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Oral history interview with Conger Metcalf,  
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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Conger A. Metcalf on January 12, 1982. The interview took place in Boston, Massachusetts, and was conducted by Robert Brown for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The Archives of American Art has reviewed the transcript and has made corrections and emendations. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

## Interview

ROBERT BROWN: This is January 12, 1982.

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: We agree to—

CONGER A. METCALF: It's a beautiful, cold day, and I love the winter. How far back would you like me to start?

ROBERT BROWN: Well, we'll start with childhood. This is Bob Brown interviewing Conger Metcalf, in Boston, January 12, 1982. You were born in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, 1914. What are some of your earliest memories?

CONGER A. METCALF: Well. All my childhood memories are pleasant. I had loving parents. Father was a plumber, not by choice. When he was, I think, 19 years old, he had 10 or 11 brothers and sisters to take care of.

ROBERT BROWN: Parents had died?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes. His father had come from Dublin. The wife, I think, had died. The grandmother—my grandmother had died, I think, in Dublin.

ROBERT BROWN: In Ireland?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes. Father was five years old when he came. I think it's very interesting how he happened to come. His father was a landscape architect, and apparently a super elegant one, and he managed and plotted, and laid out the gardens for an Irish lord in Dublin. And old Mr. Sinclair, of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, knew him, went to visit. Mr. Sinclair was extremely rich, in meatpacking industries. He looked out a second-story window of the Irish castle, wanted to know what those formal gardens were. [00:02:03] They were parterre gardens. He said, "Well, I've got a big pad in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, but we would never have a gardener that could do that." The old Irish lord said, "Well, I'd hate to give up Cyrus Metcalf. I've never had a gardener likes of him. But he wants to go to America, so why don't you take him?" So off they set. Landed in New York. Went directly to Cedar Rapids, Iowa. I was in my 30s or 40s before I learned, from old Aunt Rachel, who knew all the family lore—she said, "Did you realize that all the parks in town were laid out by your grandfather?" He laid out streets here. He did Bruce more, the great estate, which is now a national historic house.

ROBERT BROWN: Was that Sinclair's house?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes. Within the last year, it's been given to the United States. I was fascinated by that. So when my dad's parents died, he took the first job he could get, which was a plumber's apprentice. And he really didn't want to do that. What he wanted to do, really—had a glorious, untrained Irish voice. He went to the great voice teacher in Cedar Rapids, a graduate of Juilliard. And old Professor Ernest A. Leo listened to him and said [laughs], "There's nothing I can teach you. Just keep doing what you're doing." [00:04:00] So dad wanted to be an evangelist, but he had to raise all those brothers and sisters.

ROBERT BROWN: He wanted to be an evangelist as well as a singer?

CONGER A. METCALF: Not a singer, really. But he got it all out of his system at the end of his life. He organized the gospel team quartet, and he would go out every night in small towns in Iowa, and preach and sing. I'll never forget his funeral. He was a very overly generous man. He had a terrific, terrible Irish temper, which he tried to control. He was a loving father. When he died, I came out—

[Audio Break.]

CONGER A. METCALF: —came from all over Iowa. It lasted four hours. Open casket. Everyone stopped. He had

been so kind and generous to them all. We had the low, the mighty, the high, the lame, the halt, the blind. They all went by, kissed him, talked to him. And uh—

ROBERT BROWN: Hmm. Was this a prominent part of when you knew him? I mean, as a boy growing up, this was a prominent part of your life, his going around preaching?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes, yes. He and mother were very active. Mother was a great Christian. She had Bible classes in the house. We had the Sunshine Mission in Cedar Rapids, that housed all the poor old homeless, and the poor old bums would have to get a bed, and a hot dinner. [00:06:02] They had to go to the service, and they loved to go when dad was preaching. He had a great sense of humor, and they all loved him. So, they wanted to give a memorial service. I then lived in Boston. I, of course, went out for the funeral and the memorial service. Is this relevant?

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Certainly.

CONGER A. METCALF: And a great friend of mine, Worth Rowley—he's now one of the biggest lawyers in Washington—he was the only roommate I ever had. When he was 20, he was six-foot-seven, and we lived in a room that was literally one-fourth the size of this room.

ROBERT BROWN: Very small.

CONGER A. METCALF: Which is small. We had two cots, with a little passage between of about five or six inches. When he went across the little room, I'd have to put my feet up. We had a Morgan Memorial desk, a floor lamp, one chair, and two cots. Well, Worth's father was a tough, marvelous, greatly respected old Boston lawyer. He was Buffalo Bill's lawyer, and John L. Sullivan's lawyer, but a tough man. And he told this giant son of his, "No one helped me through school. You go to school and earn it all yourself." Well, at that time, I was going, my first years at the Museum School. I had no money. Worth, with a great appetite, great frame, had no money. He was going to Northeastern. He couldn't go to Harvard. He was ushering in a theater, and father would not help him. [00:08:00] Worth graduated with the greatest honors. At that time, perhaps still, they have an oral and a written exam, and he did so well on the first one, they said [laughs], "We've never seen anyone like you. Skip the second one." When he graduated, his father still would not take him into the office. "Make it yourself."

ROBERT BROWN: This was a law school he went to?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes. Law, law. Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: But he—he was involved in your father's memorial?

CONGER A. METCALF: Well, he had no job. He was just out of school. And so, father died. He went out, and I trust we paid his bus fare, but he stayed for two months. My mother was trying to pay off dad's debts. And I often think of her, trying to run that plumbing shop, several employees, making the payroll, learning about couplings, and everything she'd have to learn—and it was war years, and hard to get lead pipe, hard to get anything. All the forms. So Worth went out, and stayed two months, and helped her. She paid off all the debts. Every businessman in town came and doffed his hat. But there was this memorial service for my father while Worth was there, and I said, "Worth"—now, he, to my knowledge, had never been in a church. I said, "Now, you won't understand this evangelical little mission. They all loved father. And you and I will have to behave." Hot, hot Iowa summer night. In the first row were the wives of the men who used to sing with dad. [00:10:05] We all sat in the second row. My brother Malcolm went way down, then Aunt Rachel, then Smithy, the old housekeeper, then mother, then someone else, then I, and Worth, with all his long feet, put him on the aisle. They stuck out there six feet. The service was too much for Worth. It was too much for me. Old Mrs. Smith got up. Daddy, Daddy Smith, ran the mission, and Mrs. Smith's very ancient. The Lord was so real to her. He was more real than her next-door neighbor. She got up and gave a long prayer, and all but gave her favorite cranberry muffin recipe, you know. Well, that started Worth. He began to chuckle, and I said, "Worth, very serious occasion. Stop it." Then the Hinkin boys got up, five dreadful little children. They had a ukulele, and they sang "I want to be a Christian Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, all day Saturday," and then he really started. He crossed his legs and started biting into his hands, trying to control himself. The women in the front were all turning around, looking at him. And I was beginning to shake, and they probably thought, at that point, it might be grief. Then the quartet got up to sing. Old Jim Killian, who had the biggest department store in Cedar Rapids. He had a wooden leg. He was the pianist, not a good one. [00:12:05] And a little piano on a cement floor on the platform. The big men put their elbows on it and started to scoot across the floor. Well, they had to bring it back, and without dad's beautiful voice to hold them together, I really didn't think they were all singing the same song. Well, that started Worth, and I began receiving notes down the line from Mother. "Please," underlined. "Please." Mother was publicity-shy, and every time she went to the mission, she had to get up, and they would say, "We all know Mother Metcalf. We all love her. But we want her to speak to us now." Such a hot, sticky night. She had a navy blue dress, dotted Swiss royal [ph]. It had little balls of cotton on it. The seats had just been varnished. She knew she was sticking to it. Well, she had to get up. There was this terrible ripping sound. [Laughs.] I looked over

at the seat. It was dotted with little furry balls. She thought, of course, the whole back of her dress had gone. Well, that really started me. Then Aunt Rachel began turning those blue-violet, heavy-lidded eyes on me. She was the one in the family that loved funerals. She is the best of the Irish. She just loved disaster and funerals. She began giving me these terrible looks. Then someone got up and brought a rocking chair on the platform, gave it a tilt, and they recited the old chestnut "The Empty Chair," you know. Well, that did it in. Finally—did Worth and me in, and I was truly shaking by then. [00:14:01] Finally, Daddy Ward got up, Daddy Smith, and he shook those great big bar-handle mustaches. He had a cane. And he kept talking about all of dad's kindnesses, many kindnesses. Every time he brought up something new, he'd say, "I hope you'll pardon this little personality," and off he'd go. He had a series of climaxes, but he finally got to the right royal one. He shook that cane in the air, and he thundered. "You can lead a horse to drink, but you can't make him water." Well, at that point, I just grabbed Worth, and we went outside and waited. When we came out, Aunt Rachel, of course, wouldn't speak to us. Mother was pretty disappointed in us, too. Now, how did I get off on that?

ROBERT BROWN: [Laughs.] Well, we were talking about your father. So it was a pretty warm family, was it?

CONGER A. METCALF: Very.

ROBERT BROWN: And as a small child, you all were pretty closely knit? Did you help your father in his shop, things like—

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes, I used to go bill-collecting. Just hated it.

ROBERT BROWN: When did you begin your interest in art? How did that begin?

CONGER A. METCALF: Oh, that began, I would say, when I was old enough to hold a pencil.

ROBERT BROWN: Really? You just—

CONGER A. METCALF: We went to a small, little Presbyterian church there, and I would draw on the hymnals. I remember sitting down front, looking at the Communion table, wondering what this "Do in remembrance of me"—I wondered what that meant. But I would fill the hymn books, you know, with little drawings. So, Grant Wood had his summer art colony.

ROBERT BROWN: In—where, nearby?

CONGER A. METCALF: In Stone City, Iowa.

ROBERT BROWN: But this is when you were a little older, right?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes, 15, 14.

ROBERT BROWN: By then, had you had some schooling in art?

CONGER A. METCALF: No. No. But drew all the time, but my greatest attraction was the piano. [00:16:05] Mother said—as a child, she played the piano, and every time she went to the piano, I wanted to sit on her lap, and she said I never smashed or banged. I'd touch it softly, but I couldn't stay away from the piano. But I was drawing all this time. So, when it came time for Grant Wood to start his famous Stone City Art Colony, Mother and Dad said, "Conger, we'd like to send you, but we hear they have nude ladies there. Life classes." Well, they prayed about this and decided I should go.

ROBERT BROWN: Your parents were willing to encourage you?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yeah. Oh, yes. Oh, Dad never wanted to be a plumber. Mother had wanted just sons. She had five sons. But Dad never wanted any of us to be a plumber. So we all turned out to be in music, this or that. So they sent me off to Stone City Art Colony, and fascinating place. It was a strange part of Iowa. You wouldn't see it going through Iowa, because it's off the beaten track and highways, but seven hills like Rome, and an old Mr. Green bought the whole town. And he had found sort of pink marble, pink granite, quarries all over. So they had a real feudal system. He built all these little cottages for his workmen, out of pink granite, and he chose the highest hill. He built this Victorian mansion, complete with Carrara marble fireplaces, parquet floors. He had an ice tower at the foot of the hill. He built a big hotel for his guests. It accommodated 800 people. [00:18:00] And so, Grant Wood took this over.

ROBERT BROWN: At his invitation? At Mr. Green's invitation?

CONGER A. METCALF: Mr. Green was dead by then. When cement came in, he went out. It belonged to the Nissen family. You've heard of trampolines? Well, I went to school with the Nissens, and one of the boys developed the—invented the trampoline, and now a small multi-millionaire.

ROBERT BROWN: So Wood came in—he took on one of those buildings that was no longer used?

CONGER A. METCALF: He took the mansion, and the—the hotel was pretty well in ruins. None of us lived down there. But the ice tower and all. It was a learning period for me. People came from all over the United States, and at that time, even, some were on drugs, pushing drugs, and it was a fascinating, wild set of people.

ROBERT BROWN: Mostly older than you I would say?

CONGER A. METCALF: Oh, yes. Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: It's not too far away from Cedar Rapids.

CONGER A. METCALF: Oh, I would say it's about 20 miles.

ROBERT BROWN: Pretty close, yeah.

CONGER A. METCALF: And you approached Stone City by what is called the Ridge Road. You'd think you were in Switzerland. It certainly doesn't look like Iowa. You have these deep valleys, and all these hills. It's perfectly beautiful. A family, now, a young family, have taken over Stone City, and they have an inn there. I'm going out in February, and I want to return—stay at the inn, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: Where did you stay? You stayed in the mansion?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes. Slept in the attic, terrorized by bats. I had hair in those days. I don't remember sleeping any night. They were all over the attic.

ROBERT BROWN: Huh. What were you—this was for summer, a summer school?

CONGER A. METCALF: Summer. Summer.

ROBERT BROWN: How did it begin? [00:20:00]

CONGER A. METCALF: What do you mean?

ROBERT BROWN: How did it begin? I mean, can you describe the schooling you had?

CONGER A. METCALF: All classes were held in the ice house, because it was enormous. I studied—it was my first experience studying under Grant Wood, my first and only. Studied drawing. He was a dear man. Pink cheeks, blue eyes, guileless. Just the most sincere, wonderful, simple, great person, but he was a little tyrant as a teacher, because you had to work exactly as he worked. You would make these tedious preliminary drawings for any painting. You would work on brown wrapping paper with charcoal and chalk, and he had a system of modeling little X's. It was like knitting a sweater. Just didn't send me, but I went along with all this.

ROBERT BROWN: Did he demonstrate before you would do it?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes, yes. Actually, the dear man taught me nothing, just nothing. Nothing. Zero.

ROBERT BROWN: Did he talk quite a bit during this teaching?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes. I went to my first life class there, and I was nervous about that. I put off the hour as long as I could, and I entered the ice house, and in the middle of it was a huge box, and I could see bare feet. I knew there was a bare lady there. The only seat left was facing her, right under her. So I thumbtacked and sharpened pencils, and finally looked up. Well, she was a beautiful girl. She was my classmate in high school. She was the naughtiest girl in town. [00:22:01] And she was blushing, and hissing at me, "Don't tell my mother. Don't tell my mother." [They laugh.] Well, I was very nervous. I'd love to have those first live drawings. She would disappear at rest time, and one man after another. She'd come back all covered with hay. [Laughs.] The flies were bothering her. Grant Wood sent me into the mansion to get the fly spray, so I had to spray her. Well, it was a grand time. Grand time.

ROBERT BROWN: Were you able to draw fairly well there? Or you were under the same—

CONGER A. METCALF: I have no idea. I didn't know an ankle from an elbow.

ROBERT BROWN: He didn't teach anatomy or anything at that point?

CONGER A. METCALF: No. No. But I met wonderful people then.

ROBERT BROWN: Were there a number of other students who went on to become pretty prominent artists? Do

you remember any?

CONGER A. METCALF: Not of national importance. Howard Pyle, David McCosh, Adrian—long German name. None of them really achieved, you know, acclaim. And Grant Wood, at that time, certainly hadn't achieved any national recognition.

ROBERT BROWN: This was when, about 1930 or so, around that time? You were 15, you said.

CONGER A. METCALF: Fifteen. I'm 67 now.

ROBERT BROWN: So, 1929 or 1930?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: So that was three months of mainly drawing and some paintings?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Had you painted before on your own?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes, I had done a self-portrait of my favorite brother, Malcolm. I remember he was playing on our little front lawn, and I said, "Mother, I'd like to paint Malcolm." [00:24:07] Well, she went out to get him. He always had a sweet disposition, but he was not pleased to come in from play. I put him between two windows. Very difficult lighting. All the frontal areas, you know, dark. He had all this mop of yellow curls. He sat, and I did this thing. Someone sent it in for me to the Des Moines State Fair. It won honorable mention. Received a little plaque. When I closed the house after father's death, mother and I—I brought her to Boston, and they were bulldozing the walls as we left the house. I brought her to Boston, so I gave things right and left, right and left, things I wish I had now. I gave that portrait to a doctor and his wife in Waterloo, Iowa. Before my brother died—this is perhaps four years ago—he said, "Conger, I wish you hadn't given away that portrait. I'd like to have it." So I phoned the doctor in Iowa, just before Christmas. He left his office, packaged it, sent it out, and Malcolm got it Christmas Eve. The doctor asked for two paintings in return. So, then Malcolm died, I gave it to the Cedar Rapids Art Center. He thought it might go there.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you, from the start, take to oils? Did you particularly like them?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes, I did. I don't do watercolors now. I did a lot of watercolors.

ROBERT BROWN: But that time with the Grant Wood school, did he instruct you in oil painting, too?

CONGER A. METCALF: Well, I don't remember seeing much of him, really. [00:26:02]

ROBERT BROWN: Hmm. But someone did, I mean?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: That summer.

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes, he had helpers. It was a beautiful scene there, this great big Victorian mansion and all, and then Grant Wood had a lot of taste, a great deal of imagination. He could have been an architect. He had great interest in renovating houses. He bought a whole fleet of ice wagons and put them all over the hills, and various people painted them. I don't know what's happened to them. I know that Grant Wood painted one of the ice wagons. Many people lived in those, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: Hmm. So it was an extraordinary experience for you?

CONGER A. METCALF: Oh, tremendous.

ROBERT BROWN: When you went back to Cedar Rapids, did it seem rather humdrum after being—

CONGER A. METCALF: Very. Very. It still does, when I go back, but I can't stay away. I go out two or three times a year.

ROBERT BROWN: When you went—continued high school, what did you—did you concentrate in anything particularly?

CONGER A. METCALF: No, but always this interest in music. So then—I don't know how Dad did it, but he sent me to Coe College, which was about four blocks away from the house. I studied piano, music, and graduated with a B.M. degree. I remember coming home one day. I was a freshman at Coe College. Came home, the house

filled with the smell of homemade bread and donuts. The old housekeeper, what a cook. She'd never heard of pâté, but she certainly—a lemon meringue pie, just plain marvelous food. And Mother was a nurse. [00:28:01] She had been a trained nurse. One of her old cronies from nursing days was visiting. I entered the room, and the lady said, "Conger," she said, "you've grown. I haven't seen you. What are you doing now?" I said, "Well, I'm working for a B.M." Well, she just dissolved in laughter. I backed out of the room, and later said, "Mother, why did she laugh?" She said, "Well, Conger, to a nurse, a B.M. means something else." And that lady said, "Imagine working four years for a B.M." [They laugh.]

ROBERT BROWN: What did—your bachelor degree in music, were you trained to be a performer? Is that what you thought at that point?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes, I—

ROBERT BROWN: You thought you might become a pianist?

CONGER A. METCALF: Actually, what I wanted to do was to be an accompanist, because all my family sang. I didn't. I had wonderful teachers. They were graduates of Juilliard and all. They were so encouraging. I would have to give a junior, sophomore, senior, freshman recital. It was always packed. And they told me, and I think sincerely, that I had a far greater gift in music. To me, it was just like talking. I really loved it. But I had simple aspirations. I wanted to be an accompanist, not a concert pianist. But I couldn't sight-read easily. I had a good memory. I knew I wouldn't forget. But I'd get truly frightened when I had to perform, especially—and I had to work three or four times harder than anyone else to run the technical side. [00:30:01] So my hands would freeze, and they would sweat at the same time. And I soon realized that that was what I really wanted to do, but I better just turn to painting, because I could work quietly in the studio, and didn't have all this trauma.

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CONGER A. METCALF: —well, could I finish up with the music bit?

ROBERT BROWN: Sure.

CONGER A. METCALF: I felt, really, that I had nothing to say in painting, and more to say in music, but I didn't have any technical equipment, or what it would take to be an accompanist. I couldn't sight-read. And through no fault of my own, the good Lord gave me a kind of built-in technique in painting. There were no technical problems there. I could draw. So I just settled for that. I've never cried my eyes out, but I still think of music.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. How did you happen to come when you came to the art school, the Museum School, in Boston?

CONGER A. METCALF: I had just graduated from Coe College. I guess that was 1936. Brother John, was established in Boston.

ROBERT BROWN: Really? As a—what?

CONGER A. METCALF: Singer. When he was 19 years old, he entered a national contest that was by the old Atwater Kent radio every year. You're too young to remember that, but they would have a national contest, looking for great voices. Old Professor Ernest A. Leo, that I had mentioned, he was John's voice teacher, and so Professor Leo urged John to enter this contest. I think he was 19. He got to the nationals. You had to win the city, then the county, then the state, and then, if you were any good, you got to the nationals. Well, at 19, he got to the nationals, and he won fourth place. Reinald Werrenrath won first place that year.

ROBERT BROWN: And he became a noted singer?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes. So John received \$1,500, which was a good-size bit in those days, and he could study anywhere in the United States. [00:02:00] Ernest Leo, Professor Leo, urged him to go to the New England Conservatory. So he came here. I had just graduated. He came back to Iowa to visit, and so he and I drove in an open car from Iowa. Forty-seven years ago, I landed at this little Flemish place. John was not married at that time. He and I had part of the studio, a little charming room—I'd love to see it again—on the top floor.

ROBERT BROWN: You came east to Boston to do what? Had you—

CONGER A. METCALF: Well, to study at the Museum School.

ROBERT BROWN: You'd already been in touch with them?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes. No money at all, so I worked at the Goldman Chocolate factory. They were marvelous chocolates. The firm is closed now. That was in Cambridge. I remember working there, and walking across the

bridge and back to Hemenway Street from Cambridge every night. John's first wife, she was the most gorgeous-looking thing. She was unreal-looking. She came from a rowdy, fighting, drinking Irish family, and suddenly into this terrible family, this perfect beauty was born. Blue-violet eyes, porcelain skin, a natural platinum blonde. She was very smart, and very cold. Ice, ice cold. As a girl in high school, she entered the Goldman Chocolate factory. She was a chocolate-dipper. And in two months, she invented a speed belt that speeded up their production 20 percent. Brainy. They made her production manager. So through her, of course, I got the job. I can see her now, that gorgeous, cold, beautiful face. Going to work with her mink hat and mink coat. [00:04:02] John went to a party, and he was a great drinker. He saw this blonde bombshell across the room, and he said, "She will be Mrs. John Metcalf." Well, she married him. She never liked me. She never liked our mother. She didn't like anyone, but she adored John. And he played the horses, he sang on the radio here. He had a program, *Coast to Coast*, every day. And she died at 36 of cancer. He died at 37 of heart. But, uh—

ROBERT BROWN: What was his relation to you? When he brought you—he was an older brother, I assume?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes, he was the third brother in the family.

ROBERT BROWN: When he brought you here, he sort of showed you the ropes and suggested things, or where you on your own?

CONGER A. METCALF: I remember his talking all the way up from Iowa to Boston, saying, "Conger," he said, "I have done well in Boston, but it's a tough town for anyone that's in a creative, artistic field." He said, "Do not expect any kind of success for a long time." He was successful. He spent it all on horses, wine, and women. And Jean, his smart first wife, she would give him an allowance. They managed to buy a house and whatnot. I must say, Boston was more than kind to me from the very beginning.

ROBERT BROWN: Was it?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yeah, and has been.

ROBERT BROWN: Can you describe your beginning, when you went to the Museum School? The people you got to meet.

CONGER A. METCALF: Well, fortunately, I—yes, I met some wonderful friends. [00:06:03] One or two are dead, but I have those friends now. And then I had the great fortune of studying with Karl Zerbe. Jacovleff—Jacovleff, the great Russian draftsman, was head of the school when I first came. He was no teacher at all, and wasn't interested in teaching. He didn't know the English language, and I think he just hated teaching. I remember watching him demonstrate, and my mouth would be open, and I couldn't believe what he could do. But he was no help. You know, and then Karl Zerbe came. Remember Karl Zerbe. Took great interest in me. He was very kind. He would dissolve students in tears. He was very firm, very hard on me. I can hear him say now—he said, "You're the most talented student I've ever had, but you're lazy. You'll never amount to anything." Wasn't he right? But, uh—

ROBERT BROWN: Was this—what courses, kind of teaching, did he do?

CONGER A. METCALF: He taught everything. He had a technique—technical course where you ground your own pigments, did everything but make your own brushes. He studied fresco, lithography. He said it took eight years to form a painter, to train a painter. Eight years. It was not an—it was a classical training, a training such as Picasso would agree with, you know. He didn't dictate style. And he was simply wonderful to me.

ROBERT BROWN: Did he demonstrate?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: The reason I ask is because quite a few of his pupils have a style that is more or less noticeable, that runs among them. [00:08:00]

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: I'm wondering to what extent that's attributable to their teacher, Zerbe.

CONGER A. METCALF: Well, he did not dictate your style. But as you remember, he was the first one to revive the old Egyptian encaustic method. I never took to that. It was fascinating. He became allergic to something used in that process, but he was the first one to revive that, which had been hidden for, you know, centuries. He was trained as a physicist when he came from Germany, and he landed in Cambridge. I would like to own one of this early gouache paintings, or oil paintings, or an encaustic painting. They were so strong, so personal, and then he got off—he had a very sad end, I think. He sort of dissolved, like the great rose, you know, from Germany. He kind of ended badly. He's the only one I really learned from.



ROBERT BROWN: Why do you think you learned from him, given the fact he was so stern as well?

CONGER A. METCALF: Well, for example, he would come in, and I was in a painting class. And I remember, one day—everything he said to me was helpful. He described this basic structure of an eye, and of course I have repeated it, in 34, 35 years of teaching, to all my students. So simple, so graphic, and helpful. He said if you took a thick orange, one of those eating oranges, cost a few cents more kind, and you cut a basic eye-shape into it—and then he explained that there is a certain axis in the drawing of an eye. It's just not a leaf-shape or a fish-shape. It's much more subtle than that. [00:10:00] But if you cut to the pulp, this shape, the thickness of the orange would be the thickness of the upper and lower lids. He would draw right on my palette. Well, that was worth \$2 million to me. You know, and he had anatomical knowledge.

ROBERT BROWN: You had anatomical instruction?

CONGER A. METCALF: I studied under that wonderful old man, Toura Banks [ph]. Never learned anything from him, but I adored him, and he was so kind to me. He would come in the draw—he taught drawing, and lithography, as I remember. He would come to me, and he said, "Yeah, yeah, something like that, eh? That's good, that's good." And then he would make little drawings that meant nothing to me, and he'd pat me on the shoulder. "Keep going. That's good. That's good." Well, that wasn't helpful, you know, but he was very supportive and kind.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you have to go through the classic program there, where they began by drawing from casts and the like?

CONGER A. METCALF: Uh—

ROBERT BROWN: —or was that pretty much gone by then?

CONGER A. METCALF: No, they—I think they had dropped that. No life class. But you studied fresco, lithography. You copied, say, 14th, 15th-century paintings in the manner. The egg tempera, you know, and the whole thing. Studied gilding. It was a thorough, thorough training.

ROBERT BROWN: Who were some of your fellow students with whom you became close?

CONGER A. METCALF: Well, this Richard de Menocal, who lives in Cambridge. Celia Hubbard. She was very impressive, too, because she was a debutante and came from big wealth in Cambridge. [00:12:00] So a girl that didn't need to work that hard, she was such a hard worker. She was charming. And then, as soon as I graduated, they hired me at the Boston Museum School to teach painting and drawing. I don't remember David Aronson as a student, but David has been very kind, said I was perhaps the greatest influence he ever had. He was one of my students. I don't remember him at all. In fact, when BU [Boston University] built their new art department, David became the chairman, and I saw him on the street one day. This is years after the Museum School. He came, rushed up, glad to see me. "Hello, Conger." Then he said, "Oh, you don't know me?" I said, "Oh, yes. Yes, I do. You're Arthur Polonsky." He still hired me. And I taught Jack Kramer.

ROBERT BROWN: These were—your first year, then, you were an instructor in what?

CONGER A. METCALF: Painting, drawing.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you feel fairly secure when you started?

CONGER A. METCALF: No, I don't think I knew anything. And David said I was so helpful. Jack Kramer said, "You were a great help." How could I be? I didn't know anything. Nothing.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you remember what you did? Demonstrated a bit?

CONGER A. METCALF: No, I didn't, I don't think. Just appear in class and take them one by one, and sit down, try and talk. But how could I have helped them?

ROBERT BROWN: Was Zerbe on hand to give you a few pointers?

CONGER A. METCALF: Uh, he was still there. In fact, he's the one that probably hired me.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. But he wasn't apt to explain to you how to go about—

CONGER A. METCALF: No.

ROBERT BROWN: —teaching?

CONGER A. METCALF: Of course, I would go to the library, and I did a lot of reading. [00:14:00] There are, even today, so few good books on drawing. There just aren't any. But I would study anatomy on my own. I had been in anatomy class with dear Toura Banks sitting in the back row, and didn't understand a word he said. The whole thing meant nothing to me. But I would go to the public library and bury myself in books, so I must have, you know, taken diagrams and learned anatomy for myself, really. So perhaps I had that to offer. I've got a stack of notes like this. They should go to the Smithsonian, I should think. Probably Marguerite is already a scout. I've given up teaching, so they won't be used again.

ROBERT BROWN: You also, during these very same years—you started at the Museum School in 1940.

CONGER A. METCALF: Did I?

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah. That's what you said here. By 1940, you said.

CONGER A. METCALF: Well, no, I came to Boston the year I graduated from Coe. That's 1936.

ROBERT BROWN: No, I mean you started as a teacher by 1940.

CONGER A. METCALF: Oh yes, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: But also, that same year, 1940, you went on a trip to Mexico.

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes, I received—

ROBERT BROWN: How did that come about?

CONGER A. METCALF: Well, I received a scholarship from Museum School.

ROBERT BROWN: A traveling—

CONGER A. METCALF: Traveling scholarship.

ROBERT BROWN: Fairly generous with those, aren't they?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes. And war was brewing, and I couldn't use the money in the United States. You had to travel. So Mexico is the logical choice. I went down there and spent a summer.

ROBERT BROWN: Where was it—had it been suggested you go to any particular place?

CONGER A. METCALF: No. Europe wasn't the place to go at that time, so I went to Taos, and stayed there.

ROBERT BROWN: In New Mexico for a bit?

CONGER A. METCALF: Taos.

ROBERT BROWN: No, you mean Taxco?

CONGER A. METCALF: Taxco. I mean Taxco. Taxco. [00:16:00] Of course, got a severe case of dysentery.

ROBERT BROWN: How was it for you as a young artist? What effect did Taxco have on you, if any?

CONGER A. METCALF: I had never really enjoyed oil painting. I went by bus. To this day, I don't enjoy a stretched canvas, the give of the canvas. If I paint on just a panel or canvas at all, I mount it. I like the firm support. So I decided I wouldn't paint down there, and I took along big tablets, huge pads of cameo paper, and my oil paints, lithograph pencils, whatnot, and found that the cameo paper was just what I had been looking for, and stumbled into that.

ROBERT BROWN: Is it a very stiff paper?

CONGER A. METCALF: No. It's not flimsy. It's coated with clay, actual clay, on both sides. I wouldn't know how to prepare it myself. You buy it commercially-prepared. And Grumbacher used to make it. They called it cameo paper. They gave it up, because it's a tricky paper to work with. It's very fragile. If you drop any water or perspiration—of course, the clay is soluble—that goes. So they stopped making it, and then, of course, I was distraught. I went down to the big paper corporations, you know, down around South Station, and I'd buy it in great big reams. And I've worked in that method over about 40 years.

ROBERT BROWN: You found it—what was it that recommended it to you that summer in Taxco?

CONGER A. METCALF: I never enjoyed impasto painting, you know, thick painting. [00:18:00] This, I found, if I used no linseed oil, but just oil paint, turpentine, diluted, and then a pencil I've used these 40 years—the only one—ebony pencil—the graphite, and then these thin—it's essentially a glaze technique. I discovered this in Taxco. I've made more demonstrations for friends, for students, colleagues, how I do it, and they all give up.

ROBERT BROWN: You begin with the pencil only?

CONGER A. METCALF: Well, sometimes with a brush. The drawing—lay the drawing in, but usually with pencil, and then successive layers. Even after 40 years now of using this technique, I still find effects that I didn't know I could get.

ROBERT BROWN: The paper, then, when you're through, has to be mounted on something, doesn't it?

CONGER A. METCALF: No. I've found that it couldn't be mounted, because it's coated with clay on both sides. I wish they'd make it with just clay on one side, because then, after certain humid days or something, it might—it begins to bubble. So I've learned not to mount it.

ROBERT BROWN: But you put something firm behind it?

CONGER A. METCALF: Oh, yes. Yeah. As you stuff it into the frame. And Karl Zerbe was a little concerned about my using it, and then he said, "No, it's all right, because it's a completely, 100 percent rag. It will last."

ROBERT BROWN: Permanent, yes.

CONGER A. METCALF: It's permanent.

ROBERT BROWN: Were you, when in Mexico, at all interested to go see the now-heralded contemporary mural work in Mexico?

CONGER A. METCALF: No.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you go see some of that?

CONGER A. METCALF: No. [00:20:00] I was sick most of the time I was there. But I have—I must say, they're very strong—I was, of course, fascinated by Diego Rivera, so I did—I'd hire these models, and I did these strong—they are strong. Perhaps mal-drawn, but strong—Mexican miners, you know, and whatnot. I remember one—Worth Rowley, he has a big collection of my things. He prizes this enormous head I did of a grizzly Mexican miner. It's more than life-size. Very Diego Rivera, you know, style. And I did it with a lithograph pencil. I discovered that that worked beautifully on this paper. You get soft, ivory-grays, and strong blacks, and carve into the thick lithograph pencil. It was a fascinating time for me, despite the illness, because I ate my meals in a little pancion there, and I looked at this fellow every day. He commandeered a whole refectory table all to himself, surrounded by about 20 wine bottles. It was Robert Motherwell. He was there with some avant-garde painters. Matta. Motherwell had a Spanish dancer girlfriend with him. He was quite handsome. Somehow, he started talking to me. Well, he had come from my part of the country at one time. He decided he liked me very much, and he loved my reminiscing about Aunt Rachel, you know, and all the Iowa incidents. He was very kind to me. [00:22:00] When I was ill, he'd bring me food. He looked at my drawings and he said, "I really admire your work. I don't like it, but I wish I could draw like you." He said, "I couldn't draw a thimble." He said, "I can't draw anything." But I've never forgotten his kindness.

ROBERT BROWN: Hmm. Well, was he actively drawing or attempting to paint while he was there?

CONGER A. METCALF: Probably. Yeah, I think that's why he was there.

ROBERT BROWN: And so were some of the others?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes. Oh, Matta and others.

ROBERT BROWN: Taxco was one of the prime Mexican art centers at that time, wasn't it? Did you keep up with any of those people you met that summer?

CONGER A. METCALF: No, no.

ROBERT BROWN: It was an interlude.

CONGER A. METCALF: When I was in Iowa one summer, before, just before I received this traveling grant, I began getting letters from a young fellow at Iowa University. He was there studying art. He was from the Bronx in New York. His name was Saul Goldstein. He said he'd like to meet me, and he admired my work. Well, I did

meet him. Unfortunately—he heard about my traveling grant, and he wanted to go. He had no money, and unfortunately, I took him. He's living. He's in New York. Painter.

ROBERT BROWN: But you took him along with you?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes, I did, unfortunately.

ROBERT BROWN: And it was an impediment?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes, a great one. He's Stephen Greene. It was to be alone, I remember, and he absorbed a good half of whatever money I got. I never heard from that. He didn't really take care of me when I got sick [laughs]. [00:24:01] Robert Motherwell did. Well, I wish Steve well.

ROBERT BROWN: You came back, then, to take up your teaching post at the Museum School.

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes. I may have taught there two years. I don't know.

ROBERT BROWN: What happened when the war came? Were you called up, or what happened?

CONGER A. METCALF: I surely was. Unfortunately, again, I was in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. A good friend of mine from college said, "Why don't you study Russian?" He said, "You can be in a special group, and have a delightful time in the war." Well, I listened to Al Kitzhaber and his wife, and I don't know how I got into this high-powered, intensive, exhausting thing in Iowa University. There were three groups, Midwest and the two coasts, and you were to learn Russian in 13 weeks, and even in that time, study contemporary or slang Russian. Be an interpreter, you know. Unfortunately, I got into that group. I don't know how I got into it, because all of the others were trained in Latin, spoke all the languages.

ROBERT BROWN: You must have tested all right, then.

CONGER A. METCALF: Well, I did get into the group, much to my sorrow. I appeared in Iowa City, Iowa University. I remember that first session. They had imported a Dr. Posen. Great big, tall, gruff man. A real Russian from Moscow. He was heading the thing. He came in. We were divided. There were 15 of us, divided into three groups of five. And he struck my group, the first one. [00:26:01] Came in, glared at us, and said, "You have 15 minutes to learn the Russian alphabet." At the end of that little period, we were writing simple words, like Kalinda [ph] knife, and chai tea. I was chained to the textbook. It fell apart in about three weeks. Couldn't go to the bathroom without it. We couldn't talk to other people. We met at lunch and dinner, and breakfast. You could only talk Russian. It almost killed me. After—this was 13-week course.

ROBERT BROWN: By the way, were you already in the army or in the forces by then?

CONGER A. METCALF: No, no.

ROBERT BROWN: This was before?

CONGER A. METCALF: The army was excusing me for the minute, because I was obviously doing—or supposedly doing this great thing for the country, learning to be an interpreter. After 10 weeks, the Iowa draft board decided I should just be drafted. I couldn't have thanked them more. Couldn't have thanked them more.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you finish up the Russian program?

CONGER A. METCALF: No, I had 10 weeks, and then gladly went to [laughs] Arkansas for boot training. Happy to go. Happy to go.

ROBERT BROWN: So your military career was a fairly routine one of a GI?

CONGER A. METCALF: Well, I was sent to—oh, that dreadful place—Little Rock, Arkansas, and I had 10-week training there. Then they sent me to the Mojave Desert, the Lower Mojave. From there, I had another 10 weeks, and had my first real battle and encounter with snakes, and I don't know what all. And then I was sent to Fort Belvoir to study camouflage [00:28:00] I remember, um, there, a girl from Cedar Rapids, Iowa found I was there. She was in the camouflage department, and she said, "Let's get together," so I took her out for dinner. We went to a bar and restaurant, and this great big, crazy, crazy decorator from New York, Mortimer Yoken [ph], came in. What a character. He wore his hat sideways. Enormous man. So this girl said, "I want you to meet Conger from my hometown." [Laughs.] He looked at me and he said, "Well, he isn't attractive, but I need 13 men. Would you like to go overseas?" I said sure. The next morning, he came, dragged me out of the drill line, and he picked 13 men, and I remember getting to the dock there, and we all got on a little banana boat. He walked on. He had cut his pants off. He was wearing these bikini shorts. Hat like this, great big glasses. He had decorated Orson Welles's apartment in New York City. He took over. He went to the officers. He said, "I'm going to take over."

ROBERT BROWN: Wasn't he in the military himself?

CONGER A. METCALF: He was a lieutenant.

ROBERT BROWN: Huh. And this would be a camouflage group he was taking?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes, there were 13 of us. All the rest of the men were engineers. We were so-called engineers, but the others were the kind that dig ditches and build bridges. He went to everyone and he said, "My men are artistes. They're not to do anything." Well, that made us friends of everyone. [00:30:01] He took over the social activities. We were on the outside of the convoy, going off to war, and he planned a big show. I was doing backdrops on sheets.

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ROBERT BROWN: Testing, testing.

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT BROWN: We were talking last time—you were just on your way to Europe in the army, with this camouflage unit. So, what happened the rest of the time?

CONGER A. METCALF: There were 13 of us in this small engineer detachment, they called it. We landed in Oran, North Africa. This crazy Yoken, lieutenant—we were assigned to live out on the desert. So, he took his artistes with him, and went out and saw the Quonset huts, or tents. "Oh, my artistes can't live there." So he took us right in town. With no permission at all, took over a great big department store there, owned by some wealthy Arab. He had me doing a mural a block long. I did *Ali Baba and the 40 Thieves*. And he had men going all over town, catching birds, sparrows and whatever he could get, and he designed—had this—this was all on government money, you understand. He had a giant birdcage made, and he got hold of silks, or satins, and made giant poufs. He was making it into an officers' club. And the poor old Arab sheikh came to see his store. He couldn't believe it. And here, other outfits were trying to get hold of a barrel of paint or this or that, he got hold of an enormous amount of barrels of oil paint.

ROBERT BROWN: You went along with this willingly enough, huh?

CONGER A. METCALF: Well, what could I do? [00:02:00]

ROBERT BROWN: Having a pretty good time, too?

CONGER A. METCALF: Grand time, you bet. But in Oran, there's this tiny little piazza, circular, and he had men out there painting all the storefronts, olive green, shocking pink. Each of us could have had a Jeep at our disposal. Other outfits crying for—

ROBERT BROWN: What was his secret? He was extremely clever at requisitioning things?

CONGER A. METCALF: Well, he just barreled ahead and didn't check with anybody, and just took. He also promoted himself to captain. The government wasn't aware of it. Then he took over some villa outside city limits, and again, owned by some wealthy Arab. He put me in the prayer room, the most sacred room to the Arab, painting trellises of ivy. He had violet satin poufs in there. Poor Arab came, you know, just absolutely shocked. And there were 1,500 prisoners of war out there. This Yoken character would give parties, and he'd throw cartons of cigarettes to them all. He didn't drink. Plenty of booze out there. And then, finally, orders came from Fifth Army to—they wanted four people sent to Naples. Well, I was one of the four. We flew—

ROBERT BROWN: You couldn't get out of that?

CONGER A. METCALF: No. I was glad to leave, really.

ROBERT BROWN: You were, really?

CONGER A. METCALF: Oh, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Was it kind of boring in the end? [00:04:00] Too much of just—

CONGER A. METCALF: It was just profligate, his waste, and just—so we were—the four of us, we made terrain models for aviators, you know, so they'd know what was behind the hills, this and that. And outside Naples, in the woods, one night we heard this, "Can you hear me?" Yoken had flown over from Oran with five boxes of French pastry. That's the last time I saw him, except I did visit him in New York once. Couldn't believe it. He had an antique shop. It was full of Europe. He became a special service officer, and Katharine Cornell and Brian

Aherne were doing *Barretts of Wimpole Street*. He was assigned to them, so he looted every palace and house he could get. It was all in New York, when I saw him in New York. Shipping all this stuff home.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh my. Huh. That was the last you saw him until then, was near Naples?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes. He disappeared.

ROBERT BROWN: Your own work, then, was more related to the war work? These terrain models and—

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: —then the airmen would be brought in to look at them, and you would—

CONGER A. METCALF: We could hear the *boom, boom*, because we were right behind the front lines. My brother, Malcolm, left for the war—he was in the first boat that left the United States. They were all Midwestern fellows. Malcolm's job was grave registration. Now, for a sensitive fellow, that was pretty rough. [00:06:00] Every one of his friends from Cedar Rapids, Iowa was killed, and here he is, going over the grounds, you know, picking up a leg here, a head there. It did an awful job on him. He lost all his teeth. Hair all fell out. He came back just a nervous wreck, and for years he was—[phone rings].

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT BROWN: So your own time in Italy, then, was—you were in Naples, and then did you keep creeping up the peninsula?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes. Fifth Army worked up from Naples.

ROBERT BROWN: And your job was mainly to make these terrain models?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: How were they made? Were they difficult, complex, to construct, or did you use papier-mâché?

CONGER A. METCALF: You worked with maps, some of them almost obsolete, and then you'd try to figure out elevations. You'd work with—drive your little stakes, stretch cloth over that, and then use gesso, and then you'd paint in little things. We got to as far as Florence, and Fifth—the Germans were all holed up in Bologna, and they were up in the hills, and Fifth Army couldn't go ahead. So that was a great bonus for me, really, because we were in Florence about nine months. The Germans had just left. We arrived two days after the Germans had left. They bombed every bridge except the Ponte Vecchio. They would love to have bombed that, but they knew how the world and the Italians felt about the Ponte Vecchio, so they gave people 45 minutes to get out at the two extremities of the bridge. Forty-five minutes to clear out the goods. Then they bombed the two ends, and weakened the whole structure, but they bombed all the other bridges. [00:08:01] So there was nothing, really, to do in camp. Peel a few potatoes, and have drill in the morning, but we were free to go into Florence every day. So I'd walk across these improvised bridges, and they'd have ropes with a little piece of wood, you know. And I can't look out a second-story window without getting dizzy, so I'd walk across there, and of course there'd be some clown behind me, jumping up and down [they laugh], and here's the river below. But I braved it every day, and some of the shops weren't open yet, but I walked into one shop, and the windows were bombed-up, there's tarpaulin in there, and I made a dear friend. Then I found a shop that—

ROBERT BROWN: What kind of shops were these?

CONGER A. METCALF: Oh, antique shops. Antique shops. The museums were all closed. I went by one shop, and I saw frames in the window. There was this enormous, or very tall, austere-looking woman in there. Blue eyes, gray hair, smoking like crazy, right down to the tiny butt. She had a curtain behind her. They were all frames, so I was fascinated. I would trade chocolate bars and things—rations for cigarettes. I didn't smoke then, and they were five cents a pack in the PX. The poor Italians on the black market were paying [\$]2.50 a pack. So I'd take in a whole barracks bag full of cigarettes. Well, I walked in, and this woman spoke no English. I spoke little or no Italian. We became friends immediately. [00:10:00] I bought some frames. When I left, I opened up the bag and poured the whole thing on a table. She couldn't believe it. I went back to Florence two years later, in the war. I had a mustache, and uniform, of course. I went back. She didn't recognize me. The mustache was gone. I was in civilian clothes. I discovered that, behind the curtain, she had room after room after room after room of frames, beautiful frames. She had three brothers that were famous. They were all painters.

ROBERT BROWN: What was the family name? What were they?

CONGER A. METCALF: Angelie [ph]—Angelie.

ROBERT BROWN: Angelie?

CONGER A. METCALF: Angelie. Mizner, the great American architect, discovered these three brothers. They didn't—they had a whole factory going in Florence, old men, skillful painters, tied to the weasel, reproducing *Birth of Venus*, everything else, and they would do it on old canvas. They would do it in the manner, technical manner, of the period, and you couldn't tell the difference. And they sold them as fakes. Fakes. These three brothers, of course, loved frames, and all three of them were collecting all over Italy. So here were these marvelous museum-quality frames. Well, I went wild.

ROBERT BROWN: What were you going to do with the frames while you were still in the army?

CONGER A. METCALF: Ship them home. Ship them. No, this is after.

ROBERT BROWN: But during the war, you said you picked up some when you first—

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes, it was easy to send things home. Easy. I can remember Mother's consternation, because all the time—I bought about 20 chairs from Caserta, the palace, outside of Naples. [00:12:00] Marvelous palace. And the Italian king had seen Versailles, and a few other—he came back and told his people in Naples, "I don't want to be open to bombardment here in Naples." He went 20 miles out of town to Caserta. He built his Versailles. And before I came home from the war, I was stationed in the stables of Caserta, and there were many German prisoners of war. And one day I went into the courtyard, and they were burning these chairs. Well, a friend of mine, in my outfit, still living—I saw him two years ago, Columbus, Ohio. Great big guy. Every day, he'd show us this letter from his mother, encouraging him to read the Bible, "My darling, blue-eyed baby boy." Well, her darling, blue-eyed baby boy was the biggest black market king I ever saw. He got—the government had these planks of wood. He would fill up trucks that were going out every half hour, selling all these planks of wood for \$5 or \$10 apiece. He was in charge of these workmen burning these palace chairs. I went to the workmen and I said, "I'll buy them. Don't burn them." "Well, you'll have to see him." So I go to the darling, blue-eyed baby boy, reading the Bible, and he sold them to me, and I sent home, oh, I think about 15. Had them taken apart, crated. So they are dumped on the front porch, out in Iowa, you know? When I came home, there they were.

ROBERT BROWN: So this was—those times were much opportunity, was there, while you were in Italy?

CONGER A. METCALF: Oh, yes, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: While you were in Italy, then, you had so much time in Florence. You went to—you studied in Florence as well? [00:14:03]

CONGER A. METCALF: No, I did not study formally. Gradually, the museums opened, so I simply went and took notes, and just haunted the museums. One fascinating day, I went to the Pitti Palace, and that powerful, rich family, they built the great Pitti Palace, and then the Medicis decided they'd do them in. They bankrupt them, you know. But the beautiful Gates of Paradise at the Baptistery, the Italians had taken them down. They hid them in the gardens of the Pitti Palace. One day, I was strolling through the vast gardens, and I saw this group of workmen, a lot of excited people around them. I went, and the Gates of Paradise were only about—buried about five inches below the soil. Germans never found them. So I had a real chance to study the Gates of Paradise, you know, they were sweeping the dirt away, and I could really study the things. That was fascinating.

ROBERT BROWN: You had plenty of time to do this kind of thing?

CONGER A. METCALF: Oh, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: And you made notes, and did some sketching?

CONGER A. METCALF: But this Ms. Angelie, two years after the war, she didn't recognize me. I was buying up a storm of frames, and suddenly two couples came in. They were Americans, but the kind of Americans that you'd be proud of. They were kindly people. They were so drunk from their lunch, and they picked up a little glass, I remember, and "How much is this?" She said, "Three hundred lira," which at that time was one dollar. [00:16:00] They said, "You dear thing, you can't live on that." They threw her money, kissed her, went out. Ms. Angelie turned to me and said, "You know," she said, "Mizner"—"I love Americans," she said. "They're *bambini*." And—

ROBERT BROWN: *Bambini*?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yeah. "And *mingione* [ph]." I found out what *mingione* meant. Suckers. And *bambini*, children. She said, "They're really too good. They're the only altruistically kind people left in the world. The only thing I have against them is that Mizner, the great architect, came over and took my three brothers to America. They did murals in the great houses. Mrs. Merriweather and everyone. And they learned to drink martinis." She said, "America taught them to be drunkards. And that's the only thing—but I love the Americans." She said, "For

example, during the war, I remember a GI came in, and he gave me tons of cigarettes. Just gave them to me." I smiled. She said, "Were you ever in Italy during the war?" "Yes." "Did you have *un baffi*?" Mustache. "Yes." "Was it you?" "Yes." Well, from then on, she was my Italian mother. She was very protective. She told me where to go, who not to trust, who to trust. She died about three years ago. Marguerite was in Florence. She went to see her.

ROBERT BROWN: By then, were you thinking of being a collector?

CONGER A. METCALF: No, it was—I just, I've always had a fetish about frames. Never mind painting; I love the frames. [00:18:00]

ROBERT BROWN: What is it about the frames that you like?

CONGER A. METCALF: Oh, I just love the variety, the craftsmanship, and everything about them. And I went back to Italy then, I think I made 19 trips after the war. Two of those trips, frames were still plentiful. She was living. And I'd buy beautiful frames for \$2.50, \$4. I don't have one of them left. They're all on my paintings, all scattered all over. I'd love to have them all back. I could buy a villa in Florence and retire if I had them back.

ROBERT BROWN: But you wanted them to be on your paintings, then, did you?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes, yeah. They're all over Iowa. They're all over the Newtons here, everywhere.

ROBERT BROWN: Were you doing a lot of sketching during these trips, too?

CONGER A. METCALF: Oh, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, because so much of your work, today, too, still refers back to Italy.

CONGER A. METCALF: Well that's—you know, I love Iowa. Just love it. Could never live there again. I never saw anything out there I wanted to paint. The minute I got to Naples, which was a very frightening city, very frightening during the war—

ROBERT BROWN: What was? Why?

CONGER A. METCALF: Children, five years old, selling their mother on the street. People living in sewers. Desperate poverty. For example, Post Office Square there—I hope they still don't have it—but there was a cave right in the center of town, and people with malignant diseases, syphilis and all kinds of things, lived in there, in the dark, separated by curtains or whatever—you know. And they were not allowed to come out. Terrible. [00:20:00]

ROBERT BROWN: Hmm. This did stick in your mind and in your pencil, too, right, in terms of painting and drawing?

CONGER A. METCALF: Oh, I made copious, copious notes, and some of them—I don't know where they are, but I'd love to see them again. I was fascinated by the people. Naples, especially, the people are handsome, handsome. The children, especially. Naples had been occupied by the Moors and this and that, and such a crossbreed of—so we worked up until we got to Florence, and then the war ended, and back home I come.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you go back to Iowa? Did you think that might be home, or you came right back to the Boston area?

CONGER A. METCALF: Oh no, I went right out to Iowa. Mother, delighted to see Malcolm still alive, barely. Then, uh—

ROBERT BROWN: Did you keep in touch—at that point, did you see people like Marvin Cone, your teacher?

CONGER A. METCALF: Oh, yes. Loved to go to visit him.

ROBERT BROWN: Maybe you could say something more about him now. I don't think we did talk much of him. You described your years as a student. What was he like?

CONGER A. METCALF: Marvin Cone was head of the painting and French—he taught French, painting, and drawing at Coe College. One of the simplest, most genuine, kindly men. Handsome fellow, and very self-effacing. And one of the most honest painters I've ever seen. Painted what he knew, what he saw. Grant Wood got the acclaim. Marvin never did. And then Marvin needed—had a sabbatical, and he sent for me. I went out and taught his painting and drawing classes for a year. [00:22:05] That was a frightening experience. I had just recently graduated from college, so there were a lot of fraternity brothers left. And I was to teach art history, and there were over a hundred people in the class. All these fraternity brothers, you know, kids that are known, they



thought, "This is a snap; Conger will give me an A." I used Gardner's *Art Through the Ages*. Every night, I was boning, and I was just one chapter ahead of them. I wish I knew—I wish I could see the gal. She was one of the most outstanding students I ever had. I never saw such a bust on a girl. She could—she came from some swanky suburb of Chicago. No brains at all. None. And lovable. She was in the class, and she was always late. I'd be sitting on my little desk, and I'd look down the hallway, and she was the last one to come in. That was all planned. She admired Mae West, so she'd walk in front of the boys. They'd all whistle. She was a sweater girl, you know, with plenty to fill the sweater. One day, she strolled over—this is the top floor of the oldest building at Coe College. She looked out on the campus, all covered with manure. So she put her hand on her hip, and turned back to me and said, "Who said this was a one-horse college?" [They laugh.] The test, first test, her sorority sisters wanted to up their average, so they kept her up all night and fed her rum and—no, Coca-Cola and something deadly. [00:24:02] Not turpentine. But just to keep her awake. So she staggered in for the test, and she had no idea about nothing. Nothing. Somewhere along the course, I talked about the Knidos [ph] Venus, who was the first nude Venus, I understood, to arrive at the Vatican Museum, and some pope decided to put a skirt on her. It was a tin skirt, painted—simulated marble. Well, that stuck in her mind. [Laughs.] So, one of the questions was, "Describe and illustrate a groin vault." She said it refers to that Venus with the tin girdle. Her spelling was something. The word "medieval," M-I-D-hyphen-E-V-I-L. Well, we passed her. Where is she now?

ROBERT BROWN: But that was a rather interesting and rather grueling year for you, that first year?

CONGER A. METCALF: Oh, it wore me out. Wore me out.

ROBERT BROWN: After the war, did you decide that you wouldn't stay in Iowa?

CONGER A. METCALF: Well, I had this brother, John, who was two years older than I.

ROBERT BROWN: And He was here?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yeah. When he was 19 or 20, he won fourth place in a national contest, put on every year by the Atwater Kent radio. And you had to win the city, then the county, and then the state, and if you were any good, you got to the national. Well, he won fourth place. He must have been 20 years old. He had a wonderful voice teacher in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, old Professor Ernest A. Leo, graduate of Juilliard.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, you had mentioned some of this. And that got him here?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yeah, he came here, went—

ROBERT BROWN: You described that, and his marriage.

CONGER A. METCALF: —to the New England Conservatory, and he came home to Iowa in 1936, which was my graduation year. [00:26:06] He said, "Now, dad never wanted us to be plumbers. He never wanted to be one. I think you should come to Boston and go to the Museum School—or go to art school." All the way here, driving this open, old car, he told me how tough it was for anyone in the art field to exist in Boston. He said, "You have to be doubly good. Don't expect any success whatsoever." Well, from the first, Boston was very kind to me.

ROBERT BROWN: And so after the war, you thought of coming back? After World War II?

CONGER A. METCALF: I thought of what?

ROBERT BROWN: Thought of coming back to Boston. Not staying around.

CONGER A. METCALF: Well, it hadn't crossed my mind, but John came out and said, "Come to Boston." That's 47 years ago. I'm still here. Never went back.

ROBERT BROWN: After your army, you went to Iowa?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: And then you came back? How come did you then come back here? Because you had a job or —

CONGER A. METCALF: No. This brother, John, said, "Come and study art."

ROBERT BROWN: In '45 or so, he said to come?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you come back after World War II and study some more? Or you began teaching fairly

soon at the Dexter School?

CONGER A. METCALF: I first taught at Boston Museum School. I went there four years.

ROBERT BROWN: We talked about all—you talked about a lot of that. You studied—

CONGER A. METCALF: And then they hired me to teach painting and drawing. But I worked in the Goldman Chocolate factory here.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you think, after the war, when you went—did you decide you wanted to continue as a teacher?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes, I've always loved teaching.

ROBERT BROWN: What was it like, then, teaching instead—as opposed to the Museum School, which you taught just before you went into the army, what was it like going and teaching children at the Dexter School? [00:28:08]

CONGER A. METCALF: I enjoyed that. Didn't earn a penny. They paid me—well, Mr. Caswell was headmaster, and he's still living. And he was sort of a defrocked Episcopalian minister, married to a hideous woman, a Unitarian. Mr. Caswell hired me. I don't know how he got to Dexter. He wanted to pay me \$8 a day, and I was supporting my mother, and I did have enough mother wit and gumption to say, "Well, I should get at least \$10 a day." That's three days a week. Somewhere, I have a withholding slip. It was less than [\$]300 for the whole year. I was driving school bus, cleaning urinals, and raking leaves, and painting windows in the gymnasium. Mr. Caswell—every Monday morning, we'd all meet, first the faculty, in the assembly room. This big motto, "Or best today, better tomorrow." He'd tell us that when he was a boy in Salem, he earned 50 cents a week, and he made the point very clear that we were all money-mad and lazy, and all we wanted was no work and lots of money. His wife, perfectly terrible woman. She had a face like a bulldog. She'd wear a black dress with a pin. She wore poppets and alligator shoes. She was the school dietician. [00:30:00] On Fridays, poor little boys that were supposed to have fish on Fridays, she'd make sure it was something they shouldn't have. The soup was very watery. My oldest Boston friend, Felice Pennypacker, had gone to Bermuda and gave me four yards of the most beautiful plaid I ever saw. I had no money, but I went to Yokouchi [ph] in Cambridge. I'll never forget, he made this plaid suit for me, and I went for several fittings. He'd use whalebone and line up those things, you know. Just the coat and the trousers, at that time, was \$175. I didn't know there was that much money in the world. I was very proud of the suit, and one day I was to be invited for dinner after school, so I wore the suit. Mrs. Caswell, the donut hour, morning coffee break, she spotted this suit. She sent for me. They had a little apartment within the school. She opened the door with that ugly face of hers, said, "Mr. Metcalf, I think it's in very bad taste that you should be wearing a suit as obviously expensive as that." A week later, I was filling a fountain pen, spilled ink all over it, so the suit [laughs] went up in smoke.

ROBERT BROWN: [Laughs.] What about the teaching there? How did you—

CONGER A. METCALF: Oh, I loved it.

ROBERT BROWN: How did you go about that?

CONGER A. METCALF: I taught first through seventh grade.

ROBERT BROWN: What would you begin—you'd never experienced with teaching such small children, had you?

CONGER A. METCALF: No, and I soon—

ROBERT BROWN: Did you have somebody—a mentor? Or did you turn to anything?

CONGER A. METCALF: I had no—I didn't study any books on child psychology. I soon learned that—these little boys, they loved me. [00:32:03] But I soon discovered that no must mean no, yes is yes, and there was no maybe.

ROBERT BROWN: Else they'd run all over you?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yeah, yeah. I was—I taught music. Mr. Caswell had a lovely voice, and he loved music, but art was just nothing to him. I was relegated to a room in the basement, next to the boiler room. So I'd have these little kids—still, I see them all over Boston. They're all married. Some have been in jail. They're all divorced. The boys called me "Metty." So, Mr. Caswell tried to clear that up, Monday morning meeting. He said, "Now, we—in this school, Ms. Seale is Ms. Seale. I know you all love Mr. Metcalf, but his name is Mr. Metcalf. We will have no more Metty." From then on, the boys called me "Mr. Metty." They still do, when I see them here. Little Dicky Howlett, he did love me. He was in the first grade. I had him right straight through. He would fight. He would fight at noon. I had to line them up at the long sink and get their hands washed, and try to keep them

from tearing one another apart. Line them up, and he would fight to get to the head of the line, because he knew he'd sit by me. One day, I know, I was monitoring the line, and he looked me all over. I had an Italian plaid sweater on. He looked at the shoes. Finally, he said, "Mr. Metty," he said, "I like everything you have on, except your nose." [00:34:04] I went, "Thank you, Dicky. What's wrong with the nose?" He said it was like an old squash. He said, "What are those holes in your face?" I said, "Oh, I file old letters in there. Put my laundry in." That satisfied him in the first. Then he'd sit beside me, and he'd stroke my hand. He said, "Mr. Metty, I just love you, but you're so ugly," and I'd say, "Thank you." Then he'd say, "I'm excused from spinach." I never asked to see his mother's note. We were great friends, great friends. Lawrence Minet Channing the Second. My first day at Dexter was his first day. He didn't like athletics. He was all out, like I am here, with a stomach in front. He had a Dutch bob. His mother had put him in little jumper suit with overalls. He stood at the top of the little terrace there, overlooking the ball field, and stood just like a State Street banker, hands behind his back. I walked up to him and I said, "You're a new face. Who are you?" He said, "Well, I am Lawrence Minet Channing the Second, and I'm only five years old, and I don't know what I'm doing here." I thought, boy, I'm going to watch you. You're going to be fun. In about two minutes, he came up to me. "Mr. Metcalf," he said, "Willis Payne Beale Jr. just snapped my suspenders, probably five times." I said, "That's rough. That's rough." Willis Payne Beale Jr. came up, all freckles and teeth missing. He said, "Well, Mr. Metcalf, it didn't hurt any." [00:36:00] Lawrence turned on him, put his hand out, and he said, "Well, it was unpleasant. That I know." Oh, he was marvelous. He walked on tiptoe, and he still does.

ROBERT BROWN: These were marvelous—or a great group of students to have, were they?

CONGER A. METCALF: Oh.

ROBERT BROWN: Did they take to art, a lot of them?

CONGER A. METCALF: Oh, yes. Yeah. That was therapeutic for them, and for me, too [laughs].

ROBERT BROWN: Did the school mainly view the art course as therapy, as almost extracurricular?

CONGER A. METCALF: Well, they just thought they should have it in there, but it was really less than nothing.

ROBERT BROWN: But you were there about 11 years?

CONGER A. METCALF: Eleven years.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you sort of rise in stature with Mr. Caswell, and in the school?

CONGER A. METCALF: No, not really. He did like my piano-playing. He thought that was just grand. But I remember the year that David Aronson became chairman of the art department of Boston University, and his job was not a nice one. It was to clear out the old ones and get the new ones. I was the first one he hired. Haven't we gone through this?

ROBERT BROWN: No.

CONGER A. METCALF: Well, he had been a student of mine at the Museum School. I still—well, he is—I'm sure it's correct information. I don't remember him as a student. On Boylston Street, right in front of R.H. White—or what was that old store?

ROBERT BROWN: Stearns?

CONGER A. METCALF: Stearns.

ROBERT BROWN: R.H. Stearns.

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes. He rushed up to me. "Oh, I'm glad to see you, Conger." Finally, he said, "You don't recognize me. You don't know me." "Oh," I said, "I know exactly who you are. You're Arthur Polonsky." [They laugh.] He still hired me. So I saw the dean, went through what you have to go through to be hired. I went to Mr. Caswell, and I said, "Mr. Caswell, I'm leaving." [00:38:03] I said, "I'm going to be teaching now at Boston University." He said, "I will believe it when I see it in print." Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So then I had a call from Mrs. Caswell again. I went to the door, and she said, "Well, you're certainly an ingrate." She said, "After all we've done for you, you just feathered your nest at our expense." Slammed the door in my face. Shortly, a day or two later, a little tiny thing came out in Boston paper. I just went in and laid it quietly on Mr. Caswell's desk. He still, every April, sends me a note. Getting a little shaky now, but every boy that's ever gone through that school, on their birthday, he sends them a birthday card.

ROBERT BROWN: Hmm. So he was good in some ways, perhaps?

CONGER A. METCALF: Oh, I liked him. Yes, sure.

ROBERT BROWN: They just weren't attuned to music or art to speak—or to art, particularly?

CONGER A. METCALF: He really thought I was overpaid.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah. Couldn't change his attitude. What caused you to think of going to BU? Was Aronson particularly persuasive? Was the dean?

CONGER A. METCALF: Well, he came to me, yes, and—

ROBERT BROWN: What did he say he wanted you to do?

CONGER A. METCALF: Well, he wanted me to teach painting and drawing. That was in the days when the art school was on Garrison Street. Wonderful old stone building and felt like an art school. No elevators. I was terrorized. [00:40:00] I didn't think I knew enough to teach. I remember Karl Fortess. I heard he was coming from New York.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you know of him?

CONGER A. METCALF: Pardon?

ROBERT BROWN: Did you know of Karl Fortess?

CONGER A. METCALF: No, no, but I knew he had sold a painting once to the Whitney Museum, and I thought, "Gee, I'm in big company." First day of school, I'm scared to death. I saw this fellow on the floor. He had walrus mustache, and his close-cropped gray hair, and great big bags under his eyes. I said, "You must be Karl Fortess from New York." "Well," he said, "obviously I'm too old to be a student." He said, "I'm scared to death." And I said, "I am, too." He said, "Well, I'm really scared to death. I'm teaching advanced drawing, and I can't draw." I said, "Certainly you must know more than the students." His first class was hilarious, I guess. There were very few. There were about 15. The school was small then. He walked in, and he said, "Well, obviously, I'm outnumbered." And he said, "There are going to be some changes here." He said, "I think we'll clothe the model, and all you girls can draw in the nude." Well, they began to sit up and take notice. He said, "I don't give examinations, but I think, end of the semester, I'll take the temperature of the boys, and all you girls can strip to the waist." He is truly one of the most amusing men I've ever met. He went to Mallory, our secretary, Christmastime. I said, "What are you giving Mallory at Christmas, Karl?" He said, "Hell, I'm Jewish. [00:42:01] I don't give presents." Then he showed me his watch, with Hebraic numbers on it, you know, to prove he was Jewish. He said, "I'll be glad to crucify her." Oh, he was the only fun I ever had at Boston University.

ROBERT BROWN: By and large, you didn't too much enjoy your time there?

CONGER A. METCALF: I enjoyed it completely for the first, maybe seven or eight years, when we were in the old building. And I'd have a ball every weekend, but I couldn't wait to get back to class on Monday. We then moved up—what?

ROBERT BROWN: Was it getting bigger each year?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes, more students.

ROBERT BROWN: And Aronson was adding on more teachers?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Were they—what did you think of the ones he was adding on?

CONGER A. METCALF: Wonderful—old friends of mine. Reed Kay. Jack Kramer. Then we moved up on Commonwealth Avenue, and I walked into that building, and the vibes were not right. I didn't like the building, and something seemed to happen to the whole structure. There had never been any jealousy, nothing like that. And suddenly, politics, and—I just kept in my grotto.

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ROBERT BROWN: So the Boston University—the move to the new building, in your opinion, or at least on you, had bad effect?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes, and something dead happened there, but I still enjoyed the teaching, until the last two years. I taught to—well, I was hired to teach painting and drawing at BU, and that first year in the old

building on Garrison Street, the students were trying to paint, and they were just having a terrible time. I went to David Aronson, and I said, "Could we just put the paints away?" I said, "They can't draw. Can't draw." I said, "Drawing, as you know, David, is the ABCs, the spine, the core, and every time they twiddle that brush, in effect, they're drawing. Do I have your permission to turn it into a drawing class?" From then on, taught just drawing. Fine. Was happy with that.

ROBERT BROWN: He was pretty amenable and understanding?

CONGER A. METCALF: Oh, yeah. And he was so good to me, so good to me. I never asked for anything. It was he that would get me the raises, the raise in rank, and more pay, and tenure, and the whole bit. Wonderful, wonderful. I think he's mad at me now. I don't think he wants to see him. Because when the aunt died in Germany, I had enough money, I didn't have to teach. And I was very unhappy the last two years at BU. Very unhappy.

ROBERT BROWN: Why were you unhappy?

CONGER A. METCALF: The quality of student.

ROBERT BROWN: Really?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yeah. I always had 8:00 classes, three days a week. They'd loll into class—8:00 to 11:00—10:00, 10:30. [00:02:03] They were telling me what they could do, and what they were going to do. They did nothing except breathe pot fumes in my face. At the end of—they all—big artists. They'd, toward grade time, bring me in a sheaf of drawings that were so terrible, just paper diarrhea. There was no place to start. They didn't want to listen. They didn't want to go the old, disciplined way. It got to the point where I became a clock-watcher. I thought 5:00 would never come. Also, I was taking a big bottle of scotch in my office, and disappearing between classes and having a swig. Oh, it was bad. I thought, well, I guess I won't destroy myself because of BU. I left BU, and I thought, well, try to support myself painting. I'll take a job buying the counter of sheriffs if I have to. And then dear old Aunt Helen died in Germany, and left me a little caboodle. That worked out well. But I do miss teaching, but no more now. No more. I'm through with that. I think it—I had this one great teacher at the Museum School, Karl Zerbe. Such a tough man. Dissolved the girls in tears. He said to me, he said, "You're the most talented student I've ever had, but you're lazy. You'll never amount to anything." Wasn't he right? And he drove us—drove me, in particular. What little I've ever learned in the art world, I didn't learn from dear Marvin Cone or Grant Wood; I learned from Karl Zerbe. Very grateful to him. [00:04:02]

ROBERT BROWN: What were some of those things you learned from him?

CONGER A. METCALF: Well, I remember one day, he came in. I was painting a head, and he went—spent a lot of time with me. He took a brush, and on the palette, he drew the basic shape of an eye, which is not the shape of a fish. It's more intricate than that. He explained to me something I've explained to my students in all my 35 years of teaching. He said, "The eye, basically, is very easy to understand. Very complex, but," he said "if you take a thick-skinned orange, and you cut this basic shape into it, that is an eye. The pulp inside is your eyeball. You have the thickness of the lids. The upper lid is, of course, thicker than the lower one. The lower one just finishes the shape, holds the eyeball in, but the upper one does all the work. Then you turn that, and then you have this very extreme axis in the eye." Well, thrilling things like that.

ROBERT BROWN: What about in matters of technique? Was he—

CONGER A. METCALF: Yeah. Actually, I had a kind of hard time in the technique. Zerbe would say that it took eight years to make a painter. He was talking about a classical—not an academic, but a classical training, and the kind of that Picasso would agree with. You had to learn to grind your own colors. You studied fresco. You did this, you did that. Anatomy, perspective. I just didn't seem to—I copied a 14th-century little masterpiece up at the Boston Museum. [00:06:05] And you had to learn to gold-leaf. My mind just wasn't geared to that, you know?

ROBERT BROWN: So it's drawing, would you say, that's been your strength?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes. Yeah, that was my interest. Always has been.

ROBERT BROWN: Even while you were in college, you received a Tiffany Foundation prize, 1938. What did you do with that? Did that simply go to your special study?

CONGER A. METCALF: I went to—is it Oyster Bay where Tiffany had his great estate?

ROBERT BROWN: Somewhere near there, on—

CONGER A. METCALF: Yeah, Long Island. That was just fascinating. He had built this huge place, and of course just filled with Tiffany windows. Lamps and whatnot. He had four daughters, as I remember. He had a blue room

for daughter Alice. A pink room, a this room, a that room. Used to give big banquets there, and there were all these tiers of balconies above the dining area, and he'd have people up there throwing roses. He was a character. He drove in every morning. His chauffeur would take him into New York. No one could go ahead of him. He'd keep rapping on the window, "Faster, faster," passing every car. We just worked on our own, and then you had to report and show your work when you came back. Wonderful experience.

ROBERT BROWN: You were exhibiting all those years you were teaching at Dexter, and at BU, too. You put down here that you showed with Margaret Brown about at least four times. Was that a fairly important gallery at the time? [00:08:02]

CONGER A. METCALF: I think I was still in art school, and Zerbe came to me, and he said, "Conger, I think that you're ready now to show. You've passed the kind of art school caliber." So I went down to the old Grace Horne galleries. They were at Copley Square. Do you remember those?

ROBERT BROWN: I know of them, yeah.

CONGER A. METCALF: Remember? Margaret Brown was the secretary in there. That's how she got her start in the art world. So I walked in with a portfolio of things. Only she was there. I was working on this clay-coated paper at the time. Maybe this should be struck off the record, but there was a girl in school with me, Edna Hibel. She hated me. Just hated me.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you know why?

CONGER A. METCALF: I can only suspect. But she started working on this clay-coated paper. The Boston Museum even bought one of them, years ago. So, I showed my things to Margaret Brown, and Edna Hibel apparently had been in the gallery just ahead of me. Margaret said, "You've copied her technique." Well, I didn't try to correct that. Hy Swetzoff came to me, and he said, "Conger, you give away all your work. I think you've got pay dirt." We've covered this, haven't we? He said, "I could sell your work." I didn't believe him. Gave him a whole pile of drawings. He came back in a week or two and gave me hard, cold cash. [00:10:02] They were selling for \$5, \$10 dollars or more. I couldn't believe it. And so, actually, he gave me my start. I found that poor old Hy was—I liked him, but devious and not honest. So I didn't sign up with him. But one day, I remember, I went to, from his gallery, Margaret Brown's gallery on Dartmouth Street. I had never been in there, and I had a whole sheaf of drawings, portfolio—

ROBERT BROWN: You hadn't seen her since years ago, when she was at Grace Horne?

CONGER A. METCALF: No. No, and she didn't remember me from that time. But I walked in, just to see what the gallery was like, see her present show, and she came up to me. She said, "Are those drawings under your arm?" Yes. Showed them to her. She—bamboozled—or I was just struck dumb. She said, "Would you be one of my painters?" She was showing Alexander Calder, Franz Kline. The big shots in New York really admired her and trusted her. Most trustworthy dealer one could have. And so she gave me my start, my first show.

ROBERT BROWN: Hmm. Was this in the '50s, probably?

CONGER A. METCALF: I don't know. But that first show was a sellout.

ROBERT BROWN: Was it? What sort of things did you show in that first show, do you remember?

CONGER A. METCALF: No, I just remember a couple of things. Of course, prices were very low.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Were these figure studies for the most part?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes. Zerbe came to the show. He came over, patted me on the back, and he said, "You have stuck to your vision." He said, "Good. Just always do that. [00:12:00] Be yourself." Margaret was marvelous in selling. I've never seen anyone like her. Marguerite has the same quality. No pressure.

ROBERT BROWN: Marguerite Kareettan [ph] yeah.

CONGER A. METCALF: And no pressure at all. It was a pleasure to buy it from her. She could just charm them all.

ROBERT BROWN: Would she call attention to certain things?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes. She herself said she'd never had any art history training. She had a natural eye. She learned, of course, at the Grace Horne galleries. You could line up 40 paintings by unknowns and she'd pick the two good ones, the best. She just knew. If someone paid—she worked for the artist. Boy. If she were on the phone, the check came in, she'd cut the phone call and get the check off to the artist. Very supportive, wonderful. Wonderful. And you know, I've never had a dealer in Boston since those days. I can thank her. People

phone me, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: Did she—did you get to know quite a few collectors through her? Or were you beginning to get to know some anyway?

CONGER A. METCALF: Well, yes. Through her, I did. I'm very grateful to her, because she built a clientele for me, you know? And such a pretty woman. One of the last times I saw her, she had been to Paris. There was a very odd stick here in town. He had \$34 million, and he was crazy about her. She knew that she had cancer. He took her to Paris and bought her—he passed Dior's window, and they had one thing in the window: a long stole, fox, dyed red. [00:14:07] He went in, and he said, "Dye it three more times." He bought her Givenchy jewelry. He just really was awfully good to her. So, she came back, and I saw her in the gallery one night. She was sitting up on a little pedestal in front of a Matisse rug, just wild and beautiful color. She had the red stole on, dyed three times. Gobs of this Givenchy. Very attractive, warm woman. I really miss her still.

ROBERT BROWN: Those were days when a good many important artists from outside showed here, too, didn't they?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Would you get to meet some of them occasionally?

CONGER A. METCALF: No, I never met Franz Kline or Calder.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, you tended to want to stay to yourself, didn't you, except for—

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: In terms of other artists.

CONGER A. METCALF: That perhaps is a mistake, but I just—I guess I've always been a loner. I love people.

ROBERT BROWN: You showed—you took a prize one year in the Boston Arts Festival.

CONGER A. METCALF: That was a big surprise to me, I must say. Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: It was? Why? Did someone else—did Margaret Brown enter it for you?

CONGER A. METCALF: I was in Europe when that show was in the garden, and Margaret didn't phone me. She wrote me. I had won first prize. It was a fairly large painting, on gesso panel, not under glass. It sold for the big sum of \$350. The frame on it, I'd like to have back. That was one of the priceless ones from Italy. So deduct the price of that, and her third. [00:16:00] It's in Florida someplace.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you ever get very active in the Arts Festival in any other way? Or you'd simply submit work?

CONGER A. METCALF: No, just submit paintings. Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: After her death, which was about 1957, you really didn't have a Boston dealer?

CONGER A. METCALF: No.

ROBERT BROWN: And you—how did you show? Would you show, perhaps, every year, every other year, at the invitation—

CONGER A. METCALF: Well, in those days, I'd have two or three shows a year. I had the ginger. I worked at night. I can't do that anymore. But I was showing in Chicago, at this Main Street Gallery.

ROBERT BROWN: What was that like, the Main Street Gallery?

CONGER A. METCALF: Oh, it's still going. Bookstore and gallery, and Joe Faulkner still runs it. Joe Faulkner was a poor, poor guy, and he went to Coe College. He and I went to Coe College together. He had a very caustic tongue. He was bright. Oh, bright. I remember how he used to knock me down. He said, "Conger, you're so ignorant. You never read a book in your life." But he was a good friend. He met up with some fellow who just inherited a quarter of a million dollars in Chicago. So the two of them started this Main Street bookstore and gallery. It was a wild success from the opening minute. The other fellow is dead. Joe is still running the place. And so he would—I don't know how many shows I had with him. I remember one show. I was having a show, at the same time, at Gump's, in California, and one with Joe. So there were 40-some things in each show, and I

very carefully—carefully—selected what I thought were the strongest, the best things, to send to Joe. [00:18:06] And I can hear Joe saying, "Well, you send me all these studies. Study for a painting. Study for a painting. When are we going to see the paintings?" Well, I went out for the Gump's show, and that was a great evening. They closed the store. Evening opening. Many people there. Mr. Gump, Richard Gump, was in his office for this present lady friend. He kept sending for me. I don't know if he ever did see the paintings. And they had all these waiters. Champagne flowing. You couldn't drink a sip before they were back, giving you champagne. Helen Heninger, who ran the gallery then—she's still running it. Tough old bird. I like her. I was talking to some bigwig, and about to make a sale, and she came over and said, "I have someone I want you to meet." Well, I thought she'd flipped her cool. I went over, and this poor, pathetic young fellow, no chin, just Andy Gump. He had black-and-white golf shoes on, tweed suit. Sad little fellow. Frankenstein was their biggest art critic, and he'd been invited. He did not deign to come, but he sent this fellow, who was his assistant. So he started asking me questions, and I was full of champagne, and I had a hard time keeping my face straight. One of his questions was—he saw the word "gesso," and he said, "Do you often use guess-so?" I refrained from saying, "I guess so." [00:20:00] Well, a review came out—Frankenstein himself came, finally, to see the show. His review came out, and somewhere I have it in the records. It was almost embarrassing. He opened the review by saying that I was one of the 10 people left in the world that knew how to draw the human figure. I'll bet his phone was busy the next day. And he likened me to Titian. He got Murillo in there, and he just got everybody. It was really kind of a silly thing. I loved the review that came out in Chicago. Some smart critic went there, and—I've always objected to the mumbo-jumbo of critics, you know, they're just silly. He was right down-to-earth. It was less—it was about an inch or two in the—and he had seen the show. I thought he was wonderful. I treasured that review. The biographical part of the simple statement was all wrong. He said I came off a farm, Iowa, which was untrue. I was then teaching at BU—or at Dexter School. I had left Dexter School. That was wrong. Then, in one beautiful, simple, sweeping statement, he gave his review of the show. He said, "All of the paintings are sentimental, and rather pointlessly exquisite." [Laughs.] I thought, well, that's honest. That's honest.

ROBERT BROWN: Did that accord at all with the way you thought they were?

CONGER A. METCALF: Well, I've always thought that way, really, about my painting, because as I told you, I really wanted to be an accompanist. [00:22:01] I wanted to be in music. And technically, I just couldn't make it there. But I felt I had far more to say. And then painting, technically, I was just born with that, through no fault of my own, but I thought I had much less to say.

ROBERT BROWN: But, though, say, as he said, maybe it is sometimes sentimental, that's an appropriate expression, isn't it?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yeah, I guess so. But you know, I was so struck by the children, especially, in Naples and Italy, and it's a neat thing to carry off, to paint children and not be sentimental. I made it kind of a house rule never to show teeth and have them smiling. They were always pensive. Some people think of them as being sad. I think, now, I can dispense with the children. I got that all out of my system. I'm far more interested now in doing still life, which is a challenge, and collage, and trying to say new—old things in new ways.

ROBERT BROWN: He was perhaps off-base in calling them sentimental, wasn't he? They're pretty direct recollections, really.

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: It's just that they're—

CONGER A. METCALF: I don't think it was off-base, no, but some of them were not sentimental. I had this model, Beachy Dekalb, and she looked like a Buchenwald victim. Skin, bones, all humped over. I did these enormous Conté drawings of her in leotards. You can't believe how she looked—frightening. I wouldn't call them sentimental, you know? He had raked me over the coals, Joe Faulkner, several times, for doing sentimental things. [00:24:04] Though as I remember, there weren't very many in the show that you would call sentimental.

ROBERT BROWN: Since those days when you had—well, you still, in Chicago, had shows into the '70s, I suppose, and still have recently, perhaps?

CONGER A. METCALF: I haven't heard from him in three years.

ROBERT BROWN: But a good many of your shows are smaller shows, and also you must sell a great deal just privately. Is that true?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes. Through the years, I have. As I say, I used to have two and three shows. It was a breeze, you know. I haven't the energy, and can't work at night now, so I settle for one show, and work all year on it, which is exactly what I'll do for October out in Coe.



ROBERT BROWN: What is the, to use the alpha word, the feedback you get in general from collectors, people who have your paintings? Do they ever say why they have them, what they like in them?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes, and actually, it's a very heartwarming reaction I've had, because I often get letters from people who bought years ago, and they say, every morning, they come down, they study them, and love them more. And that, to me, is the whole point of painting, you know. It's a way to earn a living, certainly. If it gives pleasure, I'm happy about it.

ROBERT BROWN: Have you ever minded giving up ones that you liked particularly?

CONGER A. METCALF: Never. Never.

ROBERT BROWN: Why?

CONGER A. METCALF: Well, as you can see, I have nothing of mine on the walls here, and it's always been that way. Because if I'm going to relax at night and have that little old scotch, I'm not going to sit and look at my work. I'd be up 20 times, taking it out of the frame and fixing it, you know? [00:26:00] I'm happy to sell them. There are only two things I've done in my life that I would like to have back. One of them, I do. Marguerite has it out at her house.

ROBERT BROWN: What were they that made them—

CONGER A. METCALF: Old Zerbe, again, as a teacher, tough teacher, he kept talking about "Ze egg, ze egg form. If you understand ze egg, you can paint a woman's breast. You can paint a vase. You can paint a tree trunk." I had never drawn an egg. I went back to Iowa for the summer and spent the whole summer on one drawing. I took a beautiful line drawing of Matisse, a woman's head, supported in a hand, her hand, and I put that on the floor in my bedroom, where I painted in Iowa. I took two Iowa fresh eggs, put them on the floor, and I knitted on that thing all summer, until I thought, well actually, you could lift the eggs off the paper. And so I went back after the summer, and I showed it to Mr. Zerbe. Patted me on the back. He said, "I'll never bother you about the egg again. Perfect. Perfect." There was that year, and there was a Christmas sale. I was a freshman at the Museum School. So I went to Seymour Swetsoff, Hy Swetsoff's brother, who was a framer, and had a design to frame. It was a deep shadow box, and it had—from Iowa, I had brought a bolt of pongee that Mother had in the attic. [00:28:02] So we used the pongee mat, and the frame cost \$15, and I thought, who ever heard of that much money in the world? I paid him, and I put this drawing in the show. Mr. Zerbe was one of the first ones to come to the little Christmas exhibit. He stood a long time in front of this. This will show you what kind of businessman I am. I charged \$12.50. The frame had cost [\$]15. I'd worked all summer on this. He crooked that long finger, summoned me, and he said, "Metcalf, you have something to learn." And blithely, and wrongly, I assumed that he was going to tell me I should have charged a little more. He said, "I would buy that drawing, but," he said, "you really have great nerve in asking that much money." He said, "You are the most talented student I've ever had. But," he said, "you are a freshman, and you have a long way to go." Well, I was crushed. I took it out of the show. The first show I ever had in my life, I had in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, Boston Public Library [Cedar Rapids Public Library] that Dale Carnegie had given the town. It was on the third floor. Grant Wood had designed the gallery. That drawing was in the show, and I had the effrontery to ask \$150 for it. First thing that sold. One of my fraternity brothers, he and his wife bought it. Crazy about it. So I borrowed that show—that drawing—for the retrospective at MIT, the retrospective somewhere else, and the last time I borrowed it, it was for the Brockton retrospective. [00:30:16] This great Frazer the Cresswells thought they had, they boxed it beautifully, crated it, sent it out. They insured it for \$1,000, I guess. It went through the show, and two months after the show, the Cresswells had not received the drawing back. They never phoned me. Never phoned me. But they contacted the museum. Poor old Edward Diburon, he was the—

ROBERT BROWN: At Brockton, yes.

CONGER A. METCALF: Yeah. He did not have any kind of administrative sense, but he certainly was a very artistic guy, and he helped design that museum. He certainly knew how to hold a show—hang a show. I showed with Marie Cosindas, it was a great big show. He did not respond to them. Finally, the Cresswells made a phone call. Never contacted me. No response. Finally, their lawyer made it tough. So Diburon, I think, himself, put it in a just cardboard box, no excelsure, no tape on the glass. Sent it out parcel post, and insured it for \$50. The Cresswells were so excited. The post office phoned them and said, "This painting you've been waiting for is here, but you better come down." They went down, and they shook. You could hear the glass. [00:32:00] The post office said, "You better just ship that back. Don't open it." Well, still—Diburon, of course, was horrified, and terrorized. And still, the Cresswells had not contacted me. He waited a week or two, then he phoned me. This is before Marguerite days. He wanted me to come out and see this work. I took an \$18 cab out, an \$18 cab back. I looked at it. It was done on this clay-coated paper, just ripped, as if a child had taken a razor blade, torn it in bits. Finally, the Brockton Museum sent \$50 to the Cresswells. The Cresswells were enormously wealthy. They weren't at all interested in that, and so they—the museum had to fork up the \$950, and poor old Diburon lost his

job. That, perhaps, was not the only reason he lost his job.

ROBERT BROWN: Did they ever restore it for the Cresswells, or did the Cresswells—

CONGER A. METCALF: Oh, there was no way of restoring it. Diburon said, "Can't you fix this?" I said, "There's no way to. It's paper. No way. No way." So it was in the Brockton vault there, and finally they gave the drawing back to me. Marguerite has it. I put it in the show out at Coe College. It's interesting to see, but it's just gone. Well, the Cresswells left. They live in Tryon, North Carolina now. They had a daughter that got on dope, and she committed suicide. It was just too difficult to live in town. So they retired and went to Tryon, and as a housewarming gift, I did another one for them. I had a photo of the old one, and reproduced it as exactly as I could. [00:34:04] So they're happy. Isn't that enough today?

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT BROWN: Second work that you said you'd like to have back.

CONGER A. METCALF: I really would like to have it.

ROBERT BROWN: What is that other one?

CONGER A. METCALF: In Italy, my many trips, and during the war, too, I'd go into antique shops, old bookstores. I'm fascinated with those. I'd go in, spend a whole day, just going through old papers and little engravings, and stashing up this big collection. And the old book dealer, he was a grumpy old fellow, but he liked me. He'd leave me alone. End of the day, I'd have these stacks of things. He would weigh the antique paper, which came from old town ledgers. He'd weigh it like he weighed grapes, and sell it to me by the kilo. I was buying frames. That particular year, I bought over 450 frames. So, I was in my Chestnut Street studio, and Mimi Carini, my old friend, she had brought me a yellow rose. I had my big work table out, and I had thrown the frame, and it happened to land on top of this engraving, which is old, French, beautiful thing. It was just elaborate script and all, and it had the words "virtue" and "honesty" and "love" and all kinds of nice things. And the rose somehow had landed there. Well, suddenly, I went over and the rose was casting a shadow over this old, mildewed paper. The frame was beautiful. It was a little shadow box-type frame, covered with gold embossed paper. [00:36:05] That was all kind of tarnished beautifully, and the rose had faded to a beautiful copper color. I thought, my gosh, just by chance, here's a painting. So I worked on that with TLC, and that was in my first show, in Iowa. The librarian—

ROBERT BROWN: This was a collage? No, it was a painting you made from—

CONGER A. METCALF: Trompe l'oeil.

ROBERT BROWN: Trompe l'oeil from that.

CONGER A. METCALF: Yeah, and really trompe l'oeil. I just got right into that thing. It was all copper and ivory, and brown, you know, and grays. I thought it was nifty. Boy, I can't say that about my work many times. I thought that was just nifty. I charged [\$]150 for that. Mr. Archie Egin, who was then the librarian, he bought it for [\$]150 for his wife. Well, I borrowed it once from him. He does not want to sell it back to me. His wife died, and he said he just loves the painting, and that's that. But, I'd like to get that back and—

ROBERT BROWN: Those are the two exceptions? Most work—

CONGER A. METCALF: That's all—

ROBERT BROWN: —you'd just as soon have other people enjoy.

CONGER A. METCALF: Yeah, and I could have had them both in this room and looked at them with pleasure.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you work in great spurts of working?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: I mean, when you get into it, do you just keep moving?

CONGER A. METCALF: Well, you know, every painter, every musician, every writer, they have their temple, their way of working, so I'm no different. And it's always been the same. People might think I'm goofing off, but I'd go to the gallery, or my studio, look at the frames, just keep studying them. I'd see them this way or that way. [00:38:00] I see a landscape in that one, a head in that one, and I'm plotting the show. Then I start making tentative titles.

ROBERT BROWN: Are titles very important?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yeah, yeah. Titles are hard for me, because it should be, to use President Case from Boston University—everything with him was stimulating and provocative. And [laughs] I think the title should be very simple, but it should suggest something, and what you're trying to say. And then, the next step is to go to the framer and buy new frames. Then, I seem to know there's a little built-in alarm clock up here. You know them—seem to know the precise moment when it's come time, now, to work. And so you just start. I work on many things at once. If I come to a point in a painting where I don't know how to go ahead, I just put it in the frame. They're always in and out of frames all the time. It's part of what you see. I'm just seeing the tonality of the painting to the frame. I can't think, really, of any painting where I've just started it and carried through. Of course, it's more fun for me that way, anyway. And then, end of the night, working day, I sit and smoke and look at these things. I used to try to remember, "Now, on this painting, I want to do 12 things." In the morning, I found I couldn't remember 12 things. So then I started making notes. That was laborious. Now, I have a little cute trick. [00:40:03] I take a lithograph pencil and draw on the glass, then the next morning, take it out and put the glass against something white, and those little hieroglyphics tell me what I'm supposed to do. All of this is very uninteresting.

ROBERT BROWN: Are those usually technical matters, those notes?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: But overlying it all, you have a general conception of what you want the end effect to be?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes. Just keep working toward that. In some cases, I've had to amputate. There are two paintings. I was sending a—I had a disastrous show in Cleveland, Ohio once. I think I sold one painting. Two, I think. I had the paintings all ready to ship, and they were all over the floor, and my studio door was open. Mr. Little, who was about seven feet high, our mailman, he came in to hand me my mail. He looked down, and immediately he said, "That boy has six fingers." Well, I had forgotten to count. So I had to amputate there. And this last show—was it this last show or the show before? This last show. I did a study page, and I had a bare foot in the thing. I was about to close up the painting, and someone said, "There are only four toes on that foot." So I had to add one.

ROBERT BROWN: So you work pretty consistently in one medium nowadays?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes, but for this next show, I want to try some new things. [00:42:03]

ROBERT BROWN: Hmm. You've mentioned collage. Have you done much with them?

CONGER A. METCALF: I've done them, actually, all my Boston life, and I never showed them any. Never thought anyone would be interested in them. Friends had come up, and going through things, you know, they'd come across this. They liked that better than the stinking children. So I began to show them. And they're a terrific challenge to me. I could—a small collage, or non-objective-type thing, takes me—I could do five figures—I could do five heads—in the time it would take me to do one of those things.

ROBERT BROWN: Hmm. What do you think it is? The arrangement, the composition?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Much more—

CONGER A. METCALF: It's the skeleton of the thing. It's the design, the negative space. That always has been the hardest thing for me in painting, to put the thing together. You can have a lot of detail going on, but you have to have this skeleton, the thing that holds it together.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And much of that is—well, part of that is the negative space?

CONGER A. METCALF: Yes. Oh, yeah. The old boys certainly knew it well. Look at those things of Ruben's, you know—

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]