

Oral History Interview

With

GRETA KEMPTON

Independence, Missouri
April 10, 1987

By Lenore Bradley and Clay Bauske

Opened September, 2005

The interview refers to paintings in the exhibition, "Greta Kempton: Forty Years on Canvas," which was displayed at the Harry S. Truman Library from April 11 to October 12, 1987. The exhibition catalog is available at the library.

BRADLEY: I was very interested to know more about your first tutor. Was it a woman or a man who recognized your precocious talent for drawing and told your mother that you should study with her in her studio? She herself was an artist?

KEMPTON: Yes, she really was my teacher in school in art. And she too, was very anxious for me to...and I went up Sunday mornings to her. And it was just great, no church, no nothing. I could go to my art class, and I was her only student. And she took great pain with me. I don't mean great pain, but she devoted herself to what I was doing and to me. And then the most wonderful thing was that she took me to the museum.

BRADLEY: Right. That was my next question, because we all know how crucial those formative years are in a young artist. And she would guide you through the museums. What I would like to know is how the influence, say, of that early exposure to the masters like Rembrandt and Degas, how do you see it as manifesting itself in your own work? What was their influence in a concrete manner in your own work?

KEMPTON: Well, I don't know. There seemed to be something that both these men did, or their conception of things that seemed to me very much mine. Of course, I could never reach such heights, or anything—please I'm not even in the same room with them. But, you know, when I first started "The Chinaman," ["The Ancient One," 1963] and God knows it's an awful long time between that and the days of Rembrandt, but I couldn't stop thinking of Rembrandt. And as a matter of fact, I started the suit in a sort of a brownish material, which this man perhaps had or used for the stage, I don't know, because today it would look stagy. But later on I happened to go to the Metropolitan and I saw these brown things again, which I sort of, you know, I didn't think about, and so there was something hung in me.

Later on I said, “Well, that was just silly, you have to look more modern,” and I changed the suit, or the coat, into this black thing that he is wearing today in this painting, and that the man would be wearing today naturally. But it’s sort of funny.

And with Degas I had similar experiences. That little nude that he’s talking about, I didn’t know we got one of those photographs, I hadn’t noticed. Somebody came in just very recently and said, “Well, Degas wouldn’t have been ashamed of this.” Sort of funny, you know. But I discovered those people, not only through my—well certainly not Degas, but the Rembrandts through that teacher perhaps. But she didn’t like church, she just showed me, walked through with me. I was too young really, and I was so enthralled with some Spanish painters then. There was a—I don’t know that it was Goya—it wasn’t Goya and I don’t remember right now, but those two little boys without shoes in that painting impressed me so tremendously that until today I can’t forget it. Now, as far as Degas is concerned, I discovered him myself very much later and it was as though it was something I had lived with.

BRADLEY: Something inside you felt such great empathy for his crisp, wonderful style, or...

KEMPTON: And the colors.

BRADLEY: The colors.

KEMPTON: And the poses.

BRADLEY: And the subject matter.

KEMPTON: Yes.

BRADLEY: Then when you studied art at the Vienna Academy of Design, or of Art...

KEMPTON: Of Art, I think.

BRADLEY: Yes.

KEMPTON: Actually I spent more time with a private teacher after that. He was a man, and he taught mostly in that red coty crayon.

BRADLEY: Oh!

KEMPTON: And did a lot of...

BRADLEY: That’s a very hard medium isn’t it?

KEMPTON: Yes.

BRADLEY: Once it's on, it's on.

KEMPTON: Well, if you press too hard. You can rub.

BRADLEY: You can change it if you see a mistake.

KEMPTON: You can—the kneading eraser will pick it out. But you had to be very careful, he was very fussy. There must never be one little dot there that doesn't blend right in, that isn't perfectly smooth, you know.

BRADLEY: Well, that's a beautiful medium. You know they say that the influence of place, of one's native land and culture, of the whole ambiance has a great influence for life on an artist's work. Now, have you found that? How did Vienna and growing up there and studying there when you were so young, manifest itself to you, or did it? I suppose maybe I'm asking questions here that are impossible to answer.

KEMPTON: No. I don't know. Perhaps I just haven't thought. I think I was very much influenced by the complete picture of Vienna. The palace, the Kaiser with his beard, I seemed always to be painting a man with a beard. And the sound of the horses through the palace, things like that I remember so well. And then the beautiful little things you see in the shop windows.

At the age of 14 I think—it could have been 12, 13, 14—my birthday was coming along and I was asked if I had something special I wanted, and I said, “Yes. I'd like a little head,” whether it was marble or something, “of maybe Wagner, or Beethoven, or somebody, that is in such and so's store.” And sure enough, my parents thought, “she's a little crazy, that poor child,” but they bought me a whole slew of them. And it was my prize possession up on top of my piano upright. There was the piano in my room. And little silly things like that.

I would stand for hours in front of a store that sold wool and materials for embroideries, and make my selection of what I was going to do for my mother, let's say, for Christmas. And when I made up my mind, I took my little saved up money and went and bought the material and she got it.

BRADLEY: Looking at the works that are in this exhibition, especially up until the 1960s, I would say that you did very formal work. The compositions look formal, and I think of Vienna as a baroque city, more formal. And I think I see that in your painting. Of course, everybody who views a work of art, they're subjective too, you know. So maybe I'm seeing things that aren't there, but it looks...it's got an old world flavor to it.

KEMPTON: Yes, it has. And I've been trying to get away from it.

BRADLEY: Oh, I see it. I see the work, especially after 1960. But for your portraits, I think that's a beautiful style. And going back to Vienna, how did...well, that must have

been an exciting time, that's when all that foment was going on in the arts with the Viennese secessionists, but I can see that that didn't have any....

KEMPTON: Any influence on me whatsoever.

BRADLEY: No, none.

KEMPTON: Because I wasn't there anymore.

BRADLEY: Were you in boarding school in England, is that correct?

KEMPTON: I was in boarding school in Vienna, but I came to America.

BRADLEY: In the 1920s.

KEMPTON: Yes. I don't know when that started, really I don't.

BRADLEY: Oh, well, the secessionists started just sort of around the time you were born.

KEMPTON: Oh, yes, but you see, I didn't get near that.

BRADLEY: No.

KEMPTON: Because in boarding school it didn't come near me, and at home we had very formal paintings, and I think that's where I got an awful lot, was greatly influenced. Strangely enough, we had a large painting and he [the man in the painting] had a beard. Now, whoever he was I don't know, but that painting was my—I lived with that painting. As a little girl I would just stand there for hours and hours and hours, maybe that's why I run after the "Chinaman." I can't tell you. But that painting did something to me. And we had two Jordans [or perhaps Jordaens—Jacob Jordaens, Flemish, 1593-1678], one where the—I think the wife poisons the husband or something, you know, they're sitting around a table. And the other one, right now, I don't even remember so well. But those figures the way they were painted—very naturalistic, of course, and very old European. And then we had some landscapes. But I think actually my paintings at home, with which I could spend more time than in museums, influenced me as much as anything.

BRADLEY: You seem to have been drawn to the human figure, and this morning I thought you made a very interesting comment when you said that most children...and it is so, I mean they find a human figure hard to draw. They usually make sticks, or they draw animals, or the moon and stars. But here you started out...

KEMPTON: With the face.

BRADLEY: Being absorbed in something so unchildlike.

KEMPTON: That's why I brought it out, because I realized [that] myself.

BRADLEY: And the figure.

KEMPTON: I'm not so great on figures actually, it's a struggle for me, because of my not too much study. But the head, the face...like I said, the expression, the expression in the eyes. As I look back today, I find even today—and I'm not criticizing anybody, but I just notice that portrait painters particularly, you make a round and you fill it with color, and you put a little black dot in the middle, and a highlight somewhere and go on. But that's not an eye to me, that's just a drawing or something.

BRADLEY: Shorthand.

KEMPTON: Perhaps. All eyes are the same. Very rarely do you see an eye that has really great expression in it in a painting of the average portrait painter. I think, I don't know, I didn't think of it sooner, because I paint as I paint period. But now that perhaps I'm not painting quite so much, I've been looking around a little bit and I find that empty eyes are staring out at you. I hope they don't look that way in my paintings.

BRADLEY: I notice that most of your portraits have rather elaborate background scenery, which I like very much. They have a landscape or foliage. How important do you feel background is? And do you use it to evoke a mood or to say something about the subject of your portrait?

KEMPTON: I think both. Evoke a mood, as you call it, and possibly I know this person likes the outdoors, he loves the trees and gardens and flowers, so it fits. And then also compositionally, you don't want a figure, usually, at least you didn't—today it may be different—you don't want a figure to just stand there, hang there, you know, and nothing. You put a little tree here and a little bush there, or something, and you have a composition going. And the green perhaps of the leaves of the trees gives a wonderful foil for your skin.

BRADLEY: There's one in the exhibition where the foliage forms a frame, it's beautiful. It forms like an oval frame around the face, and I forget which portrait, but it's beautiful.

KEMPTON: I think there are several. I think the [picture of] President Truman—the triple portrait [“The Truman Family,” 1952, in the collection of the State Historical Society of Missouri] has foliage, and so has one of President Truman [“Harry S. Truman,” 1947, in the collection of the White House]—which one? Mostly the triple portrait has. There is another one I don't remember.

BAUSKE: The one in the National Portrait Gallery [“Harry S. Truman,” 1970]?

KEMPTON: I think I have some there. I sometime try to get the same effect with the clouds. That's why I like to paint this outdoor cloudy thing, because you can bring in a

dark cloud, and then where you don't need dark, you can make it light, you know, and show this is darker. You follow me?

BRADLEY: I do. Well, now, all of that's very Renaissance also, isn't it?

KEMPTON: Yes.

BRADLEY: It's showing a background with landscape.

KEMPTON: Yes, I think there is that influence you asked me about, you see, which of course today is not the thing to do.

BRADLEY: Well, because it's harder too.

KEMPTON: As a matter of fact, I told my gallery lady the other day that I had heard that somebody had been talking about me, like I said before, they'd all like to kill me. "Well, if she wants to paint landscapes, why doesn't she paint landscapes, instead of using the portrait," you know. Oh she was furious.

BRADLEY: Petty.

KEMPTON: She said, "They should only try, if they could do it they would." Just about what you said.

BRADLEY: Then I also wanted to ask you about your tonalities in your works as they've gone through the years. I notice that the "Aviator," [1936] which is the earliest work we have of yours in the exhibition, has sort of a more muted tone than some of the later works. Now, have you seen a change in your attitude about your color palette?

KEMPTON: Color, yes. There's no question about it. Yes, and as we said earlier at the table here, the color itself has changed so much. You know how garish color is today, and the manufacturers make the color garish, they want to help the young artists, you know, those enormous vile looking things, and it suits them fine. They use enormous canvases, they use up mountains of paint, and what better business can you have? And it's very difficult to come up with something really nice and muted using that paint. Of course, it depends on the situation. That "Aviator" stands there, his plane is far away, and it is a gray day and maybe he's wondering whether he can take off or something, and that goes through the whole painting naturally.

BRADLEY: I was going through your scrapbooks and there was a 1944 article in the New Orleans newspaper. And it said that you ordinarily start without any sketches beforehand, that you just draw right on your canvas with your brush, trying to lay in the final color as you go along. Now, is that accurate?

KEMPTON: Well, very close anyway. I do start immediately with a brush, and usually use a little touch of brown sienna let's say to draw in an outline approximately. And then

I start right with the paint, filling in the skin colors, and then I work down and around and up.

BRADLEY: Now, as you know, there is a new museum in New York that has nothing but women's art. Have you heard about that?

KEMPTON: I thought that was in Washington.

BRADLEY: Washington? Well, I thought it was in New York. Maybe it's in Washington.

KEMPTON: Well, there may be two. I may not know.

BRADLEY: No, there is only one, Washington is right. It's set off a big wave of pro and con between women, art curators and feminists. Some feel that it puts the woman in a box, and it's like a form of segregation. But why should there be a museum just showing works of women? I mean, as if they aren't universal artists as well as men. How do you feel about that? How would feel if they asked you, "Greta, we want to have works of yours in our museum?" Well, of course, I'm sure you'd be delighted, but what do you feel about that, about women having to...

KEMPTON: Well, as you say, I would be delighted. But if I dissected it, the way you are doing here, I would say it's really silly because here they've been fighting, you know. I brought that up a little bit earlier during lunch, and I don't think about it much, and it's never been a problem to me. But actually why? Why aren't we just all together? We're all together in this world, so why shouldn't our work show together? But I think what it is, is that the women have been suppressed.

BRADLEY: Well, especially women artists and there have been...

KEMPTON: Well, women artists I'm talking about naturally. And they are now going to come out and say, "Look, we are here, and look at what we have done, and we're going to show you fellows."

The other day, I don't remember just where it was...Oh, I was asked to be a juror on an exhibition down at the Salmagundi Club in New York, and one man liked one painting and one liked the other, turned out that one was by a woman, and the other fellow said, "Well, between us, you know the women paint better than we do, but of course, they have more time," you know.

BRADLEY: Well, I will be eager to see that museum because it goes all the way back to the 15th century, and I never realized there were such great masters who were women in the 15th and 16th centuries.

KEMPTON: Well, I think...

BRADLEY: Well, it's because their works were never...I mean only until recently have they ever received any recognition. It's ridiculous.

KEMPTON: I know, but that shows you that perhaps they were right to have a women's museum or else nobody would ever have heard of those other paintings.

BRADLEY: I think so too.

KEMPTON: In other words, it shows a slight bit of revenge, but at the same time it does bring something out that the public wasn't aware of, and they have had some good artists.

BRADLEY: Oh, beautiful. And we're only now really beginning to realize that.

KEMPTON: That's right. [Interruption] Some of them, not all of them, the pastels for instance. This is its first time it's left...

BAUSKE: The first time since it was set out of its plastic bag, right?

BRADLEY: I wanted to ask you about His Eminence Samuel Cardinal Stritch [Portrait, 1950, in the collection of the Apostolic Enunciator of the United States]. Was he—did he make an easy subject? Was there any sort of discourse between you all, or ...

KEMPTON: Just the nicest. Did anything I asked him. I told the gentleman yesterday that I even made him go all the way up to what must have been the attic or something, some little room.

BRADLEY: In your house?

KEMPTON: Oh no, no, no. I had to paint him in the mansion. Is it the apostolic? No, the mansion.

BRADLEY: The rectory? No.

KEMPTON: I mentioned it this morning. The mansion, the cardinal's mansion. Yes, that's right, in Chicago. I had to go there, he could not come to me. Just like the President cannot come to me. But he walked all the way up with his ermine on and it was hotter than blazes, it was unbelievable. And he just sat there all dressed up and I know he was warm, the poor darling. Well, I was hot too, it was dreadful, the biggest heat wave they've ever had. But we both hung on and we worked.

BRADLEY: And no air conditioning.

KEMPTON: Up there? Never.

BRADLEY: Oh!

KEMPTON: And we managed, and there it is. But he couldn't have been nicer. Now, of course, I had all of the robes and the beautiful cross and the ring, everything with me in New York, and worked there on that lace and everything.

BRADLEY: It's beautiful.

KEMPTON: But when he was all finished, he gave me a little medallion and it has little pearls all around it, a gold chain. And if I had a minute and hadn't felt quite so miserable I was going to go down and bring up two things, that little medallion and, don't laugh now, a tiny little gold palette, and—that has nothing to do with him—and on it, I think there are three scallops, meaning the paint. And if I tell you where I found it, you will never believe it. I was invited to the President's ball in Washington and...you want to change... [Interruption]

BRADLEY: I think I asked you this morning about "The Lady in White" [1964] that I had brought in some clipping files somewhere that it hinted at hidden mystery, or that there was a hidden tragedy, or something.

KEMPTON: No, I don't recall that. Either the writer made that up...

BRADLEY: Journalists are sometimes way off, aren't they?

KEMPTON: Yes. But she does look mysterious. She has a queenly sort of thing.

BRADLEY: She looks queenly. Now, I like that.

KEMPTON: Now, that's my term.

BRADLEY: Yes, your term, and I think that's better.

KEMPTON: I think I used that this morning.

BRADLEY: You did.

KEMPTON: Very regal for her type, that somewhere wherever she comes from, she must have been somebody, that's how I felt.

BRADLEY: She's black.

KEMPTON: Very black.

BRADLEY: And where did you find her?

KEMPTON: In Los Angeles. She came to my house in Santa Monica.

BRADLEY: She was someone else you saw on the street?

KEMPTON: No. But there was someone else. Oh, in Mexico I saw someone on the street, but the story is so similar to “The Chinaman” that I hesitate to tell it.

BRADLEY: Well, tell it.

KEMPTON: I was walking—you know you get to a marketplace and you walk through this marketplace, and all of a sudden there was this woman, tall, slim, very unusual, and in her hair...you know that thick—you see it now here, but at that time I had never seen it—thick wool you tie Christmas packages with, or whatever.

BRADLEY: Yarn.

KEMPTON: Very heavy yarn. She had her hair tied in this colorful yarn somehow, and it was absolutely terrific and “Oh, my god, was that a model,” said I to myself. And I followed her all through the marketplace and she went into a store and I went into a store, and I saw in that store in the window these beautiful, beautiful materials hand blocked or something, real artistic. And I said, “Oh, I can buy some material,” or I’ll never know why I came into the store.

Well, she started to talk to this man, and they talked and talked and finally I went to the man when she was through and [asked] the same question, “Well, you know, I like to paint a little, and this lady is so interesting and do you think if you explained to her”—I didn’t know if she spoke English—“that I would like her to pose for me,” and so forth. An Englishman, blonde, blue eyes—and he said, “Why, of course, she will. She’s my wife.”

BRADLEY: “He’s my father.”

KEMPTON: Isn’t that funny? I know it doesn’t sound true, but why would I make up such a silly story? And she came to my hotel and I had a balcony there.

BRADLEY: Where was this, in Mexico City?

KEMPTON: Yes, in Mexico City. We had gone down there to go to some sugar plantation. I was on the board, and my husband was on the board, but we stopped off. I’m just trying to think whether it was in a town near the sugar plantation. No, but the marketplace was too big and then this wonderful store with all these materials and I bought some. And there we were on the balcony, and I painted her. Well, that’s more or less the end of the story. But it’s peculiar how two stories can...with [the] same answers, you know, [the] same question, same answer.

BRADLEY: Now, I want to know about “In the Artist’s Studio” [1940]. There’s something about that mood...

KEMPTON: Don’t ask the same question.

BRADLEY: But it looks as if Matisse would have liked that studio. It just looks real Matisse.

KEMPTON: Well, I don't know about Matisse, but it was...

[End of side one of tape. Begin side two.]

BRADLEY: Who was the dashing aviator? Boy, would I have liked to have met him. A wonderful looking man, and you caught that kind of romantic expression in his eyes.

KEMPTON: There are two I have left over and I don't remember who they are or why I have them. I have no idea.

BRADLEY: Aren't you glad you have that painting? That's a wonderful gentleman.

KEMPTON: Well, you know, they were in the cellar until just recently, up on a thing, and that they weren't more broken up...and when I talked about scissor and knife or a razorblade, I mean it because those fellows that I mentioned earlier they did actually cut pieces out. I think they thought if they cut pieces out—first of all, they must have enjoyed ruining things or breaking up things, because there was so much of it all through the building—but also I think they figured that can be repaired, and they have the painting. I would throw it out. I didn't hardly discover that until they were gone, and then I just left it in the cellar. Who needs it?

And then one day, I don't know what got into me, and I was angry and we had a new superintendent just then and I said, "Who knows what the next one is going to do?" And believe it or not, I have screens, and I took the screens, I had them put it in my bedroom in a corner and I got those paintings and I stuck them all back behind the screen. And that's just what I needed was a screen with paintings behind it in my bedroom, and up to the ceiling. [laughter] But they were there now for several months.

And then this young man came from the Fairleigh Dickinson [University] after the first thing I dropped and asked me about paintings like that. And I said, "That doesn't sound likely," and I dug out those three paintings, they're very big, the others. I brought the other two out and [thought], "Boy, will I have an exhibition." According to him. And then in the last minute I pulled out the flier. He said, "Boy, I'll take that anywhere." When he heard you had it, I think he's going to come after me with a knife. I said, "Come on, you'll have it later." He said, "Oh, but I wanted that to be the first exhibition." They've never been exhibited and I don't know who they are and I don't know how. It was some shuffle in my life and they got somewhere.

BRADLEY: It was the 1930s, 1936. What airfield was this, where was the physical place, you don't remember?

KEMPTON: No.

BRADLEY: Okay. Well, what about...

KEMPTON: I mean I probably just put in that airfield. I mean I didn't go to an airport or anything to paint. He posed...

BRADLEY: I'm so literal minded, I'm ...

KEMPTON: Well, I am too.

BRADLEY: That's wonderful the way you—see now, there's your background again.

KEMPTON: Okay.

BRADLEY: I love those backgrounds of your paintings. Now, how about "Waiting" [1940]?

BAUSKE: Do you recall if he came to your studio?

KEMPTON: Oh, yes. I'm quite positive. You know, I even have an idea that that man was painted twice. And [in] the first painting, I think, [he] was in regular uniform, because that what he has on there is no uniform. And that went somewhere, but where these things went, I don't know. And then he had this second one done, and I think that was to go to his home. I don't think his wife ever saw it. I never saw him and I don't know what happened. You know, he could have—I thought of it the other day—I wonder if he was killed and the painting just stayed there. I just don't know.

And then there's the other man in uniform that I haven't any idea how that came into my possession or what happened. But it could be that somewhere along the line there, 1939, or I don't remember exactly, I got married, remarried, and then moved away partially, and stayed there. Maybe they looked for it and nobody knew where I was. Just like they couldn't find me from the White House when they wanted Mrs. Truman [painted] and God knows, I was right there in this world. Certainly not hidden away.

BRADLEY: I have just one more question about "Waiting." Can you tell me...

KEMPTON: I think perhaps I saw something like that, and then there was a man in the Art Students' League or the Academy, I'm not sure, but I think it was the Art Students' League who looked like that and I had him come to my studio. And I had him on something and then I changed that to look like a suitcase, or whatever, a trunk, and put that little thing, a little illustration, but it's still a painting, not an illustration really. But I think it was just sort of an idea.

I wanted to do things not unlike "The Girl in the Studio" ["In the Artist's Studio"], that was sort of a dream. But I was always full of portraits and I loved that more, and besides [that] the money, which naturally we all need. And then these flowers come...

BRADLEY: These were your escape. Well, it wasn't like an escape, it was like, what would you call it?

KEMPTON: Well, I always compare it to the sailor that just comes off the boat, and goes smack into Central Park, rents a little thing and goes rowing.

BRADLEY: Just like a busman's holiday.

KEMPTON: Yes.

BRADLEY: Well, I think that's all, and probably the minute I get back in my office I'll think of others.

KEMPTON: Well, you know something, if you do, call me.

BRADLEY: Would you like to add anything? Say anything?

KEMPTON: I would be glad to add something if I had some idea of what you think...

BRADLEY: I think that we've covered—I think I've covered what I needed to know to round out the information for the catalog.

KEMPTON: I wanted to get a little evening wrap and went to this furrier and he looked at me and he said, "Well, I have something very different, very new here." "Well," I said, "fine, may I see it?" And he came out with two little white minks. One was a regular little jacket and one was a sort of peculiar little [thing] like a cape almost with these great big things hanging down in the front, you now, like...I couldn't make...I loved it immediately. And they were the very first white minks produced that they could use in furs. [Kempton bought the mink cape.]

BRADLEY: Let's see, is there a date on this? When would this have been? In the early forties?

KEMPTON: It was during the Truman administration. And the reason I know that was because I'll tell you. It was at the time when I was unveiling, it could have been "Tom Clark," ["Tom Clark, 1950, in the collection of the United States Department of Justice]. I'm going back to him I don't know why. [It was] somebody's portrait I was unveiling, and in came Mr. and Mrs. O. Max Gardner. He had just been elected to the Court of St. James.

BRADLEY: Oh, dear, wonderful Ambassador.

KEMPTON: Am I telling you something? And when I saw that...what happened is, I couldn't make up my mind, and I told the furrier, "I'll call next morning," which I did. And I said, "Well, I'll take the little jacket," and he said he's sorry, but a lady had come

in and she had taken it immediately. So I gave this dinner party in my suite in the Shoreham Hotel, and one of the guests that was invited were the O. Max Gardners, and Madame O. Max Gardner comes in with my little second choice. So being as I am, I immediately went over to her and said, “Mrs. O. Max Gardner, may I take your mink? I’ll take care of it myself,” because I had a man there to take the coats. “Oh, no,” says she, “this is not the kind of fur that you let somebody take. I will keep it, thank you.” So I say nothing and I said to myself, “If she only knew that I have the brother in there.”

BRADLEY: You should have run in and put it on, Greta.

KEMPTON: It’s funnier than that. Have you got the time?

BRADLEY: Yes. This is wonderful.

KEMPTON: The party’s over, and I had to go to a reception over to I think the Mayflower Hotel—yes, I’m sure—and I was in the receiving line there. And Mrs O. Max Gardner is standing around. And I stood there in the receiving line with my little thing around me. And she [Mrs. O. Max Gardner] looked at me, [laughter] I thought there was going to be a fist fight. Can you just imagine, the same afternoon, the same two ... [laughter]

BRADLEY: I love that.

KEMPTON: It was almost unbelievable. Then I had bought this extra fur and had the hat made, which of course, she did not have.

BRADLEY: She didn’t have them add a hat. Your tailor-made hat.

KEMPTON: But I listened to her and I kept my little cape on all afternoon.

BRADLEY: “This isn’t the sort of fur that one hands over to someone else Mrs. Gardner.” [laughter]

KEMPTON: I was the hostess, but this was in a hotel, and there were hundreds of people, a little bit different.

BRADLEY: That’s right.

KEMPTON: Just a little bit different.

BRADLEY: A little bit, in your own home.

KEMPTON: And here we were avoiding meeting each other around, you know. I saw her again later at a luncheon in the Treasury Department and that was exactly before they [the Gardners] were going to take over the new post in England and it was a good-bye

luncheon for them. Of course, we never spoke about it, if we even spoke [laughter], but he never got there, he died before they went to England.

BAUSKE: I was curious about in reading the scrapbooks, a number of the columns we have talk about parties that were given at the unveiling of paintings in Washington, and I hope that you didn't talk about this earlier.

BRADLEY: We didn't.

KEMPTON: No.

BAUSKE: I was curious about...you had a number of parties at the Shoreham...

KEMPTON: Well, I was there for many a number of years.

BAUSKE: Right. But I was curious, some of these were a hundred people and just an enormous number of people at some of these. How did you ever handle that kind of number of...

KEMPTON: I don't know, Washington seems to kind of handle itself. They're used to it. They come in, they stay a little while, they have a drink or two, meet some friends, and then they have to go to another party, and in the meantime another lot comes in and it goes like so, and you never know there are a hundred people there, really. And my suite was enormous. I had two enormous bedrooms where the ladies could put their coats, or whatever, and I had an enormous living room and dining room where you could lay out the thing. I mean, not forever, it was rented for the occasion by me. But I stayed there and they tried to always give me the same suites when I came back. And I had men to handle the food [and] drinks and I usually brought somebody with me, either a maid or a man I used to have. He and the maid knew just what to do and I had little trouble there.

BAUSKE: I was also interested in—I think we talked about this once before, you know, you would have maybe several of the Cabinet members and their wives would be there and ...

KEMPTON: Oh, yes, this would be...

BAUSKE: ... and Supreme Court Justices and other diplomatic figures.

KEMPTON: Well, it was all that...

BAUSKE: Sort of the Washington social circuit.

KEMPTON: Scene, yes. Well, remember, I came there brand new and very green and very dumb, but through the Trumans and Snyders, naturally, gradually and painting all these other people, I met all these people and it was always the same group, more or less. And it was so easy to just—you call one, you call them all really. I had somebody

perhaps to send out invitations occasionally. But it could be—if I have two people in for cocktails today it's an upheaval, you know, but in those days in the hotel and Washington you could get people that are used to parties that knew, and I wasn't too impractical about these things at that time. Today, you ask me for a cup of coffee, I'd probably fall apart. But it just arose, and they knew me so well, they were happy to come I think. And they don't stay long. In Washington, you go from one party to another. I don't know how they do it really, I did it a few times, but thank goodness, I was always busy and I didn't have to do much of it. But they'd come to my party and then they'd watch the time, because they're expected at another party. And so it flows.

BAUSKE: This was also at the time when you were really living at that time, in three different cities—in New York, Washington and New Orleans also.

KEMPTON: Yes, part of the time anyway.

BAUSKE: How did you handle that, I mean in terms of...I know also you were doing a lot of paintings in New Orleans at this time also, and that must have been sort of like three times a year you would completely enter a new life. There would be a completely different set of people and social climate and so forth.

KEMPTON: I didn't think of it that way. I'd just go on packing paints and packing things and go down there and unpacking, setting up my easel. Really, it's awful when I think about it, but doing it at the time it didn't seem awful at all. And I'd let everybody know I'm here and everybody came fluttering in, and posing and painting, and more sittings, and invitations, and it goes on.

BAUSKE: You were also very busy in New Orleans at this time. You had a lot of portraits that you were doing there too.

KEMPTON: Yes, I did.

BAUSKE: Do you recall any—what do you recall of the New Orleans...?

KEMPTON: Do you mean names?

BAUSKE: Well, I know a number of the names, but what types of people were you painting in New Orleans?

KEMPTON: Well, I remember painting a banker or two, I remember painting the owners of a hotel. I remember a darling little old lady socialite—she had [unintelligible] and grandchildren—and businessmen and the families and a lot of children, and the usual mixture of nice people that can afford it, and have the interest in either decorating their home or in owning a piece of art, I don't know which. Those things didn't bother me.

BAUSKE: In the series of paintings that you did in Lynchburg, Virginia, did you go there to do those portraits, or did you...?

KEMPTON: Well, many came to New York, even from New Orleans, many came to New York. Remember in these cities everybody goes to New York once or twice a year, and when they would come to New York they'd call me and we'd have a sitting in New York. Especially the men would fly back and forth you know, and take off a couple of hours before they'd go to a luncheon meeting or something. But in Virginia, too, now I painted Mrs. Carter Glass. She was brought to my studio originally. I was giving a party and had invited some people who asked permission to bring a guest or two, which I said was fine, and one of the guests at that time was Mrs. Carter Glass, Jr.

BRADLEY: The lady in our photograph that we're using in our new...I call her the "dragon lady" because of her long fingernails.

KEMPTON: Mrs. Carter Glass, Jr.? I don't remember that. I don't recall.

BRADLEY: I love that photograph. It shows you looking at Mrs. Carter Glass, Jr., who is looking at ...

KEMPTON: At the painting.

BRADLEY: At her portrait. And the portrait is wonderful, it has a mirror in it. Yes, so there are a lot of reflections in that photograph.

KEMPTON: Haven't you got a memory. It's a large portrait, very large portrait.

BRADLEY: Three-quarter pose?

KEMPTON: Yes. And I think a blue or black dress, maybe blue, I'm not sure. And then I think through that portrait is how I got into Lynchburg. And I don't know whether I had painted the Senator [Carter Glass] first or after, I really don't remember, because I think the Senator came through a different group, but I'm not sure. But Lynchburg was quite a town. And I remember one Christmas—this also doesn't seem true. I tell so many stories that don't seem true to me today—but one day, I mean before Christmas, I packed up and took twenty-one paintings with me in a jalopy that I had borrowed with my Mary who had been with me for a hundred years, my nice little Irish Mary, who then married a train engineer, and I think ended up with four or six sons, or something. I went to her wedding. And she and my paintings and at one time or another I took my kid along, and up we jalloped into Lynchburg. And they were excited and happy and everybody came rushing up. It was such a nice excuse to have drinks for them and get together. And I delivered my twenty-one paintings, and went home a few dollars richer, and that was very important.

BRADLEY: That's right in the middle of the hunt country, where they hunt to hounds a lot, around Lynchburg. Did they ask you to paint any of them as master of the hounds or in their hunting costumes?

KEMPTON: I think I did one, yes. I did more women there than I did men, I don't know. It was a strange career as far as the sexes goes. I started with an awful lot of children, even though I did those women after those two kids, but when you put it together, a lot of children. And then all of a sudden the children sort of got lost, and it was a lot of women. You know, like they were ganging up on me. A lot of women came at one time. I don't mean at the same day, but I mean over a period. And then all of a sudden, the men came in, where [from] I don't know, and I ended up doing practically nothing but men. This was a strange thing. An occasional woman, but the men seemed to have taken over. I can't quite figure it out, why.

I read a little note the other day in one of those clippings when I was looking for things for you, where I said that men are easier to paint than women. Did you see that?

BRADLEY: I saw indeed.

KEMPTON: And you know that hit me. I wonder if I opened my big mouth, said a thing like that, and no one thought I don't want them or something? But how could that happen that they read that in Lynchburg and in Ohio or in Washington, I don't know. I don't know how it happened, but it did.

BAUSKE: Of course, when you were doing paintings in Washington a lot of the commissions were Cabinet members, official Washington people, so...

KEMPTON: That's right.

BRADLEY: It was certainly not women, official Washington in those days.

KEMPTON: No, except for the wives here and there. Well, it was a nice change.

BRADLEY: And I'll bet now is a nice change, just to be able to do character studies and...

KEMPTON: I haven't started yet. I'm not through with the Trumans yet. And I have another one waiting, another portrait in New York, a small one.

BRADLEY: Not of Truman?

KEMPTON: No, a very difficult one. The man has suddenly like myself...is so changed, he's suddenly terribly old and you can't paint him as sick and old. You can't paint him like that, you know, it's going to be tough. And he would want to look like he did, say, ten years ago. Now, the judge [Judge Harold R. Medina] is different. He will have his 100th birthday next year.

BAUSKE: Oh, really.

BRADLEY: Good grief.

KEMPTON: He can't wait to be feted in Princeton, and he has a face—I wish I looked like that today. There isn't a wrinkle, he is absolutely fabulous.

BRADLEY: You don't have wrinkles, if you're worried about...

KEMPTON: Oh, come on, let's forget me. But just as an example—he may have changed now, I haven't seen him yet, because he's been sickish, one little thing right after the other. But the portrait is sort of finished and you would never believe the man is more than 75 or 80 years old.

BRADLEY: Amazing.

KEMPTON: So, after that we'll go to our dream. Hopefully we'll be around.

BAUSKE: I think maybe we'll conclude here because I think that—if you don't think that you need any relaxation, I think it would be good for all of us to take a break.

KEMPTON: Oh sure.

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