

BGC CRAFT, ART & DESIGN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Mary Sheppard Burton

Rug Hooker

Conducted by Kate Fox on April 13, 2009 at Mary Sheppard Burton's home in Germantown, Maryland

Mary Sheppard Burton (1922-2010) was a rug hooking artist who grew up in the Tidewater region of coastal Maryland and lived in Germantown, Maryland. She began hooking rugs in the 1950s, inspired by rugs made by her minister's wife at a local class. Upon departing from commercial rug patterns and wools, she studied vegetable dyeing techniques and hand dyed all of her wool to obtain a more varied palette. Her rugs feature vibrant colors and designs inspired by early American history, nature, traditional Middle Eastern rugs, and family stories. She was especially interested in the origins of rug making in the United States and connecting them to her own practice.

Mary Sheppard Burton published numerous articles and three books. *A Passion for the Creative Life: Textiles to Life the Spirit* (2002), edited by Mary Ellen Cooper, is a compendium of her work, musings, insights, and knowledge about the history of hooked rugs. Her earlier books, *Judging by Merit* (1977) and *Educational Standards* (1984) laid out guidelines for judging hooked rugs at state and county fairs. She also taught classes in hand dyeing, rug hooking, and competition judging at the American Institute of Textile Arts, the Home Economics department at the University of Maryland, and the Green Mountain Rug School. In addition, she co-founded The International Guild of Hand-hooked Rug Makers, and was the recipient of many awards and honors. Her work has been exhibited frequently, including at the Toronto Textile Museum, the Maryland Historical Society, the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress, and the Hooked Rug Museum of North America in Nova Scotia, Canada. In 2006 the American Folklife Center acquired Burton's *Tell Me 'Bout Series* of twelve hooked rugs depicting intergenerational stories of her family's life in Pittsville, Maryland, near the Delaware-Maryland border.

This oral history transcript is the result of a digitally recorded interview. The interviewee has reviewed the transcript and made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

This transcript is in the public domain and may be used without permission. Quotes and excerpts must be cited as follows: Oral history interview with **Mary Sheppard Burton**, conducted by **Kate Fox** on **April 13, 2009**, Bard Craft, Art and Design Oral History Project.

[The interview began with Mary Sheppard Burton talking about her rug *Alpha, Beta, Omega*, based on the *Der Christen ABC* book (1750) at the Ephrata Cloister in Ephrata, Pennsylvania, which was spread out on the floor in her home. Leonard Feenan, her assistant, was also present.]

Mary Sheppard Burton (MSB): I did this because I had to adapt their letters to my medium. So mine is not as fancy as theirs but I think I have the basic feeling of each letter. I had that Cloister alphabet somewhere, which is just absolutely elegant. Well it's worth a trip to see it. I have it. I would let you borrow it. I know that it's here somewhere. I'll look in a little bit.

Kate Fox (KF): When did you make this rug?

MSB: Let's see, it's on here. I'm going to give you a book that I wrote that has all these things in it. [Looking for her book, *A Passion for the Creative Life: Textiles To Lift the Spirit.*]

KF: Why did you choose to bring out this rug to show me?

MSB: This rug I brought out because—for several reasons—it's one of the nicest pieces I've done. It took me six years to do this piece. It's done on a number-three cut.

KF: What does that mean?

MSB: It's 3/32-inch wide cut wool, and it's all hand dyed. Plus I love to relate to history. And this is certainly history. I felt that the Cloister script would be absolutely gorgeous in color. And color is my thing. More so than drawing is my thing. But color is, it reaches deeply in me. So I felt this was an absolute wonderful opportunity for me to do something historic which I certainly relate to and to go into color in a wonderful way because I was totally unlimited in what I could use. I tried to repeat some things from one piece to another, even if it's just a touch. [Points to the *Alpha, Beta, Omega* rug.] From here you see the green here to the green there, and the green there. And the blue to the blue and the blue to the blue-green. So these pieces are all interrelated and wherever I could repeat, like that green up there I could repeat it down there, and you see it's again similar down there. But not precisely, I've got these pale blues in that [points to rug] and repeated it at the top and that to me is—color is about living with other color. You know, it really is. You look at the flowers [points to vase with daffodils in the room], look at those, see the deep green at the bottom but there's a little center in there that's got green in it. Just a tiny little in the center. But those are the things I see as a rug-hooker.

KF: Have you always been interested in color, even when you were younger?

MSB: As a child I was very interested in color. I wore out crayons faster than anyone could ever imagine. It was hard to keep me in crayons, and they didn't even try to keep me in coloring books. I colored in the funny papers. Because I needed to do that. I feel color intensely in my life. I'm eighty-six, and yet I think that this has a lot to do with keeping me physically and mentally, especially, alive. In being creative I have a sense of not only feeding myself, but maybe giving something to others.

KF: How much time do you spend on your rugs?

MSB: Almost every waking minute. I took yesterday off and went to my granddaughter's house, but I'm in here [her work room] from the time I'm dressed in the morning. I might take a nap if I'm tired, but generally I'll work right through the day up to nine, about nine o'clock, nine or ten. I try not to work on but one thing at a time. I know so many people who have closets chock full and they're not finished. But I finish each piece before I start a new one.

KF: When did you start rug hooking?

MSB: I'm going to give you my book and you're going to have to check this, but I think I started in the 1950s. I can't tell you exactly.

KF: How did you learn?

MSB: My minister's wife introduced me to this and I think she was taking Inez Fowler's class. I wanted to do it so badly that I saved a room full of wools, most of which were not suitable. But in any case it took me ten years to be free enough to go take classes and I finally started with Inez Fowler also. She was an absolutely wonderful teacher. But when she saw this piece [*Fantasia*] developed she told me she thought I'd better get another teacher because she wanted to sell patterns.

KF: And you were developing your own work. Is this your first work?

MSB: That was my first piece of my own design. I dearly love that. I did not draw it. I had a friend draw it but I certainly did color it. It took me forever. It took me two years to do that. But I had three children and then later had a fourth so, you know, it's no wonder that I wasn't hooking because I wasn't free. I had so many commitments to raise a family.

KF: How did you manage to raise a family and continue rug hooking?

MSB: It was difficult. I worked at night because I didn't have time during the day. I didn't get to work every night when I had family. I worked every night I could, and I worked every minute I could, but I did not get a lot done during that time. That's why this took me six years. [Points to *Alpha, Beta, Omega.*] As you can see it's not something you can do in a hurry. It's very intricate. The script of the alphabet itself was not something—it's full of frills and scrolls and things—it's not something you can just whip up in a hurry. Not a simple piece. But I really love the doing of this. It just gave me great and gives me great joy to sit down with it even now. If someone asked me what my favorite color block was, I'd have to say this one right here.

KF: The blue and green one?

MSB: Yes.

KF: Was there any particular inspiration for the colors?

MSB: No, I just worked from the heart as I went along. And I tell you if you look behind you in this tub it's full of the colors, most of which are hand dyed. I don't want to use commercial colors. I try to hand dye my wools.

KF: When did you begin using natural dyes in your work?

MSB: I used very few natural dyes because they are not real colorfast. I use walnut skins and there are some in the butterfly rug. The browns are from the walnuts. There—I found them to be deadly for me. I could not cook them very often. First of all I was inexperienced, and I cooked them in the house which is a no-no. They are poisonous, I found out. No wonder they made me sick. You have to cook them outdoors in really moving air. I don't

recommend people do natural dyeing unless they really have a mentor to take them along the way, because I had to learn on my own. I had books on natural dyes and things but I found out early that they weren't real colorfast. I used to pin a piece I had dyed on the inside of a curtain and then around it on the edge and the outside and it's amazing how quickly that fades. And particularly if you want to get to the softer greens, and the blues, the roses, they fade quite easily.

KF: So you're using commercial dyes to hand dye your wool?

MSB: Yes, they're made for craftspeople, they're not the ones they use in factories and things like that. I've used dyes that are made specifically for craftspeople. I have different sets that I use.

KF: When you started hand dyeing your wool, was that common at the time?

MSB: Not many people bothered with it. They wanted to work from commercial swatches. After my very first piece I decided that it really wasn't—I wanted color that was rich and mellow. I love color, and I just—I can't tell you how different it is—I love strong colors in some designs. [Leonard Feenan brings out the dye packets.]

Leonard Feenan (LF): See, this is how she keeps them catalogued.

MSB: These are all dyes, I used to have—I used so much of it.

LF: This stuff is really powerful, I'm not going to open it because [inaudible].

KF: So, when you're working you are mixing dyes. Do you write down your recipes?

MSB: I do while I'm working, and I did and kept them for a long time, but I reached a point where—I was teaching and people were trying to take my recipes and do their work. I don't want my work to be repeated twenty times. So I got so I kept no formulas after I finished a project. And that sounds goofy, but it's not important because at this stage of the game I couldn't tell you what I used today and I do a different method of dyeing altogether for my own work. Now I use what is called onion-skin dyeing. They're real onion skins. These pieces are all done by formulas, but if you look at the red on the piece up on the easel [points to unfinished rug] all those colors, all the brown, everything in that is dyed with onion skins and the way I do it is very simple. Look at this red rug over here [points] that's onion-skin dyed. I take an old roaster pan that has an insert and I layer my wool in it. But I use bright red, commercial dyed wool, bright blue, purple, green, orange, the rainbow. I let red bleed on orange and orange bleed on green, and blue or purple bleed on blue, or purple bleed on something else. I just mix them all up. Wrinkle them. I don't put them in nice and smooth and flat. I wrinkle them all up. I just put them so that there might be three or four colors touching one another. I stick them in the oven or on top of the stove, either one, depending on how deep it is. If it's a whole kettle that's deep I put it on top of the stove and bring the heat up slowly to where it just simmers, and I let it simmer for about hour or hour and a half. Turn the whole thing over at one turn. Don't mix it up again. Just turn it upside down and let it steam another hour. I just keep the steam in it, that's what I try to do. And then I turn it off and I put vinegar in it, well, before I turn it off I put vinegar in it and let it cook another half hour, and turn it over once again and let that cook in vinegar water. Just a little bit of vinegar, about a half a cup I would say to whatever water's in the bottom of the kettle and then I let it cool overnight, and in the morning I take it outdoors and shake all the onion skins out. And I have a rainbow that is absolutely gorgeous.

KF: So in the strips of wool, it's not one color, it's lots of different colors.

MSB: They bleed on one another and I really get better color that way and such a nice variety. I'll show you some of it. It's right behind you.

KF: Do you then cut the pieces into colors that match each other or do you—

MSB: Here's some onion-skin dyed.

KF: Oh, okay, I see.

MSB: You see, it looks so much more natural. These [points to commercial strips of wool] are not hand dyed. These are the garish colors, you know, but they are beautiful. They are beautiful colors, there's nothing wrong with them, but I like them so much more when they're muted.

KF: That's really pretty. It looks like Monet's *Water Lilies*.

MSB: [Holding up various strips of hand dyed wool in her wool tub.] Look at that. Look at this piece. Just love it.

KF: Do you ever dye colors from inspiration in the world, like your garden?

MSB: It's always an inspiration just to get to do this. Always an inspiration. You couldn't look at that and not really be thrilled to have it [shows a piece of wool]. This is done by sewing up a seam on this and then pushing it up on a plastic tube and then it's pushed up tight, and where it doesn't come together, the brown for instance is down in the dye and this is up folded, pushed up on the inside. Here's another piece.

KF: So these are all cut into smaller pieces for your rugs?

MSB: Look at this.

KF: Oh that's beautiful.

MSB: Isn't that something? If you would like to have a little of this, to put with your paper, you'd be welcome to use it.

KF: Thanks, whatever you think you won't use. It's beautiful.

MSB: This is what I will dye. This is what other people use [showing commercial dyed wool]. I don't think there's any comparison.

KF: No, I don't think so. You get such rich color with your dyeing method.

MSB: Now this is something that I hand dyed for a braided rug. Look at this piece. Isn't that rich? My granddaughter [Jennifer Zamora] just started hooking and it's unreal the work she's doing. Because this is her very first piece and it is beautiful. She used hand dyed wool from the tub. She has a color sense like no student I ever had and she just is doing an exquisite piece. I'm just amazed. She's so inspired by the color.

KF: How old is your granddaughter?

MSB: She's thirty.

KF: Have you passed on your hooking to any of your children?

MSB: My children were not really interested. [Shows another piece of wool from the tub.] Ahh. I could go crazy. Isn't that lovely?

KF: Gorgeous, it's like the water.

MSB: That's where the onions skins touched. And they steamed in it. Well you pick out a piece that you would like.

KF: Anything small is fine.

MSB: Well, you pick out the colors that you like, and that would go good with your paper. Isn't that wonderful? When it's hooked it's just—I never will use the commercial dyes.

KF: I read on your website that you don't sell you patterns to people.

MSB: I don't. I don't sell my patterns, but my dear friend sitting here [looks toward LF] wherever he was. He now draws patterns for me, so I'm spoiled rotten. He will draw people individual patterns if that's what they want, and he does it so well, he really does. [LF hands MSB's book to KF.] I tell you, this book will be helpful to you because though I don't go into the various techniques fully, I do it enough that you—what we've talked about, you can refresh your memory and work from that. I think it will be helpful. If you get a chance, you should go to the Library of Congress.

KF: Maybe I will try to do that tomorrow. I am here until Wednesday. I extended my stay a day. I think I am going to go to D.C. tomorrow.

MSB: Have you made an appointment?

KF: No, I haven't, should I call them?

MSB: Yes.

LF: Well, the thing is, the way it works is that there are two pieces always on display. They're in the offices of the American Folklife Center, in display cases. And they'll let you go in and look at them, but you have to make an ahead of time reservation if you want to see the rest of the works. We have a group going, but they're full.

KF: Well maybe I can at least go and see the two that are on display.

LF: What we can do is when we plan on another—we're trying to do another one for her family—we'll let you know if you're in the area. Then you can see them all laid out.

MSB: Yes, if we let you know ahead. You're in New York in school, right?

KF: Yeah, my summer break is coming up soon. I have some free time in May.

LF: In May?

KF: I'll be traveling for two weeks, but I'll be around otherwise.

LF: I'm not sure when we're planning the next one yet.

KF: Definitely let me know ahead of time.

LF: I'll give you a calendar that she did. It has the twelve pieces on that calendar. It's an expired calendar. It has all twelve of the pieces.

KF: That would be great, thank you.

MSB: It think it would be worth the trip.

KF: Oh, I think so too.

MSB: I'll tell you why. There's no other work—no other hooked work—there. The fact is that

they don't have a lot of storage, so that fact that they accepted twelve pieces was pretty good.

KF: It seems like a reflection of how they view your work. It's interesting to me, it seems like a lot of your work is related to history and that you love history, but your work is also related to your personal history.

MSB: I love it, I love it. I have a great appreciation for history. My dad and I used to—well I grew up on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. And I was just seven miles from the Maryland-Delaware line. We used to walk that line and visit all the country graveyards. My father knew the history, he grew up in that area, and he knew history, and he knew the people well in that area. I have ties in the Tidewater area, I feel like history of any sort is wonderful, but it needs to be told to come alive, and I think today's children are missing so much that's wonderful simply because it's cut-and-dry, they read it and think it's boring, and no wonder the way it's written. If it was just written as you would write an exciting novel, which is more interesting than a novel, it would be just fabulous. I love to see people work from whatever type of history it is that they're interested in. It's—you look at any of the art from time beginning, people painted from their hearts what they saw and felt and that was history. In a meaningful way.

KF: It seems like your *Tell Me 'Bout Series* was about communicating your history to your children.

MSB: Yes.

KF: When did you begin that, and how did you decide that was important?

MSB: Well I always thought it was important to tell the stories that my father told me, and that my grandmother told me. I had a grandfather whom I never knew because he was old when he married my grandmother who was a child bride. But he used put his ice skates on in Salisbury, Maryland, and skate down the Wicomico River out into the Chesapeake Bay, across the bay, and go in at Fell's Point and up to Baltimore. And if he got tired he'd stop by somebody's and spend the night. Or they'd decide they'd go trapping or hunting, you know, these were all stories of my childhood but I know that they are accurate and I just feel that those are privileged gifts to me, they're gifts without a doubt. My family, my mother and dad, and my second mother are buried down there. So I've spent a lot of time there.

KF: Do you think that growing up in a rural area influenced the way that you view craft, or working with your hands?

MSB: Probably it did because I didn't have close neighbors to play with, and I was into everything, like mixing up bird-egg pies, sometimes eating them. I just did all sorts of things. I used to grind up leaves, I don't know what I did with them, make sand pies, but those were things I think make children aware of the nature around them. I used to collect [inaudible] eggs because they'd lay them on the ground.

KF: What kind of eggs?

MSB: [Inaudible]. It's a kind of bird. It was just a fun thing to do, and I was always running in the fields and doing things dirty little girls do.

LF: Here's the calendar. I'm going to send a few extra with you.

KF: They're beautiful. I'll bring them to my class.

MSB: [Points to *Strawberry Capital of the World, Pittsville, Maryland/ John Raymond Sheppard.*] That's not an exact an exact replica of Pittsville, but I tried to put the important things together in this one piece.

KF: How long was your family in Pittsville?

MSB: My family are all gone, except for my children and their families. My generation is gone.

KF: How long have you been in this area [Germantown, Maryland]?

MSB: I was married in '41, so I moved to Silver Spring and was there ten years, and then I came out here. So I've been here since '52 I think.

KF: When you were a kid, did you do any craft, like sewing?

MSB: No, no, I really didn't have a lot of things to work with. We were a family that was struggling to stay afloat because it was the Depression time. And we did stay afloat, but just barely. Even though there wasn't money to go places and do things I was very content. My father had Boy Scouts and sometimes he would take me out on a Saturday when the Boys Scouts were out. They built a cabin and I got to go along. I could swim out there, you know, it was a wonderful way to grow up.

KF: I was interested in the rug you were talking about in relation to your grandfather, is this it? [Points to illustration of *When Pa Was Young-Skating the Bay/ Edward Sampson Phipps* in the calendar.]

MSB: Yes, well this is my grandfather skating the bay.

KF: It probably doesn't freeze over anymore.

MSB: Not like it did.

KF: Do you have a favorite story from this series that you did?

MSB: Every one I work on is my favorite story at that time. It's true, because I get very wrapped up in what I'm doing. And I have a wild imagination. You can see my color tells you that. But I feel it intensely, I love, I love the ice. I love those little subtle shades in there.

KF: When you're working on a rug do you dye your colors before you start, or do you dye them as you go along?

MSB: I dye them before I start. The last, I'd say probably six or eight pieces, I have made right from this content. [Gestures toward wool tub.] If I get low on certain colors I'll dye another tub full and just dump it in. I just keep on replenishing it that way. By doing this method of onion-skin dyeing I don't have a palette where you have to dye values. Because my values are put in the wool for me through the onion skins and the things that bleed on it, on the original color. And the color that bleeds out of the original color. All that shading is right there in the wool. And that's what makes it the most fun of all, so much more fun than when I used to have to dye, if I wanted for instance to do this piece [gestures toward a rug] I'd have to do a swatch of blue, I'd have to do six values of green, either that or I could do six values starting out in yellow and dyed into the green. I just cut that kind of labor out, and it's much more fun to do it with the onion skins for me and the result I think is far better. Those pieces that I showed you that were commercial dyed pieces, those are all done in swatches a value at a time and they tell you right on it what's in it. And that's not—you're not starting with a painterly feeling. If I wanted to get a deep color into a light value I'd have a heck of a

time if I for instance—going into this little part, that next one down, at the top—I'd have hard time getting those colors where they blended in like that. You'd see a break in them if they were swatches. In this, you see the pink. It was probably a piece that was separate, that pink was, then you had to get the pink. You can't have all the colors you want [inaudible] I go to the store and buy wool and I mess it up, and that's okay, that's the way I like it.

KF: It seems like color is one of the more creative aspects for you, it lets you experiment.

MSB: Oh, without a doubt. I like the design, too, that's why the Cloister alphabet spoke to me so much. I'm going to show you the Cloister alphabet so you'll have something to [flips through her book.] There, look at that. Now where could you get color like that, except with onion skins. Where is that Cloister? This one is in the Library of Congress. [Points to *A Chicken in Every Pot.*] And that gets its name because, who was it said, one president said “there will be a chicken in every pot.”

LF: Herbert Hoover?

KF: You have these swirls of color in your work, it seems to be part of your style.

MSB: [Talking about her rug *Puissance.*] There's shading in here, I made it from dyed swatches. You can see this green here has yellow in it. This was probably all one piece of wool that was dyed from light to medium, to brighter shades. Now this blue was a piece that was worked into that green. You can see the shading in here, and if there near colors it's fun to do your shading. I love to shade. This is shaded but I did it marrying close colors, all of which were dyed in onion skin water.

KF: It seems like you've done a lot of research on the history of rugs and you've looked at a lot of historical pieces.

MSB: I worked hard on that, I really did. There's one thing I really want you to see [flips through the book.]

LF: It's this rug here.

MSB: This is the Cloister. This is the old German Christian ABC book, *Alpha, Beta, Omega.* Of course this color is not as good as my color, obviously. [Looking at book, then rug.] It's much better seeing it in person. It was really a challenge because apparently when you're printing, the technique of printing requires that you do four different colors. So that's where you lose it. It's not like you take a picture with a wonderful camera. He takes incredible pictures, Lenny does.

LF: The other thing to is that she had the book printed in China. The editor, Mary Ellen Cooper, went there a few times, but you can't be there for everything. You're dealing with a photographer on one end and multiple pictures on the other end, you know.

MSB: She worked hard to get it as good as it is, and I think it's not bad. You know, that's not bad. That color isn't, it could be a little greener. Mine has a little more green in it. It's not bad.

KF: Do you see a connection between your rugs and the continuum of craftsmanship in America?

MSB: I work hard to make people aware of that and I've lectured a few places. When I do that I try to reach out, it doesn't matter really what your craft is. It's how much of your soul you put in it. That tells people whether you're really a good craftsman or a good artist. It's not just a repetition of things. I think that that has had a lot to do with my drive.

[Pause. LF takes some photographs.]

LF: You've known Mary a long time, and you don't even know it.

KF: I know. I'd love to get some of these photos from you.

LF: I'll email them to you.

KF: Thank you.

KF: Are there any specific artists or craftspeople that inspire you, or any works of art that you've seen that you really love?

MSB: I get inspiration everywhere I am. I particularly get inspiration from the personal stories that people tell. I love riding down the road and looking at the different greens in the trees that are coming out and the flowers and the sky. I really love looking at the sky. I think at this stage of my life I get more inspiration from a beautiful drive. It doesn't have to be that I'm going some great place, but if it's a really beautiful day I see nature. I just feel it. I need that in my life, I really do. I get wild ideas such as this. [Points to *Noah's Ark*.]

LF: Did you talk about that yet?

KF: What is this? I read it was a collaboration. Where did the idea come from?

MSB: I'm a crazy, mixed-up kid. This is playtime for me. I wanted to do a Noah's Ark. I didn't want it to be like anything anyone else had done. I couldn't find anyone, for several years I tried to find someone who would make a Noah's Ark for me. My granddaughter who does beautiful drawings for designing buildings and boats and things drew plans for me. But none of them would work out, and none of the people I approached were willing to tackle it. Until we got to Lenny. Then when I got to Lenny, he was gung-ho, he was just great. We scrapped all the other things because they really wouldn't work. It's got to be so you can take it apart and you can travel. He's built it so it's in three parts, and then this will be a separate part in addition. We figured it out. Lenny helped me, he drew it, but he came up with wonderful ideas such as putting fish on the bottom and underneath it. Having been in the service he spoke Navy about starboard and port and all those things I had to learn. It's been a collaboration. He's done all the wooden work, and if you see, do you mind lifting it down—

KF: What about the story was interesting to you?

MSB: I want people today to think how fortunate we are now and I wanted it to have some meaning.

[LF lifts down the top piece of the Ark.]

MSB: It's not just for children, it's to make people stop and think. And I thought if they looked at this, and the work in it, and if they thought of Noah, they would feel a sense of the magnitude of what Noah accomplished. What did you tell me, that Noah's Ark was three football fields?

LF: According to Genesis it was somewhere along 450 feet long.

MSB: Yes, it's mind-boggling. People don't think today. I don't know the Bible like I wish I did, but I don't take time to do that because I do this. I don't feel like I've done it all either, it's just that I've traveled a different road. But all the same I think these are important things for children to be aware of, and for grown children to be aware of. Because many of us our in our thoughts are like children. We just don't put values to things and think things through

about how blessed we are. We're always too busy at war. I'd like to see people think about things other than war.

KF: Do you imagine there's a place you'd like this to be displayed, or where you would like to see this go?

MSB: I'd like to see it go where it's well-cared for and where people can see it and enjoy it. That's where I'd like to see that go. And other pieces as well. They do need to know how to care for textiles. That's important. I've had pieces several places, and I just need to know that they're not—I can't have them in this room, for instance. It's just too bright.

KF: You have a lot of your rugs in museums and special collections. I'm interested in your experience with the Library of Congress. Did they approach you about acquiring the rugs?

MSB: Yes, they did. It was—

LF: Peggy Bulger.

MSB: She heads the Arts? [Inaudible.]

MSB: She is really remarkable. [Inaudible.]

MSB: She saw my work, but she didn't tell me anything. She wanted to buy it. I thought about it and thought about it. I went back to her and told her I needed to know—I didn't know what she wanted it for, if she wanted it personally. I told her that I did not sell my work, and that I appreciated the compliment but I just can't bring myself to sell. I don't like to take money for something that brings so much in my life. I think if I started working for money for this it would degrade my personal feelings about why was I doing this. I do it for the sheer joy that I receive in it. So I thought about it for a week or ten days and then I went back to her and told her that I while I don't want to sell my work I would put it on loan and then my lawyer and I don't know whether it was you [LF] or somebody else, it might have been you, suggested I put it on long-term loan.

LF: That was before I came along, I came along about almost four years ago. I was just at the tail end, they were just waiting for the lawyers to finalize the contracts.

MSB: I didn't have trouble parting with it if it went to where it was really appreciated. And that was more important to me than receiving money. Now some of my work may someday go, but while I'm alive it probably—I don't know whether it will or not. I don't have any plans to sell it myself. I think it might go to auction after I'm gone or something.

KF: Do you give any of your work to your family members?

MSB: I have not. But you see—

LF: Yes, yes, she just did.

MSB: Well, yes. Just this past Christmas I gave four pieces to my four children.

LF: It took six months for us to do those.

MSB: Well, what it was a picture of each season of this house, which is where they were raised. And I knew that would have real meaning for them. It was about this big.

LF: Yeah, about this big. I kept her under tight reins. Her free style art, she's a folk artist. She loves color. When you're dealing with architectural details you want them all to be the same

but change the background, the skies, the tress, the foliage, the flowers. The challenge for her was the night scene, the last one. They're on the website. It was tough.

MSB: It was hard for me.

LF: It was very, very difficult.

MSB: I took a lot out that I put in because I wanted it right. But I get carried away with color.

KF: Have you ever worked without a pattern before? Freehand?

MSB: I can't do this freehand. It's too intricate. I don't know anybody who has, to tell you the truth.

LF: You have to focus on color, so you don't really have time to think about drawing a line, it's kind of not how she hooks. She has to fill her colors and plan her colors. It's not like drawing—I draw, I have to look at something and draw it onto the panel. But Mary is into the coloring stage, so she doesn't have time—it just doesn't work that way with her, at all. It's like with my pyrography. I have to sketch it lightly first and then I can go in and burn it safely and fill it all in. It's kind of the same.

KF: Do you ever take out parts that you don't like?

LF: She took the gorilla's face apart [referring to unfinished rug]. She thought it didn't look right, and she called me and I looked at it and it didn't look right, and we talked about it.

MSB: It really didn't and I didn't know what to do because I'm working in an area this big, this big, and here is this critter with his face that starts out almost black. Not, black, but like a dark skin, and you can't get expression in there with the wool which is 3/32 of an inch wide. And I'm still fighting with it.

KF: You choose to work with very fine wool.

MSB: I prefer the very fine work myself. The reason—I can make wool in wide strips, but if I work in wide strips I can't do any decent shading. You'd have to have an enormous canvas to use really wide strips. I have a rug in the dining room, what I call the dining room, it was before the fire. But in the next room over I have a rug that's 10 x 12 and there are no seams in that rug, which is almost unheard of because people in their right mind would never carry the weight of it on one shoulder to hook it. I used wider strips, I used fours and fives, I don't think I used anything bigger than that. Now some people just tear wool and hook in torn strips. You know, their work is very coarse, it stands that high off the floor because the strips are that wide. It would be a toe-stumper. If you wanted to put it down on your floor, you'd really have to build the floor up around it because it is a toe-stumper.

KF: Do you see your rugs as wall hangings or as rugs?

MSB: I see this piece as a rug, I had it on the floor in very protected places. That is a wall-hanging. It just as well could have been on the floor but I've always had it on the wall. Did you bring—here they are. [Shuffling, unrolling rugs].

MSB: This piece is definitely a rug, and the early pieces of this type are now on walls and anyplace else. But I don't think it matters much whether it's on the floor or on a wall it's where it can be seen and enjoyed. Of course things that are on the floor do get—

LF: Ruined.

MSB: Yes, they do get wear. A friend of mine made a gorgeous wedding rug for her daughter and son-in-law and she came back a year later and the son-in-law not knowing the effort in making such a piece of work had come in the door every night in the rain and wiped his feet on it. That is definitely a rug, but it could be hung just the same.

KF: You mentioned this is a prayer rug. What cultures are you most influenced by?

MSB: Every one I see. I have an innate feeling that comes forth when I'm in a strong culture. I see little things. It might be something in a piece of their silver, it might be something in a pottery piece, but I see it when I'm around it. If it's a woven fabric I see the color and the technique and the textures. The textures are important things. I look at that chair, for instance, the colors in that chair I adore. They make the chair more than what it would be without it.

KF: I'm interested in texture. Rugs, more than paintings, are so tactile. When you first started, was that of interest to you?

MSB: Oh yeah, I'd reach out and love to run my fingers on them. I can hardly resist sitting here keep my fingers out of that rug. I just want to get down and run my hands over it.

KF: It takes a very long time to make your rugs.

MSB: Oh yes, it does.

KF: The work is very detailed. Does that appeal to you?

MSB: Yes, that does appeal to me. I love the detail in pieces. It takes a lot more time, a lot more time, a lot more thought. But that's where I get really into it. I forget to answer the phone, I got to where I couldn't take time to read the newspaper, which was terrible because I found myself getting it but I just didn't take time to read it. When I get into shading I just get swept away. It's a strong tide, really, that pulls me along. I think it renews me. I'm happy in doing what I do. I'm very happy in what I do. I thank God I've got good eyesight and enough strength and energy in my hands to be able to do this. Lenny cracks the whip every now and then, sends me to bed. Thank God for Lenny. You know I mean that sincerely. I'm doing these things because I am healthy and able. But I know so many people my age, and even younger, who've just sort of sit. They either sit and sleep or they fade away. I'm not one of those people. I'm going out kicking and screaming.

KF: Have you found it important to teach others?

MSB: Oh yes, I do. I feel very deeply about that because I was first taught by teachers who were at a school where everybody worked on the same pattern as a beginner, and I thought that was pretty awful because you would get some people who were very adept, and then there would be one or two at the tail end, whose work was not good, but at the end of class, we all had to put them up and show them, and I felt so badly for the people whose work wasn't good. And of course, after a few times of doing this, they faded away, and I just felt like that was the wrong approach to people. And so I've always taught by having them draw their own design. It can be very simple, but then, I taught dying in classes, not just the hooking. And by doing it that way, they could create their colors, and they became really excited, and that makes such a difference. This is one of Lenny's patterns.

KF: Beautiful.

LF: This one's going to the Altoona Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art.

KF: Wow! What kind of bird is it? Is that a cardinal

LF: It's a finch, it's kind of a red finch.

KF: Okay, this is beautiful.

LF: She did a beautiful, she's donating this one. This is the first one she's ever, really, outside of the library, ever really donated. She just finished that, and it's tricky to draw for her so that she can stay, remain within her style.

KF: Yeah.

LF: Because it has the look like something that she would have done.

KF: That you do. And this looks like a scene that you could see outside of your window.

LF: It was from a photograph.

KF: From a photograph, wow. Do you think that people are beginning, have moved away from using commercial patterns at all?

MSB: I think a great many people have. That's encouraging to me. And, you know, more and more teachers, have branched out into this, and I think that that's very positive because if they really want to promote art, which will be around as long as the piece is this, as art, they have to present it that way, and you can't have twenty-five of the same thing, sometimes, very frequently, the same color pattern. If nothing is hand-dyed, it's flat. And that's okay in an ultra-modernistic type of design, you can do that very well. But it doesn't look so hot if you wanted to have a beautiful, like the butterflies, for instance, you would get really delicate color. I wish you could see the piece that he designed and I dyed and did the hooking for. It's just one butterfly sitting in a blossom, but that butterfly was so magnificent. We got him as a cocoon.

KF: Oh, so this is from life?

LF: I found him as a caterpillar, actually.

MSB: Yes, that's right.

LF: I was working the bricks outside and I was on my hands and knees, and he comes crawling right across. So I remember I wrapped him up and brought him in.

MSB: About three days after we had him he began to make his cocoon. It didn't take him any time.

LF: He hit the pupae stage.

KF: Okay, yeah.

LF: You ever watch one of those?

KF: No, I've only seen the videos.

MSB: It's worth the time, just to watch it. He hatched right in my hand.

KF: Wow.

MSB: It was an experience.

KF: Oh, wow.

LF: But he inspired a rug, and actually it was just drawn, I drew it up from one of the photographs, not this photograph, but in about fifteen minutes because we had to go to, I took Mary to a retreat, and she needed something to hook on, and I didn't have anything, so I drew this up from a photo, and she worked on it a little bit at the retreat and she just kept working on that piece. Then it turned out pretty amazing, and it became, she named it *Miracle in My Garden*, and she gave it to me.

KF: That's incredible.

LF: So I had it framed, I had it box framed and everything.

KF: And this is the butterfly? Wow, he's beautiful, a monarch.

LF: This picture was taken after he had been sitting on her finger for an hour drying its wings. And then she was like, "I need to get—"; I took several pictures in the garden, this is one of them.

KF: That's incredible.

LF: It turned out really nice.

MSB: But that was such an enriching experience. That's why I love color, that's why I love nature.

KF: I think it's interesting because you seem to be interested in this notion of time, that your pieces take a long time, but you like that, and there's supposed to be something valuable in spending time on something.

MSB: I do, and I love, to me, just bringing them in this room and then putting them on the floor is a feast to me. I just love seeing them. And yet, I can't keep them here, it would just kill them.

[...]

MSB: I've got one in the living room that I especially want you to see.

[...]

KF: It's pretty. I was wondering if, just looking at any of these rugs conjures up any one story you can share with me, or any memory.

MSB: Any number of stories, it really does. I do a lot of daydreaming, have all my life, but the piece over here is, in a sense, a daydream.

KF: Which one?

MSB: The lion and the lioness. They are at peace with themselves and at peace with the world. They have food, the sun is coming up, and they're laying down by a stream of water. It's the way God designed nature, you know, I just love that, and I loved doing that piece in particular. That's also done in an oriental style.

KF: What does that mean, 'the oriental style'?

MSB: It's like, that's an oriental [rug], and this is in 'oriental style'. They're not oriental rugs, they're 'oriental style'."

KF: Is that because they have the border?

MSB: They have the border and they're prayer rugs, these two are prayer rugs. And I just think that there's something, even though I don't pray to Allah, to me, there's something very peaceful and beautiful.

LF: Didn't you say something to me one time about the oriental. You can typically find the center and it's like a repeat pattern?

MSB: It's the center at the top. See it right at the top?

LF: But wouldn't it be like this rug over here, down the center it's the same on this side as it is on this side? Did you mention something like that to me?

MSB: Not that one. That really is not an oriental. That one, it was originally, a seventeenth- or eighteenth-century folk piece.

LF: It says 1704.

MSB: But that's my date from my own kitchen. [A portion of her home was built in the eighteenth century]. But the original one was in 1800 somewhere. But it was not, it didn't look a thing like that. It had a red band in the center of the border and the outside was another color, and the feathers were not shaded, they were all one color, and the shells were all the same color, just marked with an outline. It was very much more simplistic than that. I kept looking at it, and I could see something way beyond that. So this is my rendition, but I don't take credit for the beginning of it, though, you would never recognize it.

KF: A lot of your rugs, I mean, the craftwork of hooking often reminds me of earlier times in America.

MSB: It comes from that, from the past. And it's a way to bring the past into our lives, and it's meaningful to me as I sit and work. It's very meaningful.

KF: That connection.

MSB: And I think it's meaningful to others who see it. I'm so proud of what he's done with that art.

KF: It's beautiful.

MSB: It is.

LF: The whole bed sheet covered [inaudible]. [LF uncovers part of *Noah's Ark*.]

MSB: So that's part of it, that's one part of it.

LF: These are all popsicle sticks, by the way.

MSB: It would be an animal that sticks his head out of the window.

KF: That's really great. [Gestures to items hanging on the wall of the room.] I was actually noticing these hangings that you have here, and are these your tools on the wall? Or are those historic tools?

MSB: The tools, the one of the top is made of reindeer horn, and that came from New England, and it was probably carved by sailor to bring home as a present to his wife. The one in the center was my great-grandmother's rug hook, and I just adore that one. The one at the bottom was made to hook yarn with, so they made yarn rugs that were hooked also, or crocheted, they could crochet a rug with that.

KF: And do you think there's been a revival of rug hooking, or do you think it's just been continuing?

MSB: Yes. Well, the history is in the book, you'll read that. It's not too bad a history, because I really did spend time doing research. But actually, it began in the Near East, as near as anybody can tell, and then it went through the trade routes and came to the Mideast, and of course it's been there forever. I love textiles in general. I'm not just in love with hook rugs, but I love quality in weaving and quality in other techniques like those pieces of laces. I look at them and I think they're phenomenal, and they're just pieces that I found. This one little heart at the bottom right, that's a particularly nice piece. It's very early, very simple, very simple, but if you look at the stitches in it, they're exquisite.

KF: Is it 1800s?

MSB: Probably that piece is. I don't have any way to document it. The handkerchief at the top, that's all drawn threads. You think of pulling a thread and stitching the pattern without removing the thread, but just stitching those threads together to make a pattern like that. Think of the hours and think of the eyesight that you need to do that. I think it's phenomenal. The lace is beautifully made, the two little inserts for a child's, for children's garments, that's handmade lace. I just look at them. They had to be from a pattern because they were found at separate places, and I don't know what the date on them is, I don't know, but I would guess that might be like 1850, excuse me, or '60, maybe 1840.

KF: It's interesting, though, because they're different. They're the same pattern, but you can tell different people made them.

MSB: Yes, and I just love them, I just love them. I love these pieces over here. The one in the center over there I found in this house. We had old floors that had cracked boards and things when we came here, and that pin had dropped in a hole underneath the radiator where the floorboard was cracked, and I found that, and the fabric came up in the vacuum cleaner when I reached down there to clean it out, so the pin had come off of the fabric, but it's just as sweet. And I imagine that might be around 1860, I would guess possibly.

LF: Would two you like some water or something to drink?

KF: I'm okay, but Mary, do you want something? I think I'm okay, but thank you.

MSB: You know, I just, I like pieces of handmade furniture. I love the early furniture. I just, this piece. I adore this. That's from either the Île-de-France—[gestures towards a painted wooden chest.]

LF: The Île-de-France, or Normandy, we think it's Normandy.

KF: Oh, wow.

LF: That was one of a dozen.

MSB: Not like it. Each one was different.

KF: It's beautiful. Oh, it's just a painted chest. It's beautiful.

LF: And you asked about her inspiration?

KF: Yeah.

MSB: I want to hook that.

LF: That's a nice piece, but hers will be bigger.

KF: It's beautiful.

MSB: If God let's me live long enough, I'm going to hook that.

KF: Will it be the same shape?

MSB: Same shape, but probably, I'm going to try to use some metallic threads of some sort. I don't know. I have to find them.

KF: Have you used metallic threads before?

MSB: I've played with it, but I've never made anything. I don't know how successful this is going to be because it's a different, if they're made as a yarn, which is probably what I will have, I don't think I can cut metallic thread and sew on my cutter. And I don't think I can find fabric that is metallic that will cut on my cutter. I might be wrong, but I don't want to ruin my cutter either.

KF: Yeah.

LF: I'm sure that those are almost foils, they're so fine.

KF: Yeah, I would think they'd be very thin.

MSB: I think it would, and I don't want—

LF: You know, we're going to ask Dolly about that because she's used to that.

MSB: Well, I want get started on finding the fabric.

LF: It's going to be sculpted and dimensional like that, we're even talking about, I might possibly hand carve the fish out of wood, and then get that—

KF: That would be beautiful.

MSB: It would be wonderful.

KF: Really wonderful.

LF: And we're going to have stones, polished stones, and mother of pearl buttons and pearls and for all the bubbles and things in there. That's what they originally were. And abalone, probably. So we're going to make it really beautiful.

KF: It will be really interesting to see all those materials.

MSB: I just feel so thrilled about that.

KF: All these new projects. That's great.

MSB: I can't wait, I just can't wait.

LF: She'll start on that. When she's finished with this panel, and the two ends—

KF: Okay.

MSB: Then I will definitely want to start on that.

KF: Yep. That's great.

LF: Because she'll be chomping at the bit.

KF: You'll be ready to go.

MSB: You know, that's the spice in life, it really is.

KF: Yeah. Well, I guess maybe my last question is, what do you think, what is the role that craft has played in your life?

MSB: It has been the blessings of my every day, it has. Particularly the later part of my life, from the time that I would say that my children were near the end of high school, the girls probably were both out of school, and Shepherd was still in school. But from that time on, it's given me, I've had the freedom to be able to do work, and I have worked regularly. I don't think there's been any length of time, except once when I was sick, I don't think I have missed it at any great length of time. And it just, to me it's really very nourishing. That's the secret of art. It nourishes your spirit. And that really is what art should do for people, whether it's your own or someone else's. You know, that is to say that it's art, if it doesn't, nourish other people, but it's art to you if it nourishes your soul. And that's, I think, one of the keys to being happy is to have something that you vibrantly enjoy.

KF: I agree.

MSB: Do you do artwork?

KF: I do.

MSB: I had a feeling.

[End of the interview]