the beginning.

HB: Most people equate -- now I'll bring it back to pottery for a moment -- Bauhaus with design for industry, and with design rather than with pottery or --

MW: Yes, well, that I can talk about if you want, because at that time, there were in the pot shop two fellows, Lindig and Bogler. Lindig had been a sculptor before the Bauhaus, in the old art school in Weimar, and when it became the Bauhaus he just moved with it, and Bogler had been an officer in the General Staff, and he was tall and from the Baltic province and very arrogant. My master was very small.

HB: He didn't care to be looked down upon by a taller man who seemed arrogant.

MW: Yes -- no, it wasn't Marcks, it was the pottery master, Krehan. Krehan was small, Marcks was tall, and Marcks could have given an answer, but Krehan was a simpler man -- the man was forty-five or something, and the other was twenty-five -- so he didn't like that arrogance. Well, but that was a little side remark.

HB: We were talking about the direction of the Bauhaus.

MW: Yes. Well, in the beginning it was not so abstract. Marcks, Klee, Feininger, they all did what they wanted, and Schlemmer, who was the painter, they all had a few students -- Feininger had only one student, and there was no workshop with more than ten or twelve. The biggest shop was the carpentry shop, where there were about ten or even eleven, but not more, and the pottery had six or seven and some had only two or three. But Gropius thought it was better to have two or three good ones than a dozen bad ones, you know, and that was his point of view all along. And in the architecture class there were some years where there were no students. He was the head of the architecture, Gropius. Why? Because they had to go to one of those schools where they learn about putting masonry together.

HB: Engineering and all this.

MW: Yes, and all that. So he didn't take them before they had gone through that learning. Some had already, then they came to Gropius. And I know there was one year when he didn't have any because there was nobody that had gone through

that. So you see, they didn't just fill the classes with students like they do here. And I remember that story, that the director of [California College of] Arts and Crafts once told me when I first came here, of a conference of directors of art schools in Berlin somewhere, years back; the American delegation was the biggest, of course, the big country, and there were twelve men, and all other countries had only one who represented either the British or the French or whatever. And so they came to the Academy in Berlin and Liebermann, the painter, who was the head of the Academy, was asked, "How many students does a professor like that have?" And he said, "Well, this class has only one." He said, "One? Well, how much do you pay your professor?" And it was pretty high. And he said, "Well, how can you do that? One student on that high salary?" He said, "Well, you know, we're supposed to be the Berlin Academy, the best in Germany, we can't afford a bad master, we have to pay him well. We also can't afford bad students, and if there's only one good one, we have only one." And that was something unbelievable for those American men there. They could not understand that you could run a school that way. And in a way that was at the Bauhaus, too, you know, there were not more than sixty or seventy students all in all.

HB: I suppose that one would be typically American and question not being able to afford a bad student -- who decides who is a bad student, the master?

MW: Well, the students, how they were chosen, we had to go through a six-month trial period, that was the choice, whether we came

from the street or from the Academy, it didn't make a bit of difference. The difference was what could we do with our hands or with our heads, you know. Unless they -- how shall I say -- there was much less red tape. I was astonished how complex it is always here. I mean, if a fellow has talent, why can't he just go and say, yes, I can draw, try me out, and then they take him, without --

HB: A fair number of people feel that way today, you know; the apprenticeship programs are going very well.

MW: Well, we had to register for three years and we had to sign that, because the masters were regular craftsmen and they belonged to the guild and the guild can't take students; they can only take apprentices. They don't have this idea of "students." And an apprentice is in the hands of the master for three years. The master is even supposed to take care of his moral behavior, too, which we thought was very funny at that time because we were all grown up; of course, it's made for fourteen-or fifteen-year-old kids. But there was something about it. You see, the master is responsible that the student also learns something.

HB: At a certain point, when you were proficient in throwing, in making various pots, bowls, plates, pitchers and so on, you were actually working on Krehan's production.

MW: From then on we could do whatever we wanted.

HB: And then you did your own work as well?

MW: Yes, we did our own work and Krehan didn't bother us, but then we had to do with Marcks. You see, every workshop had two masters. The apprentice master was teaching us the

craft and Marcks was teaching us the "art," if you want to call it that. And so then our master was Marcks. But the two masters, both Marcks and Krehan, got along very well, because they both had a sense of quality. That is not always the case; it was sometimes jealousy, you know because if the craftsman, let's say, of the weavers or whoever it was was jealous of Feininger or whoever it may be -- Klee -- that sometimes gave friction. But on the other hand, we were not under the tutelage of the craftsmen when we were through our apprenticeship. Then we were completely free to do what we wanted to do. Our master would come in once in a while and pat us on the back for the fun of it, or to see what we were doing; it was Marcks now who was our master. He came every day, you see. But Krehan had us rebuilding the kilns and all those things that required technical knowledge -- Marcks knows nothing about that sort of pottery. Actually, he knows only about sculpture, you see. I mean, he could say whether a pot is good or not, but he knows little about the making of it.

HB: I think it would be important to have people be aware of what kind of examinations you took to reach -- to be called a master.

MW: Yes, when I got my master's, for instance. Okay, I had been seven years a potter. That was the prerequisite. Three years an apprentice, four years a journeyman. All the Bauhaus people went through it. That was the official requirement, and after that you could apply to become a master. And the master did that for you. If he thought you were fit, he would apply to the guild.

HB: Otherwise, you'd stay a journeyman.

MW: Yes, you remained a journeyman, and you could never get a teaching job at a school if you're not a master, you see. A journeyman is a man who knows his craft but has not proven yet that he has an idea of his own -- that's the master. Yes, well, that is very true, you see.

HB: I understand.

MW: Yes. But this is something no one tells you, and I say it all the time. I say, man, you're a good journeyman, you show me that you can be a master. I mean it's like you teach somebody to write and so, okay, he can write, and he knows all the letters -- but has he got something to say? That's where the man comes who has talent, or ideas. And so when the time came that we were ready to become a master, my master would apply to the guild for a meeting with the head guild man, and would introduce you as a future master that was ready to take his master examination. So I had to go there another time. I was the first woman who ever became a master potter, and they just couldn't believe it, you know. In fact, the master offered me his son in marriage in case!

HB: What year was this? Do you recall?

MW: 1925 -- no, it may be a little later -- 1926. I have it somewhere.

HB: I'm sure that it's in the publications, in your books, too.

MW: Well, anyway, so I had to go to that guild master and he interviewed me a little and then he said, "Well, what do you want to make as a masterpiece?" And I said I thought,

maybe, a dinner set because it's pretty complex, there are so many pots and you can also show what you can do. He said, "All right, and how long do you need?" And I said, I'll fire in the kiln of my master, and we could only fire eight or twelve weeks from now. All right, so we agreed on the time. And then he said, "And then you have to make a calculation of the glazes and this and that, and also what it will cost in retail." A very down-to-earth affair.

HB: Were you working in stoneware then?

MW: Yes, about the same temperature that we --

HB: Mid-range?

MW: Not exactly, because it was a different kiln, and every kiln always changes the material. Some pots were much higher and some were lower in that kiln. But that doesn't matter. Stoneware -- it's just like if you ask me, if you're a seamstress, do you always only work in silk or something, you know.

HB: No, I was curious to know because of the feel of that kind of clay, and I was trying to visualize what your master work turned out to be.

MW: Yes, well, I don't have anything that my master did here, but they had -- do you remember that jug with that inscription? That was salt glaze, and my master had a big kiln, and things were fired in capsules.

HB: Saggars?

MW: And on top of the saggars there were always certain single pieces, like that jug, or a bottle, and they got that salt-blue on there. So he had two different wares: he had

the ware inside of the saggars, which was like the glaze for things of everyday use, and the others that were more decorative. And he used to make quite a few pots for his own pleasure with figures on them or something -- he always put them on the top there, so one never knew exactly how they came out.

You asked me about that master examination. So he asked me how long I would take and I said that long, and so on. And when the time came I brought that all in, and he looked at it, and he turned it around, and asked me how I made that glaze, and all this, and then I got my degree. Not a single question about technique. Of course, a good potter can see that; it doesn't have to be explained. You know, I see a pot somewhere -- I can see how it's made. Just like a good seamstress can see whether a skirt is well cut or how it's sewn without taking it all apart. And then my master invited the master who was the -- how shall we say -- the judge, for a glass of wine, and so I was left standing there and I could hear what they said. And the master who had given me the degree said, "Too bad my boy married that girl six months ago. He shouldn't have married anyone but her." That was the highest praise he could say on me! I got a kick out of that. But that was not my master, that was the other one. Well, and then I was "Master." And then that evening master Marcks invited me for dinner, and he had a bottle of champagne or something, and he said, "Now we can call each other by our first name." I had always said, "Professor Marcks," or "Mr. Marcks," at least. Now we

called each other by our first names. And you know, I was so awed at the time. Here they can't understand that we were awed by our master -- Klee, Feininger and so -- we thought so highly of them, that it took me more than two weeks before I said for the first time "Gerhard" to him. I just couldn't make myself do so, I always wanted to say "Herr Marcks."

HB: Let's go on now. From the time you became a master you began to teach.

MW: Well, I taught before I was a master, actually, although it was illegal, because when the Bauhaus broke up and went to Dessau, the school in Halle got me as a potter so I went there. But then I had to get my master's degree, and I got it about six or eight months later. So I taught there from 1925 to 1933, and I taught pottery, and then I made all those models for mass production for the porcelain factory.

HB: Was that Royal Berlin?

MW: Yes, Royal Berlin -- "Königlich Preussen," they called it. And I must have made at least -- I can't remember exactly -- I would say fifty or sixty different models.

HB: How did you go about making those models?

MW: Well, the director of that porcelain factory had been the museum director in Munich, and he had contacted me years before and wanted to have some pots for his museum, and that's why he knew of me personally, I mean of what I had done; otherwise he might not have known it. And the first thing he did when he became head of the porcelain factory in Berlin was to be sure that he could contact me to make

designs for the porcelain factory. And so that's how I started making designs for the industry. And I made many, and I worked quite a few weeks in the factory and then I had also -- they gave me a trained man, a mold-maker. I would design the models and make the master model, and he would do all the other work -- all the molds that were needed -- it's a very complex procedure. And we worked together, I making the creative part and he making the technical part. And I did that for quite a while, until the Nazis came into power and I was thrown out. I had to live from one day to another.

HB: In your work at the school as a pottery teacher, did you also maintain studio work in addition to that?

MW: No, I didn't have a studio of my own. At Halle I had about maybe nine or ten students -- I don't know exactly -- one of them was my future husband, Frans Wildenhain. He had been a few months at the Bauhaus before he came to Halle -- three months, I think, so he had a little bit the same background that I had. And when I started there he became also my apprentice, and later when I was making porcelain he became my helper. And then he became a master of his own. But he was also trained by me. You know, he has never acknowledged that, because men don't like to say that they've been trained by women, especially European and German men.

HB: Well, maybe not at that time, either.

MW: Well, anyway -- so I taught and I made those models for the industry. Well, what else do you need to know? I was three or four weeks in the factory working with them, and I've

never forgotten that time when I made my first model on the wheel for the industry for porcelain. Porcelain -- I have some there I can show you afterwards -- that Berlin made was very thin, one millimeter thin, so the models had to be exceedingly correct. You can imagine.

HB: Well, this was versatile and adaptive on your part, to go to what character a machine could do and what you could do with porcelain, in terms of style and different --

MW: Well, yes, it was different, it was different. That's why I went to the factory to learn it, and what I was going to tell you was just this first apprenticeship. I made a model on the wheel, because that's how you have to make the models, but you make them upside-down. You make them like this because you have to pour the plaster cast on it. And I made that and I thought it was fine, and the master of the model workshop there had been out for a while and came in and saw me on the wheel, and the wheel was, say, over there where that pillow is, and he came in and he said, "You can't use that one." I said, "What's the matter?" He said, "It's at least a tenth of a millimeter off." I said, "What? A tenth of a millimeter!" You see, if porcelain is that thin a tenth of a millimeter is a big part of it. But that fellow could see it!

HB: That's amazing.

MW: Yes, it was amazing. I learned there. So I said, "I don't believe it." And then he took -- he had a point like this, and he let the wheel run and he went like this, you see, and you could just barely, but barely see the teeny little wheel

there. So you see, I learned that way, too. And then I made many models and then the fellow who was with me, he did all the plaster casting and all that --

HB: I think it's important not to confuse the two kinds of ends, of purposes.

MW: I thought it was very interesting for me to make porcelain, because it was a completely different problem. It's like somebody doesn't work always in wood, let's say a sculptor, or always having to work with bronze -- he has to change his whole way of making -- I too. And that was very interesting. I learned a great deal. And partly that I'm so able is probably because I have this background, you know. All the others -- here they only learn about glazes, but the glaze is just stuck on there. You see, I knew something about form and I knew also something about the craft. When the craftsman there in the plaster workshop told me what was the difficulty, I understood that. Generally, the designers in porcelain, they only design on paper. I was one who knew something about the craft. And so they were very helpful to me, too, because they understood that we spoke the same language.

HB: To leave these forms without a surface decoration was quite a breakthrough in design.

MW: Yes, well, I decorated some, too. I remember Hindenburg had his eightieth birthday, or something like that, and they chose my dinner set or my dessert set for the main birthday present of the Academy, and it had to be covered with gold, of course, you know. Well, it was all full of

gold lines. You see, those are two cups, two teacups. Look, the profiles are different.

HB: Yes, this one lifts and then it --

MW: Yes, and that one is more in one curve. But then also -- listen to this (chime sound) -- we fired the highest fired porcelain in the world -- cone fourteen.

HB: Fourteen?

MW: And that was a little coffee set. I made that for the airport Leipzig-Dresden. They had a new, very modern airport that was built at the time and I think -- I don't know if Gropius designed it or Mies van der Rohe or somebody -- anyway, I was supposed to make all the porcelain for the restaurant; and those small pots that I had in the show, they were made for that airport.

HB: I see.

MW: One-person coffee pots, you know, or two-person coffee pots -- little ones like this. So I learned many things that were very down-to-earth. I think this is a good part. This is why I could also run this place here. And this is the thing that our schools don't teach. They are all like in a blue moon, you know, only thinking of glazes. Well, the glaze is like the dress -- you have to put it on something first.

[Break in Tape]

MW: In 1933 I went to Holland. That was just when the Nazis were coming into power, and you know I am Jewish, and the burgermeister of the city in Halle thought highly of me because I had really put that workshop into the public eye. And he came personally to my studio and he was in tears

when he told me that he thought I had to leave because the Nazis otherwise would destroy the whole school. That's how it was. So I said, "Oh, in God's name, sure, I'll leave. Goodbye." And so I left the next day, just like that.

HB: And you went to Holland.

MW: I went first to Switzerland, where my parents lived, and I talked things over with my father. My father was a businessman in the silk business, and he had a good head and I thought he could advise me. Frans and I were married, and Frans, not being Jewish, was not thrown out like I was, you see. So we talked about whether I should move to Switzerland, and Father said, "No, don't go to Switzerland, Switzerland is too small. It has only four million inhabitants; there's not enough of a market for people like you," and he was probably right. And he said, "But Holland has about fourteen million inhabitants, it's a progressive country and has all the colonies as background -- thirty million inhabitants -- Rotterdam, Amsterdam, the big cities, and there you can probably make it." So all by myself I went to Holland. Then I looked around and I looked around and looked around, everywhere where I thought there might be a possibility to get a place, to rent a place or something, you know, a potshop somewhere. And then I found one, after quite a while, I found one in a little town called Putten. There was a little old factory there that a man had left because he couldn't make a living, but he was making of course purely commercial stuff. And I thought, well, it's near the railway and it's not too far from the big cities, sixty

kilometers from Amsterdam and all this -- I thought, maybe that's a possibility. So I tried to find out how I could get hold of that, but I did that all by myself, and I must say that was just about the worst thing I've had to do in my life.

HB: How so?

MW: You know, because first of all, I am not a businesswoman in that way. It doesn't interest me, that sort of stuff, and also I was alone. You know, that's not so easy in a country that you don't know. Well, I found at last this place, Putten, and I wired to my husband who was still in Germany at that school. "You can quit. I've got a place." And so that same day he went to the burgermeister and quit his job and he came over. But you see, I learned pretty early to have to do things on my own, and people come up here in California and always say, "How do you find a place like that?" And I say, "Find? One doesn't find a place; one makes a place." I always say, "It takes two hours before I can tell you the whole story and you haven't got the time."

HB: Well, we may just touch upon some of the things about that. I know that we can read the Invisible Core.

MW: Well, yes, some of it. But in the Invisible Core I tried to be as dumb as -- how shall I say -- not to make it exciting, too exciting -- as low-keyed as possible. I don't like to show my feelings like this in public, you know, and I could have written quite another Invisible Core, but I thought it through, and I thought, no, it's better to make it as simple as you can and the people who are going to understand, they

will see what goes on -- what I don't say -- they will understand. That's namely the Invisible Core, you know, and I think that has come out true.

HB: Well, since we're moving in sequence, at Putten you had your studio and shop, and what kind of work were you doing there?

MW: Well, first of all, you know, a potter makes thousands of pots, that's the way it is. It takes only a minute or two to make a pot when you know how to make it, but you have to make many because not every one is first class, and then if you're a good potter, you'll eliminate the worst and you only keep the good ones -- while the bad potter makes them all mediocre. Do you see what I mean? And so in Putten we very quickly got customers, visitors would come like they come here, and they find you like they find me here and support you because they thought you were better than average. And the few good shops in Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Utrecht and so, very quickly found us out. We went with carloads -- we had a car -- a carload of pots, and it didn't take much time, Holland being a small country, also being accustomed to pottery. You see, they have Delft, and the Delft was called the "Porcelaine Flesh" -- that means the porcelain bottle, and we called ours "Kruikje" which means the little jug. That brought the things somehow in relation. They right away had the idea that "Kruikje" must be a potshop, you see. So there we were seven years, until the Nazis again marched practically into Holland, and I fled again.

HB: (Tape II) Marguerite, we'd come to the point where you were leaving your husband and your workshop and your pottery in Holland, and that was early in 1940 with the Nazi invasion.

MW: Yes, 1940.

HB: And you say you caught almost the last boat?

MW: Yes, I caught the last Dutch boat, anyway. We sailed through the channel full of mines, and they had all the officers on deck because they were afraid they could detonate a mine. And they also went without the motors on, they just let themselves drift, figuring out that if they hit a mine they would probably be in the same sort of movement as the mine rather than if they went with power. And then we arrived in New York, and I thought the Statue of Liberty was disappointingly small -- that was my first impression. Because I had always thought it was big, and when I arrived it was awfully small, because New York is so high, you know.

HB: But when you get onto the island it looks fairly large.

MW: Yes, that's something else. Well, I had a brother in New York. My brother had come in the First World War. My father had sent him off, because he was seventeen and my father was afraid he might be drafted into the First World War and he didn't want that, and he sent him off before he was drafted to some friends in New York. So this brother, George, who still exists, he met me when I arrived in New York, so I wasn't quite alone. And I stayed in his house for about three months. Then -- all this, though, is in my book. It's so long.

HB: It is. Let's go on to -- first, though, I think it would be interesting --

MW: I got a job at Arts and Crafts.

HB: You were teaching at Arts and Crafts, and I think that your comments about education would be important, and I'm sure that some of your thinking starts with the experience there.

MW: Yes. But when the professor in the pottery shop said that I could come and teach there, I said, "All right, I'll be there at eight." And he said, "At eight o'clock? You don't have to come at eight. They don't come before nine." But I said that I thought that the class starts at eight. "Yes, but they don't come before nine." I said, "They will." So I came at eight, and there were only four students, and those I put on the wheel and started teaching them. And around nine and ten the others dribbled in. And when they saw those four on the wheels and working they wanted to be shown how to do it, too. I said, "I'm sorry, I showed it at eight o'clock. Those were all here when I showed them, I don't show it again." The next day they were all there at eight o'clock.

HB: Was this a summer class or a regular semester course?

MW: Wait a minute, it was a summer class, yes. But then afterwards I was there as a regular teacher when they saw that I knew something. So I taught there, and then -- it's all so complex. I went to North Carolina, you know, because there was a job offered to me to start a new school, something big like the Bauhaus, and that very night that I arrived there the director died, had died that very night.

HB: What school was that?

MW: I can't remember the name -- a Presbyterian college, I believe. The director of that school had wanted to start an art school or craft school built more or less on the idea of the Bauhaus. He had as a helper a man who had been in Europe, I forgot his name now, and he had not told the trustees anything about this, and when I came, that was sort of a surprise. And that very night, when that director died, and when I arrived there, those trustees didn't know a thing about me and they were absolutely confused; they didn't know what to do. So I roamed around for three or four days, picked up rocks, flowers, and things like that, until at the end, they said, "Well, we won't go through with that, you'd better go home." And they paid me my trip there and back, and so there I was again here in California. And at that time Jane and Gordon Herr had bought this piece of land [Pond Farm], and they wanted to start a school here. They had visited us when we lived in Holland and asked us if we would come if they started a school for the crafts, and we sort of said, "Oh sure, we'd be glad to go to America," you know, like one would say. And so when I arrived here by myself, I contacted them and I stayed with them a little while, and then they bought this piece of land and they were going to start this school -- you probably met Jane or Gordon Herr. And Jane died in 1952, and that was more or less the end. And Trude Guermonfrrez later was here, and Victor Riese, but Victor couldn't make it here because it was too far away from the city. The people wanted that expensive jewelry all over the city, and he was always traveling around. And

Trude got married to Elsesser and that left only me. And that's how it is, you see. You see, what a long story!

HB: But how was that school seen? I know that I'd seen advertisements once for the early potshop.

MW: How it started?

HB: Yes, what were your goals?

MW: Well, we all had this idea of the Bauhaus. You see, Trude had not been at the Bauhaus, but she had been in Halle, which was sort of the end of the Bauhaus. You see, I was in Halle, too, about that time, and Frans and others, too, and Marcks -- well, Marcks wasn't here, yes. But that's how it started. She had to escape from Germany because she was Jewish, and she came to Black Mountain College. And I went to Black Mountain College, not as a teacher, but I once gave a one-week seminar there at the same time that Leach and Hamada were there. They wired me: "Would you be able and willing to stand up to Leach and Hamada?" I said, "Of course." And so they got me there.

HB: There must have been some fireworks, Marguerite.

MW: Yes, it was really fun because I'm always ready for a fight -- not for a fight, but I believe in what I'm doing, so that's it. Well, then.

HB: Well, you were thinking about organizing the school here.

MW: That's right. Well, we thought we could organize a school here which would have maybe a pottery, a weaver, to do the same thing in a way as was done in Europe, you see, on crafts, based on crafts. Then, as I say, Victor moved out and Trude went to San Francisco and -- who else was there --

that was it. And me. And that broke it up. And then Jane died in '52 and Gordon sort of lost interest -- because Jane had always been more active than Gordon. Gordon -- I mean, he had interests but he rarely stuck to anything that he did if it became hard.

HB: Well, he built the --

MW: No, they bought the place.

HB: -- the other building and remodeled the barn, didn't he?

MW: Yes, he put that point on the barn. But of other buildings, he built those chicken houses, because during the war, if he didn't want to be drafted, and he didn't want to be drafted, he had to have 10,000 chickens. That was the point. If you were a food producer, you could be exempt from military service. And so Jane and he put their heads together and they thought it's better to have 10,000 chickens and not go into the war. So he built that chicken house there, and later that became the weaving and the potshop. And then it was later again that he tore that down. After that, Trude had left, and Jane had died, and Gordon completely forgot about the craft. And he was flimsy somehow -- he was not without talent and one could like him, but talent is only one thing. We learned that in the Bauhaus, too, that if you didn't have what it takes to use that talent, that was no good, you know.

HB: You need this balance.

MW: Yes, you need also discipline. Talent alone is not going to do it. And so that ended just like that, he just gave up one day and I was left alone here with the potshop. And

since then I've been alone and I've rebuilt it in my own way, you know.

HB: How did students begin to hear about the school?

MW: You'd be astonished. The first year I was here, a Chinese student was the first one to find me. The Chinese Hui Kakwong. Hui came one day with a teacher from San Jose, I think, or somewhere like that, and that teacher wanted to show him what was going on. He had been a student in sculpture and pottery in China, and he came to America when the Chinese Communists took over. They took his land away and the parents moved out and he went to America.

HB: But they found you.

MW: They had heard of me. It was maybe two years after I had come here. Anyway, I did not have any students yet. And Hui saw with one able look. He had been looking all over the country for a place to work, and never did he find anything but the schools, and he didn't want to go to a school, he wanted to go to a master, because that's the way one teaches in China. One doesn't go to a school, one goes to a master as an apprentice. And he came with this other fellow, and before we were through -- oh, they were here perhaps an hour -- he said --

[Interruption]

HB: Yes, we were talking about the students, your first students. So your first student found you, he wanted a master.

MW: How they found me -- Hui, this Chinese boy, came up with some friends who wanted to show him the pottery, because by then I had already a little bit of a reputation. And before the end of the talk, he said, "I would like to come here."

He said it in broken English. And I said, "Well, you know, I've only been here about two years. I don't really want an apprentice now. Also, I have no place to put you." And he said, "Me can sleep on the table, can sleep under the table or any place, as long as I can work with you." No American student had ever said that. They had generally said, "You'd be astonished at how good I am," and "how much will you pay me?" That's what they had said generally when they wanted to work with me. And after I tried to get him off that idea, he was so persistent that I said, "All right, Hui, let's have a try." I had an old little cabin there that had been a sheepherder's shelter, and Hui stayed there. And he was a marvelous student, probably the most talented I've ever had. When I had that show at Cornell, he was there, too. And every ten years or so he comes in here, and always, when he doesn't want to leave, he always says -- he turns around like this and says, "This is my home," and he really means it, you know.

HB: You had started then to do your own pottery and to produce, and you weren't really going to have students year around.

MW: I've never had students year around. I have had one student year around, but never students. That student, the only one, was Hui, and he wasn't there a whole year because of the stupidity of the law. He was on a visitor's visa, and on a visitor's visa he was supposed to be at an "accredited" college and I was not "accredited." He had never said a word about this not being "accredited." He

had to go every month or so to the whatever it is, the department or something --

HB: -- the Immigration Department.

MW: Immigration Department. And every time he said, "I'm studying," and so long it was all right. But then they found out that he was not studying at an accredited place. You know, whether he learned something or not, that they didn't care for. And I was not what you call accredited. And so he had to leave, and then he went to San Jose -- then I said, "No, go to Alfred. If you have to go, go to Alfred. At least there you can learn something." I didn't think they could learn so much in San Jose and so on. And so he went to Alfred University.

HB: He could certainly learn technical things.

MW: But he was so good with his hands, and he could use a little technique. Also, I figured out he could probably make a living somewhere there, because they need all sorts of people, and some who know something are rare. So he did, and that was it. That was the only student I've ever had except in the summer. But then I saw that people were coming from all over and writing -- even now, every second day I get letters from somebody who wants to come and "study" with me, all the time. I've never made an ad anyplace, you know. But my students are my best recommendation. They prove that they know something and then that's it.

HB: People who've come to your summer programs here have really considered it a unique experience. Maybe you would tell us

some -- how you made it different.

MW: Well, I think what they always say to me, they say, "It's not only that we learn pottery, we learn something about life and how to live it." I say, "If I can do that, that's the best thing you can say about me," you know. Because that's the point. To be a craftsman is also a way of life. It's not only that you have a job, and if you don't have that in you, then the whole craft is nothing. You understand me? I know that it is always the point on which the good student and the bad student separate. Now and then you have a mediocre student. And he wants to have it clear cut: "I'm going to have a degree when I'm through, yes?" "No," I say, "you don't get a degree. We just -- you know something, but you don't get a degree." "Well, then I can't get a teaching job." I say, "I've never been asked if I've had a degree," because I knew something, you know. But those that don't know anything, they have to have a teaching job, and they have to have a degree. In fact, that is very funny that all my mediocre students are teachers; all my good students are on their own. They go on their own. They don't want to teach especially. They have one student maybe, as an apprentice or something, and the mediocre ones, they get their teaching, San Jose State or Petaluma or wherever it may be. So, how do I get my students? I don't know how I get my students. Because they know my work. I've never made an ad any place, not a single one in my whole life.

HB: In working, let's go to the rest of the year other than the summer. Then you're firing, you're potting, you're making sculpture, you're firing week in, week out.

MW: Yes. Well, except I generally take a month off in the fall, and generally after the fire danger is off here, because when the grass is high like that and the people come with their car and throw cigarettes out, this whole thing -- I've seen too many fires around here. So that's why I leave generally in November, after we've had four or five inches of rain or something. But yes, I'm here all year. It's not that I work every day ten hours. I work -- how shall I say -- if I need to work ten hours, I'd work many times more than ten hours. Like when I fire, it takes twelve hours. And when I used the big kiln it was sometimes twenty hours. But then if I feel like going to the coast tomorrow because I've done my job and I can't do anything, the stuff has to cool off, I go to the coast. So this sort of life is also very impressive for the students, because they are all in school somewhere where they have to be there at a certain time. I start at seven or eight or six, depending how I want to. But on the other hand, we start school, when I have my class here, at eight. And I remember one student who is a very talented girl, she arrived the first day at twenty past eight. We were all there at work and I just told her, "We start at eight." And it made such an effect on her, she was never late again. I'm very strict the first week. But once they have the rhythm, then I let go, then I don't have to be strict. I also see to it that the

workshop is clean, that they don't work in a mess, and all those things, that they put the clay away when they are through, and don't leave it for me to clean up, etc.

HB: Let's go back to how you, in your approach to pottery, differ so much from what is available in the schools you've talked about, the technical training, making glazes and all of this sort of thing. I think it goes farther than that.

MW: Oh, well, yes, that's only the beginning, that's only the very beginning. You see, when they are a little more advanced we don't talk about that at all, they know that all. It's like if you had a class of advanced writers you wouldn't talk about how to make the letters, they know that. You wouldn't talk about punctuation, they know that. And that's with us, too. In the beginning you have to be strict so that they learn all those things belonging to the craft, just like a doctor has to know how to bandage and all that, you know.

HB: Did you take absolutely beginning students?

MW: Yes, I've taken absolute beginners too. I've not always kept them. I mean, I've not always -- yes, sure, I've taken absolute beginners. They're not the worst. The worst are those who think they know something and they don't, you see.

HB: In what way?

MW: If somebody has never touched clay and says, "But I would love to try it, because I would sort of like to," I say, "All right, let's see," and sometimes they are quite good. I mean, they're still beginners but they're quite good. While I had some that thought they were very good and haven't

got one thought in their heads. That means after they knew the craft they hadn't one thing that they knew how to or wanted to make. I had also once a boy who was terribly good with his fingers, that meant he was skillful, but after he had learned to throw he would always say, "What shall I do now?" I said, "Well, that's up to you. I won't be there in your home tomorrow when you start. It's up to you."

"Tell me what to do." I said, "No, I won't tell you." And he didn't know what to do. He gave up, you see, he gave up being a potter.

HB: He would be a good journeyman.

MW: Yes, he would have been, in an old-fashioned shop where the master would have said, "You make 2,000 of those and 100 of those." He would have been good. But today that doesn't exist any more, because mass production is made in factories, so that's why it's harder today, actually. If you can't make pots that the factory can't make, then you have no chance. You know, there are thousands of potters that dabble around. Very few make it.

HB: I've noticed that there are a lot of potters making it, if we want to use that term --

MW: -- but none are very good.

HB: -- they earn their living as craftsmen, and they do a kind of limited production, but it's in fair quantity, and usually sell out of their own potteries as well as other things. On the whole, though, it's very seldom the sculptural kind of expressive work that's so much a part of your work --

MW: They're not good enough. You see, all those people who are trying to make it like this, they only know how to make a bowl and a cup and a saucer and a few other things, but they have no imagination, no craft imagination. That is what we did learn at the Bauhaus, you see, that the craft is only the beginning. It's the handwriting. If you don't have something to say, you might as well stop making it, and that's never said enough in the schools. Everybody can dabble in clay, but then does he have anything to say that is better than what that other fellow does with his foot or something? And this is the point, you know. You see, those old timers, let's say, like in Peru or somewhere they've had beautiful potters for thousands of years. It was generally the women who made the pots. But they started when they were two or three years old. I've seen little girls of two or three years making little things; I have here a saucer made by a two-year-old. And by the time they were ten they were skillful craftsmen. Well, if you are a skillful craftsman and you have some talent, you can get around. But if you are only a skillful craftsman and have no talent, I mean no other talent, creative talent, you can't make it nowadays anymore, because there's no need for that. The factory does that. And so there are different problems there. And I'm always very unsure when I have a student. I always tell them, "I think maybe you should do this or that, or maybe this is not the craft for you." You know, I've told them. Because of that they also trust me, that I won't hide behind a bush and fool them. I mean in a school they're always apt

to say, "Oh, you're just wonderful." Oh, that's so wrong, because we are all not wonderful, as you know.

HB: That's very true. I'd like to go back a little in time, to the post-World War II, the early days that you were here at Pond Farm, and at the point of time when in most American art schools and universities the pottery programs were just recently introduced and were for the first time sort of growing up. There must have been an amazing difference to you when you first came here in 1940, between what you found in Germany or in Holland and public understanding of pottery here. What did it seem to be to you then?

MW: I'll tell you, I thought that they were absolutely lousy. I really thought that, because it was always started like a school program and not like a craft. You see, the Bauhaus was not like a school in that way, we were craftsmen. We came every morning at seven o'clock to work and we worked an eight-to nine-hour day.

HB: And that was a traditional craft program.

MW: That was tradition. That's how they do it in China still.

HB: There's our rootless society -- no traditions in California.

MW: Yes, well, and here they would come in, like wiggling their tail, I was going to say, you know, and work for an hour and think they have done a great thing. And I can remember also that I used to get so disappointed, that was the reason why I left Arts and Crafts. I just couldn't stand it. Jane and Gordon were already here and I used to come on weekends, come on the bus, and every time I was like a nervous wreck. I said, "I just can't teach like that and I won't teach like

that. They come at ten, they go away at eleven, they leave all the mess and all that." I wasn't accustomed to that, you know. I didn't think that that was the way a craftsman works. Even Michelangelo was an apprentice first. And here they were always doing anything they wanted, and I couldn't get over that. And that was the reason why I quit Arts and Crafts after I'd been there about two years. I just couldn't take it. And then I said I'd rather starve in my own way, and here or anyplace else, than go on trying to teach those kids who don't want to learn.

HB: So actually you really didn't want to be a teacher at that point.

MW: No, I've never wanted -- no, I wanted to be a potter.

HB: It was not a goal of yours to --

MW: No, the Bauhaus was not training teachers, they were training craftsmen. There was not one of us who was a teacher.

Afterwards they became teachers because they were so good.

You see, Albers was probably the only one who was by birth a teacher, but we didn't think of him highly as an artist. We thought he was a very good teacher, and he was a good teacher because he was so intellectual, he could explain it all. But we never thought his art was anything.

HB: His art is very intellectual.

MW: Oh, yes, only. I mean, he was a year in Mexico and all he did -- I saw it because I visited him at that time -- he had a paper pad about that big and he had put lines, horizontal and vertical, not a single circle or curve, in as many different ways as he could, you know, and during that whole

year, in Mexico of all places, where there's so much that you could see and draw, he had only worked on that theme for a whole year. That was his one year that he had off. And I thought, only somebody who is an abstractionist to the core could even conceive that!

HB: All right, we've missed part of this. You say that there's something about pottery that is primary.

MW: Yes, I said -- I mean primarily human, may I say that.

HB: Primal?

MW: Primarily human. A monkey doesn't make things, at least he doesn't make pots, and of course no other animal does either. But there's something about taking a lump of clay, a lump of earth, and taking it in your hand like that, that every child will do, at all times and in every country. You give him a little something and he will go like this. And this is what is the fascination of pottery. You see, if I take a lump of clay I can squeeze it like this, I can squeeze it like that, I can squeeze it, and if I have any talent, it could be a beautiful pot without any other help. And in all the other materials -- in wood you need a knife or a scraper, or something metal --

HB: (a new tape side) You went on to say that clay is so primary to what a person can do that it's --

MW: It's very tempting. You see, you lie in the grass or something and you take a little clay earth and you go like this and you notice that this pressure has made a form there. Well, in metal you can't do it, you need tools. In wood you can't do it, in weaving you can't do it.

HB: It's immediate, too, isn't it?

MW: It's an amazing medium, you know, and if you have any feeling for that, that just fascinates you. And this is why there are so many potters, because it feels so easy -- it doesn't need any knowledge, it seems, to make it -- well, but it does need knowledge; still, the first reaction is completely primitive, like a monkey, I would say, who goes like that, you know. And there is something very fascinating about it, especially for the civilized man.

HB: Yes, but now let's move on to your sculpture.

MW: Yes, well, that's because I'm interested in not just only pottery, you see. I had a year and a half of wood sculpture before I went into pottery, as I told you, and I've always been interested in sculpture because pottery is a sculpture all in all, you see, and my master was Gerhard Marcks, a first-class sculptor, so that even went stronger than if I had maybe a chemical engineer or somebody, but they wouldn't have had me long.

HB: Have you ever regretted not becoming a physician?

MW: No, although I have taken several first-aid courses during the war and I know a little bit about things, you know. It interests me. When I go to a doctor I always ask him questions and he always looks up because I ask those funny questions. But no, no. I might have been a doctor, I think I could have been a doctor, but no. Maybe in a -- I don't mean psychological way, that's the wrong word, but I'm a doctor to my students too. You'd be astonished at how many I've actually saved from stupid life, just by giving them

something worthwhile to live for, to work for. That's being a doctor, too, to a degree.

HB: I have a sense that to you clay is a lot more than the making of pottery and sculpture, that it's a way of life and it's a humanistic experience.

MW: Well, I have dozens of letters of people who were students who thanked me, you know, but I can't keep them all and so one day I -- some I sent to the Smithsonian, because they have a file on me. And I thought, well, maybe I should, after all, because that shows why I have this reputation. And this girl who is now here from Vermont, she has been five summers with me, she'd do anything, anything to help me, and my other students, too. I have at least six or eight who would just do anything. I'm grateful, that's all I can say. You know, sometimes I get tears in my eyes -- I don't cry easily -- but I think how ever did I deserve this kindness. But they always say that I've done so much for them that they can never make it up. Well, if they feel like that, I'll take it. I'm glad, you know. Like there's a couple in Oakland -- you probably have met them -- they were on my show --

HB: Yes.

MW: The two, Wayne Reynolds and his wife, Caryn.

HB: -- with the studio.

MW: Well, Wayne was here, when he first came he was twenty-two years old, and that fellow has stuck to me through all these years. He was in Chile for quite a few years, and he would write to me twice a year, and he's been all over the

world. He started at seventeen on a ship in the Merchant Marines, and he comes here once a month and stays two days with me. He stays in the cabin and does all sorts of chores around the house. He has put those new shakes up, and he's going to paint them the next time when he comes, and so on. And when I thank them, you see, they always say, "Don't thank me, don't thank me. You've done so much for me, I can never make up for it." And they mean it, they mean it. And it so often takes me like this because it's so much that I -- it's so much love and so much gratitude that I wonder how I can accept that, you know.

HB: Do you think that it's possible to work beyond this one situation in making changes in the education? No, no, I think that you -- I was asking you that question.

MW: I have a couple of students who teach in colleges that are pretty good, too. But the students then all go off afterwards when they're through. And then they become one to one, free, like I am, see. And that is the point. Instead of training them to be again teachers, train them to be a potter or a weaver or something. Then, if they want to teach, that's one thing. Like I, I have taught also. But I don't depend on my students for a salary. I depend on my pots, and I think that is the point. You know, I have sometimes asked in the schools when I used to go to colleges what a student is going to be when he is through. And they said, "Well, I guess I'll get a teaching job." And then I said, "Well, what makes you think you have the right to teach? Do you think you're so good that you have a right

to teach?" "No," they said, "not that, but you can't make a living with your own pots." Who says that? You can't, if you're bad! If you're good -- I've always been able to make a living. I'm not a millionaire, but I've always made a living, you know. And then they say, "Oh, well, you know, you have to --." I say, "Well, in every job there are things that one doesn't like to do. Don't wait but do these first." If there's a job that I have to do in my potshop that I don't like doing, it's the first thing I do. It's off my mind. I don't push it off. It's the very first thing I do on Monday morning -- get it off my mind. Then I'm through. But if I always push it off, then week after week -- it's going to bother me for months. Well, they have to learn also to live. This is the point. I think here the students always say, "We learned something about life."

HB: How do you think you accomplish that? Because I know that so many people feel this way.

MW: Yes, they do. Well, they see me. I think it is this. They see me as a single woman having accomplished what I have accomplished. And I always say, "Honestly, you're not dumber than I," I say, "If I have made it, surely you can make it, too." I talk like that to them. And I don't beat around the bush, and they understand that I mean it straight, you know. And I say, "And if it doesn't go, oh, all right, you've wasted a year maybe, but at least you found something out about yourself, and that's probably worth that year that you have given." I talk to them. And then I also read to them often, things from van Gogh or Michelangelo, or

something from some other artist that's written, Delacroix or something, where they talk about problems like that. And they see, well, that those problems are not only their own, but that they exist for every artist, whether he's a painter or a sculptor doesn't really matter too much probably. Like not to waste your time with having all sorts of relations with people who have power, you know; otherwise, as Rodin says, you'll be spending all your time making those public relations and you won't have any time to be an artist. And I read that to them from Rodin's testament.

HB: That's true. Tell me, where do you find -- what's the root, the well, the source for your inspiration in your work?

MW: The inspiration for my work? Oh, that comes from everything, it can come from something like that, it can come from your sitting there, it can come from a cat or a flower, it can come from anything. You see, I do a lot of drawing always. I don't know that I have many right here now. But whatever just happens to interest me I draw, and the drawings are all made out of memory, because those people that I want to draw get so nervous when you look at them and they see that you draw them. So all I do is look.

HB: These are three pencil sketches of women washing their hair --

MW: -- washing their hair in the lake.

HB: And the lake is Lake Atitlan in Guatemala.

MW: And they're all made from memory, you see. Here there were two dancing. Whatever it may be, it was a couple. But they're all out of memory because I've learned that if I have a book like this and I draw, the person right away turns away.

Instead, I just sit like this and scratch my head as if I wasn't looking at them, but look with all I can look. And then when they're gone, do that drawing. It's also good for me because it forces me to see only the essentials. I can't remember every detail, but I can remember the main movement of that person, and this is where it goes quickly into my pottery, because this is how my pots look, too, you see. A figure like this I can see right away thrown, you see, like this.

HB: Yes, I was thinking that, too.

MW: This is how it goes, you see.

HB: But how much time perhaps elapses between -- when you're on --

MW: Sometimes six months, sometimes a year or more. But meanwhile, I don't forget it. It remains somewhere in the back of my head. "Think" is probably not the right word, but I do think about it -- I think, those two, I want to make them, or those three, or that boat, going like this over the lake. I close my eyes, and I try to revisualize that, and I can.

HB: But there's something that's added. It's not just simply finding people on visits in South America that turn out to be sources. There's more than that.

MW: Let's say like this. I find those South Americans just like I find maybe the French or Italians, to me, more conducive to my feeling than, let's say, an Anglo-Saxon, Nordic. It's probably because I was born in France, you know, and I have that background and all that. I also think those tall Anglo-Saxons that are so -- like this -- somehow they are

not good for sculpture. Do you see? While those short ones, like this -- they're more compact. So I think that has something to do with it because then I see it right away like a sculpture. While a long-legged, like this -- how do you make those two legs in clay -- that's terrible, because they have to be hollow, you see, otherwise they don't fire. And a compact person like that woman or whatever else like this -- you can hollow it out. So I think that goes all together.

HB: So your notebooks go with you. I imagine if they're here you could draw your trees, your plants from the window here, or from the patio or under the grapes.

MW: Oh, I draw a lot of things like that too, sure.

HB: I remember --

MW: You see, I have this little book there. It's marked "Front" so I know where the front is of the book. I'll draw anything that I happen to see. Sometimes a student sits somewhere there and, you see -- I made a sculpture actually afterwards. That boy was one of my students there, at coffee break or something, and the form intrigued me and I thought right away, "Aha," you know. And then I don't draw it when they're there because then they get self-conscious. But I go here and I draw it. Those are all drawn out of memory.

HB: Do you include drawing in the --

MW: -- in my class? Yes. And the older the students are, the more the students have been here, the more do they come only for drawing. I have many of my students who have come last year and the year before only for drawing, because as they

get better in pottery, it's not any more the craft that's so interesting, it's what you do with it. And then they come and they would like to draw something on a pot, on a plate, and if they don't know how to draw, they can't do it, it looks corny, you know. And this is why they come. I have many students who come here for drawing.

HB: Do you paint?

MW: No, I don't paint. I've never -- well, as a child I painted, but I don't paint. No, I'm more for form than for color, actually. That is also why my pottery is not especially on glaze. You see, if I were especially interested in color, I think I would have gone more on glaze, but I'm much more interested in form. I can make beautiful pots without any glazes. While somebody who was for glaze, I mean for color, wouldn't do that and couldn't do it. And you see those people in Peru and all the American Indians have never used the glaze, and they made beautiful pots. That has always -- already when I was in Europe, I always admired those, in Paris, in the Musee de l'Homme, that's where I saw those Peruvian pots for the first time. I was maybe twenty-five or something, and they made a terrific impression on me. We all have only certain talents. I'm not a genius and I have only talent in one -- I don't think I could paint, I personally, it's not my -- I can draw, but I don't think I could paint; it's not my force, you see. But you see, here's a pear because -- this is probably here from the garden. I probably picked it and I just thought it was nice the way the leaves hung, and there are all sorts of things.

HB: I remember an interesting series in the exhibition, your retrospective show that's on tour now, where you go through the growth cycle, and a series on growth, maturity and decay.

MW: Yes, I have lots of those.

HB: That's what I was saying; there's a further ingredient there than just simply the drawing itself.

MW: Well, I'll tell you. What interests me, you see, is always, if one can say, the soul behind the form. Do you know what I mean? That means, let's say I see a flower, oh, I have here somewhere all these. You see, here are leaves and what interested me was the way those three leaves, those three triangles, were not parallel, but somehow related. There's always this or that or something. You see here, for instance, it was interesting to me. Those are all daisy family, but each one has another rhythm, and that interests me. It was somebody who gave me for my birthday, October, they gave me a basket with all sorts of chrysanthemums and so, and as I looked at them I saw that they were actually all marguerites; it's all the same family. And then I started looking at them and saw here was only a single leaf, here were three or four, here were more, here were big leaves, here were tiny leaves, here were little ones and so on. I could have gone on forever! So in a way, it is also intellectual, but it always comes from the eyes, though, it doesn't come from the brain. I don't think it over. All at once, I see it. And then I look and see something else, and look again.

HB: Birds, cats.

MW: All sorts of things.

HB: Do you still have your cats here?

MW: Yes.

HB: Poppies.

MW: And those are poppies, you see. In fact, I had them here on the table, and as they opened up, I -- well, this is also, you see, I teach the student not only pottery, and I mean I teach them to look. I remember I once told a student to go out and pick something to draw. He said, "I didn't find anything." I said, "What do you mean? All this country there and you didn't find anything?" "No, I don't know what." So I went out and we just stood like that -- a little piece of grass. I said, "All right, let's take a piece of grass ten inches square. What do you see?" "Nothing." I said, "What do you mean, nothing?" I said, "What's that?" "That's a piece of grass." And I say, "What's that?" "That's a piece of grass." "Is that the same?" "Oh, no, wait a minute, no." "Well, what's the difference?" And then I get them like this and I say, "Well, are they both equal or broad or wide or sharp or smooth, and what's this?" "That's also a piece of grass." "Is that the same?" You know, I get them like that. After a while, the whole class stands around this one square piece and is watching how many -- fifty or so -- pieces of grass they can find. Like this I open their eyes, you know. I know often students have told me that they now can see a hundred times what they could see before. They said, formerly, they used to go through the landscape just like that and never see anything. "Now I see every stone."

HB: But you don't start out by saying, "All right now, students, we're going to develop our perception."

MW: No, I don't use that word ever.

HB: You don't?

MW: No, never. I don't talk abstractly. You see, because abstract, that's up there, that's in the brain. I'm not dumber than those abstractionists either, but I don't have to put it like that. You see, if I talk in plain words, I could talk to the garbage man out there and he would understand. But if I talk like you just did, he wouldn't understand me. And my students are sometimes completely illiterate. I mean, they've been in college, but they're still completely illiterate, you know, often. And so, if I talk like that, down-to-earth, they'll also realize that there's nothing like a magic about it, that they can get there too. Well, I don't know why I am a good teacher, but I know that they think I am, and I get results, and so that's what it is, you know.

HB: But up until now, there's more than just teaching. There has been a consistent large body of work that you've done, and through ten to eleven months out of each year.

MW: Yes. And also, I've done it for sixty-one years. It had better be good, you know. Otherwise, one should have long quit.

HB: People come here, or do you send your things somewhere else?

MW: You mean to buy?

HB: Yes.

MW: No, they come here. I used to sell at Gump's all the time, that's how I first started. He bought my whole production in the beginning. But then I found that people in Chicago or in Dallas somewhere wanted some things too, and then this whole production affair, the arrangement I had with Gump's, that didn't work because the others wanted something too. So we cancelled after a certain time and then I sold in Dallas and I sold in Houston and I sold in Chicago. But never very much because people quickly found me here. It's not far from San Francisco, and I have a lot of private customers, and I always tell my students ~~that's much better~~ than the shop. The private customer pays the full price, while the shop people want fifty percent and they deduct another three if they pay inside of a week, you know. So you sell it practically for nothing. So I have always told my students, as soon as I could go without the shops I went. And I've always had this showroom upstairs there and people have come from all over the world. I've had them from Egypt and South America, Australia, everywhere. If you're good, you don't have to worry, they will come, you know, it's like with a mousetrap. If you make a better mousetrap they will come. They don't all come when you want them, don't misunderstand me. I've been poor, too. I've been so that I was on my last fifty dollars and I filled my station wagon with all the pots I had and I went all around and sold them. But I've always managed to sell them and I've always managed to live without borrowing and without getting into debt, and I've done what I wanted to do.

HB: All very important.

MW: How few people can do that, you know. I've done what I've wanted to do the best way I could. Maybe that's the thing. Yes, and that's what I think my students begin to understand and we talk like we talk here. And they often say -- at coffee break we sometimes sit together there, they have twenty minutes, and sometimes someone will ask me just a question like that. And then another one will say, "Well, let's talk," and I say, "Okay," and we talk for an hour or so. I think that's just as important as to throw a pot. That they can do when they're alone. And also, a few people have had not only the pottery experience or whatever, but also the human experience, you know, from what you've heard from my life; not everybody has gone through that much in their own lives, and that is a point that also impresses them, not to count on it that it will always run smooth.

HB: Yes, yes indeed. I can think of --

MW: I mean, how many times have I had to restart again, always from scratch?

HB: Yes, your whole world has come to an end several times. Living here, in a remote area, although you're certainly not untouched by people coming by the road, and in the summer there are probably too many people at the state park here, but is there some connection between a creative life and being able to tolerate a certain amount of isolation, to want, to need it?

MW: I think all artists need isolation at a certain time. But some need more people than others. Some feel at home when

there are no people around, and some feel at home when there are a lot of people around, that's a matter of character. People always ask me in town if I'm still up there, "Aren't you lonesome up there all by yourself?" "Oh, no." "Well, don't you want to see people?" or, "Aren't you bored?" They always say. I say, "No, I'm only bored when they invite me to a boring cocktail party, then I'm bored." And that they can understand, you see. And they thought I'd be bored when I'm alone. But when I'm alone, I've all this beautiful nature, why should I be bored? I've also seen a lot of the world. That means, if I see a map of France, I can visualize -- or Holland or Germany or even South America, I know a lot of it and the people. I'm friends to them and they're friends to me and if they need something they write to me. I could even say I've had a good life, you know. I had a tough life, but I had a good life, and I will never complain.

HB: I haven't been able to get you to talk about the effect of your work in other ways, but talking about an exhibition is one way to do it. This was just about 1940 or 1941, wasn't it, the first exhibition you had in this country?

MW: In this country it was 1940, I believe.

HB: At the San Francisco Museum of Art?

MW: Yes.

HB: I heard other people say that that was the first time they felt they ever saw pottery.

MW: Well, that's when I met Olive Cowell. I don't know if you knew Olive Cowell. She was -- she doesn't live any more --

she was a teacher at San Francisco State, but in history or something like that. But she sort of discovered me. She was so excited about my pots, and I went to the museum to see how they had set it up a few days after the opening and there was that woman, all excited and showing everybody around. And when she found out that I was the woman who had made most of the pottery, not all of it, because much of it was from my husband, she invited me to her house, and she became very kind there, and I was very entranced in her home -- well, that's not to the point -- but it shows how those things go. They are purely accidental. I could have been, you know, five years totally unknown. Well, Gump's you know, pushed me, Gump's pushed me then. He took everything I had.

HB: But your work -- you're not coming to the point. It was quite different from what was going on locally or even in most other parts of the country.

MW: Lukens, do you remember Glen Lukens?

HB: He was in Southern California and his work was sculptive.

MW: Mine is more diversified. Those people were all only on glaze and low fire, while we, coming from the Bauhaus, had quite other ideas, you know. It was more an art than a craft, it has always remained more an art than a craft. I mean the craft is just like writing, knowing how to write. But then what do you have to say with it? And that's what I always tell the students. Last year I didn't give them anything special to make in pottery. I made them invent all sorts of new things, new techniques and do things that

they had never done before, architectural things, where they would put masses together, things like this. Because they were all good craftsmen, I've had them for many years, and the craft is not the end, it's only the medium through which you can say something. And when they have the craft they still have to get something else, and that's what the schools never understand. You can't do without the craft and you can't do without the other. You have to have both before you get something, you see. A fellow who can just paint and has nothing to say with his painting is no good, he's just barely a wall painter, you know.

[end of tape]