POLLY THAYER STARR

"NARRATIVE HISTORY" AMOUNTS TO FABULATION,
THE REAL STUFF BEING MERE CHRONOLOGY

1904

November 8, Tuesday: Ethel Randolph Thayer (Polly Thayer Starr) was born in Boston to Harvard's Dane Professor of Law Ezra Ripley Thayer and Ethel Randolph Clark Thayer. This would make her a lineal descendant of the Ripleys of Concord, as well as of Governor William Bradford of the Massachusetts Bay Colony), and she would eventually relate that the family was:

> "from Concord, the Old Manse. I used to visit there. His father was a professor at Harvard Law School, and – I say invented, I don't know what the right word is – I think he formulated the Law of Evidence. And back of that Emerson, and a long line of Ripleys. There was an old Ezra Ripley who was a minister, I think; but they were mostly legal. Father became Dean of the Harvard Law School."[1]

1. Although this family does proudly assert Ralph Waldo Emerson as among their forbears, I have not as yet been able to document more than a spiritual relationship.

("Polly" would become a tall woman, and would live to be interviewed at a hundred in the year 2004 for an exhibition of her paintings at a gallery in Boston.)

SELF-PORTRAIT

During this year Sarah Alice Huntington agreed to deed her 9-room, 2-story home in Amesbury, Massachusetts to the New England Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends for use as a retirement home for "unmarried women Friends who devoted most of their lives to teaching" — with a stipulation that she herself would be able to reside there until her death. (The building, although old and guilty of narrow dark stairs and thus a firetrap, was not at that time considered inappropriate for the elderly.)

NEW ENGLAND FRIENDS HOME

This structure –although it had more recently been in service as a tavern– was the one that had been made famous by Captain Valentine Bagley, protagonist a poem by Friend John Greenleaf Whittier. The building had been the homestead of Hannah Currier, built in about 1710, and Hannah had become Captain Bagley's wife — after the Captain's death in 1839 the building and its wayside well had become the property of Daniel Huntington.

The Captain's Well.

The story of the shipwreck of Captain Valentine Bagley, on the coast of Arabia, and his sufferings in the desert, has been familiar from my childhood. It has been partially told in the singularly beautiful lines of my friend, Harriet Prescott Spofford, an the occasion of a

public celebration at the Newburyport Library. To the charm and felicity of her verse, as far as it goes, nothing can be added; but in the following ballad I have endeavored to give a fuller detail of the touching incident upon which it is founded.

From pain and peril, by land and main,
The shipwrecked sailor came back again;

And like one from the dead, the threshold cross'd
Of his wondering home, that had mourned him lost.

Where he sat once more with his kith and kin,
And welcomed his neighbors thronging in.

But when morning came he called for his spade.
"I must pay my debt to the Lord," he said.

"Why dig you here?" asked the passer-by;
"Is there gold or silver the road so nigh?"

"No, friend," he answered: "but under this sod
Is the blessed water, the wine of God."

"Water! the Powow is at your back,
And right before you the Merrimac,

"And look you up, or look you down,
There's a well-sweep at every door in town."

"True," he said, "we have wells of our own;
But this I dig for the Lord alone."

Said the other: "This soil is dry, you know.
I doubt if a spring can be found below;

"You had better consult, before you dig,
Some water-witch, with a hazel twig."

"No, wet or dry, I will dig it here,
Shallow or deep, if it takes a year.

"In the Arab desert, where shade is none,
The waterless land of sand and sun,

"Under the pitiless, brazen sky
My burning throat as the sand was dry;

"My crazed brain listened in fever dreams
For plash of buckets and ripple of streams;

"And opening my eyes to the blinding glare,
And my lips to the breath of the blistering air,

"Tortured alike by the heavens and earth,
I cursed, like Job, the day of my birth.

"Then something tender, and sad, and mild
As a mother's voice to her wandering child,

"Rebuked my frenzy; and bowing my head,
I prayed as I never before had prayed:

“Pity me, God! for I die of thirst;
Take me out of this land accurst;

“And if ever I reach my home again,
Where earth has springs, and the sky has rain,

“I will dig a well for the passers-by,
And none shall suffer from thirst as I.

“I saw, as I prayed, my home once more,
The house, the barn, the elms by the door,

“The grass-lined road, that riverward wound,
The tall slate stones of the burying-ground,

“The belfry and steeple on meeting-house hill,
The brook with its dam, and gray grist mill,

“And I knew in that vision beyond the sea,
The very place where my well must be.

“God heard my prayer in that evil day;
He led my feet in their homeward way,

“From false mirage and dried-up well,
And the hot sand storms of a land of hell,

“Till I saw at last through the coast-hill’s gap,
A city held in its stony lap,

“The mosques and the domes of scorched Muscat,
And my heart leaped up with joy thereat;

“For there was a ship at anchor lying,
A Christian flag at its mast-head flying,

“And sweetest of sounds to my homesick ear
Was my native tongue in the sailor’s cheer.

“Now the Lord be thanked, I am back again,
Where earth has springs, and the skies have rain,

“And the well I promised by Oman’s Sea,
I am digging for him in Amesbury.”

His kindred wept, and his neighbors said
“The poor old captain is out of his head.”

But from morn to noon, and from noon to night,
He toiled at his task with main and might;

And when at last, from the loosened earth,
Under his spade the stream gushed forth,

And fast as he climbed to his deep well’s brim,
The water he dug for followed him,

He shouted for joy: “I have kept my word,
And here is the well I promised the Lord!”

The long years came and the long years went,
And he sat by his roadside well content;

He watched the travellers, heat-oppressed,
Pause by the way to drink and rest,

And the sweltering horses dip, as they drank,
Their nostrils deep in the cool, sweet tank,

And grateful at heart, his memory went
Back to that waterless Orient,

And the blessed answer of prayer, which came
To the earth of iron and sky of flame.

And when a wayfarer weary and hot,
Kept to the mid road, pausing not

For the well's refreshing, he shook his head;
"He don't know the value of water," he said;

"Had he prayed for a drop, as I have done,
In the desert circle of sand and sun,

"He would drink and rest, and go home to tell
That God's best gift is the wayside well!"

NOBODY COULD GUESS WHAT WOULD HAPPEN NEXT

1915

September 14, Tuesday: Professor Ezra Ripley Thayer, 50-year-old father of 11-year-old Ethel Randolph Thayer (Polly Thayer Starr), disappeared from the family home at 77 Bay State Road, Cambridge.

The New York Times reported the slaughter of 350,000 Armenians. The survivors of Musa Dagh arrived in Port Said.

ARMENIAN GENOCIDE

DO I HAVE YOUR ATTENTION? GOOD.

September 16, Thursday: The body of Ezra Ripley Thayer, father of 11-year-old Ethel Randolph Thayer (Polly Thayer Starr), was found in the Charles River not far from the family home at 77 Bay State Road. This would be regarded as suicide, since he had been suffering for several years from such insomnia and acute depression that he had not been teaching his classes at the Harvard Law School or attending to his duties as its Dean (fellow Professor Roscoe Pound would take up his deanship and an Ezra Ripley Thayer Professorship would be created in his memory).

The nation of Haiti in the Caribbean, in effect in receivership due to disfunction, was by treaty transformed into a virtual protectorate of the United States.

The Russian Duma was prorogued.

German troops captured Pinsk.

WORLD WAR I

Talaat sent instructions by circular telegram to mete out the same fate to Armenian women and children, that had been being meted out to Armenian men. A circular dispatch was issued advising caution against the looting of the property of foreigners, making special mention of the property of the Singer Sewing Machine Company. A telegram went out to Ali Suad Bey, Governor of Der-el-Zor (Deir el-Zor), explaining his responsibilities.

ARMENIAN GENOCIDE

WHAT I'M WRITING IS TRUE BUT NEVER MIND
YOU CAN ALWAYS LIE TO YOURSELF

1930

During this year and the following one the architect Jack Ames, Jr. would erect a Georgian-style brick-veneer home atop Turkey Hill near Hingham, Massachusetts for the widow Ethel Randolph Clark Thayer and her children, to replace their larger shingled summer house at that location that had burnt down in the previous year when at their back door a workman had dropped a match into dry vegetation (the present stone walls were set in place at this time, and lily ponds were dug where rose beds presently are located).

NEW ENGLAND FRIENDS HOME

1933

December 13, Wednesday: Ethel "Polly" Randolph Thayer

> It is a melancholy fact that most contemporary speculation about the future of Man is concerned rather with whether he will destroy himself completely than with what new heights he may attain to. But we should not yield to discouragement; when we look at the whole vast, multifarious, and marvelous evolution of life, we see the working of a Force infinitely inventive, tirelessly persistent, and robustly optimistic, that made the primordial scum into modern man with precious little assistance from us; indeed with some kicking and screaming, not to mention some downright sabotage. If we represent the whole span of that development (which scientists believe has taken about 1200 million years) by a twenty-four hour day, then the time during which civilized man has been on the scene, with the power to collaborate with the process, has so far occupied less than two seconds. It is as though we were on a surfboard riding on the face of a great advancing wave; if we can keep our balance, we can be carried forward unimaginable distances to unimaginable shores.... It is of the nature of the evolutionary process to produce surprises, and just as the history of the process is unexplainable (and I understand that no reputable scientist pretends that it is otherwise) so is its future unpredictable, and it may be that one of its glorious spurts is just ahead — if we can just keep our balance on that surfboard.

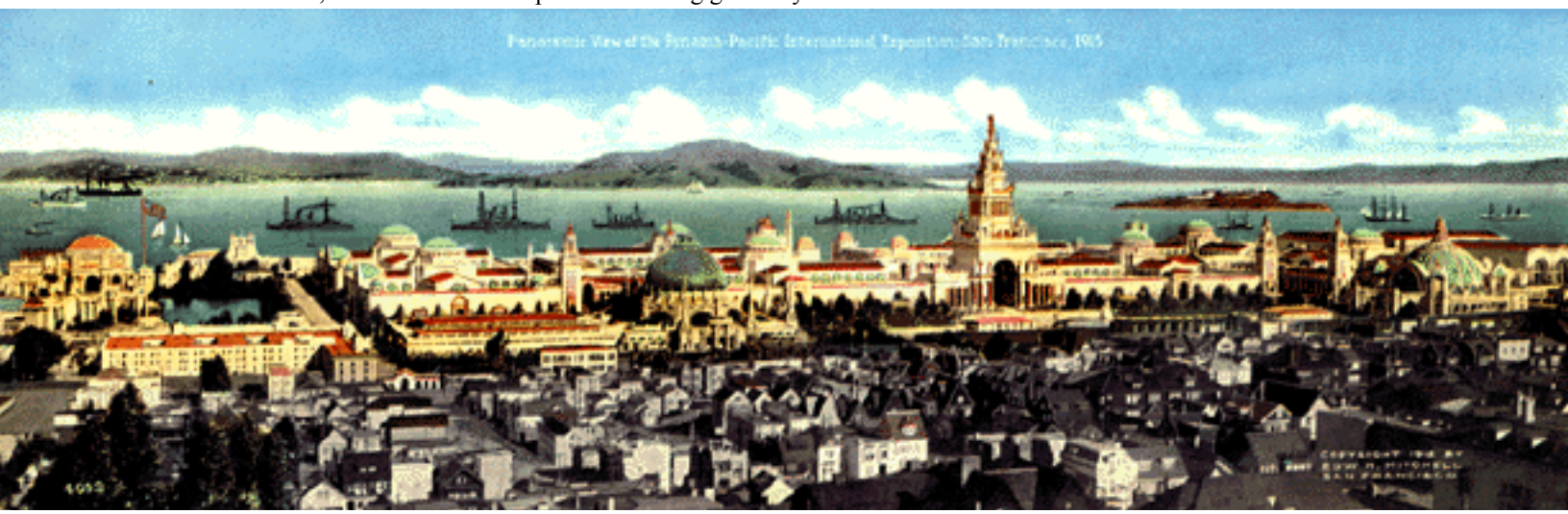
CHANGE IS ETERNITY, STASIS A FIGMENT

1935

At the summer home of the Thayer family on Turkey Hill near Hingham MA, the camel statues at the bottom of the drive to the farmhouse, each weighing over a ton, and the stone peacocks and pheasants, were at this point set in place.

(They had been purchased in San Francisco, presumably at an auction of leftovers from the ornate Panama Pacific International Exposition that had been erected on what had been mud flats at the north of the city in

1915, and was then in the process of being generally dismantled.



Isn't it appropriate, that the stone eyes of a camel that had once been allowed to stare imperturbably at San Francisco Bay should be allowed to stare imperturbably in perpetuity at lovely Hingham Harbor?)

NEW ENGLAND FRIENDS HOME

1938

At the summer home of the Thayer family on Turkey Hill near Hingham MA, during this year and the following one, a plank bridge that had been put across the River Weir in 1905 would be being replaced with the present stone bridge.

NEW ENGLAND FRIENDS HOME

1958

At the Moses Brown School of the Religious Society of Friends in Providence, Rhode Island, Robert Cunningham took charge as Acting Headmaster under the following stipulations:

> that a qualified Friend be employed as Assistant or Dean;
> that a special effort be made to add to the faculty some able and experienced teachers who are Friends;
> that the Headmaster take early steps designed to upgrade the faculty, strengthen the curriculum, and lay the groundwork for a new Development Program;
> and that he will join sympathetically in any studies which may be undertaken to develop further co-operative activities with Lincoln School and the possible integration of some of the activities and/or services of the two schools if they should prove to be feasible and desirable.

Friend Whittemore Whittier was made Assistant Headmaster.

A Middle School was created. An advising system was created for Upper School students. Enrollment began to exceed 500 students.

The building that the Quakers had been using as a residence for retired spinster Quaker teachers, in Amesbury, Massachusetts, the Huntington Dixon Home, had been condemned as unsafe for congregate living. Friend Polly Thayer Starr came to the rescue when her mother Ethel Randolph Clark Thayer, an Episcopalian, died, by donating the lovely quiet slate-roofed brick-veneer home on Turkey Hill near Hingham, which would become the New England Friends Home. This Georgian-style building had been erected after the family's

larger shingle summer home previously on the site had burned in 1929. Interestingly, at the back of the property there is a small pet cemetery having headstones bearing appropriate verses — and among these pet graves there is a headstone for one Peter Kocche. Mr. Kocche had instructed Mrs. Thayer in German and had once expressed a wish that his ashes might be interred there, so when eventually he died, this comment had

been taken seriously.

Friend Polly is an artist of note and here is one of her self-portraits:

Her portrait of her mother Ethel is hanging in the building. The blue tiles used in the building were imported

from Japan, the marble in the fireplaces from Italy, the carved woodwork in the library fireplace from England. Stone camels and peacocks and pheasants had been added from the San Francisco World Fair in 1935. There is an oil portrait of Friend John Greenleaf Whittier's mother, Friend Abigail Whittier, and several depictions of the poet himself. There is a photograph of the Whittier farmhouse in Haverhill ("Snow Bound") and a photograph of the later home in Amesbury MA. A number of nice-to-have items were found in the basement of the home in Amesbury: spectacles, slipper chairs, sofa, gilt mirror, candlestand, etc. The folding wooden stand and brass tray were brought from Egypt by Katherine Howland, who also provided the Rose Garden Memorial. Before the building would be opened for senior occupancy, some $110,000 worth of renovation work would need to be accomplished, some $40,000 of which would come out of the fund established in 1886

POLLY THAYER STARR

POLLY THAYER STARR

by Sarah Nichols Pope-Dixon.[2]

POLLY THAYER STARR

2. Fire escapes and a fire alarm system were added. Some of the rooms on the 2d floor were subdivided, creating 10 bedrooms, and the 6 bedrooms on the 3rd floor remained unchanged, as did countless bathrooms. Three new bedrooms were created on the 1st floor from what had been servant quarters. The kitchen was enlarged. As a safety measure, the lily ponds were filled in to create rose gardens. The driveway was paved and a parking-lot installed. The carpet in the “Whittier Room” was a gift from members of the Providence, Rhode Island monthly meeting and the carpet in the Library was a gift of the Hartford, Connecticut monthly meeting. Katherine Haviland, the first director of the Home, planted flowering crabapple trees in front of the house. The renovated structure would open in 1961.

1995

May 12, Friday: Robert Brown began taping an Oral History Interview for the Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian Institution with the artist Polly Thayer Starr at her home in Boston (in order to break up the lengthy block of text of this interview, I will at more or less random points interpolate some of this artist's paintings):

ROBERT BROWN: I thought we might start with perhaps some of your earliest memories. You were born in Boston in 1904, I believe? Your parents were Ezra Ripley Thayer and Ethel Randolph (Clark) Thayer. Can you describe your family a bit?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes. Father's side of the family was from Concord, the Old Manse. I used to visit there. His father was a professor at Harvard Law School, and — I say invented, I don't know what the right word is — I think he formulated the Law of Evidence. And back of that Emerson, and a long line of Ripleys. There was an old Ezra Ripley who was a minister, I think; but they were mostly legal. Father became Dean of the Harvard Law School.

ROBERT BROWN: Was he Dean at the time you were born?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): No, he had only been Dean about five years when he died, and I was eleven then. When I was born he was in practice with Storey, Thorndike, Palmer and Thayer, in Boston. On Mother's side of the family, Connecticut was the family seat, and that was mostly ministers. My great-grandfather was Alexander Hamilton Vinton, whose brother was Bishop of Massachusetts. They were both Episcopalian ministers, and there's a St. Gaudens plaque commemorating him in Emmanuel Church here in Boston, where he served for a short while. Her grandfather Vinton meant a lot to Mother. It was the days of Mesmer, and he was very interested in everything of that sort, everything occult — being a minister, the invisible world was important to him — and I used to hear a lot about it. We used to go on visits at Pomfret.

ROBERT BROWN: Pomfret, Connecticut?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Would they have seances, hold sessions, that sort of thing?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): I don't think so. There was one story, though, where I think grandfather had a ghost with a candle on her head for his guests. Well, they told ghost stories a lot, and he'd stage-managed it so that in the shadows at the end of the lawn she appeared at just the right moment. [laughter] But I don't think there was anything with any continuity about it.

ROBERT BROWN: Was your mother very interested in that sort of thing?

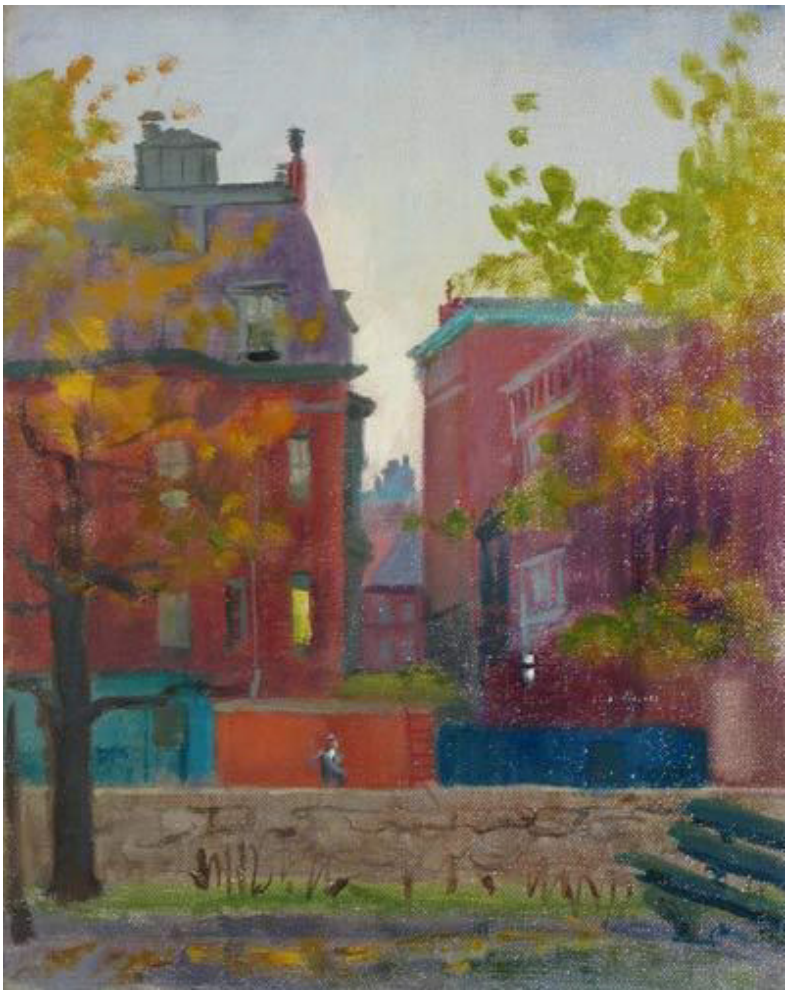
POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, she was. She was very pious — well, pious is a pejorative word today. She was a faithful church-goer, and when Father died, she restored the church in Hingham in memory of him. It was always in terms of the church that she thought, fundamentally.

ROBERT BROWN: Were you brought up to be quite pious yourself?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Ah, yes, yes. We went to church very faithfully, and Sunday school.

ROBERT BROWN: Were there brothers and sisters?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): I had a brother, who taught Roman Law at Harvard, and a sister who died at the age of twenty, who was lovely, a saint.



ROBERT BROWN: So your brother followed in the family tradition of law practice. Not merely practicing, but also scholars of the law, is that right?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes. He would never have done very well

practicing. He was rather eccentric and highly sensitive, and the practical end of things was not his strong suit. But he was a fascinating and quite a brilliant character. I think he was in his thirties when he was the accredited authority on Roman law in the Western world. He was an exchange professor in Berlin, and he loved the Germans always afterwards. He wrote a book called the Lex Aquila, that was I think a little classic of a sort, and a long history of the Roman Law, that hasn't been published but might be any time.

ROBERT BROWN: Was he about your age?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): He was five years older than I, but a very strong influence.

ROBERT BROWN: In what way?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well, he was very funny, and very brilliant, and people amused him. He was fond of me, and he was a powerful personality. If he took a fancy to you, you became his creature more or less. He liked to ... make you perform.

ROBERT BROWN: Since your father died when you were eleven, did your brother act in some ways as your father?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well, he was off-horse always. He was the Protestant with a capital P, so his influence was rather disruptive. No, it was not a fatherly relationship. It was very much brother-and-sister teasing. But no responsibility. He was the enfant terrible. [laughter]

ROBERT BROWN: Where were you raised, in Boston?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes. Born, and lived until I got married, at 77 Bay State Road. Mother and Father built the house there, and I can remember going riding ... We had a stable back of a synagogue, fairly nearby, with horses. Mother was a good horsewoman, and they'd ride every day.

ROBERT BROWN: Where might they ride? Could they then ride along the Charles?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): They'd ride out to the Fenway, that was generally the trek.

ROBERT BROWN: The Bay State Road was only just being built up at the turn of the century, wasn't it?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, half of it was empty lots.

ROBERT BROWN: So you have fond memories of that?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, I have. We had friends all along the block, and it was great fun.

ROBERT BROWN: What activities would there have been for you as a young girl? before, say, even you went to school?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): I went to a little primary school, Miss Woodward's, which I remember not so fondly because I was very stupid. I couldn't do anything with mathematics, and cheated my

way through by just copying a girl's paper in front of me [laughter], and that wasn't much fun. Then I went to Winsor School and didn't enjoy that either – didn't like schools until I went to boarding school. Had two years at Westover, and that was delirious excitement. But life in the city as a young child was ... Well, we roller skated on the Esplanade, days on end – that was great fun – and then, Mayor Curtis' two daughters were just a block up, and they were a very lively, high-spirited pair, and my sister and I just played endless games of every kind – hide and seek, and [laughter] everything you can think of, for years, and that I remember with great pleasure.

ROBERT BROWN: Would you summer somewhere else?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, in Hingham.

ROBERT BROWN: Was that a place to which your family were attached, or had some connections?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes. Well, the question was, where would they go that would be near the city for Father so he could get to Cambridge – commute – when it was necessary. The North Shore was pretty cold – Mother loved the heat, never hot enough for her – so they started by renting on the South Shore, and bought a farm on Turkey Hill almost immediately after they were married, and we always went there.

ROBERT BROWN: So summers were a considerable contrast from the city?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes. Completely different life. We milked the cows, we gathered the fresh eggs and dammed the river, swam ... It was complete country life, and relaxed, and quite an idyll. Mother always looked forward to it enormously.

ROBERT BROWN: And this memory – or rather, the experience there, as with the city – has also stuck with you, hasn't it? I mean, it's shown in your work for many many years.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, right, not that I did so many ... A good many paintings around Hingham, yes ...

ROBERT BROWN: But you found the schooling in the city, ending at the Winsor School, as being ... you weren't too compatible with that ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): No. I never seemed to have any friends, I didn't enjoy the studies ... I didn't like any part of it.

ROBERT BROWN: What was it about Westover School that you liked?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Friends! Made friends, and the studies were relaxed, and I seemed to be able to under... They gave up trying to teach me mathematics! They dropped mathematics from my curriculum – I didn't have to struggle with that – and I didn't have to struggle with Latin, and altogether, it was a delightful experience to have friends, and have a lot of them, when you've been very solitary and unnoticed.

ROBERT BROWN: Were you drawing, or trying to paint, or things like that, from a pretty early age?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes ... Ever since I could hold a pencil, I was drawing something, and ... I didn't know what I wanted, but Mother luckily [realized], I don't know how she happened to find out — perhaps we went to the Museum together — that I was bug-eyes when I saw some students in the Cast Room at the M.F.A. doing charcoal drawings of the casts. I couldn't leave them. I was fascinated! So she entered me in a class with Beatrice Van Ness, who taught there, and that was heaven. I would go after school and draw ears and hands and casts.

ROBERT BROWN: From the casts.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: And you enjoyed that, the casts?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Oh, yes!

ROBERT BROWN: What do you suppose there was about the casts that ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Just drawing.

ROBERT BROWN: Just drawing!

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Drawing something ... Reproducing ... I guess the anatomy, too. I don't know what I'd been doing in Art at ... The Art class at Winsor was not stimulating. At best it would have been some pots with a piece of drapery to reproduce, and compared with that ... And I guess Miss Van Ness must have been a pretty good teacher. She said afterwards she never thought I could progress an inch, that I covered myself with charcoal trying to sharpen my stick! Grimiest looking subjects ... She didn't think I'd ever emerge enough to [laughter] ... I loved it.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you do this for several years?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Beginning when?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): I think I was nine, ten ... Oh yes, I must have done it four or five years!

ROBERT BROWN: You were in the company of other young people?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes ... I don't remember them. There weren't many, I guess a couple of others. I don't remember them at all! Just Miss Van Ness, telling me what to do.

ROBERT BROWN: So is that what you did there, drawing? Did you ever do anything but charcoal?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): No.

ROBERT BROWN: Then would they be exhibited? Would they have a little display or anything?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): No ... No! No. I wonder if I could have

been alone with Miss Van Ness after a while? I think I must have been. I don't register that there had been anybody to compare with ... I guess they were private classes with her.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, when you had finished at Westover ... Had you had art there? Had there been any kind of ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Again, it was practically — I don't remember any pictures on the wall, I don't remember any books that we looked at or were steered to ... We had a library there, too. I just draw a blank. I remember a rather neutral teacher who didn't seem to register. I found a little landscape that looks [laughter] pretty commonplace ... I think that was the only thing that remains of that period, and I don't even recognize the medium. Some kind of crayon, I think. No, it was just — it was totally unstimulating, and I didn't ...

ROBERT BROWN: In that respect, but you did enjoy it.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): I enjoyed it. I enjoyed it, and I guess ... It was mentioned by the other girls, that I was good at it, or that I liked it, I know, but ...

ROBERT BROWN: Well, when you had finished at Westover, what did you think you might do? What did your mother or your older brother think you might do?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well, right to school — the Museum School — as soon as I came home from there!

ROBERT BROWN: Is that what you wanted to do?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, well ... It was going to be painting, you bet — something of the sort — I had no question about that. I would like to have gone to college otherwise ...

ROBERT BROWN: And you were ... That was about 1923 or so, wasn't it?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): '21 ... '20 ... Right. We graduated '21, and then that next winter, I guess. '21 ... '22 ... February, what ... '23, that would have been. I came ... made my debut, and I don't think I tried to work that winter. There were balls, there were dances every night ...

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, sure ... Did you love that?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): [hesitation] Yes, that was fun.

ROBERT BROWN: So you had a number of friends through that, I suppose.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): [enthusiastically] Yes, I had ... The people I'd known in the class at Winsor were all coming out that year, and the headmistress at Westover tried to persuade my mother to have me stay another year at boarding school. She said if I stayed long enough I'd be a leader, and would find myself. All things being equal, I'd have liked to do that, but I wanted to come back and come out with my contemporaries. I felt it was rather shameful to be kept out, and then I wouldn't know anybody

when I came to make my debut, so I came back. And the coming out was ... that was pleasant.

ROBERT BROWN: Mmhmm ... A very important rite of passage, was it?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes it was, and I made two lasting good friends. Just immediately we took to each other — Helen Howe, and Sally Sedgewick. And so that was great pleasure. And the dances. But the real rite of passage was the year after that. I went to China, to the Orient that summer. The great Japanese earthquake occurred ...

ROBERT BROWN: The summer of '23.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes. And when I came back, life seemed to really open up. It was ... yes, I felt a certain maturity had occurred. Perhaps the earthquake made a difference.

ROBERT BROWN: Were you there when it happened?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): We were on the boat saying goodbye in Yokohama when the earthquake occurred, splitting the — we were tied to the dock — splitting the dock right down the middle, swallowing everybody up. Nothing left but a donkey! and it was all over. And then, we couldn't get away. We thought we were done for because all the oil tanks had burst, and the water was on fire. So you couldn't jump into the water to save yourself. And we were stuck. Our anchor-chain — the hawser — was round a boat that was anchored in front of us, and all its crew was on holiday on land, so they couldn't move it. But our Captain, a Britisher, got out somehow ... filed through just in time, and we were able to inch out of the harbor. All the people that were injured came out to us. We were a hospital boat for them for days, until something could be ...

ROBERT BROWN: And you were to some degree involved in that?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Involved in that, nursing the poor children with noses blown off, in every stage of disintegration ...

ROBERT BROWN: That's a very sudden maturing.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): It certainly was, yes. And it was a terrible blow to Mother. Her faith ... it took a lot of adjusting in it. From every angle, it was a searing experience.

ROBERT BROWN: This was just before you were leaving?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Just before we were leaving, right ...

ROBERT BROWN: Up till then, on your tour in Japan, what had you looked at, or ... what was your impression?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well, we'd gone to China and come back to ...

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, you'd gone to China?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes ... and Korea ... and then came back. The Japanese prints, they hadn't made very much impression, it

really wasn't until later that they ...

ROBERT BROWN: Were there aspects of Japanese culture that you liked? I mean, the way the people lived, or ... It must have been quite ... intriguing.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, it was. It was very interesting. But we weren't there very long, and it was all rather official. Mother was always introduced as the wife of a very important man, and there was so much formality. Always being presented with presents, and we were always giving presents back, and it was hotel — we didn't stay with anybody local, so I don't know that it made as much of an impression as it should have.

ROBERT BROWN: Were you ... you and your mother — or was your sister —

POLLY THAYER (STARR): My brother.

ROBERT BROWN: Your brother was with you.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes. Eleanor died that summer, so ...

ROBERT BROWN: She had died before you left ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well she died while we were gone, but she'd been trailing from ... asylum to asylum. They thought something was wrong mentally, she'd go into terrible depression. Then once she died, they found it was just an enormous tumor on the brain.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh my.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): So ... she couldn't come with us at that point. And we couldn't do anything about her, she was institutionalized. So we'd taken off, the three of us ...

ROBERT BROWN: So you were all being severely tested ... apart from the earthquake.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Right. Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: What about China? Did you spend a bit of time there?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes! [renewed enthusiasm] That was fascinating! I just remember extreme heat, and just the extraordinary sights and sounds of being pulled in a rickshaw ... Everything about it was ...

ROBERT BROWN: Where were you in China, do you recall?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Peking. It was the year of the Bandit Outrages, they called it, and everybody was scared to ... we were going south, to Nanking, and then decided against it. Nobody wanted to take the train, they were afraid of being kidnaped, foreigners. So ... all really that I saw was around Peking; but that was marvelous enough.

ROBERT BROWN: Were you mostly among foreigners in Peking?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): No. No ... It was a bit fascinating. Mr. Schervesse, who had been ... Trees were his specialty, and the

Empress Dowager had sent for him. He worked under her, and stayed in China for quite a while after that. Somehow we saw quite a lot of Mr. Schervesse, but I don't remember who else we saw. He told us a lot about the native culture. We caught up again with him on the Riviera, and had a great time with him.

ROBERT BROWN: So, on these trips ... They were quite intensive, were they, you were learning things, and your mother wanted you to ... ?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): She was a great traveler — she'd always traveled. She'd gone to boarding school in France, boarding school in Germany, and she just loved traveling. We'd just always present letters to various people, and they'd take us about — there was a certain pattern to it on that basis — and do the regular sight-seeing. That was about it. Whatever their specialties happened to be ... You collected your letters of introduction, and then you presented them when you arrived, and

that more or less outlined what you'd do.

ROBERT BROWN: There had been various learned Bostonians in Japan and China.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Fenelosa, yes, I suppose ...

ROBERT BROWN: So some of those.. Fenelosa in Japan, and then in China there were various Harvard faculty ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes. No, don't remember them. Don't know how we knew ... why Mr. Schervesse was so much the most important. It wasn't a very long stay.

ROBERT BROWN: And it included Korea, as well? You saw a bit of Korea?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, we went to Seoul; I guess that was

the only place in Korea, that I remember.

ROBERT BROWN: How long before you could leave Yokohama?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Gee, I wonder how long it was. I kept a diary just for that short period. My impression was it might have been a week or two. They thought that the Americans ... The Japanese were paralyzed anyway, but then they thought we'd come to take over, when the American Navy came in to help out ... took them a little while to get over from the Philippines. And I can remember when they arrived, and the Japanese were sure that's what was going to happen. But they'd just come to help. It was very touching. I was never prouder of being an American than then.

ROBERT BROWN: You were then, yes, of course.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): I was indeed, yes ...

ROBERT BROWN: And then the Navy took over and helped, and your ship could withdraw.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, was released to ...

ROBERT BROWN: — steam away ... So on your return to Boston, you said you were much more determined at what you ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well, something had happened internally. I still went to ... the post-debutante year was important, and I used to go to dances. By then I'd had big rushes, and was popular, and knew more — a little bit more — who I was dancing with, and who I liked and who I didn't. I was just a child before that. I began to wake up to my surroundings a little.

ROBERT BROWN: And it was the following year that you began at the Museum School.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you have to sit for an entrance exam or anything?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): I don't remember anything of the kind, no ... And I remember saying to Mother, being very nervous about it, being as usu — I'm afraid I'm rather temperamentally on the apprehensive side — that I wouldn't be any ... I'd be completely outclassed, they'd undoubtedly all be very experienced and know much more than I did. So it was rather a surprise at the end of the first year to find that I had most of the prizes. So I had to shift gears on it.

ROBERT BROWN: What was the first year? Can you recall what you had to do?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Oh, yes! Indeed I can!

ROBERT BROWN: Well, I wish you would ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): [Laughs with delight] It was wonderful fun! I think Mr. Hale must have been an awfully good teacher.

ROBERT BROWN: Philip Hale. He was ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Philip Hale, yes. I know I was told that he was excellent. And he taught anatomy and drawing, and that's what I did that first year.

ROBERT BROWN: Was anatomy taught from casts, or from

POLLY THAYER (STARR): He didn't have any life ... We had life models, but when he taught it, the lectures were, as I remember it — unlike the League, where you always had the model, the live model, to point things out — Mr. Hale just drew what he was talking about. I don't remember ever having a live illustration. They were lectures, and he taught us anatomy, and then we did the drawings of the live model. And it was a fascinating system. Would I go into it now, or another time?

ROBERT BROWN: Please, yes, tell us!

POLLY THAYER (STARR): I don't know what relation of Philip Hale's it was who taught at the League later, taught my godson; but he taught — and was apparently a brilliant teacher of anatomy — just the way Philip Hale had ...

ROBERT BROWN: Robert Beverly Hale.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Robert Beverly. What was he to Philip, do you know?

ROBERT BROWN: I don't know, don't know.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): No. But he was something. He was a nephew, I think, maybe. Anyway, apparently Robert Beverly used to say, "Establish the form, carve the detail." You did a nude in a week, and you worked ... all day on it, as far as I can remember, each day. You began by outlining it. You established the form, in the first two days, then you carved the detail for the next four, and it was a regular system on every one. You started in more or less ... You were given a ruler and a piece of paper the size, as you held it up, of what you saw on the model stand, the model. And you cut off that little strip of paper, thumbtacked it to your ruler, and then divided that into seven and a half heads. Then you reproduced that on your paper, and so you were establishing your exact points ... Your drawing became as faithful as it could possibly be made, comparing the plumb line and diminishing glass, and this ruler with the paper on it. And that took quite a while ... Then, you blocked in the shadows, just as you might do with a photograph or — he used to give us newsprints, to show us how to do it. You blocked in the area with the heaviest charcoal you had, and then you stumped the charcoal so it would be very smooth — I loved this process! — and then you got your shapes of shadows down, inside your outline, and then you turned the edges of the shadow. And it was a process ...

ROBERT BROWN: — with finer work —

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes! Only a call| [?] animal, or a dentist I had years later, who used to enjoy scraping tartar off his clients' teeth, his patients' teeth — I can't imagine the

patience that I – we – used – but I loved, as I say, every second of it! You sharpened a long piece of the hardest charcoal you could get – it was always imported, fusaille extra dur, French charcoal, so that you got a point like a wire, you see – almost flexible, it was so fine – and then you just dragged it across the surface, first up and down, and then across – you wouldn't even see you were doing anything for perhaps five minutes, and then slowly a little dim, very fine – like an airbrush, I imagine, only you were doing it by hand – and by the end of the week, we had all the details of everything, and we had an absolutely complete, minutely detailed drawing. And I suppose, thinking about it afterwards, it was years trying to get rid of the straight-jacket that this imposed – of vision, and of hand – but it gave you something to rebel against, and was obviously a wonderful training. I have a godson who's a very good painter, and he was seeking, thirty years later, for some training, and it seemed to him miraculous to be shown this method, because he – we – were able to express, to show, what we saw. I guess for a generation or so it was pretty hard to find training where you could learn how to make it look the way you saw it. Anyway, this did. Every week it was just the same thing. You did it over and over again, the same methods ... Stumped in your shadows, and worked over this ...

ROBERT BROWN: -and then worked with this very fine network ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): -very fine, yes ...

ROBERT BROWN: -so fine it didn't appear like cross-hatching at all ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): No, no ... And it took a long time to form itself. You did it ... really, you didn't know it was coming, almost, visibly, until it ...

ROBERT BROWN: -You were constantly watching, your eye flicking back and forth ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: What did Philip Hale do while this happened. Would he just sort of drift behind you all?

ROBERT BROWN: Yes, he came by, and – He'd make very fine little drawings of where he wanted to show you were going right or going wrong, because he didn't want to touch. Your drawing was so fine that you couldn't bear to have it smudged or ... So he was always very careful to make the little drawings, as you will see, on the side for illustrations, and he'd show you where you were going wrong. But of course by now you had got your measures so carefully made from every direction, with the plumb-line and the diminishing glass and all the rest of it, that you were probably hitting it just about right Later on when I went to the League, and Harry Wickey showed us what to do, he'd just slash right into your drawing. I almost screamed the first time he did it. Then I was very grateful for it afterwards, but ... This was an extraordinary method. It was like a photograph when you were

through, in a sense. I'd love to know where he worked this out. I suppose there must be documentation about it all, isn't there.

ROBERT BROWN: Possibly. I wonder if ... how it resembles the system in France.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes! I wonder ... I went later to the School at Fontainebleau, under Despujols, and I went to Colarossi in Paris. But I don't remember anything like this. I didn't stay long in either place, so ... But I'd be interested whether he ... this was his method or not. Later on, when he came to my studio, instead — I gave up the School because I felt I was lucky enough to be able to get him to come to the studio, my own studio, and I thought I'd get the best of him that way — I remember him saying about composition ... "Oh," he said, "if you don't know where to put something, that's your problem." Apparently you didn't teach composition; and certainly the color that he showed me how to work was nothing you'd want to learn as color. In fact you actually ... I remember I did a big nude, that's in the New Britain Museum now, the first nude — it was very exciting — that I did in paint, the first big one. The way you did it — or a portrait — was to make the charcoal drawing on the canvas, and then even put in the shadows, just as you might on paper; and then you put fixative over it; and then you painted over that. I mean you were really sort of tinting your drawing. And that was not ... very practical, for what I ...

ROBERT BROWN: Mmhmm ... That whole first year you were there, then, that was the principal thing you recall ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): -was the drawing, yes, right. Oh, I guess, I went in to Let Thompson's class on -

ROBERT BROWN: -Leslie Thompson ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): -on portraiture. I don't know how that ... Perhaps I stayed a year and a half there —

ROBERT BROWN: Well, you said you stayed about eighteen months.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Did I? All right ... Because you graduated from the drawing to the painting, so it must have been my second year, and I don't think I did ... stayed very long in that class.

ROBERT BROWN: Was that second year in painting your first formal instruction in painting?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you take to that right away, too?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): [Sigh] Not as much, no, by no means as much. No, I was at sea in the color, and I don't remember that he ... I remember the point of view ... He'd say, "Look at the thing, divest yourself of all associations, look at it as an idiot might look at it, look at it as a child might look at it. Just reproduce exactly what you're seeing." That was what we were to do that first year. And ... it wasn't very stimulating. I did it, but I didn't know ... I didn't know how to lay on the

paint, I didn't know what my palette was, and it wasn't until later at the Painters Workshop that Gardner Cox and I both went to that I got any idea of what paints went with what — really, anything to do with color. I just did by the light of nature.

ROBERT BROWN: So it was the drawing that you'd had in that first year that really meant a great deal to you.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes. And I learned a lot about the ... He taught us a lot about the outlines. There are no convexities in the human figure — I mean, no concavities — just overlapping convexities. There were interesting theories involved, and I don't remember that with relation to portraiture.

ROBERT BROWN: The overlapping, ah, convexities were ... thinking in that way, you could produce an effect of volume ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, and of light. Not negative.

ROBERT BROWN: I was going to ask the role — maybe I should know, but the role of the "diminishing glass." What was it used for?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well you could get your ... You used a mirror and a diminishing glass. I think that was to get the measures so that you could compare them with what was on your paper.

ROBERT BROWN: I see, sure. To scale it up or down.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes. The things that were bad about it, of course — the lacks — were that you didn't get ... I remember the wonderful opening of doing a short minute sketch years later. I thought it was the most exciting thing in the world, because these ... Your motion was a kind of oxymoron, it was static motion, when you studied your plumb line just exactly, you know. It was right, but there was something missing, of the life in it.

ROBERT BROWN: There were hardly any spontaneous gestures to be

seen among the students. [laughter]

POLLY THAYER (STARR): No.

ROBERT BROWN: But at that stage you really ... What do you think it was that fascinated you? Realizing on paper something more or less —

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, being able to reproduce what you saw, and knowing — and communicate it, I mean — to somebody. Later on when I went to Hans Hoffman, he was all for checks, and push-and-pull, and dynamic tensions, and stuff like that ... Well, you did your checks, and you did your ... And then you showed it to somebody else, and they were just blank. You showed your drawings from the Museum School, and people knew what they were, and they said "Gee, isn't that nice!" That's the way it looked. There was a certain satisfaction. It's what you both saw, alike, and done well, done thoroughly; it was seeing with — not through — the eye; but it was seeing with the eye very correctly. And there must have been lots of other features that I liked about it. I think I'm more drawn to drawing anyway. Always, I know exactly ... I have the feeling that I know exactly what I'm doing when I do it; and with paint I'm always working on it and thinking about it. There's another question of choice involved that I sometimes don't get at all with the line. I know whether it's right or wrong, and that's it, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: And your degree of control, with the drawing, is very high, isn't it?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Right, right.

ROBERT BROWN: Your desire to reproduce as a very young person, what do you suppose prompted that?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): I don't know ...

ROBERT BROWN: You've mentioned, in growing up, your mother's piety and ... I don't know if it's a rigidity ... in your older brother's discipline and mastery of a subject. Do you suppose you had a similar streak, a similar wish to be — to master something that would, in mastering, require great discipline?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): I'm sure you're right ...

ROBERT BROWN: Without even thinking about it, do you suppose that was an admired goal, one that you wanted to achieve?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, I'm sure you're right ...

ROBERT BROWN: We're looking now ... at the beginning. This is probably from a cast.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Maybe you can say what you've done here. There's an area that's very light gray, and then there are some very dark tones at the side of the nose. We're looking at what looks to be a Greco-Roman head.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): And the very dark shadow, which you mapped out the shape of, you then turn it, model it, endlessly, until you see this process that I speak of that's so painstaking ....

ROBERT BROWN: Yes. We're looking at this life study now.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes ... of the very hard charcoal just breathed on to sections of it, in the next step. And this is the map of it, so to speak, here — where we ground into the paper with a paper stump.

ROBERT BROWN: When you first laid out the shadows.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: But now the finished drawing of the life study ... You see no evidence of your measurements or calibrations whatsoever. These are all just laid out very schematically in the very beginning, is that right?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Mmm. First two or three days were just getting all these spots and all this outline exactly right. As you say, I think there's a feeling of control that's so ... paramount in it. Oh dear ...

ROBERT BROWN: This is another and similar one.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes ...

ROBERT BROWN: -modeled from the rear ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes ...

ROBERT BROWN: And quite a difficult angle of perspective, isn't

it. The legs are akimbo ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Would you strive ... It looks as though you would give equal attention to the head and hair. That's quite finished as well.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Everything got equal attention, yes. Loving care of the jock-strap, even ...

ROBERT BROWN: Would Hale then come and give a talk in front of the class?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Now that would probably be a Hale. He explained to you, I think, what happens there ...

ROBERT BROWN: Some lines we have of a .. the lower right leg ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, exactly. And there's the bone...

ROBERT BROWN: Mmhmm. And the tendon ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): -tibia ...

ROBERT BROWN: And so that it would ... you would understand and remember that underlying anatomy, as you drew the surface.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): And when it was relaxed, and when it was tense – the difference in the quality of the line.

ROBERT BROWN: So this is on Strath ... You were trained about Strathmore paper.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: You held it up to the light to ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): to be sure you had the Strathmore watermark, and it was all rag. We didn't ... we never paid much attention, certainly in mats, to the acid ...

ROBERT BROWN: – acid. Oh, you didn't ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): – No.

ROBERT BROWN: Whereas in your paper, your drawing paper, you had very good quality.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes. Yup. We seemed to know about that.

ROBERT BROWN: Now this is one largely in shadow, this frontal view of a model.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Was that often set ... that problem set for you, working in a very limited tonal range?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): No, I think that was due to the class ... You had to squeeze in where you could, and you were out of luck if you got as much shadow as that. But I do think, I found at the end that the work in the shadow was difficult – there was never any reflected light, it was all simplified, and the range was limited.

ROBERT BROWN: It required extreme subtleness, didn't it, of tone ... which you've done quite evidently there.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: This is one much more highly lighted. It's also numbered. Would that just be that you keep a numerical sequence of your drawings?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well, I think Wendy has, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: So I notice you've got "43" in the upper right.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Right.

ROBERT BROWN: This drawing, then, is just beginning, and for some reason was stopped, I guess. But you began with the outline, and we can see how you're beginning to lay in the shadow. This — doing the outline — would that have taken a day or so of very careful work?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, the endless measuring, to be sure that everything was in the right spot.

ROBERT BROWN: Would Hale be with you every day during this class?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): I don't think it was every day. I think about twice a week he came, or three times a week. He was very merciful, too, he wasn't one of those who had his pupils in tears.

ROBERT BROWN: He was a very kindly person?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): He was very kindly. He had a very acute tongue — I don't know what the word would be — but he was very kindly too.

ROBERT BROWN: You said that the best drawings were kept by the school, and you won prizes for them. Were they displayed, or there was an exhibition from time to time?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): I think so, right. Every week the best one was chosen from among them, so I remember a good number of them ...

ROBERT BROWN: Did you discover that you were doing quite well?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: You weren't behind the other students at all.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): No. No, [laughter] I wasn't.

ROBERT BROWN: Had most of them done afternoon or Saturday classes at the Museum? Had a great many of them, when they were young ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): I think so, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: So there were a good many fairly highly trained — to a point — young people coming in.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, but then there were plenty who weren't, too ... Three or four of my friends, I know, had had

nothing back of it.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you recall some of your classmates at the Museum School?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well, I'll tell you who was awfully good, was Catherine Richardson.

ROBERT BROWN: Catherine Richardson.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Do you know ... Does it ring any bell with you?

ROBERT BROWN: Mmhmm.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): She was a good draftsman.

ROBERT BROWN: And were there others that eventually became fairly well-known?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): That I don't know, because ... No, I don't remember ever hearing of any. You see I wasn't there very long.

ROBERT BROWN: After a few months, then, with Leslie Thompson in painting, in a second year, you left the school.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: And were some of the teachers trying to urge you to stay on?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): No.

ROBERT BROWN: And after that did you fairly quickly begin to take private lessons with Philip Hale?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes. Right away. Just moved over and had him come to me.

ROBERT BROWN: And it was drawing that he taught ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): No, then I was painting.

ROBERT BROWN: But you've intimated earlier that you didn't quite admire his color.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well, I was too green to know what I wanted. I just knew that he was my teacher, and that he said he'd help me, and he suggested what I ... He said why didn't I do a nude, and I remember having this be sort of a piecemeal process. I remember when he first suggested the nude, he sketched a big figure of a nude back, and I remember thinking what a marvelous speed. There it is in two minutes, what I've been ... I thought took four days to do! I couldn't believe my eyes! It was a real opening — that something was certainly happening, and that I had a great deal to learn from him. So he used to come while I was working on that nude. He suggested I show it in New York, and it got the First Hallgarten Prize, and I think he felt very pleased — sort of as if it were his doing. And indeed I think it probably was! He would come and give it criticisms, periodically.

ROBERT BROWN: How long did you work on that nude, which I believe you entitled "Circles," and why did you call it-

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Because ... Well, I said, "What do I call things?" And he said, "Call 'em what they are!" You couldn't have a better title. And the nude had a drapery on the back of the chair that had circles on it ... I'd gone to Paris — had never been introduced before to interesting clothes by grand designers — and went to Poiret, who was then the great designer. And this was the lining of a Poiret cape I bought, a hand-blocked, beautiful bit of material, and so in itself that was a picture. How long it took, I couldn't ... I took a good while, I'm sure.

ROBERT BROWN: You received the award for it from the National Academy of Design, the Hallgarten Prize, in 1929, I believe.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Was it?

ROBERT BROWN: Had you submitted other things for exhibition, or had Mr. Hale suggested that you ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): He suggested that. I wouldn't have known the ropes enough for it. But ... No, I don't think so. The method that that was painted by, was the most — looking back on it — perfectly extraordinary! First the outline in charcoal; then charcoal fixative; then color on top of it. And you approached it by doing the edges. And so you had a completely finished section, say two inches by six inches, that would never necessarily be changed! And you inched around the picture that way, and you got your edge. You studied where it blurred, you know, and where it was sharp, and where you lost it. And you made the edge by putting a stripe of red, and then a stripe of blue, and then a stripe of yellow. Then you pulled them together. And you did this over and over again, and you did it day after day, until you got your edge just right! Well, that didn't make

for much color! You'd lost your ... it was kind of a dark ... just dark on the edges. And as time passed, doing things that way – it got a lovely look to it, sort of a professional, the Boston School has it – but you also lost quite a lot of vitality and color in the process. Color as pure color.

ROBERT BROWN: And you began to sense that, at that time ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well, pretty soon after that I began to ... the shadows ... that self-portrait ...

ROBERT BROWN: The shadows ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): They're just muddy done that way! You see you were pulling it in just the way you did charcoal, you were working your shadows into the light, and studying just how it went into the light, but not from the point of view of color. From the point of view of value and local color. So you didn't ... I began to sense that something was making difficulties for me in the shadows, and I'd got to get around it somehow. Later on I came to trying glazes – underpainting, like Rubens, and gray, and then glazing over it. It took a long time to come to that. But what drove me to it was this method of treating it almost like a drawing, and of putting three colors together so that then you lost your ... lost any purity or clarity.

ROBERT BROWN: I see, there was no distinctness in the color ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): No!

ROBERT BROWN: Well this is a self-portrait which I think you also ... is this the one you call "Interval"?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): No. That's "Interval."

ROBERT BROWN: "Interval." Right, there. That's also a self-portrait, isn't it?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, right.

ROBERT BROWN: And this took a prize, in 1930.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Did it? I'd forgotten.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes, a Gold Medal at the Tercentenary Exhibition ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Oh yes, that's right ...

ROBERT BROWN: Do you recall that Exhibition at all?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): It was down by the Armory. Was it in the Armory ... ?

ROBERT BROWN: Was it not only contemporary art, but historical painting as well?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): I don't know, I really don't remember.

ROBERT BROWN: By the way, did you go down to the National Academy after you received the prize?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): I was in Morocco ...

ROBERT BROWN: So you didn't.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): No. I always wished I could have. They had a dinner, and I remember I would have gone to that if I'd been here. No, I got news of it there.

ROBERT BROWN: At the time of the painting called "Interval" — your self-portrait that won the prize in 1930 — apparently critics thought that you were one of the most talented, as well as one of the youngest, Boston artists.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Hmm.

ROBERT BROWN: It was pretty flattering to ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, yes, it was ...

ROBERT BROWN: Was the art press something you worried about in those days, do you think, or what the critics might say? Did the public read them very carefully, and so therefore as an artist were you quite attentive to what the critics said?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes ... yes ... But I ... I don't know — Looking back, it always looks as if I'd been quite unconscious of the situations ... as if the awareness comes rather late for me. I just sort of go ahead without much consciousness of what was going on around me, in rather a cloud nine, as you might say. I can remember later Miss Francis, when I had a show and got the Burton Emmett Memorial Prize in New York, she said "You and Edmund Quincy" (who came from around here), "you never understood the art market." I never ... not only didn't understand the art market, I really wasn't aware of much else! [laughter] My own painting, only, and wanting to realize what I was doing, the right way, so ... I can't say I was alive to — I was pleased if it went well, and if it didn't, tried to block it out.

ROBERT BROWN: Beginning very early you were doing portraits.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, always portraits, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: And would these be people who would come to you, friends ... ?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well, I had a show, at Doll & Richards about that time, and I remember eighteen commissions for portraits.

ROBERT BROWN: Wow.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): They were the people who came in and liked this sort of thing, I guess. There was a head of Tufts, Mr. Watson — no, he wasn't head of Tufts. [Paul Barron Watson, President of Wentworth Institute, c. 1945] And there was a couple in Swampscott, the Ericksons. One thing would lead to another ...

ROBERT BROWN: So you were soon extremely busy as a portrait painter.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: And were you at that time beginning to work out away from tonality and toward more color, or were you being rather conservative?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well, I started conservative, and then ... kept moving.

ROBERT BROWN: How did you feel about doing portraits? Did this ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Oh, I liked it!

ROBERT BROWN: You liked doing that ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): It didn't occur to me to do anything else!

ROBERT BROWN: And you weren't troubled by their reaction, or what their reactions might be, and ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Oh, very much ... Yes ... But it didn't cripple me. [laughter]

ROBERT BROWN: I'm not too clear on the sequence of other education you had. You went to Fontainebleau, to the School of Fine Arts, that Franco-American School, in '32 ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well, after the Museum School, went to New York, the League ...

ROBERT BROWN: You went to the League then. And that's when you did some ... Did you study lithography there?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): With Harry Wickey. I studied lithography, right. And then, I guess, Fontainebleau. That was only the summer. And then one winter at Colarossi ... But that was ... Didn't get anything out of that at all...

ROBERT BROWN: But at Fontainebleau, your teacher was Despujols.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: And did that have any effect on you?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well, that was good, but it didn't really take very deep. He said a few things that ... We used to have criticisms. We had a model, and we painted the model, and I don't remember that he offered very much about that. At the end of the week, we'd put up compositions of one kind or another that he'd given us subjects for, and he'd criticize them. I remember his pointing out to me — and my being much impressed by the fact — that you had value, line, and color, and you could measure in two out of the three, but you couldn't be equally good in all three. What's the French saying? "Tout dire c'est ennuyer" — To say everything is to be a bore. That you just would be boring. You couldn't do that. So you had to make your choice, which two. It was perfectly clear to me that value and line were my bag rather than the color. He clarified that way. I remember his showing one of his visitors around his classes, and instead of all the pictures on the canvasses being other Despujols, they

were all different, and he was very pleased with that. He said he liked to bring out what he thought was your specialty, not just make little Despujols out of you. He pointed to mine and said "That's Bonnard," I think. He didn't make any sort of dogmatic statements. He was interested in drawing, and did a good deal of simplification, and I remember struggling with that, but not being much attracted to it — sort of a stylization, rather like Leger, that didn't appeal to me. I pretty doggedly went on doing my Boston stuff.

ROBERT BROWN: But he was liberal in the sense that he allowed and hoped that students would each produce something quite distinct.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Right. He was so liberal that I didn't really get a whole lot out of what he was giving me.

ROBERT BROWN: How would you compare Despujols with Hale as a teacher?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Oh, that's a good question. Certainly Mr. Hale ... When I went to New York and came back with that "Interval," which certainly looks very Boston School, I remember his saying: "Oh, I see the slime of the serpent!" You had to do it one way and one way only, and anything else was serpent slime! He was certainly the other end of the spectrum from Despujols. As you say, Despujols prided himself from drawing out of his students their thing, and analyzing what it was; but otherwise, I don't know how to compare...

ROBERT BROWN: Do you suppose Mr. Hale saw in "Interval" a tendency toward becoming fashionable, or stylized?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): I don't know, he didn't explain — he didn't say more than that.

ROBERT BROWN: He merely said "I see the slime of the serpent ..." [chuckle]

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes. He knew that Speicher had been to ... I'd had some introduction to Eugene Speicher, and he came to my studio when I was doing another big Hale, in charcoal — -a two-nude big thing, life-sized, that I was starting on. He didn't recommend that. He said Get out on the streets! Get into the subway! Get into the park! Get some life into it! He didn't put it that way, he put it more politely, but I got the idea. I scrapped that canvas, thank goodness, and did get out into the park, and did get out into the streets, and got the point. And I think Mr. Hale must have felt that, or perhaps I let it slip.

ROBERT BROWN: Because you had not done that particularly in Boston, you'd not gone around ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): No!, oh no! You did the way, putting your little worms of paint ...

ROBERT BROWN: Well how did you like the experience in New York, then, the going out ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well, I felt it was very important. It was all too short a time. I don't know why I didn't stay longer ... But that was what I struggled to do thereafter, to get to the humanity, the life of the thing, not the techniques.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you recall, that first time — that was the first time you'd lived in New York, I guess, wasn't it? — meeting other artists, or ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): [hesitation] No. Always the trouble was ... I wished I had, all my life, had more contact with fellow-artists. I saw more friends on another basis.

ROBERT BROWN: Social friends.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, social friends.

ROBERT BROWN: What about exhibitions, or art galleries?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well I had a big show at Wildenstein.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes, a bit later than this.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Was that?

ROBERT BROWN: '32, I think, a little bit later ... But at that time, at least you met briefly Eugene Speicher, who gave you this advice. What about museums? Did you go to the Metropolitan, places like that?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, yes, I did.

ROBERT BROWN: As a city, how would you compare it, at that time, as a young woman? Did you care for it as much as Boston?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Oh, it was so much more exciting, yes. I think I'd liked to have lived there.

ROBERT BROWN: What brought you back?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Mother. Widowed, lonely ... She'd ... given me a nice, loose leash to get there at all, and I felt that I must get back, and settle in ...

ROBERT BROWN: And then after that, you did go ... That's when you went to France, somewhat after that? The Academie Colarossi in Paris, you studied there briefly?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Just one winter, yes. Went there pretty sporadically, really didn't get anything out of it — just like

going to a commercial sketch class or something.

THE FUTURE IS MOST READILY PREDICTED IN RETROSPECT

May 18, Thursday: At the artist's home in Boston, Robert Brown and Polly Thayer Starr continued with their Oral History Interview for the Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian Institution (in order to break up the lengthy block of text of this interview I will continue to, at more or less random points, interpolate some of this artist's paintings):

ROBERT BROWN: We talked last time about your studying with Philip Hale. You also studied in the '20's, in Provincetown, I gather, with Charles Hawthorne?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: About when was that? Mid-twenties, something like that?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): I think so, yes. I would think probably

... '24? — it might have been quite early in the '20's, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you go down for the summer?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Went down and rented a fish-house, with a student I'd just met at the Museum School, Lucia Four. We shared the fish-house, and stayed there for a couple of months.

ROBERT BROWN: Was it pretty primitive living?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Very. Right out over the water, and very simple.

ROBERT BROWN: Now he was ... in contrast to the drawing you'd learned from Hale, Hawthorne was well known for forcing you to lay out broad areas of color, wasn't he?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes!

ROBERT BROWN: Was this difficult for you in the beginning, considering your ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): No, but I'm quite sure that I must have — how conscious it was at the time I don't remember — already been attempting to have some cracks in the straight-jacket, valuable

and comfortable as it was if you didn't struggle. I was beginning already to want to offset any too-strict rules to go by. I think my pleasure in the matière, or what Hyatt Mayer used to call the cuisine, came probably early with Hawthorne, because you laid on paint so nice and thick instead of in thin layers, as I found myself doing in the Museum School method. It was slashed on, and he got you out of any finicky linear attempts. Also keyed up the palette a lot. I remember afterwards Charlie Hopkinson saying if you wanted to really get your color, if it was getting muddy, get out in the sunlight. Hawthorne keyed it right up.

ROBERT BROWN: You in fact worked outdoors most of the time?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, always outdoors, as far as I can remember. I don't remember any rainy days! It was always on the beach, in the sunlight, full sun.

ROBERT BROWN: What was he like, as a personality?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): — I — total blank! — don't remember at all. I've been trying to recall what he looked like. I can't! I seem to have resisted ... There are just blank areas where the teacher didn't happen to hit the spot with me, and in fact I don't even remember anything that he advocated! But I do remember the pleasure of the thick pigment, the richness of it.

ROBERT BROWN: It's almost as though he introduced you to this — these options, or this opportunity — and you were more or less on your own.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, entirely.

ROBERT BROWN: But he did have weekly criticisms, I think, where all the students ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, he must have!

ROBERT BROWN: work was brought together and

POLLY THAYER (STARR): I don't remember for those criticisms getting in to any structure, any building. Perhaps you'd have some notes on that. He wrote a book, afterwards, that I understand is awfully good. I'd like to read that.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes. Various students would make notes

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, he didn't write it himself, did he? It was the

ROBERT BROWN: After he died ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Oh, after his death! He died untimely. How old ... What did he die of, do you know?

ROBERT BROWN: I'm not sure, no. Died in 1930. But ... Hawthorne ... Were there any others you studied with in those early days? Of course, you went to France in the early '30's ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, right.

ROBERT BROWN: You've mentioned, well, Hans Hoffman in Provincetown ... that would have been somewhat later.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes. In Boston it was Mr. Hale. He came to my studio after that first year at the Museum School, so that I had the full of him to myself, so to speak. Until Carl Nelson many years later, I never got any other New England instruction.

ROBERT BROWN: Well one of your first shows in January of '29 was at the Boston Art Club. Was that a fairly important place to show in those days?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): I think it was, yes. There weren't so many galleries in those days, and it was very handsome ... good light ...

ROBERT BROWN: I believe it was an exhibition of "Women Artists" at the Boston Art Club.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Was it? Yes ... Didn't that move on somewhere else, that whole show? "Woman Artists," was it?

ROBERT BROWN: Well, or "American Women Artists," something like that ... And apparently that's where you — as you did the next month at the National Academy — exhibited your large nude, "Circles." And there's a letter written by a ... Mary Hooper Warner, Mrs. Roger Warner, who was thrilled by your work at that exhibition, speaking of the "clean, strong color, fine textures, and the breaking up of spaces in "Circles," which she also said was "grandly vigorous."

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Hmm!

ROBERT BROWN: So that it did stand out. I mean you — when you discussed this with me last week — you mentioned it being still very tight, and I think you referred to it almost as a "tinted drawing," working with Mr. Hale. But in fact others seem to have seen it as a rather vigorous, powerful work.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Oh yes, I don't think I did myself justice on that one. It was good and vigorous. And it escaped that look of being kissed all over that the Boston School can have. It was really my first attempt at anything that size, and it was a fresh sensation and has life to it.

ROBERT BROWN: And then, to receive compliments like this ... Were these unexpected, or did you feel you'd done a pretty fine thing?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Oh, no, it was unexpected ... I really didn't think much about it, except that I was pleased with what I had produced. I can remember the ecstasy of that foot in the fur — tiger fur. I never forgot the feeling that overwhelmed me. And then I felt that I'd gotten ... expressed what I wanted about it, so ... I can really say no more. I was satisfied.

ROBERT BROWN: Then the following month, or perhaps it was March of 1929, you were at the National Academy Annual in New York, and there also "Circles" was shown, but also ... a portrait you called "The Book of Dreams."

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Oh, but it was ...

ROBERT BROWN: "The Book of Dreams" was not as successful, well ... The review in March of '29 in the Herald Tribune, by Royal Cortissoz, says, for example, that 'Circles' could have taken a medal in Paris as easily as it won New York."

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Very high praise

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well, it is ... That's timeless, that's all right. This begins to be more of the Boston School.

ROBERT BROWN: And "The Book of Dreams," on the other hand ... Here is actually a poor reproduction of it. It's a woman looking at a book.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: And was that not done as a portrait, but rather as a type of young woman?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well, it's somewhat of a portrait. But ... portraits would turn into still life's, too. Mr. Hale said as far as he was concerned there were three methods of painting. There was the "Grizzly Bear Method," whereby you measured yourself. You know grizzly bears stand up against a tree, make their mark, to see how tall they are against the other ones. You try to reach up to the others, and you measure yourself by the past, those that have succeeded. And then there was the "Spider Web Method" — the spider just pulls it out from himself, his own thing. And then there was the "Chicken Hash Method," which he himself liked, which was that you took the prettiest girl, and you took the nicest, handsomest Chinese coat or costume you could find, and the most beautiful background and Chinese jar — and you put them all together and you had the best of everything.

ROBERT BROWN: That was the Chicken Hash Method.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): That was the Chicken Hash Method. Well, this was a little bit Chicken Hash Method. Is it a portrait? It's of somebody, and I wanted to get it just the way she was, but I also wanted to get the nicest costume, and the nicest ... That book was something hand-tooled by a friend of her mother's, a very rich leather creation. So it was a "Chicken Hash Portrait," shall we say.

ROBERT BROWN: Mmhmm. And it's a young woman with her dreams.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, right.

ROBERT BROWN: There was this romantic quality to some of your early portraits, but also ones on themes, such as this. I think we see it also in the "Interval," for example, which we talk about in a minute, which is a self-portrait, I think ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, Cortissoz talks about it — "The Book of Dreams" — as "a decorative arrangement, a graceful model," and then he goes on to talk mostly about "Circles." He concludes in

his review that your advent is "exciting, for behind that finish there must lie the rich promise of more and more interesting work." And then that summer, he wrote to you, didn't he?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Maybe you could talk a bit about that letter to you, which he wrote in, I think, July of 1929.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): He speaks of "The Book of Dreams" — that I've gone about as far as I can along the very road of painting that I've been traveling so far, but he'd like to give me some good advice: In the first place, I feel that your conviction is sound. You've mastered your technique as far as it goes. But how is it to be enriched still further? I am not at all sure that a change from a Boston to a New York teacher will be the answer. And then he speaks of "The Book of Dreams" as being perhaps a portent that I might get locked in, that he doesn't want me locked into any dogma in the matter.

ROBERT BROWN: And he sees that that could happen ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): He felt when he saw "The Book of Dreams" after the "Circles" that there might be a danger, and then he gives excellent advice about how to keep ... open up.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you suppose he was thinking there of the so-called "Boston School" of painters, some of which became quite predictable?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, he says just that: ... with candor that could only hurt your feelings if you forget that a sincerely anxious friend is writing to you. The one danger that I sensed in your work at the Academy was that of crystallization into a studio formula, specifically the formula which the Boston group has made so popular. The members of that group — DeCamp, Cartaba, Paxton — have done some admirable things with it. But they've painted human beings too much as still life. Benson alone seems to have sniffed the danger. He suggested this by plunging into the realities of his etchings. And paradoxically by making his actual still lifes broader and richer. Well, your nude didn't make me worry about the formulas creeping in. But the picture called "The Golden Book" made me say to myself, "I wonder if Miss Thayer's going to drift into the way of the rest of them? I wonder if she's going to settle down into a painter of pretty girls, posed in the studio, still life made decorative, and if you like charming, but somehow dead things." That's why I urge you to do what I believe would keep you in a more invigorating air — sit in front of Velasquez, make your work substance ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): How would I cut that down, I mean how much of that ...

ROBERT BROWN: That's fine.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, it's awfully good!

ROBERT BROWN: Well, that was very interesting. Also, there was

a letter to you, I gather while the exhibition was still on, from the National Academy, from an Elizabeth Pfessler, saying that John Gallatley was interested in "Circles." His special attention had been called to it, and he came to see it and get its measurements, and then — it's not clear just what this meant — but he was going to take the matter up with Sir Joseph Duvene, regarding the possibility of presenting "Circles" to a museum. And then she goes on to tell you how you should price it and so forth, if Mr. Gallatley were to buy it.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): I don't believe ... If I know myself at that period, I didn't probably answer it. I had no idea of ... Later on, I think it went to some little museum.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh yes, it's in the New Britain Museum of American Art in Connecticut, yes. At that time you had a couple of heavy hitters of that day, Gallatley and Duvene, somewhat interested.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): I was in Morocco, and as I say, I probably didn't answer it. I was quite unaware of every ... anything or anybody but just the next painting I was going to do ... [laughter]

ROBERT BROWN: So your trip ... You'd gone to, what, Spain and Morocco?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Had you gone, as Cortissoz suggested, partly to look at Velasquez?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Not that time. Why did I go? Well, I felt very sick, as I remember, and fetched up as I told you in the hospital, and got home by the grace of God. But I ... Perhaps I was hoping to end up there, after Morocco, and settle to work. I don't remember what the plan was.

ROBERT BROWN: Well in Spain did you go looking at museums, and things of that sort?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): I did, yes ... only instead of fetching up with Velasquez I fetched up with Goya. I was fascinated with Goya, always have been.

ROBERT BROWN: His portraits, or other things as well?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Everything! The Disparates ... I copied in the studio a portrait of Dr. Perez — I copied that over here at the Metropolitan. I admire his portraits enormously.

ROBERT BROWN: You were even then, say in the late twenties, sort of beginning to kick the traces a bit. I mean, in yet another way ... You were interested in some of his imagery ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, right. Subject matter.

ROBERT BROWN: Subject matter?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes. Rather than still lifes, and "chicken hash," I liked those social comments and the Horrors of War.

Anything that seemed closer to the bone.

ROBERT BROWN: In Spain did you move around to different cities?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): No, no ... Just Ronda, and to the South.

ROBERT BROWN: You went to Ronda. For its picturesqueness, or its spectacular location?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes. And of course, outside of Madrid, had to go and see the Grecos.

ROBERT BROWN: Who would have suggested where you might want to go where you would find spectacular or interesting subjects in a place like Spain or Morocco? Were there other artists or teachers who might have mentioned this to you?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): No, I don't think so ... no.

ROBERT BROWN: Just other friends.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Morocco ... Was it difficult traveling there, in those days?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, it was rather difficult traveling. I mean, we had all day trips, with no stops, by bus, but ... I don't know what it's like today. Haven't been back for a long time.

ROBERT BROWN: In the following year, you had other exhibits. You had one in the spring, in Hartford. You were in a group exhibition of an Annual — the Connecticut Academy of Fine Arts — in which you exhibited "The Algerian Tunic." Well, "The Algerian Tunic" is a self-portrait, isn't it?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Right.

ROBERT BROWN: And did you particularly enjoy doing self-portraits, or was this ... You didn't have very many sitters at this point, I take it, your commissioned portraits were just a little bit in the future for the most part, weren't they?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well, they were coming, yes, I was doing some, but not so many, no. But it was just wonderful to have yourself to pose at any ... Didn't have to make arrangements for it, there you were! You could use yourself at any moment.

ROBERT BROWN: You're in an exotic piece of ... The shawl, or tunic ... How do you think you regarded yourself, or wanted to convey yourself in this? Of course, this was probably done just for yourself, too, wasn't it?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, it was. Well, it wasn't until much later that I did another one of myself, and found it extremely difficult. I didn't know what to say about myself. It worried me, it threw me off terribly. At this point, it didn't at all! I was just using myself as a model. I wasn't thinking about what was behind, in any sense. Just approaching it in the purely visual. Nothing psychological.

ROBERT BROWN: Well it's looked at from a very low vantage-point, and it has therefore a rather monumental quality. Your head is way up near the top of the canvas.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes. That's something I found myself doing quite a lot, that was instinctive. And always the difficulty — I notice Cortissoz speaks of it — about design. I desperately wanted rules of composition. Years later, I remember Gardner Cox pointing out that the circle ... wherever you put a circle it dominated every other element in the design. To this day I find people painting who scorn any mention of composition, like my godson, who's been teaching it for years in the Brooklyn Museum and the Art League. "Oh," he says, "You can't make rules about composition, that's just dogmatic." But I don't know why you can't make rules about it just the way you do about color! I've been all my life struggling with composition, feeling that it's one of the most vital elements of any work of art. I don't understand why the scorn for it that I run into again and again.

ROBERT BROWN: Hale didn't think it was very important either?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Just said, same as my godson sixty years later, seventy years later, "Oh, if you can't work that out for yourself, you can't learn that from anybody." I just don't know why that point of view!

ROBERT BROWN: Well there were at that time, certainly, theories of composition.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well, I didn't run into them. I was always looking for them, and I didn't — I don't remember Hawthorne offering anything. We had critiques — that helped a good deal — at the Fontainebleau School. And we did study the composition of the Old Masters, making abstractions from them. Yes, I did. But not half enough. I wanted every kind of simple — I wanted to move on, get the simplest elements and then move from them to the more complicated. And when I did run into it, it seemed to me we were right into the most complicated, so that I didn't know quite how one had arrived at the conclusions that were made.

ROBERT BROWN: So from time to time therefore you've been ... not happy with your arrangement of things.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): No, no ... And had to scrap quite a few things, just because they're so poorly placed.

ROBERT BROWN: But other things, you knew you had it just right.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, yes, oh yes.

ROBERT BROWN: I mean, as in this "The Algerian Tunic" ... Splendid!

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, right. I felt that, oh yes.

ROBERT BROWN: The end of that year, 1930, you had your first one-man show — or one-person show, I should say — at a very old gallery here, a commercial gallery, the Doll & Richards Gallery. Maybe you could talk a little about that. How did that come

about, would you say?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Don't remember the process at all, except there were very few galleries — relatively few compared to today — and it just was one of the best, and that's all I can remember as reasons for it.

ROBERT BROWN: You showed "Circles" again at that show, and according to one reviewer it was "improved" — slightly improved — by repainting and simplification.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): "Circles" was?

ROBERT BROWN: That's what this reviewer in the Boston Transcript said.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well that surprises me. Didn't remember that.

ROBERT BROWN: This man, Albert Cochrane, was rather perturbed I guess by what he would — maybe he was very conservative — by its modernism [laughter], and yet he realized, and he mentions, that you won the prize for it at the National Academy in the previous year.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): How does ... What does ... What is modernist about it? How fascin — I haven't re-read that.

ROBERT BROWN: At the Doll & Richards show, the Transcript reviewer also admired a study, "Head of a Negro Boy" — he thought that was very strong. Do you recall that? It's mentioned by other reviewers as well.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Is it? I wonder if that's the one done at Hawthorne, under Hawthorne, with the white cap. It's done in the shadow with brilliant sunlight on the white cap, and you can't tell whether he's black or white. That might be it.

ROBERT BROWN: The various reviewers all ... aside from "Circles," and some the "Head of a Negro Boy," they referred also to "Interval," a new self-portrait by you, which they liked quite a lot. It strikes me as more informal than "The Algerian Tunic." Do you recall the circumstances of painting that?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): It was in New York ... Well, I'm afraid not much comment on that.

ROBERT BROWN: About that same time, I think, in 1931, a sort of a social magazine, The Breeze, from the North Shore of Boston, did a profile of you as a youthful leader. It reviews things that you've already talked about; but it does have a quotation from you —

POLLY THAYER (STARR): I think it's high time I read some of these!

ROBERT BROWN: You're quoted as having said that you don't go for certain aspects of modern art, but you say, according to The Breeze, "I think modern art has been a superb corrective for the kind of work that used to be done. It has challenged painting,

and now more than ever before, those who follow traditions must prove themselves. They cannot get by on pretty ideas." So that was a pretty eloquent statement ... [laughter] But you did think that modern art is too fleeting to merit really serious concern. "Perhaps it's even come to the end of its rope, and we're about to see a return to romanticism." You don't recall saying all this?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): No, I don't.

ROBERT BROWN: Does it sound true to what you ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): It sounds all right! Except the romanticism. I don't know where I saw that.

ROBERT BROWN: And then an interesting comment on portrait painting. Apparently you don't ... In some ways you didn't care to work with sitters, because sometimes, you say, you found your subjects psychologically speaking a nuisance! [laughter] "Well might she be envious of the courage of Sargent, whose Victrola silenced all conversation."

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Ah!

ROBERT BROWN: And therefore you too perhaps sought some sort of a barrier between you and your sitter?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes. Well, you see ... it's terribly difficult for some of us. It's like patting your head and rubbing your stomach, to be entertaining your sitter, which you have to do to keep them — you know, if they look suddenly bored and restless, or wish to goodness they could get out, or go to sleep, which the older ones quite often did — to have to be entertaining somebody, and at the same time giving everything you've got and taking in everything you can ... It's most difficult, and I guess

I was thinking in those terms. I'd like to know what other portrait painters have said about that. To me it was extremely difficult. And Sargent used to play music!

ROBERT BROWN: According to this writer. Maybe you knew that at the time. I didn't know that.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): I should have done that! I know that Goya threw his whole palette with all its brushes out the window when somebody talked. He wanted total silence. But he could work so fast. Like Sargent, in twenty minutes, he had caught them. But I took a long ti — Particularly in the old days, with the Boston method, it took a long time to get ...

ROBERT BROWN: It was only some time later that you developed ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): I learned to speed up a bit. But it was always a problem of not being able to give myself as I would to a landscape or ...

ROBERT BROWN: In this article she talks to you about perhaps living in Paris, as opposed to staying on in America. Did you at any time seriously entertain the thought of moving there?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): No, no. I was brought up ... My mother had to live there a lot because her mother moved around a lot, and she felt terribly strongly — -and I just accepted it as being probably true — that if you cut the biotic root, if you left your own country for another, unless your husband had a job there or there were some real reason for it, it was starvation diet for you, spiritually, if you didn't stick with your own.

ROBERT BROWN: And you could always visit, and have some contact.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Oh yes, yes, but ... your allegiance belonged at home.

ROBERT BROWN: Well the exhibitions came fairly fast and furious in the early '30's. There was an art gallery at the Boston City Club, which I think was a ... Was that a woman's club?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: In early 1931, when you had a one-person show there which was reviewed fairly extensively, the reviewers usually comment on how young you are, and yet how gifted ... This is a review from a paper

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Is there a name?

ROBERT BROWN: His name is A. J. Philpot.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Oh, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: We don't have the indication here of what he's writing for. And he more or less just reviews your work, as you already discussed it, saying, however that you were also — or had been, at least — very active in amateur theatrical circles.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: The Cercle Français at Harvard ... and also you

had written for the stage ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): That I don't recognize.

ROBERT BROWN: Had you done, or were you still doing, a bit of acting here and there?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, I was. The Footlight Club was an awfully good amateur organization, and I acted with that. And then a little later the Poet's Theatre. A friend of mine started it, and I acted in that, and enjoyed that a lot.

ROBERT BROWN: At the exhibition at the City Club, we have also a list of the paintings you showed. I don't know if there's any of these you'd want to take a peek at.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): I'd be interested ... Some of it, I think, poor. "Head of a Negro Boy" ... No, I don't know which it is ... "Bitter Thing" wasn't good.

ROBERT BROWN: Now that was called "Bitter Thing"?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: I wondered from the title if that was the beginning of your getting into some fairly imaginary -

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, it was an attempt. It did not come off. They're merciful, they don't pillory —

ROBERT BROWN: But you were attempting that.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes I was.

ROBERT BROWN: And critics were beginning to note that.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, right. That, and "Pareil a la Feuille Morte," none of them any good. Well, I was floundering. I didn't know just how to express what I wanted in the more ...

ROBERT BROWN: And these shows were very frequent, too, weren't they, and there was a pressure, I guess.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): They seem to be, yes ... "Chinese Dragon" — that was in. "Blood and Sand" — that was very poor, that was an attempt at impressions of a bullfight. But then, the "Interval" was all right, and the "Circles" was good. Not a very good portrait of mother. The drawings were good. And the portrait of Bandler...

ROBERT BROWN: What's his first name?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Oh, I didn't bring him in, did I? Portrait of Dr. [Bernard] Bandler. The Athenaeum's acquired it ...

ROBERT BROWN: Who was he, Dr. Bandler?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well, he was a man of parts, intellectually. He was studying to be a rabbi. When he was at Harvard, he was a great friend of Lincoln Kirstein's, and together, they ran a magazine. Oh dear, what's it called — over there. It was very successful.

ROBERT BROWN: The Hound & Horn.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): The Hound & Horn, yes. And that had a great splash, it was awfully good. And after that, he studied, as I say, to be a rabbi. And then he finally fetched up as a doctor, I think a psychiatrist. I don't know what his hospital is, here in Boston.

ROBERT BROWN: So that was a portrait which you felt worked.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, that worked, right. And he became a long-time friend. He got me into a sort of an ... intellectual convocation, that they'd had periodically in Pontigny in France, of international scholars ... It was very exciting, people like Dubos and Valery, and Gottheusen from Germany. It was all on the last period of Goethe. Highly stimulating.

ROBERT BROWN: Would this have been in the '30's?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, the early '30's, before I got married. And then Quincy Howe — I've talked about ... That drawing, yes, that was good.

ROBERT BROWN: A portrait of Quincy Howe. Now, was he a friend?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): The Howe's were great friends, they were like a second family to me. His sister was one of my dearest friends.

ROBERT BROWN: His sister's name was ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Helen Howe. She wrote a book — lots of books, as a matter of fact, — but I think her most successful is the last book she wrote, Family Recollections [The Gentle Americans, 1864-1900. Biography of a Breed, Harper, 1965].

ROBERT BROWN: Quincy Howe ... at that time, was he a writer?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): He would have been, at that point, editing The Living Age, very successfully. Later on, that was taken over by somebody else, but for a good many years he ran that. And he would have been writing — perhaps writing his trilogy, on the First World War. Evarts Scudder was a poet and a writer, who'd married the Ducessa di Lanti — very romantic, they'd eloped from the Villa di Lanti — and I'd got to know him. He'd come over from Italy.

ROBERT BROWN: Well this show was in early '31, and then in early '32 you had a show at Wildenstein, in New York,

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Oh really!

ROBERT BROWN: which was very much reviewed,

POLLY THAYER (STARR): That was the date, then ...

ROBERT BROWN: — and attracted a lot of attention. In February 1932. And there you showed certain things that had been shown already, such as "The Algerian Tunic," your self-portrait, but also another, "The Head of a Negro Boy," — "a roughly handled work" — which was admired; a portrait I think of your mother; a

portrait of Mrs. Farley, Mrs. John Wells Farley ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): That came out very well.

ROBERT BROWN: which was reproduced in several of the newspapers.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes. Oh, there it is, that's it, right, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: And this is quite a monumental portrait in effect, very dignified – and yet, there's a beauty, and quietness about it, isn't there.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Mmmm.

ROBERT BROWN: Was she a friend?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Ye – Well, I knew her ... We were in the same club together. But at that time I didn't know her. I knew one of her daughters a little bit. I got these eighteen commissions out of that first show, and I think she was one of them, actually.

ROBERT BROWN: From the Doll & Richards show the preceding year.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): That ... "Circles" spread. They liked the technique, I think.

ROBERT BROWN: The portrait here ... It's hard to tell from the reproduction, but are you beginning to simplify more?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well I think so, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: This is something you alluded to earlier, getting a bit away from the very careful work of your early years.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): There's a better photograph of it. Yes, right.

ROBERT BROWN: The work has a great sense of volume, it seems to me.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Good!

ROBERT BROWN: What would be your working methods, say, on this? Would they be more or less the same as when you were studying with Hale? Or fairly different now?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Oh, now it would be quite different!

ROBERT BROWN: By '32, although the critics felt that your composition was, in their words, "unaffected," and that you displayed tremendous workmanship, the suggestion is that in fact they see you moving toward simplification.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Mmhmm, mmhmm.

ROBERT BROWN: And as you look back, I suppose you were.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well I was, yes, certainly was. Instead of piecemeal, inch by inch, I was trying to get the whole thing in – as a whole, instead of just pieces, glued together, so to speak.

ROBERT BROWN: Was painting becoming more fun in the process?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well, yes. It's always, when it goes well, bliss.

ROBERT BROWN: You also showed at the Wildenstein exhibition a painting called "Laughing Death," which suggests certainly not a portrait or a landscape, and which one reviewer says "exhibits a note of grim horror." Do you recall that at all, that work?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): I've got it upstairs, but I haven't got it cut down. When next you come I'll show it to you.

ROBERT BROWN: Was it a portrait?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): It was actually a self-portrait, I suppose. I'd used myself for it. But that was Goya ... when I was deep into him.

ROBERT BROWN: A pervasive effect upon you, Goya had.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: You then had your second one-person show, at the Guild of Boston Artists, in the fall of the same year. Your portrait, again, of Mrs. Farley; and then a portrait of an ecclesiastic, which to me looks — slightly smacks a bit of Zurbaran, or another class of Spanish painter. Is that fair to say?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): All right, fine.

ROBERT BROWN: How large was that painting?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Life-size.

ROBERT BROWN: Life-Size! Your portraits were getting quite large. Was that true of most of your commissioned portraits?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well, the Eriksons were an imposing pair, and they were almost over life-size — great big canvasses. Yes, I did quite a lot of ... depending on that they wanted.

ROBERT BROWN: It was this exhibition that elicited considerable praise from the great painter and widow of your teacher, Lillian Westcott Hale.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Oh, she wrote, did she?

ROBERT BROWN: "Dear Miss Thayer ..." Did you know her a bit?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): No, I don't think I ever met her. How nice, really ... [laughter] All of this is coming new to me.

ROBERT BROWN: "... I have not seen such fine portraits for a long time. My husband would be proud of you ..."

POLLY THAYER (STARR): She was a good painter, too.

ROBERT BROWN: So you were on a pretty high crest at this point, in a sense, weren't you?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes I was.

ROBERT BROWN: You were frequently showing ... Very fine reviews. There followed the beginning of the next year, at the Boston Art Club again, a Women Artists of New England exhibition.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): What year is that?

ROBERT BROWN: Early 1933.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Really! Then we don't get them for quite a while after that, do we?

ROBERT BROWN: Let's see what you exhibited. A painting called "Track Thirteen."

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Which was described as being in "dull red brick, of houses, and dirty white of snow, that border the railroad track. An interesting landscape by Ethel Thayer."

POLLY THAYER (STARR): I'm still Ethel ...

ROBERT BROWN: Yes. You become ... another name shortly after that. There are several letters you've kept relating to that show. The first is from a painter, Harry Sutton: "Good for you! Just been to the Art Club show, and your picture stands up beautifully. It's a good thing, well drawn and painted, with quite a lovely cool clean note of color. You must feel much encouraged."

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Was that about the landscape?

ROBERT BROWN: Evidently, because you had I think only one work there. This was a group show.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): "Clean" color!

ROBERT BROWN: Yes.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): It's a grimy, dirty track, I was so sorry ...

ROBERT BROWN: Dirty track, but evidently within that color range ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: And then another, rather curious letter, from yet another painter, Robert Hale Ives Gammell. He was "interested and impressed" by your canvas, and he felt it was "handsome and entertaining in design." A friend of his who was on the jury for the Pennsylvania Academy had just come, after seeing your painting — "He could talk of nothing but your painting. Which," he said, "in my studio, I found irritating indeed! [laughter] I am writing this to give you some amusement and cheer, though I can see in your canvas no evidence of your needing the latter."

POLLY THAYER (STARR): How nice of him! Isn't that funny! Was he

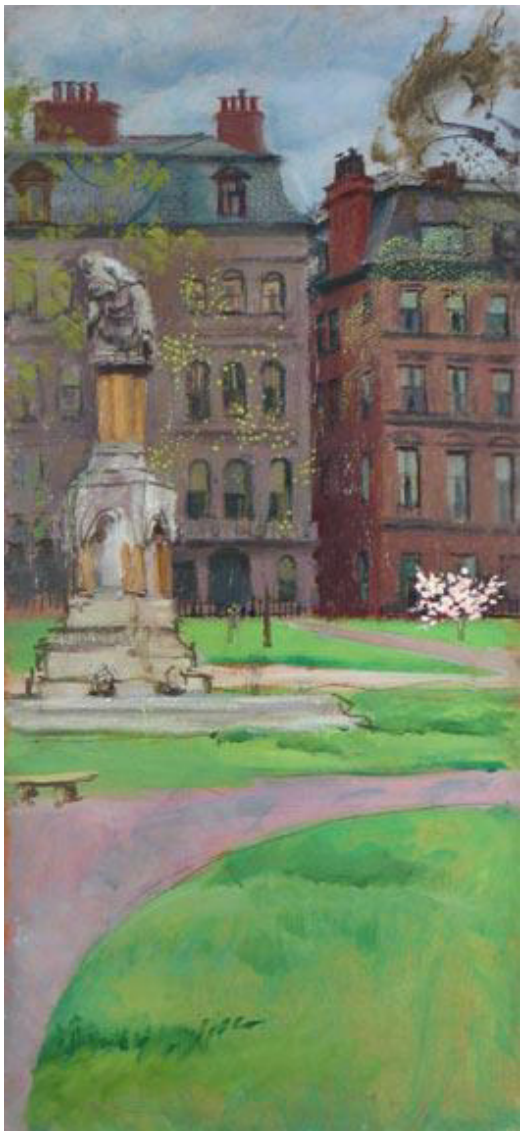
well-known anywhere much ... other places?

THE FUTURE CAN BE EASILY PREDICTED IN RETROSPECT

May 30, Tuesday: At the artist's home in Boston, Robert Brown and Polly Thayer Starr continued with their Oral History Interview for the Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian Institution (in order to break up the lengthy block of text of this interview I will continue to, at more or less random points, interpolate some of this artist's paintings):

> ROBERT BROWN: One of your early successes was the show you had in February of 1932 at Wildenstein & Co. In New York. It was a show of portraits for the most part, I gather, and I wonder if you have any recollections of that. Were you abroad at that time, or were you in New York?
>
> POLLY THAYER (STARR): I was in New York, certainly during part of it. But I'm afraid I can't offer much in recollections of

that.



ROBERT BROWN: A bit later it was said in another catalogue that after that highly successful exhibition at Wildenstein, you departed completely from your earlier type of work and developed your own approach to painting. Is that more or less accurate, would you say? I know you've already talked about trying to pull away from Philip Hale's teaching, and trying to develop something else.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Oh, it is indeed, yes. Not to sell the Boston School short — it gave me all kinds of implements, tools, to use in painting — but I knew I had to somehow get away from the technique, being overwhelmed by it, and say something. The subject matter of the placid ladies and the pleasant backgrounds

was not what I wanted to paint about. The subject matter would have to be entirely different, and I wanted to express something entirely different, and I wanted to learn about color. The color was just ... It didn't seem to teach me or speak to me much. And also composition — it seemed to me more or less hard and fast. So, a lot of things to be learned, and I decided New York must be it, the place that was most available. Did I speak of Harry Wickey?

ROBERT BROWN: Well you haven't to any degree. Why don't you ... You met, or you studied with Harry Wickey ... ?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes. And that was a great "opening," as Quakers would say. It really was a turning point. Where Mr. Hale had with charming, delicate drawings on the side of that we were doing at the Museum School indicated what he wanted, Wickey took my first drawing and slashed into it. He marked it all over so it would be of no possible use thereafter, to show me plastic values. That there was something that went on between the outline, other than just dark and light. And that — suddenly to realize another dimension — was very exciting, and just what I was after. The heavens opened. And then the question was, what — I didn't want to do Chinese jars and pretty kimonos, and interiors, typical Boston School. So the question was — I wanted to get out, into the streets as had been recommended to me. The most dramatic things were either onstage or operations. I remember asking a doctor friend to take me in on his operating room. So he tucked me in a corner, and I followed ... made drawings of them.

ROBERT BROWN: So you witnessed operations ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): witnessed operations, and did street scenes, and genre of any kind, and got backstage. When Judith Anderson was acting as Gertrude, a part she longed for for a lifetime, in Hamlet, I did some drawings. The remaining thing was composition. I wanted to get some hold on that, but I couldn't seem to find at that point anybody to teach that. Later, in Fontainebleau, I got a little bit on that. I never actually have found anybody who taught composition in the sense that I wanted it until I got Carl Nelson.

ROBERT BROWN: And was that somewhat later?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): That was later, much later, yes, after I was married and back here. But the volume — the sense of volume, and plastic values, was such a wonderful revelation. And from then on, even when I did things that were fairly flat, when I was interested in Japanese prints, I still — it altered the whole sense of the area you painted.

ROBERT BROWN: How do you suppose he did that, that is, Harry Wickey?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well, he drew bands around each limb, each section, hoops, to explain the — what? — the roundness of it, the different roundnesses, and the sense in depth of its going

back, whereas no mention had ever been made of anything of the kind. I'd never seen it before, I'd only seen outline – edges, and dark and light.

ROBERT BROWN: And you weren't intimidated by Wickey's coming right in and redoing your drawings?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Oh, I was fascinated – and aghast, because if you did a nice drawing at the Museum School, it was kept on record if it got a prize, and if not you could take it home and frame it! You had something. But [laughter] to have this possibility of a good drawing taken – just smashed all up – made me gasp! But I was so infinitely grateful from the minute he'd put a line around the torso, to realize what he was opening to me, that I gladly tore it to ribbons.

ROBERT BROWN: -So for you at least, he was a very effective teacher.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Oh, very. Yes, a wonderful teacher.

ROBERT BROWN: What was he like as a personality? Did you get to know him at all?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): No, not at all. No, just as a teacher, and just that part of his teaching.

ROBERT BROWN: And before you knew it, you too were capturing the volumes.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well I felt I was. I was feeling for them in anything I looked at ... and felt it would come through.

ROBERT BROWN: And you think by studying rather dramatic subjects, such as operations or backstage at the theater, you were more ... ?

ROBERT BROWN: Yes. Well that was light and shade, and I knew ... That I'd got from the Museum School and Mr. Hale. Or at least he had developed it, the feeling for chiaroscuro. That's where you got the drama of that, and I could go on with that. And instead of its being a subject of flowers and interiors, it was something that was vital, something that had some life to it.

ROBERT BROWN: And then you say at Fontainebleau, where you were about 1932 or '3, you did have some introduction to composition.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, that was where Despujols pointed out that you had to choose, you couldn't say it all – you were a bore, if you tried to have line equally good with value and with color. That you had to choose two out of the three, and you had the three elements to work with. And that clarified and illuminated things, and I realized that for me, the color was last, that the line and the value were the things that really counted. So value of light and dark was ... I could concentrate on that and realize what I was doing, and why I was doing it.

ROBERT BROWN: Now this is then the first several years of the 1930s. Can we see some difference in some of your work of that

time?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Where the plastic values come in as opposed to line? No, I don't think I ...

ROBERT BROWN: Maybe we can talk about this person, now, this lady who in France ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Right. Well, there's Lawrence Dennis, that portrait of him. He and she came at about the same period.

ROBERT BROWN: In France.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well, he was over here, but he lived all over in Romania and everywhere, and she was in France; it was the same period.

ROBERT BROWN: What was her name?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): She's Neyan Francis Stevens. She called herself Neyan Stevens.

ROBERT BROWN: And what was she? An artist herself?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): A little short thing, sort of —

ROBERT BROWN: I see, yes, but

POLLY THAYER (STARR): She was painting, there, but she never — the smell of turpentine wasn't enough for her. She'd studied white magic with the Moroccans, and Boronov, the doctor, who was famous at the time for rejuvenating monkey glands — she was in love with him, and traveled around with him. It was all very romantic.

ROBERT BROWN: She was a rather romantic, well-traveled ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Exotic, yes. Born in Egypt, I think, and —

ROBERT BROWN: She influenced you to a degree.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Very strongly.

ROBERT BROWN: Now Lawrence Dennis, whose portrait you've done here, you did back here in ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes. She [?]opened[?] sort of Van Gogh. I ...

ROBERT BROWN: A writer of the time, right?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well he was in jail, he was a Fascist, and also quite a colorful character.

ROBERT BROWN: Well we can see from this portrait — I mean there's a hardness about him, his eyes are nearly coal-black ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes, he's very ... rather long-jowelled ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: And there's a slight twist to his face. Were you trying to ... Were you doing this for him, or just for your own

uses?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): For myself.

ROBERT BROWN: For yourself.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes ... But it's the same period where she opens to me what to do with the form. Wickey gave me the feeling of what there was to play with, and then she showed me Van Gogh. To a Boston trained person, Van Gogh looked wildly distorted. She just sat me down and explained what was going on and what you could do with it, and I began to play with it a little, and then ... Though it may seem flat in the portrait of May Sarton at the Fogg — you may have seen that —

ROBERT BROWN: [?] in 1936, I think ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Right.

ROBERT BROWN: And the one of Dennis is just a little bit earlier, I suppose.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, right.

ROBERT BROWN: Well we certainly can see simplification. Would you say lying behind this then is Stevens's talks with you?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: And also ... It looks not unlike Velasquez, either, or some of the Spanish painters.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well that's it. You see Cortissoz had said "Go over and look, and particularly look at Velasquez, so I went over and looked, went to the Prado, looked at Velasquez, and was much moved, but actually —

ROBERT BROWN: Now it was 1929 when he wrote you then ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes. And then I ... chew on it and then go away ... And ... Goya comes out of it. I was very much influenced by Goya, to this day.

ROBERT BROWN: And is this study ... There's a study here, which is presumably ... What would you call this?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): I think I called that "Laughing Death," because it was mentioned in one of these —

ROBERT BROWN: "Laughing Death."

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: And was this ...? This was exhibited.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: So you were making some rather strong statements in paint by 1933 or so.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Right. I was feeling around, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: You were ready to unmoor yourself from the perhaps comfortable trade of doing portraits.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well, yes, I was ... But that always seemed to come first. I stuck to that right through, to the end. It seemed of paramount importance, always.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you feel you had almost an obligation to paint people?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well, yes, and I was kept to the discipline of the sittings. When life became pretty complicated with three pregnancies and a new husband late in life, and his gregariousness that I ... felt needed attention — I couldn't just check out and do my work. And I became a Quaker, and the Quakers — they've never looked with much favor on the arts. How did I work that out? As you know perhaps, we have no hierarchy, no paid hands, everybody does the work. You can't just get away with not doing anything about it. You are the ... committee. It's been called sometimes a committee within a committee within a committee. So time became a very important issue, and with the portrait commissions it seemed to be ... easier to keep that going than to find the time for myself.

ROBERT BROWN: You mean for your own — if you can call it that — own kind of painting.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Right.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, you were abroad, I gather, when you married your husband, Donald Starr. I've heard about his great sailing expedition with friends, and that you were married in Genoa, in late 1933 I believe.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Right.

ROBERT BROWN: How did you happen to be there? Was he someone you'd known, back there in Boston?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well, he'd been a friend of my brother's, and I'd met him nine years before we got married. I was pretty gun-shy of marriage when it would mean giving up painting, and ... it took a long time to make up my mind. But when he said he was going around the world for two years, I said OK, I'll marry you when you get back. And then I got a cable from him saying "We aren't waiting till I get back. Your coming to Genoa."

ROBERT BROWN: And you did!

POLLY THAYER (STARR): So I did. I obeyed orders. We met there ... And then I didn't go back with him on the boat. I sailed home, and he followed. I mean, he finished his trip around the world.

ROBERT BROWN: He finished his sail. He'd done I think about three-quarters of his sail.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Right. He'd got to the Indian Ocean.

ROBERT BROWN: So you just went to Genoa specifically to be married, in late 1933.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): That's where Rose Nichols came into the

picture. (She was always in it for me.) When we got to Genoa — he from the Indian Ocean and I from America — we couldn't get married! Mother had come over with me, and brought her friend Rose Nichols. And when Rose found out that we were having trouble — we weren't citizens, so they couldn't marry us as such; and we weren't Catholics, so the Church couldn't marry us! — Rose, very pitying, said "Oh my poor friends, all you need is a little money!" She knew the ropes in Europe. So as soon as we caught on to that one, we got married immediately. They found that an Argentinean had married a Turk somehow, recently, and if there was enough money forthcoming, they could do it. So we were married, and had a honeymoon in Paris, and then ... I went home and he followed.

ROBERT BROWN: Now, you mention Rose Nichols, whom you painted.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: The painting is sometimes known as "A New England Lady," I believe.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): I guess, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Was she someone you'd known, then, your whole life?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes. She was a friend of my mother's, and a remarkable person.

ROBERT BROWN: What was she like?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well, you might be amused by ... One thing I found the other day ... Cleveland Amory wrote a book about Proper Bostonians, and about her ...

ROBERT BROWN: This is a story about Rose Nichols

POLLY THAYER (STARR): by Cleveland Amory, in The Proper Bostonians, which gives you a little the flavor of her: Whatever her complaint, and to whomever addressed, the Proper Boston Woman expects preferential treatment and immediate action. Remarkably enough, she usually receives this. Many of these women would undoubtedly be inveterate letter-to-the-editor writers were it not for the fact that they are [— this is badly cut off, so it's a little hard to find —] that these [?] would be published; and this of course, with the exception of the Boston Transcript, would be an unthinkable breach of propriety. First Family ladies today usually confine themselves to major issues, which they take up on private basis, directly to the top. During World War Two, Miss Rose Standish Nichols, a noted Beacon Hill spinster, did not hesitate to write directly to Admiral King [He fails to say that Admiral King was a personal friend of hers] in Washington, complaining that his subordinate, Admiral Halsey, who had just referred to the Japanese in his customary colorful manner, was "a disgrace to the Navy" [this is a quotation from her letter]. She declared he was not a gentleman. Admiral King not only answered Miss Nichols politely, but also told her that he'd referred her letter to Halsey, and

he said he'd appreciate hearing from her what the latter's reply would be. Unfortunately for King's curiosity, this reply was not all it might have been. Evidently, "Battling Bill" was apparently awed by the Boston spinster. In a letter which contained not so much as a gosh, he told Miss Nichols merely that he had been misquoted.

ROBERT BROWN: She was a rather formidable person.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Very formidable. And loved politics; and traveled all round the Western World.

ROBERT BROWN: Was your mother a bit that way too?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): No, she was shy. But she was most interested in politics and general public affairs, and very public-spirited. They had that in common, and were very old friends.

ROBERT BROWN: There was one other story of Miss Nichols, that interested me because she had the Crown Princess of Greece come and stay with me. She was great friends with Bernard Berenson, the critic and writer, and one day she took a carriage out from Florence to see him, and the servant came to the door. She said she wanted to see Bernard Berenson, and the servant said she was very sorry, but Berenson was indisposed and couldn't get up — wasn't feeling well. "Well," she said, "tell him I have three queens that have come to see him," and wrote it on her card. The servant, quite impressed, took it up to Berenson, who looked out the window, and there he saw Queen Sophie of Greece, the Queen of Italy — Margarita, I believe her name was — and the Queen of Yugoslavia. So he said he'd be right down. [laughter] But she knew all the politicians, crowned heads and prime ministers that she could contact, and they were all amused by her. So when I went to Spain I went with her, and it was great fun.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, you did! That was about — when? The early '30s?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes ... I was twenty-six — must have been — or late '20s.

ROBERT BROWN: And was she, I suppose among other things, interested in art herself?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Very much. She was the first woman landscape architect in America. They apparently started a course for her at MIT, the first one in landscape architecture, I was told. She's written several books about it.

ROBERT BROWN: When it came time for you to paint her portrait — was that commissioned, or did you just ask her if you might paint her?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): At that point, I was crazy about Eakins, and she was just an Eakins subject, exactly. So I asked her, when she was staying with Mother, if she'd pose for me. She didn't want to much, and she showed me a drawing St. Gaudens, her uncle whom she admired very much, had done of her. But he'd

put her against the light — she was quite homely, by ordinary standards — put her against the light, and all you saw was a sort of a blur. I realized that she wasn't going to like what I was going to do of her probably very much, but I said, "Wouldn't look like that at all ..." And she said "Well, all right."

ROBERT BROWN: You said it wouldn't look like that?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): No, I [laughter]. And she said she'd sit for me if I wouldn't ever tell anybody who it was! So I said all right. I wrote a thing about it, because it's in the Museum now, called Painting Rose. So I promised I wouldn't show it ever. Then I came to want to show it, and I asked her if she wouldn't mind if I just said "Portrait of a Lady." She said that would be all right. And then years passed, and she wrote and asked if she could buy it from me She wanted to give it to somebody she was very fond of. So given time enough, it gets to look better to the sitter. I think it probably looked very old, and she didn't like it in the beginning. But after many years pass ... [laughter]

ROBERT BROWN: So this portrait — you really do seem to me to penetrate her mood, even her character. She seems very much at rest, and yet I gather she was an extremely vigorous and intellectually active woman as well. Were you intimidated in painting her, or did you know her so well that ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): No! Oh, I knew her very well ... By the time we'd traveled together in Spain for a couple of months ... you know, you get to know people very thoroughly! [laughter] I was very fond of her. She was the most open-minded person I ever — well, strong-minded and open-minded at the same time. She would have a Fascist for a dear friend just as ... She was very liberal in her politics herself, but she was just as much at home with anybody who was interested in what they were doing, and interesting. There was a touching story that was told by her niece, who was in some kind of educational venture, and saw a lot of traveling scholars from different countries. Rose — just a few days before she died — said to her niece, "Bring in some of your students, I'd like to talk to them." The niece brought four or five; and they were deeply impressed. Rose sat up in bed and said: "You'll all go home, and your voices will be heard, obviously. Make the world a better place. It must be a peaceful world." And she gave them a short speech about what their influence would mean and where it should go. I'm sure they never forgot it. She was very much at home in her own skin, which was ...

ROBERT BROWN: impressive?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): She wasn't very keen on what she called "kitten-women."

ROBERT BROWN: By which she meant

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well, the very seductive ... Well, how would you characterize it?

ROBERT BROWN: Society types, or ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Sex-pot, or society — well no — she didn't care what society it was, as long as there were people, she loved people around her. Social or otherwise, it was all one to her. If they were interest — had something to offer. She was a very strong pacifist, actually.

ROBERT BROWN: And this was a streak that was emerging in yourself, in the '30s.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes. Well, I'd gone through the First World War, and my mother had been to Germany in boarding school. She simply couldn't buy the war fever of the Germans being all devils, and the Kaiser the Devil himself with horns, and she stood out against it where she could. Of course at school this didn't go over. I was only about, what — '14, I was ten then — young, but I remember in my desk, underneath the flap, when I pulled it up was "You are a pig"! I was not popular. Even at that age children take color so much. The pacifist thing, and "one world," was one that I came to more and more strongly with every year. Hence the Quakers, when I came to join them.

ROBERT BROWN: In 1935, you had a show in New York which was reviewed by Royal Cortissoz. This was the National Association of Women Painters and Sculptors show; and there you exhibited a painting called "Woman in Black." This is a rather striking portrait. It's a close-up, just a bust, really —

POLLY THAYER (STARR): That's not it, that's another one, but it's taken from

ROBERT BROWN: What do you suppose he meant by "strained in pose"?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well I think it is.

ROBERT BROWN: Why is that? You mean, she's ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, it must have been quite hard holding that.

ROBERT BROWN: — [?] back, and her neck turned. Now this would be an example of a newly simplified work that you're beginning to do, isn't that right?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, and the groping for form, form in the sense of something more than just the light and the shade.

ROBERT BROWN: And tremendous range from light to dark, too.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, right.

ROBERT BROWN: Was this a model, this person?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, she was a hairdresser.

ROBERT BROWN: And she's also the one known as "Diana," which was shown about the same time — if not in that show, at least in other shows of that time — and was then purchased by the Pennsylvania Academy.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Mmhmm.

ROBERT BROWN: This is more of a bust, a smaller portrait. Was that a surprise, when they purchased it? Did you have anything at that point in a major collection, a major museum? Was this about the first?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, I think it was ... yes.

ROBERT BROWN: What did you try to do in this portrait, would you say. What were you trying to get at in this – particularly the close up, called "Diana"?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well, I think it's the feeling ... I think Eakins was already moving me. It's a little hard to say. It's just the feeling of the form, just the beauty of that ... to get everything I could from that. And the spirit. Eakins has said that he wanted to make a portrait so that the onlooker would want to take their hat off ... I think its a feeling of that. There's something of the grandeur of the spirit behind it ... how the form will show that.

ROBERT BROWN: And was the sitter in fact quite a compelling person?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): She came to stay with me for a little while, while I was doing it, at one point ... I don't think I ever did any exploration. I wanted to do it entirely from the outside, I mean what I could guess from the ... I wasn't using any other feelers with relation to it.

ROBERT BROWN: You preferred to guess, rather than know, because there might have been so little there, I suppose, upon inquiry ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes. And I think she must have been quite surprised at being picked up from having cut my hair to being asked to come and sit in a rather strange posture in a house in Hingham ...

ROBERT BROWN: By this time you were living quite a bit in Hingham.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes. Well, summers.

ROBERT BROWN: Hingham was what, a family place, or ... ?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, I'd rented ... This must have been after I was married, because we had rented a house before we built our own.

ROBERT BROWN: You lived largely there, or in Boston as well?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): In Boston in winters, yes. It was just summers there.

ROBERT BROWN: Now your husband, Donald, was practicing law at this time?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes. He was into the fisheries a lot. Water, I suppose, attracted him ...

ROBERT BROWN: In his law practice?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): In his law practice. He had webbed feet — always had to get on a boat. He was pretty well held in a vice by the law, by his cases, and worked far into the night on them. But the minute he could get off, he was on the boat.

ROBERT BROWN: You said earlier that Mr. Starr was a very gregarious person.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes he was. Well, like Yoric, he could "set the table on a roar," wherever it was. [laughter] He was a brilliant mimic, and riotously funny. I think I counted eleven clubs ... He was very much beloved by his kind, male and female. So I wanted to make it possible for him to have his social life. A lot of times he would cruise, and I'd paint. But ... it took up time ...

ROBERT BROWN: Yes, you no longer had your steady ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): No.

ROBERT BROWN: You did a portrait of him which was exhibited at Doll & Richards in March of 1935, in another one-person show.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes. Well, back from his cruise — two years — the question was what he'd do — where he'd go, what he'd settle into. So he had a short time, while he was looking around. And Frankfurter, Felix Frankfurter, who was very fond of him, wanted him to become proconsul in the Virgin Islands. I didn't want to interfere with it, if he really wanted it very badly — but I felt that we ought to think about it pretty firmly, because ... I think it was the President of the Bar Association at that time, oh ... offered him a job ... He'd approached me and said, "Do you think Donald's going to settle down, now?" And I said "Yes, he will, I'm sure he will."

ROBERT BROWN: Who, the President of the Bar Association?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, Bentley Warren. And he still wanted Donald as a partner, and I'd sort of ... already said that I was sure he'd settle down. So he gave way. He didn't do the Virgin Islands job. I hope he didn't regret it too much ... Anyway, he took out his wanderlust on these cruises when he could get off. But he settled into a long case at that point, the New Haven Railroad case, which was tried before the Supreme Court, and went on for years — it was Bentley's chief case, Bentley's and Donald's — after his fisheries, which interested him.

ROBERT BROWN: When did you do the portrait — in odd moments?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): When we got back, while he was deciding about whether he would go in with Bentley, or whether he'd go to the Virgin Islands, or just what he would do, he had time to stand for that portrait.

ROBERT BROWN: Your husband's head is up at the very top, and it's a very long and elegant feeling to it, isn't it?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: What is he in, evening dress?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: You wanted to suggest ... something momentary, do you think, or ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well, oh I think I wanted to suggest that he loved ... his gregariousness. He loved going about. And he was a born athlete, a really quite brilliant court tennis player. And there's something about the grace of it, of him in evening dress, that comes through better than in any suit or sweaters. I think that's why I chose it. He was well-coordinated physically. Whatever he took up he could do very skillfully.

ROBERT BROWN: Well the critics said that it was painted very vigorously; and yet it's rather simple in its composition. It's an unusual pose, for you, they said. Is that true? Or did you do other sitters in similar poses?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): No, I don't think I ever did.

ROBERT BROWN: He's turned away, really, and he's just sort of then glancing back ... at you.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes. I don't ... think I gave that thought. It just ... struck well, that pose.

ROBERT BROWN: Did he enjoy sitting for you, or standing for you?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, I think he did, yes. We were just returned from our honeymoon. We were enjoying each other in every aspect ...

ROBERT BROWN: And he was very delighted with your art, your painting.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, he was. He was very supportive of it always. And then took to painting himself! My cousin Edward Forbes used to have us every autumn for a "painters' weekend" He'd have Gardner Cox and Charlie Hopkinson — there were about ten of us — and we'd paint! And when Donald was introduced to the group, Cousin Edward said "Well now, Donald, we're all going to paint!" And Donald said "Fine, my boat's in the harbor, I'll go down, and come back for dinner." "Oh no," said Cousin Edward, "I said we're all going to paint!" And Donald said "But I don't know how to paint. I've never done anything ..." "That's all right," Cousin Edward replied, "We're all going to paint, that's all I know." So off we went, and Donald borrowed materials, and came back, as Charlie Hopkinson called it, "singing like a bird" in his painting. Perfectly realized, perfectly charming watercolor ... Later on, I persuaded him to have a show, and he sold everything in it. So he painted from then on, when he'd go sailing, painted everywhere on his travels, and loved doing it, so he had full appreciation of what was going on in a painting. And greatly enjoyed it. He had a great many sides. He loved music, played the cello, piano — practically any instrument you handed him he could play. And wrote — his book's coming out, I

think, before the year's over, one written sixty years ago.

ROBERT BROWN: What is it on?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): It's about his trip round the world, and its really a very charming and lively performance. It would have been published then, if it hadn't been for wartime restrictions for Houghton Mifflin and a few changes they wanted, and he lost interest. But it'll be nice to have it come out now. They've got all his materials at the Peabody Museum, from that cruise now, so it fits in ...

ROBERT BROWN: You were admired in this show for striking out in what to the reviewers seemed new directions for you. I think they were a little puzzled, they didn't know what direction you would take in the end, you were trying different techniques, perhaps, or different approaches to the portraits; and this show was largely, I think, if not entirely, devoted to portraits. So you were moving toward ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well, it was somehow to get rid of a formula that I'd been working in so completely, of the Boston school of painting, of how to put the paint on, and how to make shadows. When I, along with Gardner Cox, joined a thing called The Painters' Workshop, at night — only ran for a short time, and was very informative — we studied techniques ...

ROBERT BROWN: Who ran it? Just you ... various artists?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): We didn't have anybody running it that I can remember — except Bill Littlefield might have been said to, as far as anybody did. We sort of exchanged methods.

ROBERT BROWN: Bill Littlefield. Was he a painter?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Quite a good painter, William Littlefield. I don't know that he did much. And there I realized that what I wanted to do was ... another formula to be sure, but the Venetian, Reubensian underpainting, in grisaille, and then glazing the color over it. How to develop that, to get the luminosity of the shadows without losing the color, and keep the form simplified ...

ROBERT BROWN: Because you now have the color, that color which you did not have in the beginning. You felt you had quite rich and striking color, and you wanted to give an added quality to it through the gla —

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Shadows were my difficulty. Shadows in the color that I was taught — laying on red, white and yellow worms close to each other — only produced mud for me. So how to get the right luminosity in flesh for portraits.

ROBERT BROWN: And this you feel that you did gain during your time with the Painters' Workshop.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes. I found what I wanted and what to work on, which would stand me in good stead.

ROBERT BROWN: Different kinds of subjects, you mean?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): No, this underpainting, the grisaille with the glaze on top. And the question of just how to get that working.

ROBERT BROWN: Gardner Cox was also mainly a portrait painter, wasn't he?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, you didn't collaborate ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): No.

ROBERT BROWN: But did you discuss, and look, and talk about your work?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, somewhat. I wish we'd done it a lot more; but Gardner was very reticent. The Smithsonian has his painting notes, has, I think, a book, haven't they?

ROBERT BROWN: Yes.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): ...that he's written about it? It's coming out, going to be published, I believe, now. He did it on paper, but he didn't talk about it much. He never talked about his sitters, and practically never talked about — well, occasionally — technique. He taught me a few things, but reluctantly. It came rather like pulling teeth.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you suspect there was a little rivalry there?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well I think possibly, when he worked out some pretty good tricks, like one of spraying an area with fixative and then peeling your charcoal into it — it was an awfully good trick, and very expressive — I think every now and then he was a little reluctant to pass on something that.

ROBERT BROWN: He had certain formulas ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, his own particular inventions that were his trademarks. He was a wonderful listener, and a very good storyteller, but didn't talk about his work as much. But we did exchange.

ROBERT BROWN: Now, the Painters' Workshop, what did it consist of? You would all hire a model, or ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): No, no ... It was an attempt, before the War — somehow that put an end to it — to get the equivalent of a Pure Food Act. To know what you were getting when you bought paints, to know what was in them. To force some kind of registration of ingredients. As it was at the time, you didn't know what you had ...

ROBERT BROWN: I see. So you were not necessarily a painting group, but a group that was lobbying, perhaps.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): No. Well, I don't know exactly how that came into it, because what we did was strictly ... how to apply it for ourselves. I learned, I suppose, very much how to mix my

own paints, how to prime the canvas, with what. We were trying to work our way, to find out what was the quality and nature of the materials we were using.

ROBERT BROWN: And who among you was particularly ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well Bill and Gardner and I —

ROBERT BROWN: Bill Littlefield —

POLLY THAYER (STARR): About three or four others there were, so seven or eight — I can't remember who they were.

ROBERT BROWN: And you just pooled your common knowledge ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, experimented, and pooled the results of the experiments. What seemed to work.

ROBERT BROWN: Also at that Doll & Richards show, the portrait is often shown of the noted writer and essayist Mark Antony DeWolfe Howe. Now he was the father, right? of some of your close friends, Mark, Jr. and Quincy Howe ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, right. And Helen.

ROBERT BROWN: And Helen. Did you ask him to sit for you? Or did the family, or he ask you to do a portrait?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): I don't remember how it came about. I visited them every summer, wherever they were, and it was when I was visiting them. I imagine I probably asked him. I'm sure he didn't ask me ...

ROBERT BROWN: What were you trying to capture? You simply asked him to sit for you, and ... What was it? Was he a striking looking person? He looks rather formal. Was he in fact, or is that merely the way he was dressed, which to modern ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): I think it's just the way he's dressed. As someone once said about him, if somebody came from Mars and wanted to see an example — the best possible example that could be found — of the human race, homo sapiens, Mark Howe should be produced. Humanly speaking ... well, in every way, he was a darling. You couldn't have found a nicer example of homo sapiens than Mark Howe. He was warm, kindly, clever, wise ... He just had everything. [appreciative laughter] And I think my approach has always been to see what the form — if you do some really good looking, good seeing — what the form will reveal of what's underneath. That was what I was taught early on, and that stuck. Not taking it from the inside out, saying I feel this about him, and therefore I'll pick what says that. To approach it in a simple-minded way and just see how much you can say, how much will come through if you do exactly what you're looking at. Seeing it prayerfully — I mean concentratedly — really intensely. I haven't read much about Eakins, I always come back to Eakins ... What's said about him?

ROBERT BROWN: And out of that will come, if all goes well, some revelation, about a person ...?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): That the alchemy of painting ... that that will work. That what you're feeling about it, you will be able to convey.

ROBERT BROWN: But at the time — in that era — there was beginning to be a good deal of talk about expressing yourself, wasn't there?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes. I've never been on that side of the spectrum. Humility before the nature is the thing I understand ... but expressing myself, going into myself, and digging out what's in myself, doesn't come as natural as seeing what identifying with the object will do ...

ROBERT BROWN: In some of the paintings of this time you're beginning to use fairly raw colors, I gather, and juxtapositions that are less subdued than formerly, and some critics, I know ... have a time with that ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): don't like it, no.

ROBERT BROWN: But did you ever know the critics at all, to speak of?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Never knew any of them.

ROBERT BROWN: So these were sort of ... scribblers out there ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Voices totally unknown to me.

ROBERT BROWN: Did their reactions mean much to you, really, or ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): [laughter] Yes, oh yes ... I didn't like anything unfavorable much. But no ... I didn't follow any suggestions. Early on, after the show at Wildenstein, Quincy Howe knew Alfred ... Frankfurter, isn't that his last name? — I don't know, he was a major critic in the Art News — and he said "She's strongest on black and white, tell her to stick to that." I never took any advice that I was given. [laughter] Just went my own way.

ROBERT BROWN: But they are useful at least in telling us what was shown, and what seemed to attract attention.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, right.

ROBERT BROWN: There's also, I guess in this same Doll & Richards show in 1935, a portrait of, I gather, a view from your studio, and that was the so-called "Track Thirteen." Was that overlooking the railyard, because your studio was — where?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): It was number 30 Ipswich Street.

ROBERT BROWN: Isn't that the Fenway ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): That's the Boston artists' stronghold.

ROBERT BROWN: You were there for some time?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, I had a s...

ROBERT BROWN: So you were alone, when you were in the studio —

but there were a number of other artists around you at all times.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Oh yes, but I didn't know any of them. It was very solitary, really. It was a mistake. I wish I'd known more. I remember Jack Levine. I saw him and was much drawn to him, and hoped I could make friends with him. But it's pretty difficult ... if you're married, if you've got children coming along, if you're working with the Quakers, trying to do your own thing, trying to keep two houses going ... there isn't the time for much. Your husband's friends ... you don't branch out much. And none of his friends were painters, actually. Might have been, but weren't.

ROBERT BROWN: The opportunities were merely mights-have-been, but never were.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes. Any real research after I was married and started a family, any real digging into it, was not ... That's why portraits sort of kept up, because they ran themselves. But ... take the initiative, and take the time off otherwise, was difficult, got more and more so.

ROBERT BROWN: Eventually you came to some terms with it, but it must have been trying for you in the '30s from time to time.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well, it was a problem.

ROBERT BROWN: In this very show we've been talking about [1935], after he'd been, William James, the painter, wrote you, and said he was amazed at your cleverness. He liked the Mark Howe portrait best. He said "Hale and Benson couldn't show us where to look for that something that you're beginning to capture, because they didn't even know about it themselves ..."

POLLY THAYER (STARR): [laughter] Is that what Billy says?

ROBERT BROWN: Yes ... and then says, "Perhaps Thayer — Abbott Thayer — and Eakins are the only men who could have shown-"

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Did he really? Where ... I never received it!

ROBERT BROWN: This is in March 1935, writing you.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Isn't that grand!

ROBERT BROWN: And then he says Jacovlev — who is the Russian who'd just come, I think, to teach at the Museum School —

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: He said, "Jacovlev, bless him, has been able to show me, at least, in what direction to look."

POLLY THAYER (STARR): That's it! What direction to look. That's what Wickey's ... Why we don't see ... Why we have to be shown the direction when it's there, seems so extraordinary, but it just has to be shown you, doesn't it, some of us, anyway?

ROBERT BROWN: Was James someone with whom you were quite compatible?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Oh I loved Billy James. I didn't know him well, but socially speaking, his wife was very ... loved people about her, and had a sort of salon–

ROBERT BROWN: That was ... Alice?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Alice, yes. And we were on the list, and we would go for everything. I never saw Billy alone, but I saw him at his parties, and was very much drawn to him. He was one of those dears like Mark Howe, and he ... But I like — don't you like his paintings? I think he was an awfully good painter. I respected his painting enormously, and knew he was after just what I was. So ... that's interesting. Eakins and who else did he — Jacovlev — oh, yes!

ROBERT BROWN: And Thayer, Abbott Thayer —

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes. Abbott Thayer ... hmm ... I don't know. Funny, I wouldn't have thought so ...

ROBERT BROWN: So you were complimented[?] by a painter this time, not a critic — [laughter]. In '36, I guess, you did this portrait of May Sarton. How did that come about? Evidently you had met when you provided some furnishings for a theatre group with which she was involved.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: And this is certainly a striking portrait, which is only now, in 19- well, in 1994, transferred to the Harvard University Art Museum, having been kept by May Sarton all those years. I gather it was initially bought by the teacher Paul Sachs, Edward Forbes's colleague, on condition it eventually go from Miss Sarton to Harvard. What were the circumstances of your painting her?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well she came and stayed with me in Hingham, with that Neyan Stevens.

ROBERT BROWN: Ah, the woman born in Egypt. She knew her ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes. Well, only through me. Met her there. And we — Neyan and I — painted May while she sat for us during the visit. And, didn't I tell you about Neyan's — ha! Neyan Stevens (I'd met her painting at Fontainebleau, it had been a sort of a side interest of hers) had painted a good portrait of May in Hingham, and she took it back with her to New York. Next thing I knew I was approached by a District Attorney from New York. They said that a pair of Lass brothers had been arrested for forgeries. And they said that art forgeries were one of the most difficult things in the world to prove. Please come on to New York. They've got a portrait that they say is by Picasso, which we have reason to think is a forgery. Turned out — I went on, and I cooperated — that it was Neyan's portrait of May that was being sold as a Picasso! And I could give them chapter and verse for where it had been done. What happened I don't know, but in the course of this case, they took me on to see the Lass Brothers' collection, and there was every painting ... If you

wanted a Rembrandt, there was a Rembrandt for you, if you wanted a Vermeer, there was a Vermeer. And [laughter] forgeries of every great[?] painter — some of them fairly good — and among them was this! Neyan's apartment in New York had been robbed, and her fur coat taken from the closet along with this canvas. Apparently it was one of the times that they really were able to catch a forger red-handed, that one.

ROBERT BROWN: So May was with you and Neyan at your new Hingham place.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, the rented house there.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, your rented house, before you built. And what was she doing, was she writing?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): She would have been writing by then. I think she'd given up the acting, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: What was she like at that time? You knew her a bit, by then ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, I did. Oh, she was great fun. She was really very ... is charismatic the word? She could make anything come alive for you. I've never known anybody who had quite that quality of imagination, that made things real that she was imagining with the same power. And she was the best company, and the most interesting. And very generous.

ROBERT BROWN: She had a very striking, almost haunted look to her there, a fierceness ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): She was very handsome, I would have said, and a very good actress, yes. Lesbian, but I think lesbians make very good friends, very generous friends. They aren't ... don't tend to be jealous, in my experience ...

ROBERT BROWN: Following that show, you had a show at Grace Horne Galleries here in 1938. William James again writes you in February of '38.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Oh does he! What does he say?

ROBERT BROWN: He says, "I was greatly interested to see your paintings, to see the change that has come, is coming into them." And then he says, "To get at the form, and to get the form into tone and color, to get away from the copying — what a job! And I congratulate you."

POLLY THAYER (STARR): [pleased laughter] Really!

ROBERT BROWN: So, [according to] his letter, [you'd] accomplished much of what you said you were struggling to achieve ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: "I particularly admired the portrait of May Sarton; and those flowers" — now what does he refer to there?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): I haven't any idea, because I didn't think

I was doing flowers at that point. Can't imagine.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, there were some done. At this show, you were in the front gallery, and in the rear of Grace Horne's was an exhibition of Charlie Hopkinson's watercolors.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: You must have known him a bit ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes I did. I knew him on these "painters' weekends." Charlie Hopkinson had always seemed to me ... a good painter — I respected him — but ... his color didn't strike particularly. I'll never forget that show. Brought tears to my eyes. He must have been in his eighties by then, and he'd gone out to stay with his daughter in New Zealand, who'd married a diplomat, and they had a lot of diplomatic parties under a pink tent. And Charlie did a series of the pink tent, and the color had all come together in a kind of a hymn, that was so beautiful. I'd never felt that ... never moved me before. Suddenly this thing had happened, in his eighties, that was — for me — was very moving. I'll never forget that show of his.

ROBERT BROWN: The work you showed there involved, for the first time I guess, a good many landscapes.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Maybe we'd want to talk just a little bit about some of those.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, I look back at those landscapes with a good deal of surprise now that you've got me thinking with all of this. I'd been on a cruise with Donald. I can't say that I like the sea much. I get sick. Instantly. I used to even get sick in an automobile. I was a nuisance as a child, seasick ... So I would go cruising with him faithfully, but I would lie down all the time we were under way. As soon as we came into port, at night, I was activated. [laughter] I'd been two weeks cruising, and Quincy Howe had been with us. And he'd come fresh from Washington, where he'd been at hearings testifying on the conditions of the Tennessee miners, which were grisly. And he would tell us something about it. And I remember his saying, thoughtfully, at the end of ten days, "You know, if they knew, in Washington — if the Tennessee miners could know the conditions under which we've been for ten days — the overcrowding, the stenches ... [laughter] What it is, living on a very small boat, three of you, you know. Have you cruised ever?

ROBERT BROWN: No ..., no.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): It's not comfortable. And I remember thinking, "Boy, you said it!" Anyway, I was put ashore at Lyme, Connecticut, and they went on for another week. And I never felt about the land — Who was it, is supposed to have kissed the land when he got off a boat? Isn't there a picture ...?

ROBERT BROWN: Well, Columbus is supposed to have.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): That's it! He kissed it? Where? America or Spain? Well, I wanted to kiss the ground! I'd never felt about the land as I .... It was newly revealed to me, as if I'd been born again! I'd never done any landscape before, as far as I can remember, of any kind. And whatever came was just as primitive as ... the only influence anybody mentions as I remember, in reviews, was Douanier Rousseau, because there's a primitive quality. At the time I couldn't analyze it, didn't know what I was doing. Just there it was, and I wanted to celebrate it, praise it, it was so wonderful. And I could see line, design, even the color. You get a little of it there perhaps in that one of the house.

ROBERT BROWN: So when you landed, when you were on shore, you wanted to mention ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes! I just set to work. I went to a little inn, and got out my paints, and just painted like mad for whatever it was — two weeks, three weeks.

ROBERT BROWN: And this brings to mind a poem by Frances Cornford.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, it's the way I felt about what I was looking at: How rich the elms, and large, and summer- sad, My childhood trees. I thought of them as people, when I had No words for them like these. I drink their presence, and I go my ways, They bring no altered mood. These heavy trees are part of all my days. Like sleep they are, and food.

ROBERT BROWN: And your feelings were very analogous to that?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, right.

ROBERT BROWN: Well this is a painting of a house. Is this in Hingham?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): That's all they are, again and again, those little little houses, kind of lost in the big trees. Looking back, I think Hawthorne must have given me a little feeling for the matiere, because as I go along in time I like laying the paint on so thick you can feel it ...

ROBERT BROWN: And it is laid on quite thickly here.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, but later on I get to putting it on so thick that it's ...

ROBERT BROWN: But you can certainly sense the embrace by the foliage, by the trees particularly, of the buildings. The buildings are just sort of peeping through.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, they're almost swallowed up.

ROBERT BROWN: Many of the leaves are rather feathery, and light.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes. Well, you remember Queen Elizabeth's motto was "Per molto variare la natura e bella." And it's the infinite variations of the soft and the piquant and the hard and the large and the small — and the textures.

ROBERT BROWN: And in that measure, you've captured the richness and variety of this foliage.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: The buildings themselves, on the other hand, are delineated rather crisply. Is that intentional, or ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well yes. Again the difference ... the solid, man-made exactitude of it as compared to the fuzz and fur around it. They go on and on ...

ROBERT BROWN: In some of these you can scarcely see any indication ... In one, a truck in the shadow of a tree, and in another one, automobiles, very small elements. The rest is entirely fields and, again, foliage, isn't it?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you do these for several years?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, I did.

ROBERT BROWN: And would you say you felt doing these, sort of liberated? At this time you weren't doing portraits ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well, it was a totally unconscious process. I felt as if I were getting what I wanted out of it.

ROBERT BROWN: Even in —as occasionally in this one here, in Wickford, Rhode Island— and that happened to be simply a place you'd pulled up on one of these cruises —

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Where there's a good many buildings — nevertheless, the ... the trees, particularly, are the dominant element, aren't they?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: For example, this tree here almost looks as though it has arms —it's the boughs and [?], and the leaves— ready to reach out and embrace or grab something. Was this conscious, or do you think this was just ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): It was unconscious ... just happened. Just because I had nothing in mind back of what I wanted to say. I had no Constables, or no ... I wasn't thinking of anything but the immediate reaction, as I say.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you think the comparison with the Douanier Rousseau was legitimate? In fact, would you have been very aware of Rousseau's work?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): No I'm not sure I even was.

ROBERT BROWN: Probably very little seen at that time.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): I'm not particularly wild about Rousseau's work anyway. [laughter] I don't see tigers and things ... But, uncomplicated. I'm not getting any plein air or — what is it Cezanne — I'm not working space into it, or theories of shapes

or cones and anything else, it's just a child's ... They're my childhood trees, my fairy tale, my Grimms, little Grimm houses and [laughter]

ROBERT BROWN: Did you by then have children? Were you beginning to be aware of the child's clear sight? That might have affected you a bit, too.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Hmm. Yes, I think so.

ROBERT BROWN: You studied too with Hans Hoffman in Provincetown. I think you may have mentioned it briefly. You remembered chiefly the push and pull, but there were some other things you were mentioning. You had a time assimilating what he was ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, I did. I suppose I assimilated something with relation to this "dynamic tension" that he referred to constantly, and that did appeal to me. I felt that I knew what he was talking about somehow, and I would face a landscape thinking of where the tensions came and how to balance them, but I couldn't get much more out of it. I wonder what others were getting, too, because in the class you saw such a variety of results, with the nude model in front of them, that his students were producing! One student would produce black and white gray checks, week after week. They'd be different ones each time, a little bit, larger or smaller, but that seemed to be ... Why he was producing that in the face of a nude model I couldn't tell. When I started to do what nude models suggest to me, Hoffman had fine scorn for it. He said it was just paper dolls! That I'd got to divest myself from that approach entirely. And I would find that somehow I was starting at the collarbone, to compose the drawing of the nude. It never got across to me, really, what he was telling me about it. Gardner Cox once said the hardest thing for him in a portrait was the background. And I knew exactly what he meant. The relationship of what you've got in front of you, putting it together with the background, is enormously difficult; and what Hoffman was doing with relation to space and putting the nude model together with the background — I couldn't feel my way to it. But if I went out to do some homework on landscape to produce for the end of the week, I did feel I was getting a little more about what was in front of me. There was more of a unity that I could get the push-pull working in. But I was never very clear about it.

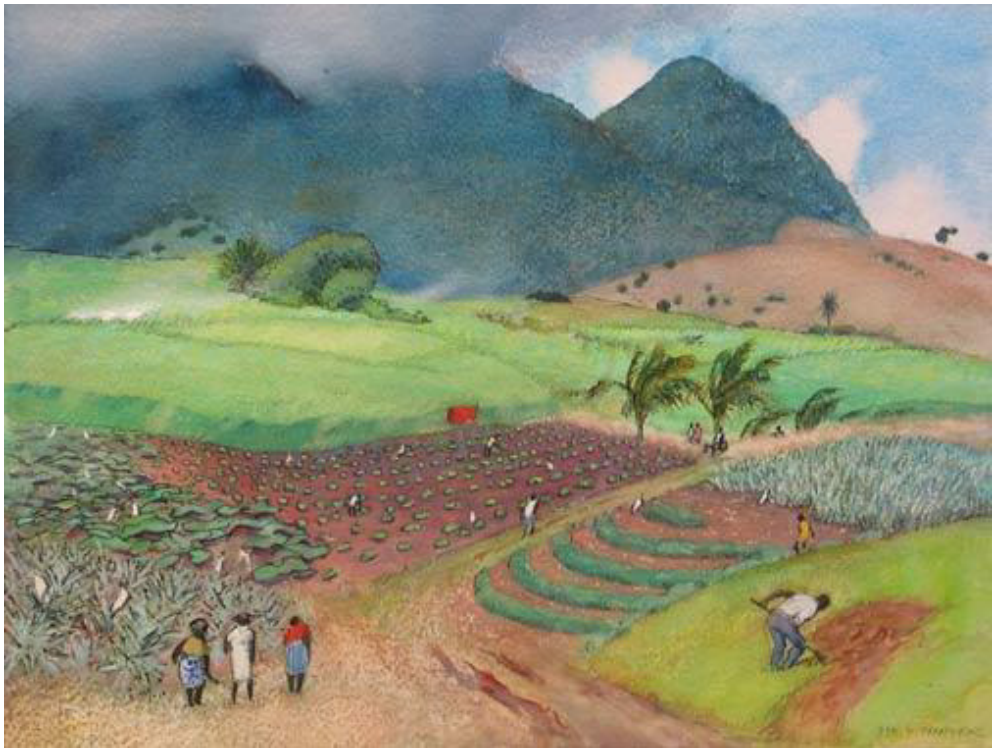
ROBERT BROWN: As you look back, though, there may have been some effect, some positive ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes. I think, by osmosis, I was getting something about tensions involved, that would sort the masses in front of me ... sort them out, and get them in balance. But Maud Morgan wasn't much of a help on it.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, you asked her, because she had some idea ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): I asked her because I knew she'd spent a lot of time with it. She said it was all very new at the time, what he had to say, and it was very difficult, and that's about

what I got out of it [laughter] ... And that it was not color, that he never talked about color — and when I mentioned composition, she said no, didn't think he talked about composition. So I could only get negatives, like mentioning God...



February 1, Thursday: At the artist's home in Boston, Robert Brown and Polly Thayer Starr wrapped up their Oral History Interview for the Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian Institution:

ROBERT BROWN: Now we were talking about your shows and activities through the 1930s, and you mentioned some recollections of Hans Hoffman, and also of changes in your paintings. But you also, as I recall, emphasized that there were more and more demands on you time, and you had more and more time therefore away from painting. Would that be fair to say?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well yes, it would indeed. The development of what painting was going to mean for me takes a turn at that point due to exigencies of time. I've read somewhere that Cezanne didn't go to his mother's funeral because it would have taken a day from his painting. [laughter] It got to be that kind of a choice for me, practically.

ROBERT BROWN: And for you, you chose ... otherwise, is that right?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well ... portraiture took over, pretty much, from then on, because it was ... more practical.

ROBERT BROWN: You weren't able to ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well, it is such a consuming business, the internal development of what you want to say, that it takes ... absorbs everything you've got, so that ... I had to make choices, and the sittings and the exigencies of portrait painting worked out better And there was more definition ... I couldn't put all my time into painting, which is what I really wanted to do, with the family and ...

ROBERT BROWN: and you had children by then.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): I had children, and my husband ... he was Assistant Attorney-General, and decided to take two years to sail around the world in a small boat; we got engaged before he left, and he sent for me to come to Genoa, said he wasn't waiting till he got home, and we got married in Genoa.

ROBERT BROWN: I recall that, yes.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): He was very gifted socially, and also a gifted athlete, crazy about Court Tennis. And that meant a regular, triumphant circuit of tournaments, from Long Island to Virginia. There were only eight courts in the United States, but those courts kept pretty busy, at Long Island, and whether or not I was going to abandon him on those — he was always very supportive of me, my painting, and it seemed pretty mean to just leave him to do it on his own. There was that, and there was ... The stage had always been a love of mine.

ROBERT BROWN: The stage.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, the theatre. I'd acted in the Cercle Français at Harvard — they had a director of the Théâtre des Variétés in Paris who'd retired and was in charge at Harvard, and was a marvelous director, and I was given the part of Dorine in Moliere's Tartuffe, and that started me off. That was great fun. [laughter] Joined the Footlight Club, and then an old friend of mine from Ireland ...

ROBERT BROWN: The Footlight Club was here in Boston?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): It was in Brookline. But a really first-class little group. Better in some ways than professional. And then a real friend of mine from Ireland came over here, Mary Manning, she'd been acting in the ... Gate Theatre with Sarah Aldgood, and she also wrote plays, and directed, and she started the Poet's Theatre in Cambridge, which has been a great success.

ROBERT BROWN: Would this have been, say, in the 1920s or '30s?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, right. And Bill Alfred was writing plays at that point, and Archie MacLeish had some new plays. It was very tempting, so I acted. It got into my blood stream. I was really very keen about it, so that took time ...

ROBERT BROWN: And this continued after you marriage, you still acted now and then?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well, yes, right. When we got home from Genoa, this came up as an alternative to more time-consuming pursuits. And then, joined the Friends, joined the Society of Friends. Friends — having a Puritan streak — have never been enthusiastic about the arts. In fact, there were stories about people being read out of Meeting because they had a piano, or because they ... Some Friend burnt his violin.

ROBERT BROWN: Then why did the Friends appeal to you?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well [laugh], everything else about them. Their spontaneity, their genuine quality, their true democracy ... Well, there was a sermon of the famous preacher Buttrick I listened to, in which he said you had to join, if you meant business, some group — you couldn't do it on your own. So I decided that within a year I would, and everybody said "You've got only two choices, Quaker or Catholic. They both mean business. It makes a difference in your life." And the Quakers have no hierarchy, there's no minister in the regular Quaker group, and you have to do all the work, yourself. There's no paid staff, and it means that Quakers are ... committees within committees within committees, working at it. It is extremely time-consuming. So between that and dedication to art, and that story of Cezanne skipping his mother's funeral to work, it gives a little the feeling of the pressures of time, if you really are into such time-consuming things.

ROBERT BROWN: You were still having a great many shows, or at least in a great many shows, into the 1940s.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, well, I kept in.

ROBERT BROWN: For example, at the Contemporary Arts Gallery in New York City, you had a one-person show!

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you recall that at all? Was this arranged for you, or did you solicit a show in New York, or ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Can't remember how I got in with Miss Francis. No, I didn't.

ROBERT BROWN: Miss Francis was the Director?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): I don't think it's still operating. She was the director, and I got a citation, a medal — what was it? — from them. And I think then they asked for a one-person show. They might even have had a group showing at which I showed a painting.

ROBERT BROWN: Well the brochure advertising your show said that you have simplified, that you've "discarded the accidental and superficial." Is this related to what you described last time when you were sailing with your husband and you went on shore, and you had a revelation, I suppose? I think it was partly to simplify. Some critics even use the word ... There's an element of "primitivism." You're no longer concerned with this extreme

detail that you describe learning from people like Philip Hale.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, right. Well, it seemed to come naturally. I had no previous influences to get between me and my work. It just sprang so spontaneously, the delight in it, and the feeling that I could express it ... adequately ... what I was feeling. This gives you a little idea ...

ROBERT BROWN: Now we're looking at examples of this work.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): I just started right in without any fumbling, I think that was the first thing ... The land suddenly took on new meaning, having been at sea for weeks.

ROBERT BROWN: This one is "Wickford" —I suppose Wickford, Rhode Island— and it's the backs, and just partial glimpses, of old buildings, houses and ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, right.

ROBERT BROWN: But they're almost overwhelmed by the foliage.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Were you doing any of this consciously, or, as you said, this just was spontaneous?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): It was just pure delight in the fairy tale quality of the dark woods and the ... There's a little old one over there.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes, here's another example. Here's another one, called "Tucked In," and in fact the old house literally does look to be tucked in very dense foliage. We're just again getting a glimpse of it. So you weren't trying to do portraits, so to speak, of buildings, or detailed recollections.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): No.

ROBERT BROWN: This kind of thing was very much approved and liked by art critics and as a result, I guess, you continued to have a good many shows. Now were you actually painting as much as you had been, say, back ten years earlier, with all your other interests, perhaps, and pressure as to ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): No, I don't think so. Between the children, and ... One child was always sick. I wondered if I could raise her. She had allergies, she was permanently in bed, it seemed to me, up till about ten years old. No, I had no time to think about it, to dig into what I wanted to say, so that's why I kept up with portraits a lot, because that sort of took care of itself, during the sittings. It was a little different.

ROBERT BROWN: And were these portraits achieved by recommendation? Would one sitter recommend you to another?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well, the first show I had, showing portraits at Doll & Richards, I remember there were eighteen commissions from it. And then eighteen commissions led to eighteen more. It grew of itself. I never had any agent, or.

And, generally — I never had any all-portrait show, because the portraits went right off to the ... I didn't bother them back for any — I didn't need it, because the commissions came in.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you change in your manner of doing portraiture, now? We talked about how you simplified in these wonderful landscapes from your earlier work.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well here you can see ... different styles ... I was feeling my way. And then we move into sort of Eakins period.

ROBERT BROWN: An Eakins period, yes — the New England Lady we talked about.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes ... Did we? And then, the sitter dictates, really, pretty much, what I ....

ROBERT BROWN: Well now, do we have some here that are later, say over the 1940s or so?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Ted Ferris, I think ...

ROBERT BROWN: He's from the 1940s, of Worcester ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: He looks like a rather hefty fellow, with a great smile on his face and twinkling eyes. Would you have tried to capture someone in such an animated posture in the past, or was this somewhat new for you, in portraits?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): No, I think the sitter dictates what happens at any given time, pretty much, as far as the expression or ...

ROBERT BROWN: Well now this is 1942, and you seem to be painting rather broadly, is that fair to say?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, I wanted to ask a moment about ... There's a portrait of Lawrence Dennis, which was shown at Doll & Richards, probably in the early '30s. Now, this is a rather ... a man that's rather ill at ease, or certainly puts the viewer ill at ease, he has a grimace, scowl. What was it again — the sitter dictated what you did?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Was this commissioned by him?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): No, I was just interested in his face. Him, as a person, too.

ROBERT BROWN: And what was he. Was he a person who was well known?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, he was. Dear me, now ... I have his material, and I should have looked him up. He was on a lecture tour for years. He was, I think, jailed at one point, but he was in the Foreign Service. He was Fascist, and at that period, it

didn't mean yet what ...

ROBERT BROWN: No, it was almost ten years before the war.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): That's about all I can tell you right now about him. I ought to be able to remember more, but I don't.

ROBERT BROWN: But by the 1940s the portraits had the merit at least of taking less time.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, they did, really.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you feel, after you'd done them, did you feel real satisfaction? Did you feel you were growing as a painter?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Oh, I think so, I think so.

ROBERT BROWN: Now we're suddenly looking at a fairly recent work, 1982, a portrait of Linda. Was this a commissioned portrait, as they had been years before?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes. Tasha Tudor asked me to do it.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, the children's book illustrator.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, right.

ROBERT BROWN: Was this of her family, or a friend?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): That was a friend who was living with her at the time.

ROBERT BROWN: And what were you asked to convey, just a likeness?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): I wasn't told. Just, do a portrait of her.

ROBERT BROWN: And do you recall your reaction to her?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): No.

ROBERT BROWN: Well there is this simplification still, and a rather muted palette. Do you suppose that merely echoed her personality, or ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Mmmm.

ROBERT BROWN: So in the portraits there's been a wonderful consistency over a number of years.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well, I think ... Yes, I think you could say that, right.

ROBERT BROWN: You had another show at the Contemporary Arts Gallery in New York following the first one, in 1942. It was part of a group show. You again showed some of these buildings. "House and Garden" was the name of one that you had. Would you go down to New York to the openings of these exhibitions?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Don't like openings, no.

ROBERT BROWN: But would you make it your business to get down sometime while the show was up and just look at it on your own?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): I think so, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: One critic, New York critic, having seen that,

said "It strikes me as the work of a folk artist, with technical training." Would that have been an insult, or ...?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): [laughter] No, I think it ... I've always liked Rousseau very much ... I think that's fair enough. And why, I couldn't tell you. It just happened that way.

ROBERT BROWN: That same year, 1942, you had an exhibit at the Institute of Modern Art in Boston, now called the Institute of Contemporary Art. You were in a whole group of painters of this area. Did you know that place fairly well at that time? You knew Nathaniel Saltonstall ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, I did. I'd been on the board for a while.

ROBERT BROWN: You had.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, in the very early days of it. It was timely. We needed the fresh air.

ROBERT BROWN: The museum wasn't, for example, filling that need.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): No, not in the contemporary scene.

ROBERT BROWN: Did it achieve some success fairly quickly?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): I would say it did. Yes, I think so.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you recall what kinds of shows they had? A lot of European things?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): I'm trying to think who we did have. Jim Plaut was a very enterprising director. Think we had Tchelitchev ... And Nat Saltonstall had a very good eye ... remarkable ... So they'd have been the best. I can't remember others, and that I should have boned up on, because that's what I've been trying to ... get them on the telephone about.

ROBERT BROWN: Now the Institute itself was mostly housed, literally, in houses, wasn't it, here in the Back Bay of Boston, at that time?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well, when I was on the Board, we met at the Arts and Sciences ... What's that building on Newbury Street between Arlington and Berkeley?

ROBERT BROWN: It's now a department store.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Oh really?

ROBERT BROWN: The Arts and Sciences — Oh no, the Academy of Arts and Sciences.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Academy of Arts and Sciences, what is that now?

ROBERT BROWN: I don't know, exactly.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well, in there, that was our headquarters.

ROBERT BROWN: And your role was, what, choose what you might be exhibiting?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): I really don't remember my reports on the state of the organization. I think Jim did the choosing and then submitted the list to us.

ROBERT BROWN: What was Jim Plaut like in those days? He was the first Director.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes. Well, I remember, very adequate in every way — interested, and a good eye.

ROBERT BROWN: And what about some of your fellow Board members, do you recall some of them? You've mentioned Nathaniel Saltonstall.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, Nat's the only one I can

ROBERT BROWN: What was he like? You say he had a great eye.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Oh, Nat was [laughter] Oh, he was just a boon to the art world. He loved everything. He was an architect in his own right, but he just had an unerring eye. Musically, he discovered Leonard Bernstein. I mean, he was his first patron. I don't think he'd been heard of until Nat had parties for him and launched him. Music, painting, architecture ... he seemed to have an equal flair for any of the arts.

ROBERT BROWN: Did the Institute of Modern Art have a fairly sizeable audience, or was it a rather small group of people who were interested?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): That I find hard to say. I suppose interest in the arts was definitely limited, the plastic arts anyway. But the Institute had a very good launching. It did very well.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you think it really provided an important ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, I think it did. I don't think there was anything else that could have brought in the outside world to the Boston, rather hermetic, scene, artistically.

ROBERT BROWN: It was a fairly hermetic scene, was it, at that time?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well, I would say so. There were people who ... remarkable technique, but ... people with very strong opinions, like Ives Gammell. I mean, there was no painting after Fragonard, according to him. [laughter] It was a pretty closed world, I would say. I remember when I went to New York, and brought back some of the work I'd done there. I remember my teacher wagging his head, saying "Oh dear, the slime of the serpent, I can see it!" I mean, it was a question of either/or, not both/and, very definitely. So it needed something fairly vigorous to

ROBERT BROWN: That teacher, who would that have been, Philip Hale?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): That was Philip Hale, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: And he was saying that seriously, too.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Quite seriously, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Well there was a Society of Independent Artists. Did they ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, they did, but I don't think they cut much ice.

ROBERT BROWN: They sort of ... showed to each other ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): On the fringe, right. I don't feel they had the influence ... that was strong enough to last.

ROBERT BROWN: Then in the '50s there was a Boston Arts Festival. Do you recall that at all? They would have shows on the Public Gardens.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, yes. That was very successful. We don't still have that, do we?

ROBERT BROWN: No we don't.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): When did that stop? It was a great success!

ROBERT BROWN: Almost thirty years ago.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Enormous attendance, and I thought grew every year. How long since it's gone?

ROBERT BROWN: Oh at least thirty years.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Really! I wonder why we couldn't have revived that? And then it extended itself, and they even had theatre outside, something of Shaw's.

ROBERT BROWN: Would you say that Festival during the 1950s played a role somewhat like the Institute of Modern Art? I mean, it brought it to far more people, didn't it, modern art?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Or like the independents in New York or in Paris, it really ... it was a fresh breeze, and very vigorous.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, you have told me earlier that in the last, oh, number of years, you've really only shown occasionally, for the reasons you've talked about, all these pressures. Was that the prime reason, would you say, when you simply hadn't the time to assemble things?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Right.

ROBERT BROWN: The old gallery here in Boston, Vose Gallery, gave you a solo show in 1950. Do you recall how that came about?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well, Mr. Vose has always been a patron. He's been interested and sent my pictures around, to Florida or wherever, other places. And he followed my fortunes, offered a show. I can't remember the name of the man who was running it for him at the time, but he said that if I would — I don't remember the conditions exactly of what he suggested — but that they would make a Grandma Moses of me if I would sign up with them and do more of a certain kind of style. And I didn't feel I could sign up to do anything very ...

ROBERT BROWN: Because you had not arrived at that style consciously anyway.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): No, and I didn't know whether I wanted to keep up with it or whether I didn't.

ROBERT BROWN: That would have been Robert Vose, Senior.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Actually, I doubt Mr. Vose would have made such a proposition. This was somebody who was working for him at the time, I think. Perhaps his idea. But Mr. Vose was always sympathetic, and interested.

ROBERT BROWN: Well at that time, then, did a good many people go to see the show?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, I can remember a good many sales and commissions — portrait commissions — from it. I think I had a portrait of Justice Ray Wilkins, Supreme Court

ROBERT BROWN: -of Massachusetts ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Right, yes. And that ... certain portraits were guaranteed to bring in other commissions.

ROBERT BROWN: It received quite a lot of press at that time, too. Boston had several newspapers more than it does now, and I notice that most of the reviewers talk about the primitive quality, and that sort of thing that they were already talking about ten years before. But you wouldn't say that your work was hardening into some kind of style by, say, the 1950s.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): No, I wouldn't. Because I wasn't doing enough of the landscape, and the portraiture was always a definite line of what I wanted to do. Wanted to get at the invisible through the visible. I don't think there was much change of style in probing for that.

ROBERT BROWN: Well that's interesting, what you say, because here's a review of a show you had at the Childs Gallery here in Boston in 1955, and the person — it's anonymous — no, Dorothy Adlow, the Christian Science Monitor ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, she was a very good reviewer.

ROBERT BROWN: You had "formerly shown a preference for painting in a primitive manner, but this crop of pictures is almost entirely free of the ingenuous attributes of untutored workmanship." And she praises your portraits, "naturalistic and efficient and genial portraits," then mentions you do landscapes, but with a personal feeling, so what you just said evidently the critics saw as well, that you weren't lapsing into a formula. I mean, was painting, by, say, the '50s and '60s as joyous an experience for you as I believe it was when you were younger?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Oh yes ... yes, always.

ROBERT BROWN: Would you have called it recreation?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Re-creation, yes, but not

ROBERT BROWN: -not just for fun.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Not as we use the word today, no. No, I'd say it was ... bliss. I don't know, what is that?

ROBERT BROWN: It was bliss. And it was also ... Was it very intense?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes. Yes, it is. Oh, I'd like to quote Beckmann there.

ROBERT BROWN: Max Beckmann?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes. It's "a passionate seeking for the invisible dimension behind the visible, through looking." Through the eye, not only with the eye ... In fact, when you're not doing it, you feel something's wrong. Perhaps you're coming down with the flu or something ... It's all-important.

ROBERT BROWN: Were you able with some ease to put aside all else when you were seeking, when you were working?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes. Yes, I put aside ... yes, I could put aside everything I ... didn't want to do, until I accepted the responsibilities of being a Quaker and being a wife and mother. Then the conflicts become severe. But always when working ... everything is blocked out but that, that's ... ecstasy.

ROBERT BROWN: By and large you were able to find time ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Ecstasy! Yes ... right. I was lucky enough to be ... so situated I could get people to look after the children, or cook, or do whatever.

ROBERT BROWN: You said your husband was very supportive

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: At the same time, he was demanding, because he was a very busy and ... gregarious man.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well whatever I did he would have accepted. But I didn't like to leave him in the position of a widower [laugh], when he was triumphantly ...

ROBERT BROWN: Now did any of your three children show interest in following in your footsteps.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well I lost one. The other two are both, I know, talented, but haven't ... One studied for the law, so she's a lawyer by passing her Bar exams in two states. She's hasn't followed it, she's a social worker ... a Quaker par excellence. And my other daughter was a teacher for years, and lives abroad, and could be a good sculptress but has never followed up on it.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you think of pushing them to become artists?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): No. No, whatever they want. And ... I always liked a thing in Doctor's Dilemma of Shaw's, to the effect

that if ... Whenever the character in it is asked whether somebody should be a painter or not, he just says "Unless you're prepared to use your mother's milk if necessary for your medium, for your ink – don't do it."

ROBERT BROWN: Who said that.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Shaw, yes. Unless you're prepared to give all, so to speak, think about it ... twice.

ROBERT BROWN: But you had had a drive from a very early age. You had determined that you would be doing this, regardless.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: The series of exhibitions – In the sixties and later, you had only occasional exhibitions. You had an exhibition at Childs Gallery again in 1963. How would that come about? Did you know Charles Childs pretty well, the proprietor of that gallery?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): No. I wonder how that did come about. I don't remember. He must have invited it.

ROBERT BROWN: Well the exhibition in 1963 was of Boston scenes, it seems, much of it. Perhaps they thought that naturally would appeal to their ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes. He was very interested in the Boston artists. He cared a lot about bringing them along, and making them known.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you get to know him at all?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Very slightly ... And admired him very much. He was very knowledgeable, and very philosophic.

ROBERT BROWN: In the '60s, there are a couple of shows in New York. How did they come about? They were at the Pietroantonio Gallery – you had a show in '64, and I think another in '65.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Pietroantonio, too, was it?

ROBERT BROWN: Yes.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): That was through a friend in Philadelphia – a sculptress, Agnes Yarnell. She knew the gallery. It was new, it was just starting up, and she suggested that I do this ... arranged it, that I should have it there.

ROBERT BROWN: Mmhmm. The Art News, in '64, reviewing your show, said that the work was "conventional but individual. The work is calm, quiet, competent, the mood is pastoral." And I gather you mainly did show landscapes.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Would you say that's a fair assessment? That the work is individual but conventional?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): [laugh] I would balk at the word conventional ... but I suppose that's fair enough. I don't

suppose it's unconventional. I'd rather not think of it in terms of convention.

ROBERT BROWN: Because you certainly weren't consciously ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): No, I wasn't ... Not of the Gammell School, of trying to maintain a tradition of any kind ...

ROBERT BROWN: Did you know Ives Gammell a bit?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, he was a cousin of sorts, but I didn't know him well at all. And I think he was a brilliant illustrator, and very technically proficient, but that's ...

ROBERT BROWN: Well I know that year before last — 1994 — you had a very nice show — one-person show — at the Copley Society here in Boston. How did that come about? Had they been watching your work? Had you shown your work there over the years?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): No. No, I'd ... dropped out, you might say, as far as any publicity or showing went. I have a godson, Francis Cunningham, who's a painter in New York, and he got after me, and my husband and my daughter, and they all pushed, and said they wanted me to do this, have a ... sort of semi-retrospective, have another show. So I did!

ROBERT BROWN: Are you glad you did?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, very glad I did. And a little flurry has occurred since. The Museum in Duxbury has showed something, and I've had a show at the Quaker Center — we've got a new Community Room, celebrating our artists —

ROBERT BROWN: Is that here in Boston?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): In Cambridge. And ... Where was the other ... A show at the French Library, "Light" — I didn't know Harvey Cox was ... is he something of a painter?

ROBERT BROWN: I don't know.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): It's a wonderful thing, and he writes about it ... it's all around light, the subject matter. And now two more things coming up, all happening in just a couple of years since then.

ROBERT BROWN: Isn't that nice!

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, nice.

ROBERT BROWN: And do these flurries include commissions, whereby you've been doing ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well, they practically sold out on the Copley show! And nothing was for sale in the Museum at Duxbury. Would have been, some of it ...

ROBERT BROWN: Were you showing — primarily what, landscapes?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): No. The curator chose what she wanted. I think they were all portraits, or heads of people.

ROBERT BROWN: The portraits, would they be brought in by people,

loaned by the owners?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes ... Well, one was a self-portrait; one of my mother — she had three generations — my daughter; and then two or three others, of various ... Did she have one of Guy Murchie? I think so.

ROBERT BROWN: Of Guy — What was his last name?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Murchie. I'm not quite sure. Yes, I think so ...

ROBERT BROWN: Do you paint now quite a bit, or do you sketch?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): I can't. The eyes.

ROBERT BROWN: Your vision precludes that.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Did that come about rather gradually, or ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Well yes, it did. I got glaucoma about twelve years ago, but then I think it got over-lasered, and the last two years ... I can't see much, so that's ... it. Now it'll have to be insight. [laugh]

ROBERT BROWN: Insight, yes.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): We'll hope.

ROBERT BROWN: Are you writing? How ... do you express yourself? Or is it mostly kept internal.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Mostly kept internally. But I'd like to try writing. It's not easy to see, but I think I can manage, and there are various things that I'd like to ... work on. It would be an outlet. Without something to create, its ... its not easy going.

ROBERT BROWN: No ... Do you sometimes feel that you, as you expressed it in some other connection recently, that you "have the flu"? You're not alive, so to speak, when you're not creating?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): [laughter] Well, that's the feeling, yes ...

ROBERT BROWN: But does your membership in the Friends —

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes! Ah, there you are.

ROBERT BROWN: Does that fulfil ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, it does. That is what keeps me going.

ROBERT BROWN: Through searching and seeking and discussing things with them, or ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, right. I wish I could put it more succinctly. [whispered: Turn it off!]

ROBERT BROWN: So you've been in touch with the reality through the outward manifestation ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Right. If that's studied deeply enough, you get through ... to what ... to the meaning ... and what it's all about.

ROBERT BROWN: Mmhmm. And that's what you ... have attempted in your work, in your painting.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes. And it always carries you further, it never lets you down, in the sense ... You never achieve it, what you want, but you're always getting nearer to the ... to the essence. And that's a drive and a ... search that never ... that is all -important and never ends. And for which one is deeply grateful.

ROBERT BROWN: You never — when you failed to quite achieve it — you never then were depressed?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): No. Well, temporarily, perhaps, but that isn't the point.

ROBERT BROWN: You threw yourself into the search once more.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Right. I mean you can't ... There's no getting off, away from it, it's there. It's the Hound of Heaven. It's always after you, "and [?] hurrying chase, and unperturbed pace, comes on ..." [laughter] the search ...

ROBERT BROWN: Well you would contrast your approach to ... You mentioned Robert Motherwell as having said something about getting within himself, but ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): That's not the way that I would arrive at it, no ... I would lose myself with that. The only way I can see or understand is that of through the visible to the invisible reality, what it's a symbol of. Or what it really is, let's say.

ROBERT BROWN: That's reality.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, right. "But he will ever tell a lie/ Who sees not through but with the eye," as Blake says.

ROBERT BROWN: Blake, yes.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): And the thing is, to see through it, not just with it, so that it doesn't let you down. But — to be doing anything else [laughter] ... is hard ... work.

ROBERT BROWN: To be doing anything else ...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes ... I mean, that is the all-important activity ... in whatever form it takes.

ROBERT BROWN: And you were able to maintain that hierarchy of importance for yourself most of your life, were you?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: You've mentioned all the pressures and distractions...

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes, oh, yes, yes ... right.

ROBERT BROWN: So you had to ... restore the balance somehow.

POLLY THAYER (STARR): Yes. And find the unity. Ultimately, of course, it's all one, but the question is how to get it together. It isn't different things, they're all ... But one has to learn it.

ROBERT BROWN: Does it take a long time to learn?

POLLY THAYER (STARR): [laughter] I don't know if one ever gets it completely ... only in momentary flashes ...

2006

August 30, Wednesday: Polly Thayer Starr died.

NEW ENGLAND FRIENDS HOME

Polly Thayer Starr, artist, lifelong friend to many; 101
By Bryan Marquard, Globe Staff | September 3, 2006

"Ever since I could hold a pencil, I was drawing something," Polly Thayer Starr once said.

Charcoal sketches in her childhood gave way to portraits that range from literal to ethereal; to landscapes illuminating the spirit of a milieu; to a series of paintings capturing the life span of a thistle.

"You never achieve what you want," she told a friend late in life, "but you're always getting nearer to the essence . . . and that's a search that is all important."

Scion of two New England families who count among their ancestors Ralph Waldo Emerson and a host of Episcopalian ministers, she grew up a short walk from the Charles River in the early 1900s when parts of Boston were so pastoral that her parents could ride horses in the Fenway nearby.

Born Ethel Randolph Thayer, she was always Polly Thayer in her work as an artist, even upon marrying in 1933.

Polly Thayer Starr was 101 when she died Wednesday at Brookhaven at Lexington retirement community. She had lived there for nearly 10 years after giving Harvard University the Beacon Street house near Boston Common that had been her home and studio for six decades.

"She's been my spiritual home," said Susan Sherman of New York City, who became close with Mrs. Starr about 11 years ago. "It was a completely life-transforming friendship. She stretched my soul; she opened the door to God to me. And I think she had the most considered life of anybody I've ever known, through poetry and art, and she gave that to anyone who knew her."

"She leaves behind a legacy on so many levels," said Dorothy Koval of Lake Elmore, Vt., who had known Mrs. Starr since growing up with one of her daughters. "Her artwork is extraordinarily universal. And yet her human relations were as exceptional as her art. She communicated with people as so few do."

Lessons in drawing at the Museum of Fine Arts began before she turned 10. She started acting in her teens and considered a career in theater. At 18, she decided to study painting. Through her acting, though, she met May Sarton who became a lifelong friend. A portrait she painted of the writer is now in the collection at Harvard's Fogg Art Museum.

Beginning in 1923, she spent years studying in art schools and privately in Boston, Provincetown, New York, Madrid, and Paris. In 1929 the National Academy of Design in New York awarded her

the Julius Hallgarten Prize for "Circles," a portrait of a nude woman facing away.

The following year, when she turned 27, she was awarded the gold medal at the Boston Tercentenary Exhibition for a self-portrait, "Interval." Those early successes inspired many to commission her to paint their portraits. Meanwhile, she fell in love with Donald C. Starr, a lawyer who had studied with her brother at Harvard, and struggled with balancing her desires to marry and to devote herself to art.

In 1933, as he sailed around the world with friends in a schooner he had built, she traveled to Genoa, Italy, where they married, then honeymooned in Paris.

"I was pretty gun-shy of marriage when it would mean giving up painting. . . . It took a long time to make up my mind," she said 11 years ago in an interview with the Smithsonian Institution.

In 1936, before they started having children, she painted the striking portrait of Sarton that is now at the Fogg Art Museum. "She was great fun," Mrs. Starr said of Sarton, who died in 1995. "She could make anything come alive for you. I've never known anybody who had quite that quality of imagination."

In turn, Sarton wrote that Mrs. Starr was "the most unaffectedly humble person about her work that she had ever known," said Sherman, who edited the writer's letters for publication.

When Mrs. Starr began raising her children, the family split its time between Beacon Street and a farm in Hingham, and the demands on her increased. She introduced her children to art, literature, and a sense of wonder.

"She was always reading aloud -- we would read aloud to each other," said her younger daughter, Dinah of East Boston. "She loved poetry. She would memorize enormous amounts of poetry."

"She could pat bumblebees," said her other daughter, Victoria of Hingham. "While he was on the flower, she would take her finger and stroke his fur and his wings would buzz like mad, and he wouldn't fly away until she stopped. It always seemed to me the equivalent of a cat's purr." Koval said that to visit the family was to enter "a whole different world. She would read us poetry and Shakespeare on end. And she was always sketching. She has hundreds of her children at every moment."

"I've read somewhere that Cezanne didn't go to his mother's funeral because it would have taken a day from his painting," Mrs. Starr told the Smithsonian, laughing at the thought. "It got to be that kind of choice for me, practically."

She became a Quaker and ventured away from home, seeking new inspiration. She attended wrestling matches and was invited into an operating room to watch surgery, telling a friend that "to see the living organs pushing up uncovered out of a woman's body . . . I forgot everything in the wonder of it."

Stepping away from her training in the Boston School approach to painting, her work over the decades slipped the bounds of easy categorization. The gift of a jeweler's loupe opened vistas into the lives of the insects and the flowers.

Then, in her 70s, she developed glaucoma and macular degeneration. Before completely losing her sight, her final works in her late 80s were drawings of a thistle and a diaphanous self-portrait that seemed to place her both in this world and the next.

Her husband died in 1992. She gave up the Beacon Street house a few years later and donated most of Weir River Farm, her family's property in Hingham, to the Trustees of Reservations conservation group for public use.

In 2001, she was the only living artist whose work was part of the Museum of Fine Arts show "A Studio of Her Own: Women Artists in Boston 1870-1940."

In the Church of St. John the Evangelist in Hingham are two portraits painted by Mrs. Starr: one is her mother and the other is a former minister. A memorial service will be held there on Tuesday at 11 a.m. Services will be scheduled later in Friends Meeting in Cambridge and in Brookhaven at Lexington. Her daughters and friends plan to borrow her works from museums and private collections for a retrospective show in the future.

Though Mrs. Starr's sight was gone in the final years, her sense of humor never departed.

"Even in extreme old age, when the four of us got together, we giggled a lot," Victoria said of visiting her mother with her sister and Koval. While taking daily walks, Mrs. Starr would ask a companion to read poetry aloud so she could continue to memorize lines, stanzas, and entire poems. The pull of creativity, she told the Smithsonian, never ceases.

"It's the Hound of Heaven," she said with a chuckle. "It's always after you."

POLLY THAYER STARR

POLLY THAYER STARR

2009

June 27, Saturday: The New England Friends Home on Turkey Hill near Hingham, Massachusetts hosted a retirement tea for outgoing director Gretchen Condon. Her retirement gift was a painting by Polly Thayer Starr.

POLLY THAYER STARR

POLLY THAYER STARR

2011

Summer: Consultation with the Atlantic Retirement Group and the Friends Council on Ageing during a period of discernment led to an awareness that the operating business plan of the New England Friends Home on Turkey Hill near Hingham, Massachusetts was unlikely ever to become successful — the facility had never been of viable size. By late summer all residents would be placed in new homes and only a security and maintenance person would be on site as the property was shown to prospective buyers (the South Shore Meeting continued to meet in the facility during this process). Eventually a "buyer" was found, a charitable nonprofit organization that presumably would use the property for charitable nonprofit purposes, and representatives of New England Yearly Meeting addressed the details of transferring ownership of the property at a "sale price" of a "possible" $1,100,000. Volume 67, Issue IV of The New England Friend would carry a headline broadcasting a new a Quaker "Stewardship of $1.1 Million."

The use of the modifier "possible" next to the money seems to indicate that this amounts to funny money — that although ownership of the property has been transferred no actual payment of cash on the barrelhead for this piece of real estate was received or contemplated. My reading of the tealeaves would indicate that what has happened is that an organization without assets has assumed the responsibility to continue to pay on outstanding mortgages by pledging that it would, as it could, pay down these mortgages.

"MAGISTERIAL HISTORY" IS FANTASIZING, HISTORY IS CHRONOLOGY

 POLLY THAYER STARR

"It's all now you see. Yesterday won't be over until tomorrow and tomorrow began ten thousand years ago."

– Remark by character "Garin Stevens" in William Faulkner's INTRUDER IN THE DUST

Prepared: March 8, 2014

POLLY THAYER STARR POLLY THAYER STARR

ARRGH AUTOMATED RESEARCH REPORT

GENERATION HOTLINE

This stuff presumably looks to you as if it were generated by a human. Such is not the case. Instead, someone has requested that we pull it out of the hat of a pirate who has grown out of the shoulder of our pet parrot "Laura" (as above). What these chronological lists are: they are research reports compiled by ARRGH algorithms out of a database of modules which we term the Kouroo Contexture (this is data mining). To respond to such a request for information we merely push a button.

Commonly, the first output of the algorithm has obvious deficiencies and we need to go back into the modules stored in the contexture and do a minor amount of tweaking, and then we need to punch that button again and recompile the chronology — but there is nothing here that remotely resembles the ordinary "writerly" process you know and love. As the contents of this originating contexture improve, and as the programming improves, and as funding becomes available (to date no funding whatever has been needed in the creation of this facility, the entire operation being run out of pocket change) we expect a diminished need to do such tweaking and recompiling, and we fully expect to achieve a simulation of a generous and untiring robotic research librarian. Onward and upward in this brave new world.

First come first serve. There is no charge.
Place requests with <Kouroo@kouroo.info>. Arrgh.