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Oral history interview with Carl Morris, 1983 Mar. 23

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Carl Morris on March 23 & 24, 1983. The interview took place in Portland, Oregon, and was conducted by Sue Ann Kendall for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

MARCH 23, 1983

Discussion about not having anything to say when tape recorder is on precedes the interview. Morris is relating a story about Einstein when tape is turned on--Ed.]

CARL MORRIS: He [Einstein] had been a guest [at Cornell] for some time and was asked if he would talk to the student body. He felt an obligation-- you know, after all they gave him the facilities, and he had made an obligation to them, so he consented to do it. The auditorium was filled. He walked out on stage, stood there for about two minutes and then said, "I find I have nothing to say."

SUE ANN KENDALL: Turned around and walked off?

CARL MORRIS: Well, I think a bit more _____.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Consented to do it but then he had nothing to say. I think we will start with the beginning of your life, if we can, and get some biographical information. I know you were born in 1911.

CARL MORRIS: Right.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Can you talk a little bit about your parents?

CARL MORRIS: Well, I was the third. I had an older brother and sister; they were born in Indiana. My father was a glass blower there and was suspected of having TB. The doctor said, "Go west, young man." So he took his two children and went west to eastern Los Angeles, where it was at the edge of the citrus groves. He got a barley field and cleared land there. He didn't have a big acreage-- he started out with twenty acres on borrowed money. He built a house. At the time he went there, there wasn't even a road in there. There was a railroad two miles away; when he got lumber for the house and the barn it was dumped there and then he had to take it by buckboard in. They cleared the land, built a house and planted 20 acres of citrus trees. Meanwhile, he worked for others in the area for bread and butter, and _____.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Did he do glass blowing?

CARL MORRIS: No, no. There were a lot of small farmers in that area at that time, very much like my father. I think it was probably the greatest concentration of ambitious, uneducated people that ever existed in the United States. It was always an argument between my mother and father-- one went to the first grade and the other went to the second grade, and it was a question of which one had the higher education! (laughter) But, he raised citrus fruits and vegetables and did a lot of gardening, which my mother did mostly. Actually, during my youth, shopping was done only for staples; otherwise everything was grown right there. So that was where I was born, in that community-- for what it's worth I was the first boy, the first person born in that community. Uh...what else is there to tell you about it?

SUE ANN KENDALL: Were either of your parents artistically inclined?

CARL MORRIS: My mother was a marvelous seamstress. My sister was the best dressed girl in the county. Aside from that there wasn't any particular endeavor in the arts at all, except later on when I was in high school I studied ceramics and then had the audacity to have a class and my mother was in the class.

SUE ANN KENDALL: You mean you taught the class?

CARL MORRIS: I taught the class, one summer.

SUE ANN KENDALL: So where was that, at the high school?

CARL MORRIS: That was at the high school, Fullerton High School. But my mother came into that class because my teacher, Glen Lukens, who was really my mentor in high school, was a person who had the kind of all-over view of what it is to be an artist and that could be in writing, architecture, music, painting, sculpture, whatever.

And the fact that his medium was metalwork and ceramics was not a limitation on his outlook in any way. Well, he had an adult class that he taught in the summertime. He went ahead and registered this-- had a full class; then he brought out a long ticket that he showed me. At that time if you bought a railroad ticket across the country it was four feet long. He was very amused to announce that I was going to take over his class. That's how I happened to have that class. I think that every one of us at one time or another has had a teacher that was far beyond any other in the kind of influence they had on people. Certainly this man did, even at the time of high school. I graduated from high school and at that time I had only been in one museum. It happened to be a good one-- it was the Palace of the Legion of Honor, and there was a Rodin show there, so it had a pretty powerful impact. It was also with this same teacher that, when it was decided I was going to go to art school, it was a question of deciding which one, wherever it existed in the country. And we learned that, among others, that there was one person teaching at Pomona College. So he [Lukens] called and made an appointment to have an interview with this man, so we could find out about his school [_____]. And when we got there I saw more paintings of Columbus landing in California among the eucalyptus trees than I have ever seen in my life! Terribly boring paintings. It was an uncomfortable interview and it was the thing that decided me that I was never going to go to that institute.

But, meanwhile, also another very interesting and important thing happened. This man, while he was as uncomfortable as we were, he was also courteous. He said, "There's a Mexican over here in the refectory who is doing a painting and maybe you would like to see it." So school was out at that time and we went there. There was large scaffolding up and Orozco was up on the scaffolding and a half-completed Prometheus. The whole cartoon was on the wall but the painting was just about half-way done. He came down off the scaffolding, came over and spoke in very broken English. We spoke no Mexican, but it was a marvelous interview and I had a tremendous sense of being in the presence of something very important. So that was about the extent of what I had other than my art school teachers in high school and this man Lukens in ceramics and metalwork.

SUE ANN KENDALL: But did you take classes in art in high school?

CARL MORRIS: Yes.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Did you draw a lot-- sketches-- as a younger child?

CARL MORRIS: Not before I entered those classes. I really didn't start to draw until I was in the second year in high school; then I started to draw quite a bit. I used to go on weekends to the beach or out to the desert with a friend and a Model T Ford and we would camp and do our little scene of painting on a camp stool and that sort of thing. Not very good but it was an exposure.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Sure. You mention that Lukens had certain ideas of what it meant to be an artist. Can you be more specific on that?

CARL MORRIS: Yes. He knew what it was in the spirit of life. I suppose-- you mentioned that I seem to have a particular interest in poetry and it could very well have started at that particular time. He handed me Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass and he also introduced me into the interest of architecture. He had admiration for writers, musicians, whatever it was in the creative world. He knew the rewards that come from the work, rather than the rewards that could come in a monetary sense. And he kept stressing this over and over again. If that's your direction-- for monetary success-- forget it because it's not going to be there. Even it you have monetary success, that will not be your measure. In that sense he had a big sense of what it was. The rewards that come from being an artist are not, as many people are fond of saying, sacrifices. They're choices, but they have to be choices for their rewards. One thing there is no room for in the artist-- we're able to have almost anything we want, with the exception of one thing and that is bitterness. People will share with us any kind of suffering or anything else, but if there is a bitterness about your profession they will have none of it. Because they didn't choose my profession. And so they're not going to suffer over it; they will run away. So that's the one luxury that the artist has no privilege of indulging in.

SUE ANN KENDALL: That's true. Then, after high school, did you not go to the Art Institute in Chicago?

CARL MORRIS: Yes. I had an arrangement with my father, sort of an agreement that as long as I worked in any kind of job that I got myself, I didn't have to work for him. He always had work for me to do in the orchards, but if I could get a job it was all mine. Believe me, I always had a job. (laughter) I took a job all the time. By the time I could pull weeds I had a profession. Then all during high school, in the summertimes, from the time I was 14, I drove a truck and hauled fruit. This was for a man who contracted fruit hauling. So that was a job I had. Also during high school I ushered in a theater and, while I got no financial support from my parents, I also never had to contribute any finances to the family. When there was a family decision to let me go to school, that was a privilege that was given to me, to let me go to school. But that would not mean that they were going to support it in any way. So I had saved money from the jobs that I had done and went to school with enough money to finance myself for a little over a year, but not much longer than that.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Were you specifically saving the money so that you could do that?

CARL MORRIS: Yes. When I was in the Art Institute in Chicago I had a monitorship which gave me tuition in school, and a job in a restaurant as a busboy. I managed to get by.

SUE ANN KENDALL: You were busy.

CARL MORRIS: Yes. It prevented outside activity which I regret because I had to work evenings. There was no opportunity for theater or that sort of thing. Then when the end of the second year at the Art Institute was approaching, my money was running out. I saw no future in coming home and I got a job with the Corps of Engineers in Chicago. They were building a breakwater in the lake. I became a professional wheelbarrow man for the summer. I saved money from that and applied for a scholarship from the Institute of International Education for a school in Vienna. I got the scholarship and with this money I had enough to finance myself part way through school and I had a roundtrip ticket, so I could make it. Once I got over there, then it was possible to do some work drawings for architects, and someone who was working for the State Theater became a friend and [gave me some stage set work to do--CARL MORRIS].

SUE ANN KENDALL: What year was that?

CARL MORRIS: '33.

SUE ANN KENDALL: And you spent two years at the Art Institute?

CARL MORRIS: Two years at the Art Institute and then two years in Vienna. Then I applied, again from the Institute of International Education, for a fellowship in Paris. I got that. [Morris was on an I.I.E. fellowship in Paris, 1935-36--Ed.] My roommate at that time was going to go to Yale, and he kept asking me, "Aren't you going to go home? Aren't you going to go home?" I had heard nothing about the application I had made for this fellowship in Paris. This came about in a rather peculiar way. I learned about the fellowship, that it was available, and I knew only the name. I wrote to Paris for the applications. It was called the [Harriet Hale] Wooley Fellowship and Madame Seligman was the secretary there in Paris. She sent the papers to me. I filled them out and one of the statements I had made was that another year in Europe was indispensable to me to complete what I hoped would be a foundation on which I could proceed as a painter.

Meanwhile I applied for renewal in Vienna at the same time I applied for the one in Paris. But the one in Paris asked me whether or not I was applying for any other fellowships. I thought it wasn't going to do me any good to tell them I'm applying wherever I can, so I neglected to tell them. I had a letter from Madame Seligman who said that they were impressed with my application; however they were curious about one thing. I had stated that another year was indispensable to me, that Paris was the place. However, they wondered about the application I had turned in to Vienna. They were all connected with the Institute of International Education!

SUE ANN KENDALL: They caught you.

CARL MORRIS: So I was very depressed. I blew it. I thought, "No way I'm going to get out of this." My friend had already returned to the United States and I didn't know what I was going to do. So I called my friends-- I had about ten dollars I think. I called my friends and told them that I was buying the beer that night. We went out, and they all came forward, one to give me a little work here, another to give me a little there, another to give me a little work here. But I knew it wouldn't work. It just wouldn't work. So I went home, back to my room, feeling very depressed. I was living in a rooming house that then was more or less an enlarged large-sized closet with a white wall behind the bed. I sat down on the bed and I looked up and saw a spot. I kept following that spot down the wall-- it was about an eighth of an inch across and it kept coming down and down. As it got closer I turned away and I said, "My god, that's a bed bug." At the same time there was a rumpling behind me and there was a telegram. That was the telegram awarding me the fellowship. So then I went to Paris.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Then you did have a reason to celebrate.

CARL MORRIS: Yes. So then I called up my friends and we went out again.

SUE ANN KENDALL: (laughs) Good for you. And one can find lots of beer in Vienna. Well, were you actually in school in Vienna?

CARL MORRIS: I was in school in Vienna. The first year at Kunstgewerbeschule, an arts and crafts school. Basically crafts and architecture and some painting and drawing. Then the next year I went to the Akademie der Bildenden Kunste which is the school that had almost exclusively fine arts. It was in their museum, a marvelous collection of Breugel paintings and a wonderful opportunity to know at first hand some of the old masters.

SUE ANN KENDALL: That was your first experience with the old masters? Oh no, in Chicago too...

CARL MORRIS: In Chicago too. I had a good art history teacher there, Helen Gardner. Strangely, she would speak of the old masters and knew nothing about the modern masters at all, which was always a curious thing for me because I have always thought that that was the reason for knowing the old masters, so you'd know who you are today. But she had an assistant, Miss [Blackshire], who took over when we got up to the impressionists. Miss [Blackshire] did that side of the training.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Who else did you study with in Chicago? Any studio people that influenced you?

CARL MORRIS: Well I didn't have a teacher in Chicago, but I had a friend who was teaching there-- a young person, Francis Chapin, who I was very fond of. But I didn't have a teacher there that moved me in particular. I didn't have that too much in Vienna either, although I feel indebted to the teachers that I had there. At the same time I never had anyone that I had a kind of closeness to the way I had in high school. I think this is often the case. This is why I say that often the most important teacher goes clear back to the time of high school as far as the direction in one's life is concerned. But the painters that I felt mostly indebted to at that particular time were Kakashka, who was from Vienna, and the teacher that I had at that time, who was Carl Faringer. He wasn't particularly well known around the country, I mean outside of Austria. He hasn't been well known outside the country, but as a teacher he knew how to paint, but he didn't have an international reputation.

SUE ANN KENDALL: What about Paris, what was that like for you in the thirties?

CARL MORRIS: Well, in Paris I was a free agent in the sense that I wasn't required to be in a school. There my program was the program that I made for myself. I must admit I went a great deal to museums there and associations with fellow artists working there. The fellowship that I had provided housing and a studio. I worked and spent, I must say, a lot of time in museums. And I bicycled in the summertime all over Germany, Czechoslovakia, Austria and then by train through Italy. And another train trip down through Spain. There was a period of turmoil at that time. You may remember I was in Vienna at the time that Dolphus] was assassinated. I was there at the time there was a socialist uprising. [Dolphus] was chancellor and I lived between the school and what was called an algemeinerhaus, where the socialists lived surrounded by troops with sirens going on all the time. The school that I attended at that time was right next to the war ministry. So it was right in the middle-- everything was barbed wire fences and you couldn't move and wondered how long this was going on. No way of getting any information at all. I remember that I got very upset because my brother-in-law at that time sent a cable to me, saying, "Leave Vienna and tell us your destination." Well it took all of my money to send them the return cable to say, "Mind your own business; I'll take care of myself." (laughs) Anyway, I didn't leave. Then I got into a similar situation at the time I went to Spain. I was in Madrid, and Franco was firing on the outskirts of the city. We were requested to leave the country, which we did, of course.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Was your experience in Europe most vital in terms of being able to see the old masters and to absorb a lot of that art? Or was it more the work that you were doing?

[Tape 1; side 2]

CARL MORRIS: No, it was more being in contact-- I have to admit that while my teacher, Helen Gardner, was very well informed, she was dull as dishwater. So I wasn't too excited about the old masters. I felt it was necessary and her facts were straight and everything, but it was real textbook stuff. I really had to be confronted with the real thing, the painting, sculpture, architecture, and so forth, before that enthusiasm became real and alive and very personal to me. And that of course it did in Vienna. There was the opportunity both in their modern museum and in their Akademie [sic]-- the collections were very worthwhile.

Also, this is true of course in Paris. Endless amounts of time could be spent there, both with what was going on at the present time and with the collections they had. In Paris, I suppose the two shows that I felt had the greatest influence on me-- one was a Picasso show in connection with a show of the sculptor Gonzalez. [He's] not too well known in this country, but I think there is a show right now. This was incredible, to see a show of Picasso and Gonzalez together, because Gonzalez was Picasso's sculptor teacher and friend. So this was a very exciting thing. The other single experience of great impact was seeing Monet's water lilies in the Orangerie. To walk in and have a fish-eye view of paintings all around in the middle of a pool is just fantastic. To be absolutely surrounded by a single world, a single statement, a single painting, is a very moving experience.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Your European experience then was most influential in terms of your contacts, but you were actively working as well, I assume. What kinds of things were you doing then?

CARL MORRIS: Well, I was at that time painting landscapes. I did a couple of figure paintings there. The concierge in the building was one I painted. I co-painted with a friend there. But I was more interested at that time in landscaping than anything else and I did the typical thing. I would take my bicycle and canvas and go out in the country and set up my easel and paint. And I went in the summertime to a little town in southern France called Jarnac. It was just a one-store town, a one-school-teacher town.

SUE ANN KENDALL: In Provence was it?

CARL MORRIS: Yes. And I lived above the tavern with the understanding that if they required the room during the day it was available. And I was always out painting during the day. I went there with a friend who also had a fellowship in Paris, Joseph Hirsch. He lived in New York. I don't know if you're familiar with his work or not. He had some success some time ago. We never got along too well together because of our differences in direction. He painted figures. I think during the World's Fair in New York the Museum of Modern Art had a show, and he won the first popular voting ballot. That kind of thing-- so we didn't get along too well together as far as painting or exchanges in that area. On the other hand, we did have almost a sibling rivalry and did have an affection for one another. We were good bicycle companions. We managed very well on that ground.

SUE ANN KENDALL: I take it you learned to speak both German and French?

CARL MORRIS: Well enough to get by, yes. It's never been something that's given me great pleasure, to pursue languages. I've envied people who do. But yes, I had to.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Right, just to get around you had to know a little bit. Then you came back and went to L.A. and worked on some movie sets.

CARL MORRIS: Oh, I came back and worked at Universal Pictures for not very long-- I've forgotten-- a short period of time. It was in their stage sets department. It was very discouraging because I was dumped in to one of the worst cultural shocks that I think anyone ever had. I think usually people get cultural shock when they leave their country and go elsewhere. I had this culture shock when I returned home and took a job in Hollywood. When I say I took a job, it wasn't easy to get a job then; it was right in the middle of the Depression.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Yes. I was just going to ask you how you came to get that job.

CARL MORRIS: Well, I met somebody who had a connection at Universal Pictures. I took my portfolio there and they said they didn't have anything in set designing but if you want to work in our set model-making department and set department and construction... And I said, "Fine." I couldn't be a chooser. But then the kind of assignment I got was-- and you can imagine as a farm boy what this did to me-- they bought five acres of vineyards and ripped out the vines, the plants, brought them back and stripped the plants of foliage, wrapped them with cellophane, sprayed them with black paint, hung them over the side of a building that had a roof top garden. They were making a movie called Top of the Town, that no one has ever heard of, a lousy movie, but what they wanted to do was have these streamers in black, shimmering on the outside. And that's the kind of thing, assignments...

SUE ANN KENDALL: They wrecked five acres of vineyards to do that.

CARL MORRIS: Yes. Five acres of vineyards to do that. And then they would have Shirley Temple singing and Toscanini playing the music in the background. Just a whole upset in values. It seemed to be so totally crazy that I got on a bus and when to San Francisco and did various kinds of jobs there-- working in the art department of a printing company, and, you know, real hack jobs.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Yes, but at least you escaped L.A. You weren't long for that world.

CARL MORRIS: So then I went back to Chicago and taught there for a year before the Art Projects started. When they were started, this was the first time I was ever approached for a job. I was asked.

SUE ANN KENDALL: So you went back to Chicago and taught there a while. Then when the Federal Art Project came along they sought you out.

CARL MORRIS: Yes.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Why Spokane? Was that your choice or...?

CARL MORRIS: Well, indirectly. I said that I would like to go. They asked where I would like to go in the country because this was in the planning stages of their whole program. I said I would like to go west and would like to be near water. Well they had a super salesman. I had never been to Spokane. But they had a super salesman, Danny Defenbacher, who was representing the art projects at that time. He said, "You should see Spokane. They've got a waterfall in the middle of the city you wouldn't believe." (laughter) So I bought the story and I came out. That's how I got to Spokane.

SUE ANN KENDALL: But there were other centers around the country. Can you talk a little about what you did in Spokane?

CARL MORRIS: Well, there was a building that had [a print shop-CARL MORRIS]. I went out there first and set up

a program-- decided what was needed, how many teachers and in what departments. I wanted a couple of painters and a sculptor and someone who would do some art history.

SUE ANN KENDALL: It was setting up a whole school.

CARL MORRIS: Setting up a whole curriculum. When I came to Spokane, just the idea had been sold to them and this same Danny Defenbacher had set up a board. So I arrived with a board and no building, nothing. We found a building which had been used as a print shop. We gutted this and completely renovated it with galleries and classrooms and a little office space. Then I sent in my request for teachers and Hilda came as the sculptor in that group; and there was Joe Solman, a Ruth Eggar, and Kenneth Downer [who] came from New York. Guy Anderson from Seattle and [Z.] Vanessa Helder from Seattle. There were a couple of local people who worked with us in the children's classes. They started out by coming into the adult classes but they were qualified as people who could work with us. Anyway, that's how the program started.

SUE ANN KENDALL: So you directed all of that?

CARL MORRIS: Yes.

SUE ANN KENDALL: You directed, budgeted, coordinated the hiring of teachers, the curriculum.

CARL MORRIS: Yes. And the reason that we were able, I think, to manage as well as we did was that since I was responsible for setting up the program, I actually assigned the teachers studio time, which they would do as part of their responsibility. Because every person that came on that project had-- now I'm going to use that word sacrifice-- had made a sacrifice. They were on just the production units wherever they came from, and now they were asked, "Would you like to become part of a teaching program?" It seemed to me that that kind of agreement shouldn't be everything of one and nothing of the other, so we tried to make it a combination.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Which made life better for them I'm sure.

CARL MORRIS: Yes, and as far as I was concerned I didn't give myself the same assignment in the beginning. I found that I was, you know, working 24four hours a day, seven days a week and going crazy with that kind of a schedule. It was at that time that I learned that Ghandi took Mondays for prayer and nobody would interrupt him on Mondays. So from there on out I painted on Mondays. (laughter)

SUE ANN KENDALL: Was the center successful in terms of the classes?

CARL MORRIS: Oh yes. We had-- these were not full-time students-- we had a registration of over 200. And after the project was closed, because of the war...

SUE ANN KENDALL: When did they close? When the war started?

CARL MORRIS: Yes. They were closing... We were there in Spokane in 1939. I believe it was in 1939 that we went to Seattle. It was the idea at that time to set up statewide programs in Seattle and we were going to use our staff to set up a program sending teachers around to half a dozen or so of these centers in smaller places, like Centralia for instance. We made contact with them, and they had space and so forth. They didn't have a large enough population there for a long-term program, but short-term workshops. As a matter of fact, no one wanted to go there and live either, to these smaller places, but they were intrigued with the idea of going for a period of two weeks, let's say, and then going to another place for two weeks. So that was the idea of going over there. At that time, with the war rumblings coming along, the states started to-- Washington State tried to pull all control away from Washington, D.C., and in a sense we were being rendered impotent right at that source. Even before the projects closed they practically had been handed over to the state. What the state was anxious to do was get rid of them.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Oh, I see. So then when you switched to Seattle, you were going from a federal job to a state job.

CARL MORRIS: No, we were still with the federal. But, more and more it was becoming under the control of the state.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Were the federal centers totally funded by the federal government?

CARL MORRIS: No, they were totally funded by the federal government in combination with funds raised in the community; this was not tax money. In Spokane, for instance, there was a penny drive in the public school.

SUE ANN KENDALL: For the center?

CARL MORRIS: Yes. And this had two purposes. One was to acquaint the people and get their interest, in the

public schools. And we had a strong relationship with the public schools in the program that we did there.

SUE ANN KENDALL: I'd like to see a penny drive now for the arts. It sounds real healthy.

CARL MORRIS: Yes. But that was more the money that came from the community in that sense. It was more token money as a matter of insuring public support and not just putting the program, and imposing it, on the people.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Right. It sounds good. It sounds like it really worked.

CARL MORRIS: Yes, it did work.

SUE ANN KENDALL: So then you came over to Seattle, in 1940 or 1939?

CARL MORRIS: In 1939. Yes. And we got into a great deal of trouble with the administration on a local basis and the person who was head of the...or assistant to [Holger] Cahill-- his name was Tom Parker-- came out to Spokane. We talked for some time about the condition and he said in effect, "I understand your problem and it's a very difficult problem, but I have to assure you that we have lost control and there isn't very much that we can do from out national office to intervene in this situation. However," he said, "I can offer you the job of directorship of the museum that is being started in Des Moines, Iowa." I said, "Thank you very much, no thank you." And we both quit the project and set up a studio in Seattle and started teaching there.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Wasn't it in Spokane that you met Clyfford Still?

CARL MORRIS: Yes.

SUE ANN KENDALL: And what was he doing there?

CARL MORRIS: Clyfford was teaching at Pullman. And George Laisner was teaching there at the time.

SUE ANN KENDALL: So he wasn't in Spokane?

CARL MORRIS: No, he was in Pullman. But he came up practically every weekend, Sunday. Something very peculiar was happening. Fifteen minutes after he left, Laisner would always show up with his wife. It was difficult for us to figure out what was going on. We asked directly, "How does it happen that you get here fifteen minutes after Clyfford Still with regularity?" Well it turns out that they hadn't been speaking to one another for some time in Pullman. So they somehow or another, through mutual friends, learned when the other was coming. Then Laisner would camp up on the hill and had a pair of field glasses and he could see when Clyfford Still had left, so then they would drive down.

SUE ANN KENDALL: He was actively working at that point as well as teaching, I assume.

CARL MORRIS: Yes.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Did you share any ideas on painting, back and forth?

CARL MORRIS: Yes. He had a friend who taught philosophy at Moscow, Idaho, by the name of Blue. He had a lot of his paintings stored in the basement there, and I went there one time. Clyff and I didn't get along too well after an incident there-- They were in the basement and the next time he came to Spokane I said I thought it was a shame that this work was left in the basement of his friend's house and could we show it at the Center. And he said, "Well, you're just like all the other museum directors. You just want to exploit the artist." And with that I said, "You son of a bitch, get out." I left and went into the bedroom and turned my back to him and wasn't going to have anything to do with him anymore. But just before he left-- he had stayed and talked to Hilda-- he came to the door and opened it and said, "Well, thanks for calling me a son of a bitch. I guess I deserved it." And he left. Well, anyway, that was a-- I think that ought to get off the tape.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Well, we can take that off. Now, when did you get married to Hilda? Was it in Spokane or in Seattle?

CARL MORRIS: In Seattle. The day that we quit our jobs we got married.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Fantastic! Then set up your own school?

CARL MORRIS: Yes. We had a houseboat on Fairview Avenue North on Lake Union. You know where the Todd Shipyards are there? Well, we could look right towards the Todd Shipyards. Ours was the end houseboat on the moorage.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Nice.

CARL MORRIS: It was nice. It was wonderful. It was a wonderful period in the sense that the calm of living on water is just absolutely fantastic. There's nothing like it. But, the confinement of space is another story and that's the reason that we left there.

The reason that we came here to Portland is that there was a competition under the Treasury Department for a mural in Eugene. It was open to west coast artists and I was rather determined that I was going to give my best to that, and I did. I submitted my entries and the jury-- they had a local jury here in Oregon-- sent in a report choosing Jacob Elshin for the job. They said that if it had been based on quality they would have chosen Carl Morris but his work didn't reflect anything of the [agriculture] or industry of the Willamette Valley. So when this was sent back to the national office they said, "Here, here, we gave no such instructions." As a matter of fact they had even said that you can be as free as you like. If you wish you can even choose a subject such as Franklin Roosevelt's four freedoms. So that was leaving it wide open. They said, "Now if you want to put these conditions on it, then we suggest that you open it up to Carl Morris and Jacob Elshin with the understanding that they are competing again.

Well, by this time we had moved to New York. We left the houseboat and we had moved to New York, because I had already been told no. While we were there a funny thing happened. A friend of ours said, "I don't know what you think of fortune tellers, but there is one I would think you would find amusing down in the Village if you would like to come down." We said, "Sure." This fortune teller not only told an awful lot of things I didn't want to hear but also said, "You will get a letter that will send you west." I said, "O.K. I'm going to get a letter." Went home and got this letter from the department saying that I'd been awarded this commission. So we moved back out here and Hilda came to Portland and found a house for us. I went down to Eugene and spent time down there going through the lumber industry and agriculture and all of that, and completely reworked the whole idea all over again. Then, I don't know why these things always have to happen with drama, but again then I was awarded the final acceptance on this, we of course had to have a bottle of scotch. And woke up the next morning in such a condition that I think I heard the words Pearl Harbor five times before it penetrated.

SUE ANN KENDALL: That was the day?

CARL MORRIS: Well, with that we were here. So at the end of the war I'd saved the money-- which was $2,400-- from the mural. I didn't have much left over from the shipyards, because of a considerable amount of hospitalization and so forth during that time, and other tough luck. But we managed to have something put aside and that was enough. It was enough to move us any place we wanted to go in the country and take a job, or we felt we could live for a year on that money and, by frugal planning and so forth, we would have been able to. So it was a question of which do we do. We decided to stay here and we went to work and built the house that we are living in now. As soon as we could we had classes in the evening. We had a very tolerant group of people who had classes for six weeks with the understanding that if we were broke at the end of that six weeks we would have an extra six-week session, and that went on...

[Tape 2; side 1]

SUE ANN KENDALL: Well, meanwhile your son was born somewhat in that time?

CARL MORRIS: He was born in 1945.

SUE ANN KENDALL: And what made you decide to stay in Portland? Was it the area, because you were familiar with it?

CARL MORRIS: No. At that time it really was a question of whether we would move someplace. If we moved it would take all we had to go there and then it would be a matter of looking for a job. But we felt that we could live on what we had for a year and we gambled on that. And then I, in particular, am very fond of the Northwest as a studio. I love it as a place to work. Because of my habit of working, I would rather have long periods of uninterrupted working. Then when I am out in the outside world, I take it completely separate. Not deal on a day to day basis and mix it back and forth. We have had some marvellous rewards in this sense, of people we have gotten to know because we're here-- I think it's in part because we're here-- in a way that we might not have been able to know them elsewhere. A couple of outstanding ones-- our friend Stanley Kunitz came out here during the so-called "October storm." [Bad snowstorm in October--Ed.] He was giving a lecture series in this area but everything was closed down. All the schools were closed, but he was here waiting for them to open. So he came and spent quite a long time with us, and we cooked over the open fire. He's a marvellous cook and a marvellous poet. We had that side of life, an intimate relationship with Stanley that we would not have had, I think, if it hadn't been here.

I think of the time that Stravinsky came here to conduct the Portland orchestra in his own music. Phil Hart was manager of the symphony at that time. He knew that Stravinsky was interested in art as well as music, that his

wife was from Austria-- Vera-- and she was also a painter. They had some time and Phil brought Stravinsky to the studio. It was kind of a nice thing because we were going to go listen to him conduct the next night but we had enough of a snowstorm on the hill that prevented us from getting down the hill. So we didn't get to his conducting that evening.

SUE ANN KENDALL: When was this?

CARL MORRIS: Oh, I've forgotten the year. I'm going to guess now. About 25 years ago.

SUE ANN KENDALL: So, around 1950?

CARL MORRIS: 1950 or early fifties. Anyway, the next morning he appeared at our door in a taxi. He said, "If you won't come to me, I'll come to you." A delightful man, he spent a lot of time in the studio. He likes, liked to draw, so we talked across the table on paper, back and forth. That was a marvellous experience with him. And there have been others. We've had a relationship with the poets of the area-- Ken Hanson and David Wagoner and Robin Skelton and Jim Dickey. These people we have had an intimate relationship with, and Carolyn Kizer too, in a way that had been extremely rewarding for me-- a marvellous kind of exchange with these people. It's not that it doesn't happen elsewhere. But I know it's happened and has worked for me here and I like it very much.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Yeah... I want to go back a little bit to the time during the war. Were you able to keep up your art work-- because weren't you working towards the war effort?

CARL MORRIS: I was working in the shipyards and I had a job with Gunderson Engineering Company that started a plant. They had a small outfit before the war but they became large enough to have an employment of about 3,500 people. They had both steel sections building landing craft and assault craft, and then another department building lifeboats and life rafts out of plywood. That was a smaller operation within the division, but it was something that had never been done before so that's why someone who was an artist was asked to come in. We had two crews, each crew with 85 men-- one day crew and one night crew. We actually operated around the steel plant operation more or less. We had a considerable amount of independence because the difference between steel workers and carpenters is tremendous. Most of the carpenters that we had-- a lot of them-- were of Swedish descent. They were good carpenters, joiners, shipwrights, and part-time farmers. Many of them lived down in the valley and commuted daily. Strangely, while they had had far more experience as carpenters than I had, they were not interested in any new [technique], any new plywood, any new use of these materials. It was the first time that power hand tools were used. I had as much experience with a hole gun, a drill gun, a skill saw, all of these hand tools, as they had, and they didn't really want to learn anything but one of these at a time, and go home and do their farming for the rest of the day and keep that going. That's why I was there, and, by choice, most of the time I took the night shift. That meant that I went to work at 4 o'clock and was home at midnight, but I had quite a lot of time then during the day and I was able to finish that mural for Eugene under those circumstances. Then I hired someone to go down and prepare the wall and went down and installed it over a weekend.

SUE ANN KENDALL: That's nine or ten pounds, that mural, isn't it?

CARL MORRIS: Well, it's fifteen feet long and eight feet high; there were two of them.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Oh, it's in two panels then.

CARL MORRIS: Well, there were two canvases and they were rolled in from the ends, like a scroll. The wall was troweled with white lead and you start in the center, centering it, and then rolling the two sides out. Well, the weight is just fantastic in that distance, so you can imagine by the time we got out to the end we missed by about four inches. So I had to get up and paint that in. That was still lucky because any major slippage can't be corrected under those circumstances, and the whole thing would be _____

SUE ANN KENDALL: Now that was on lumber and agriculture, is that right?

CARL MORRIS: One was on the lumber industry and the other was on agriculture. They were on opposite ends of the lobby.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Those are figurative, I assume?

CARL MORRIS: Yes.

SUE ANN KENDALL: In the 1930's figurative style?

CARL MORRIS: Entirely, yes. They were typical WPA art.

SUE ANN KENDALL: I would like to see them. I've never seen those. I'm sure they are quite different from the

work that I know of yours. In terms of your house, you also started on that project after the war, and that was a major undertaking wasn't it? You built it yourself.

CARL MORRIS: It was a major undertaking, but also had many rewards. The fact that it took a long time-- we thought we'd never get it finished. It took us really, I think, about five years before we decided that we were going to stop working for the house and let the house work for us. All that period up to that time, every-- not all our energies, because we were still, both of us, doing our work during that time.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Where were you doing your work while you were building?

CARL MORRIS: We had a house here in the northwest area on Glisan Street that has since been torn down. Our house was where the cookie department is in the Thrifty Market now.

SUE ANN KENDALL: So, didn't you use salvage materials to do the house?

CARL MORRIS: Yes. In 1947 there was a flood that completely flooded out a town of 30,000. It was called Vanport.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Where was that?

CARL MORRIS: That was just north of the city here on the river. It was between the main river and a slough. There had been a railroad trestle that ran around holding back the slough and the waters were high. They had used just dirt to fill in under the railroad trestle and those broke loose. Fortunately it happened on a hot afternoon; it was not a working day. I've forgotten whether it was a holiday or a weekend. Anyway, considering the fact that there were that many people there, tragically, there were I think about 13 lives lost. But that seems so small considering the fact that there were 30,000. That had to do with the fact that, while all those people were being reassured that they would be warned in plenty of time, I think the ones that were there knew better and a lot of them, at least during the day, were out. And, as a matter of fact, we were listening to the radio and heard from the announcer that he had just talked to the sheriff and the sheriff had reassured him that everybody would have plenty of time. He was out there on the site at the time the broadcast came in. He said, "There it goes," and within a matter of minutes the whole city was up an shuffled and juggled around and...

We have a friend who is a lawyer who had written a contract on the salvage of that place. When he told me that the buildings that were out there were going to be for sale I didn't like the idea of taking over the bones of other people's tragedies. I hesitated for a long time until it was explained to me that these buildings did not belong to the people, that it was all government housing-- there was no intention that it would be rebuilt again-- and that whatever personal property was found there did not go with the sale of the building. So I was able to get back personal belongings to people and take that responsibility. Meanwhile the thing that happened was that almost every weekend while I was out there, I would work all week long wrecking the building and then a crew of volunteers would appear out there. The whole philosophy department from Reed College came out and many times there were people who would come out.

SUE ANN KENDALL: A real group effort.

CARL MORRIS: A real barn-raising. But there were a great many experiences like that, rewarding. There was even a person at that time sent us a letter. It was a dirty trick. They sent us a letter and said they had deposited $450 in the bank into our account and that they would let their name be known at the time that we got back to work and maybe they could then take the debt in work. We never found out who that person was. That's why it was a dirty trick. Ever since then we have had to be nice to everybody, because we have no idea who did that. (laughter)

SUE ANN KENDALL: That's amazing. Can you talk a little about how your work changed from your 1930's style up through the forties, since we are talking about the 1940s and the war and your house? Your work was changing a good bit at that point, wasn't it?

CARL MORRIS: Yes. It was changing a great deal. I think it was changing all over the western world. The whole thinking of that time and the whole position of artists was brought into question. We had, of course, been through this whole, kind of, social conscious period in art. In reviewing, in hindsight, what went on in the Left Bank in Paris-- it happened more dramatically in the Left Bank in Paris, particularly with the writers, the ones who got on both sides, the way they destroyed one another, the way they destroyed their productivity. Everything was destroyed because they lost their sense of values in their pursuit of art, in becoming emotionally involved in areas that, certainly, all of us should have been concerned about. But actually the act of participating with one's work under those circumstances, in hindsight, was not-- The record doesn't look very good.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Can you be more specific?

CARL MORRIS: Well, I can be specific in this sense. You know the tragedy of Ezra Pound and then, to feel that kind of art that was going on in the thirties was the Jack Levine type of thing was a-- I mentioned him because I think he was one of the better social satirists at that time, whether he was right or wrong. But the point is that-- Well, I don't know whether he's too good an example because I'm not sure that he had a great choice in being able to [work, look] in the area of art expression, rather than what he chose to do, of social commentary. I suspect that he was limited to that extent and couldn't move. But the others who had a conscience about the world felt that their statement had to be through their work. It's a trap that artists have fallen into many times and it can be self-destructive.

Now there have been some outstanding examples of artists-- and Picasso can always be used as an example for anything you want to talk about and this is a good one. He certainly didn't spend his lifetime as a political satirist or commentator, but one of his most powerful paintings was the Guernica. He did that because he had to do it. But he did not devote his life there. He said what he had to say in painting, unencumbered by any emotional feeling he had about the world around him. I think another example would be the painting of Goya of the revolution of May the what, 5th-- what was the year? I've forgotten. [The Third of May 1808] In any case it is just an incredible painting and it stands against any of his other paintings, but while he did a lot of paintings that were in that specific concern, his life was not consumed by it.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Right, he wasn't a slave to that.

CARL MORRIS: I mention these because I think they are two of the best paintings. I will mention a third. Manet's painting of a revolution [The Execution of the Emperor Maximilian of Mexico, 1867]. These three paintings are by three great painters, but they did not give their lives over to that whole cause. This was their statement. That's a very convoluted way of going back to the question you asked me--how did my work change and so forth. There was a period when I was being figurative. There is some, not a whole lot, of social comment going on in there. But I was always concerned and I think I have always been a very political person, but I found that the acceptance of work at that particular time was being accepted for the wrong reasons. Because there was always something in there to find as a figure and so I did almost a turnabout in approaching it, to take out any references that would be misleading about my intent as far as the painting was concerned. And that's how that little revolution took place on my own work.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Was it contact with any other painters in particular that precipitated that?

CARL MORRIS: No. I certainly feel that I was part of a whole movement of people going on at the same time. Hilda and I were making frequent trips to New York at that time. Before this whole New York school became a valid kind of school, I spent a great deal of time with those painters. In particular Mark Rothko and Milton Avery, and Clyfford Still was part of that group.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Is that where your first contact with Rothko was?

CARL MORRIS: No. The first contact with Rothko was when he came to see us here in Portland during the war. That was around 1942, something like that. Because he lived in Portland for ten years and so we saw him frequently after that first visit. We exchanged visits with one another a great deal.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Yes. And he was part of that whole movement.

[Tape 2; side 2]

SUE ANN KENDALL: You wanted to say something from yesterday's session?

CARL MORRIS: Yes. About the period in Vienna when we were talking about the people that impressed me-- influences of that time. There was a painter, Egon Schiele, who was a close friend of Kokoschka. I'm not positive about these dates, but I think he died when he was about 30. But during that period, about 10 years, he was quite productive and an incredible draftsman. His painting was mostly, the draftsmanship was-- he did figures and portraits and I was extremely impressed with him at that time. He was very strongly influenced by one of the first designers of the Russian Ballet, Leon Bakst, and it seemed possible that he studied with him. This I am not certain of, but there was an obvious influence there. Also, there was a surprising number of Leon Bakst's paintings. Now he wasn't primarily a painter; he was a set designer and he did stage sets for the ballet. They were quite ornate, and you see this very much in the later work of Schiele and to some extent in Kokoschka-- not so much but to some extent. I mention this because I had at that time thought how marvellous it would be to some day have an opportunity to do set work for a ballet. That was the time that Picasso, Matisse, De 'rain, and all those were doing sets and they were doing them for Diaghilev when he took the ballet to Paris.

SUE ANN KENDALL: The Ballet Russe, yeah.

CARL MORRIS: Yes. But I never quite had the guts to approach that other than it being something that I rather

hoped I might have an opportunity to do, but at the same time I was a bit afraid of the challenge. At this time Kandinsky was working with these people. When he came to the studio here in Portland...

SUE ANN KENDALL: You mean Stravinsky? I think you said Kandinsky.

CARL MORRIS: No, no. Stravinsky. When he came to the studio here he came alone first and we talked for a long time. His wife Vera joined later in the afternoon and they went around the wall picking paintings from against the wall and looking at them. First they broke off into German and then into Russian. They were talking very excitedly about how this painting would be perfect for such and such a ballet, or such and such music and so forth. There I stood with this whole notion that I was afraid to do it. Now I understood why it was so easy for those people to work together, because here, in effect, I had already designed a ballet. That kind of experience was something that I envied very very much, but I had that moment of seeing how it operated during that period in Paris. So that's the period I wanted to mention to you.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Did you ever get a chance to do that?

CARL MORRIS: No. I never did. I never got a chance to do theater and I think that is possibly true for one simple reason. Being in Portland you don't get very much exposure to that kind of opportunity.

SUE ANN KENDALL: I know Kenneth Callahan did some sets for Macbeth in Seattle, which I did not see. But he did once have the chance to do that.

CARL MORRIS: Also, I had another experience with a composer, Milton Katims. He directed at the Seattle Symphony but before he took that job he was interviewed for the symphony job here in Portland. He chose to go to Seattle but at that time that he was conducting the Portland Symphony, again he came to the house with my friend Phil Hart, who was the manager and was looking at paintings. I had a painting that was about one foot by four feet and I had it vertically on the easel. He kept tilting his head to one side and kept turning it over. Then after a bit he said, "Do you mind if I turn that on its side?" I said, "No, I don't mind a bit." So he turned it on its side and he liked it that way much better. He liked it very much. Just before he left, when he was to conduct that evening, I asked him would it be possible to get six seats for his performance that evening. That looked like a bit of a bite to put on him but he turned to Phil Hart and asked, well, was it possible? Yes, they guessed it could be arranged, but why do you want to do it. I said, "I would like to lie down at your concert."

SUE ANN KENDALL: (laughs) That's a good story.

CARL MORRIS: I did get the six tickets, though. Milton Katims as you might remember was never one to pass up an opportunity for publicity. He wanted to call the press immediately, and I said, "No. No business there." (laughter)

SUE ANN KENDALL: That would have wrecked it all. Well, we covered a lot about the forties yesterday. I thought today maybe you would talk about your gallery affiliations during the forties. When did you join the Kraushaar Gallery? Was that at that time or later?

CARL MORRIS: My ability to retain dates is not good at all. We'll have to look in the files for that.

SUE ANN KENDALL: But where were you showing-- weren't you showing in New York in the 1940s and in Portland...

CARL MORRIS: Well, before the Kraushaar Gallery there were shows, but these were museum shows-- the San Francisco museum, The Palace of the Legion of Honor, the Seattle Art Museum, the Portland Art Museum, other places. There were open shows that were available-- unfortunately not available to younger painters now because they're not open shows. This is regrettable because everyone now must approach his profession through a gallery and that's the only exposure he has. This is not in my opinion the fault of the dealers, but it is a default on the part of the museums because they have abdicated all responsibility to the living artist in that extent. They now go to the dealers and that's the only way they put together shows. It doesn't cost them as much, they have no risk involved.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Right, and it's too bad.

CARL MORRIS: It is too bad. But there was always a certain recognition that came from these shows. It was almost like the underground grapevine-- getting catalogues from these [shows] and knowing where your friends were in various parts of the country. Having that kind of communication was nice and that we don't have today.

SUE ANN KENDALL: And then the dealers would discover people through those shows, I assume. And now it's almost the opposite.

CARL MORRIS: Yes. But there was a show at the Kraushaar Gallery that had been arranged by the then director

of the museum here, Tom Colt. It was a group show.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Was that the "Eight Oregon Artists" show?

CARL MORRIS: Yes. And it was after that show that I was invited to join the gallery, and I have been there with her ever since.

SUE ANN KENDALL: So that's been a good connection for you in New York?

CARL MORRIS: Yes. I was rather startled to find out at that time-- there was a comment from Howard De Vree, who was a critic on the New York Times. Because of the show that I had there, and his openness, he didn't hesitate to say, "I like your work." We became friends and we were until he died. We had a very good relationship. He said to me at that time, "I'm so pleased that you're represented by Kraushaar because Antoinette is only one of five honest dealers in New York." And I said, "Who are the other four?" He wouldn't give the other four. But I have come to believe that he was probably right.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Right. I know that Kenneth Callahan has been very happy with his association there too.

CARL MORRIS: Yes. There weren't as many dealers at that time but also that deal with Kenneth Callahan was something that was also an attitude on her part. At that moment the man who represented him-- I don't remember his name-- he had a portfolio, and he showed Kenneth's work in his apartment. He didn't have a gallery, but he did represent Kenneth very well and saw that he was in shows and arranged for clients to see his work by appointment. When he decided to go out of business it was he that went to Antoinette and asked would she take him on, because there was that kind of relationship between some of the dealers there that they cared to that extent.

SUE ANN KENDALL: That's encouraging, isn't it?

CARL MORRIS: Yes. This had been his livelihood. He was leaving it, but he did have a responsibility to the artist.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Yeah, that's wonderful. Too bad it doesn't happen a little more often.

CARL MORRIS: Yes.

SUE ANN KENDALL: You were commissioned to do some panels for the Centennial Exposition in Eugene?

CARL MORRIS: Yes. No, in Portland.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Sorry. Can you talk about those a little bit? I haven't seen them and don't know much about them.

CARL MORRIS: Well, I can show you some slides of those. They were paintings. There was a building for the Centennial, built just specifically for these paintings and it was to be called the Hall of Religious History and this was my commission. I was approached, would I like to do or attempt to do this sort of thing. And I agreed to do so. It was a ten-sided building; one side was the entrance, but there were nine panels. It had to go through the approval of the state legislature and they kept dragging their feet on this so long before they finally came through. It got down to where there were only ten weeks left to do these panels, each one of them ten feet square.

I had done the preliminary sketches for these ahead of time. They set up a jury of a rabbi, a priest, and then representatives of the associated Christian churches and the architect. I was using the studio in the house at Skyline at the time. They came to look at the sketches, and as I mentioned I was pressed for time. I had made three schemes for these and I put them out on the floor and then turned to them and said, "Now I'm going to go and make a drink. I'll take orders and when I come back you will have made a decision. Either you'll let me have the commission or you'll go out and find someone else in a hurry because there isn't any time. Also there is no time left for any committee meetings. This is it; this is the end of it right now."

SUE ANN KENDALL: How did you approach the subject matter?

CARL MORRIS: Well, it was very interesting. Going back into all I could research in the symbolism of the various religions was not an easy task, I can tell you. There was a Catholic school here at the time-- Laurelhurst School-- that assigned a class to do research to give me all the information about the Catholics. There wasn't as complete-- but there was also material on the part of the others. In some sketches I had shown to them, in using the various symbols, I had everything from the cross, the star of David, the Thunderbird-- every symbol that I could think of, going completely beyond the limited number of people who were represented on the jury. I thought if it was a history of the Northwest we certainly should have the Thunderbird in there to represent the Indian.

So then it became quite obvious that there was going to be a tug of war about which symbols were going to be dominant in all of this and frankly that was a little malice of forethought on my part. Because, as soon as this little argument started it left me absolutely free to approach this in a totally abstract way. If any one symbol offended anyone, then I wasn't the one to do it. I did chose a symbol that is the theme that runs throughout all of them; it was the intersection of light and man. I felt that this was the symbol that could cover all religions. If it didn't that was too bad, but that was, I felt, basic, or should be, to all religion. So there are some architectural references to various cathedrals, synagogues and-- and so forth in these, but only slightly identifiable. Then there were figures all through these that in some sense I drew heavily on my experience of seeing the Byzantine mosaics, particularly in the northern part of Italy.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Like in Ravenna?

CARL MORRIS: Yes. In Ravenna in particular. And I must say that the whole figure thing came back. And at this time I had no opportunity to say now I'm going to do the divinity of peace and research and work and come up. I had to put down only that which I was knowledgeable about and that which I had developed a skill in and put these together. It was the last commission I ever did. I'll never do another commission. (laughter)

SUE ANN KENDALL: That was the last one?

CARL MORRIS: That was the last one because I think working through committees and so forth is always, in a sense, a somewhat demeaning experience. Before you get through, the compromises that are inevitable are the compromises that you say you will never make but somehow or another you get worn down to the point that you have forgotten where you compromised. That isn't the best way in the world, I think, to achieve the highest form of art. However, with the time limitation that was imposed on me, and then my own condition that I would not tolerate any committee meetings after that day-- it did give me a freedom that I would not otherwise have had.

SUE ANN KENDALL: So you were able to go your own way.

CARL MORRIS: Yes. I think in the beginning they were going to use this building to house various objects and so forth. It turned out it was mainly these paintings. I was told by the architect that if I wanted to I could take paper and draw on the walls. Well, I'm not accustomed to work that way so I said, "Well I'll do it only the way I know how-- that's on canvas." Then I stipulated in the contract that the eventual disposition of these would be at the artist's agreement. So at the end of the hundred days the building came down and the paintings went to the Portland Art Museum. Then there was a request from the museum in Eugene at the university, so they have them.

SUE ANN KENDALL: That's where they are now?

CARL MORRIS: That's where they are now. Because they were all conceived as a unit, I asked that they not be shown unless they could be shown all together. In the long term this has been a hazard to them because it means that only periodically they can put on a show and then they're not useable. But they had been scattering them around the campus and I didn't want that. About two years ago they approached me. They had new buildings for the music department and they asked if they could use four of these paintings, two each in two auditoriums that they had. I agreed to that, and they are permanently installed there. Permanently to the extent that when they show all the paintings together these will be a part. Maybe one day they will have space to house all of them, but to me it's wrong to just break these up and scatter them around the campus.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Yeah, you'd lose the whole sense...

CARL MORRIS: In the way that they have used-- and they allowed me to choose the four that would be used-- I think they served well and that's fine. They're at peace there and I feel good about it.

SUE ANN KENDALL: That's good. What about the prints that you did at the Tamarind workshop? What was that [experience] like?

CARL MORRIS: The Ford Foundation set up a program. June Wayne was the director of that. She had gone to Lowrie in New York, when he was head of the Ford Foundation program in the humanities and the arts. She is a lithographer and she was on her way to Paris to have some lithographs printed. She talked casually to him at that time about it being too bad it was necessary for artists to go to Europe to find the master printer, because there were printers in this country but they were artist-printers. They were not printing for other people. But the kind of thing that Roualt, Picasso and Matisse always had of going to a master printer and having them follow through on the work didn't exist in this country. He told her at that time if she would write up a program he would be interested. So that's how it started. And she brought a master printer from-- he was trained in Paris, but he was Czechoslovakian-- and they brought stones from Paris and set up the studio.

They had two kinds of fellowships. One was a fellowship with the painter or sculptor as the case may be; almost

all of them were painters, whether they'd had any experience at all in print making. There was no prerequisite for this [experience]. It was, "Would you come and work with a master printer?" And the printer accepted the challenge then of doing whatever they felt they would like to reproduce on stone. This brought out technical problems that sometimes were just fantastic. I threw one at him myself in a sense: I did a pair of panels on a 48-inch stone with eight colors. You can imagine these being printed at the same time-- how the problems would compound each time another set of prints came off.

SUE ANN KENDALL: So you had never worked with print making before?

CARL MORRIS: I had made serigraphs but I had never made lithographs. As a matter of fact, they were not too anxious to have me talk to them about the technical limitations and then approach the work that way. On the other hand, I was to give them what I felt I would like to do and then it was their problem to work it out technically. In this sense we had some marvelous times because some things we would ask of the printer, he would laugh and then go to work on it and come up sometimes with remarkable results.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Have you worked with printmaking since, at all?

CARL MORRIS: I haven't worked with printmaking since, because I have a great deal of difficulty. The minute these things come off the assembly line so to speak, after the second one, then I want to change--I want to do something else. And that isn't considered good printmaking. So having multiples in that sense is not the medium for me.

SUE ANN KENDALL: You need each one to be an entity unto itself and then change for the next one? So printmaking, it's true, wouldn't work well for you. There was a show around the country about that time-- the American Federation of Arts-- that you were connected to. Did that have anything to do with the Tamarind workshop?

CARL MORRIS: No, it didn't have anything to do with the Tamarind workshop. That was the Ford Foundation. It had two kinds of awards at that time. They set up a program of selective jurying throughout the country. They contacted as many artists as they could find listed anywhere in the country and asked them to recommend other artists. From those recommendations then, they made a further regional selection committee. Then there was a national selection committee that did the final jurying. There were two types: one was a $10,000 grant-- Hilda got that kind of grant. The other was the one I got, a retrospective, and that show initiated at the Portland Art Museum and then toured the country for about two years and was in many museums throughout the country.

SUE ANN KENDALL: And so it was a solo show, a retrospective of your work?

CARL MORRIS: Yes.

SUE ANN KENDALL: And when did Hilda get hers? At the same time?

CARL MORRIS: No, it wasn't the same year... I've forgotten which one of us got it first.

SUE ANN KENDALL: But it was close, I take it?

CARL MORRIS: It was close.

SUE ANN KENDALL: So what happened in the sixties after that exhibit? How did your painting evolve?

CARL MORRIS: Oh, I wanted to add to that-- When they [were] planning the catalogues and the exhibition for the American Federation of Arts, each artist was asked to suggest who they would like to have write the introduction to the work. I asked for Grace Morley who had been for 25 years the director of the San Francisco Museum. As a matter of fact she was the first director and carried through that whole program for 25 years. When she left there, ironically, they said it was because she wasn't able to do proper administration of the museum. This was after 25 years! Anyway, that's an aside.

[James Johnson] Sweeney was then director of the Guggenheim Museum and she went to work for him for a short period of time. She was there at the time that this Ford Foundation retrospective came out. So, she was on her way to India because she had gotten an assignment to the New Delhi Museum as Director of their museum. In the interim period before taking up her duties there, she came and stayed with us at the house while we organized the show. That was a very pleasant thing. Incidentally, they had asked her at that time to give up her American citizenship in order to take that job.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Why?

CARL MORRIS: Well it was the national museum in India. She refused to do that fortunately and they gave her a five-year contract with the option to renew, and she's been there ever since.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Oh really? she did go ahead and write the catalogue though?

CARL MORRIS: Yes, she wrote the catalogue.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Then what did you get into in the sixties in terms of your painting? How did you change?

CARL MORRIS: You know I have never sensed a great change. My work has always been based in my experiences, my environment and, as I mentioned earlier, I started out going out and doing landscapes at the site. It's a long time since I've done that but still the landscape had been a strong part of my work. This is one of the reasons that I'm so enthusiastic about going fishing because of all the experiences that I am exposed to in the country. The work took on an abstract form-- abstract interpretation of these experiences both emotionally and the visual experience. The more abstract I became the closer I felt I was getting to nature. And so it's always been something of a surprise to me when somebody sees two paintings of mine, with a long period in between. I have had all the transition; they haven't, and they see a jump. I have never sensed that jump. I didn't just one year decide I'm going to paint this way instead of that way. It's always been a very slow thing, and I have never painted in the sense of saying that the purity of the form is without any reference. To begin with I think this is an impossibility, but I go back to the idea of what my interpretation of abstraction is in a true sense. You have an idea or you can have a visual image or whatever and you literally abstract it. But you are still locked into that original form and that original form to me has to carry the basic statement that the original experience had with me. Then, when the viewer approaches a painting of mine I do not feel that the success of that painting is going to depend on whether or not they have experienced the some thing that I have experienced in a given place, but they will have experienced something in their own life that will be parallel and the painting then stands as a centerpoint, a communicating point that in a sense brings two people together. I have no idea what their experience has been that relates to this, but I often have people speak, in seeing a painting, of something that they experience-- not a place where they were but something that they experience. And when that happens I feel that, providing it's in the parallel tenure of what I am attempting to say, then I feel yes, I've been successful. I haven't lived their life, they haven't lived mine, but we have had parallel experiences.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Do you work both from ideas and from landscapes? Can you separate those things out?

CARL MORRIS: At the time, right now, I don't work from any particular experience. I don't start a painting with an idea that I am now going to do the experiences I have had here or there. It's almost inevitable that in hindsight I will recognize where I've been. These ideas are implanted and subconsciously they will work themselves right into the canvas. When that happens, I'm having an experience too, but it's never in a sense that I start out to do a referential statement.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Right. But it comes from there and it happens. What about your relationship with the so-called Northwest School, largely based up in Seattle? Did that impact you? Of course that's going back into the forties.

CARL MORRIS: Well, in the sense that I was there and I was a friend of those people. But don't forget both Hilda and I were auslanders at the time. We were the so-called "wise men from the East." We weren't welcomed with open arms. At the same time, we did have friendships with the group, with people who were painting. I mean after all we were in the same profession. We had a very close relationship with Mark Tobey.

In the beginning of that so-called group in Seattle, Ken's first wife, Margaret Callahan, was really the matrix to that whole idea. She wanted to be in literature, she wanted to be in music, she wanted to be in art. She wanted that notion. I've not heard people defer to her in that extent, but really in their house this was a constant theme on her part. A constant working together.

Mark was the senior artist in the group and very generous in his attitude towards fellow artists. I think there are few people who, without teaching, have managed to give professions to as many people as he did. To name a few, Zoe Dusanne and her gallery, Otto Seligman and his gallery. He had never had any experience. She had never had any experience. And Betty Willis, who had raised, I think, five daughters by herself and then Mark told her, "Now look, Betty, I think it's time you did something!" Her children were grown, so she went off to Mills College, I think, and got her degree. She worked at the San Francisco museum for a time and then went to work for the Willard Gallery, and she was the one that took a portfolio of Morris Graves back there and later, Mark Tobey's. So she was the one who really in a sense-- but he was the one who gave her a profession and--

SUE ANN KENDALL: How was that? Was he that forceful a presence?

CARL MORRIS: If the person had a desire, and had a certain intelligence, he knew how to redirect it. When Otto Seligman came to Seattle as a refugee, he had I think some kind of civil service job--a clerical job, that's all. But he was a person who had great enthusiasm about music and, I think honestly, to a lesser degree in painting. But Mark gave him encouragement and he set up a gallery and he had a profession as did Zoe Dusanne and Betty Willis. And then you remember he picked Pehr up out of the market-- Pehr Hallsten, who was going around old

bookstores looking for, when he could find them, first editions and that sort of thing. Then he sent Pehr to the university to get his degree because he was a linguist and he could make a living by tutoring but he had to have some authority. So Mark sent him to the university and he got his degree. But meanwhile Pehr went upstairs where they were living, in his little room, with a bunch of postcards from his homeland, and started making pictures. Before you knew it he was a painter. I have never known anyone who had the ability to direct people in the way Mark did.

Mark used to go to Bahai meetings-- this was at the time when Hilda and I were living on the houseboat. From the bus, as he was returning to the university district, he could see whether there was a light on in our houseboat or not. If there were he would get off the bus, stop and buy a package of cigarettes, because he was sure that when he got to our house Hilda and I would be sitting at the kitchen table with one of those make-your-own-cigarettes-with-a-bugle machines. He would say, "Put that goddam thing away; here are the cigarettes; let's talk." That would happen many times. He would come and he would look at our work and then he would say, "Now I'm all excited. You will have to come to my studio and look at my work."

One time we went there to the studio and he had some things propped up against the chair. He said, "I don't know what I'm doing here. I really don't know what I'm doing." And there were the first scribbles of his white writing. I'll never forget the scene, because on the easel he had a very large painting, for Mark, maybe five feet tall. It was very much in the tradition of El Greco and it wasn't very good. Meanwhile he had these other things that were going on. It was more or less an incredible kind of breakthrough there that happened and it was almost impossible to believe that this was the same artist who was working on that easel and these other things that were coming out that were absolute invention and originality and forcefulness. I suppose Hilda has talked to you about this too. We have had a long relationship with Mark. He would even call us and say, "I'm in trouble. Will you come up?" By trouble he meant he wanted a little companionship and us to look at the work. I remember one time when he said he was in trouble, he had a pile of stuff in the corner of his studio, maybe a foot high, of drawings and paintings and things he had done. So we asked him to give us a couple of hours and a wall. And we went through all of these things and we selected things out. He had told us, "I don't know where I'm going." We selected out of these things and tacked them on the wall. And we said, "Here's where you're going." Okay, he got right to work and immediately after this came out that whole set of splatter-ink sumis that he did that had absolutely no relationship to the things that Hilda and I put on the wall. But it was that little interaction that had broken him loose and he was able to get it out. We all need that kind of human compassion and companionship from time to time.

SUE ANN KENDALL: And dialogue.

CARL MORRIS: Yes, dialogue. And what sparks one, or what sets one off, or what direction it's going to go, it may be the absolute opposite direction of where you intended, but that break is necessary.

SUE ANN KENDALL: It's also a catalyst to push somebody forward. Did you know Mark better than the others?

CARL MORRIS: Yes.

SUE ANN KENDALL: He also visited you in Portland, didn't he?

CARL MORRIS: Yes. He would frequently come and he always referred to his bed, because David [the Morris's son] would give up his room when Mark would come. I remember he did a very nice thing with David one time. He left a little sketch and he said, "I don't have any expectations that you will be somebody, because you're already somebody." I also remember he asked David-- David hadn't been playing the piano for very long, for a year or two, but he already tried his own little compositions. He played one for him, and Mark asked if he could have a copy of it. Maybe that's an answer of how he had this ability. That's how he had the ability; in that kind of way he suddenly elevated David out of whatever lethargic attitude he might have had towards this, because now somebody that he respected told him that something that he had done was important enough that could he have a copy.

SUE ANN KENDALL: That's a real inspiration for anybody, child or adult.

CARL MORRIS: Yes. He had that ability to give encouragement.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Were you able to maintain contact later on, once he went off to Switzerland?

CARL MORRIS: Each time he came back to Seattle he would usually come to Portland and stay with us for a time. He had a connection with the Bahai group here in Portland, and he would stay with us and go to the meetings there. He was considered one of their leaders. So the last time he came, he came with his friend and secretary and companion, Mark Ritter. Mark Ritter is a linguist and took care of Mark constantly in Switzerland because Mark could not speak another language. This companionship was necessary to him in the life that he lived there. While they were staying with us here, we were all going out to dinner one night. The decision to go was a little

late and it was difficult to find a place to go. There was a place that stayed open all night long. It was a restaurant in what was the old Hoyt Hotel that no longer exists. At this hotel they had the usual thing, a couple of restaurants and a bar. You could never go into the restaurant right away. Well, Mark made a great pretense of not caring about a bar or drinking or smoking or anything of that sort. However, they had a mechanical piano, an old-fashioned piano. There was a Reed College student there who played it beautifully and it had bells and gongs and whistles and all these things. You could see them all going off at the same time you could hear them. Mark was absolutely fascinated by it, and strangely he was also fascinated by the bunny girls, the waitresses. But we then stepped up to the bar while this boy was playing the piano. When he turned around he recognized me and put out his hand and introduced himself. Then I introduced him to Mark, and he had that big beam on his face as if, my God, I've hit the jackpot. He immediately said to Mark Tobey, "Sprechen zie deutsche?" (laughter) No, I think he said, "switzweditsch." Well, in any case that little recognition on the part of this boy who was there playing the piano-- Mark, who under great protest went to this place where they had a bar in order to have dinner, thought it was one of the most wonderful experiences he'd ever had. And so did Mark Ritter. This was something that Mark Ritter didn't get a chance to do very much and spoke of it frequently afterwards.

SUE ANN KENDALL: What was all the talk about Oriental mysticism and so on, in regard to the Northwest tradition?

CARL MORRIS: Well, I think a great deal of it was genuine on the part of Mark because he was, according to his own testimony, in search of his father. He turned to religion in search of his father. I think there is a little tragic end to that part too because he embraced the Bahai religion because it now became a surrogate parent for him. And then at one point he wrote a letter to-- I think it's in Elgin, Illinois, where they have the headquarters-- he wrote to them and literally offered himself professionally to them: "What would you like me to do? What direction should I go? I need your leadership." And they wrote back to him and said, "Mr. Tobey, you are our leader." So he lost his father, he lost his search, he lost his _____, but he also assumed something of that responsibility. But I also think that something went out of it for him at that time.

SUE ANN KENDALL: What about a relationship to your own work? Occasionally you have been associated with that group.

CARL MORRIS: Well, I think I can honestly say that it's only in the sense that there is a common denominator in the Northwest and in the Orient. It's a physical one. I think that our landscape is very much alike. I've always been very much interested in Oriental art, the calligraphy, the poetry, the ceramics, going back to the early Haniwa period all the way into particularly the 11th and 12th centuries in Japan. As far as embracing any religious aspects of this or having any part of that as a part of my work, it hasn't been. It has not had that overtone. I'm not a mystic in that sense of the word and I wouldn't lay any claim to it. I think that in the general association, yes, I have been shown with these people. But in that sense I'm not related to that school; I was after all trained in Europe. I've related to that whole group and I am still a part of of that whole group. I've always hesitated ever to join anything that is called a group, to have an association. The feeling that I want my independence from that... It might have momentary professional benefits on the outside but to me it wouldn't work, it would be false. It would be dishonesty to assume that position.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Do you know Morris Graves very well?

CARL MORRIS: I knew Morris Graves. I haven't seen him for a long time. I admire his work. We had an unfortunate experience one time. It was related with the whole deal with some of the attitudes he had towards Mark Tobey, and, you know, that whole quarrel. I think that's something that, as far as I'm concerned, should remain between the two of them. But Morris did bring his work to our houseboat at the time that he was invited to have a show at the Museum of Modern Art. We looked at them and there were some of the things that he has shown and things that were very fine paintings at that time. But there were also paintings in there that were too close to Mark Tobey. I mean they were just straight out of Mark Tobey's studio. At that particular time Mark had allowed him to use his studio to work and Morris had obviously taken from him at that time. So at that particular time Hilda and I said that we felt that in all deference to Mark he ought to allow Mark to show these things in New York before he did, that he had enough work and that he should be able to select those things which were his and leave it at that. That was the last time we ever saw Morris. He took them, he sent them to New York and we didn't see him after that.

SUE ANN KENDALL: His personality is reclusive too, so not many people do see him. So long as we are talking about friendships, can you talk a little about your relationship with Mark Rothko? You and Hilda did know him over the years.

CARL MORRIS: When he first came to visit us, he was visiting his family in Portland and a mutual friend brought him to our house. I think that was about in '42 or '43. We had an immediate rapport with each other and continued to seek one another out. Either he visited here or we visited him in New York. We saw him constantly right up until-- we saw him very shortly before he committed suicide. The exchange was always a very good one,

although Mark liked to pose as the arrogant one. He was arrogant so far as his own work was concerned. As far as his relationship with fellow artists was concerned, he was often very generous to the point of being very tender in his attitude. At the time when Mark was actually on top, as far as the world of art was concerned, Milton Avery was not. He had great respect for Milton Avery and didn't hesitate to say so at this time. In other words, at the moment when Milton Avery was down, he [Rothko] was quite willing to stand there and say, "This man is our master." I don't know if you ever read the eulogy he gave at the funeral of Milton Avery or not, but it was quite beautiful-- a beautiful statement. I might have an excerpt from that here. It was in the New York Times Magazine. I will look for it before you leave and you will see.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Were you aware of Mark's depression?

CARL MORRIS: Oh yes. Mark had separated from his wife, Mell, but before that, however, Mark had had a heart attack. Then we saw him I guess about a year after he had had a heart attack and he kept insisting, "You don't realize what I have been through, where I have been and how close it came to being the end." You know he fought his way all the way back. I mention this because it was such a triumph for him to get on top of this and then slash his wrists. If it was going to happen, he was going to do it himself.

SUE ANN KENDALL: And be in control.

CARL MORRIS: And be in control. But the separation that he had with Mell was a very painful one. There was a great deal of affection between the two of them and this wasn't behind the problem. I don't want to go into...to become a psychoanalyst here but I guess I am the moment I say that they felt that this was the best way if he went to live in his studio and she stayed in the house. It was by mutual arrangement but with the hope that she would get better as a result of it. She did have a problem, an alcohol problem, and I don't know whether... I can't give you any more details than that. I know that immediately after Mark died, she came out here and was with us for a time. She was really trying to look for reassurance, look for something. I think it was about three or four weeks after that that she died and I think that was self-inflicted but that is only a guess on my part too. I don't know.

SUE ANN KENDALL: It's a tragic story.

CARL MORRIS: Yes, it is tragic.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Did you share a lot of ideas back and forth with Mark, in terms of painting and the art world?

CARL MORRIS: At the time that we were exchanging a lot, we felt comfortable being together. As a matter of exchanging ideas it's a little difficult to say. His argument was always going on about, "What are you doing out west there?" I said to Mark one time, "Well, you're close friends with Bob Motherwell. When you see him what do you talk about? What conversation do you have here? What am I missing?" And he said, "Well, frankly, we're both married, we both have children, we've got problems with refrigerators and housing and things like that. That's what we talk about." (laughter) What artists talk about under those circumstances often is hardly to be repeated-- like, "Well, did you see such and such a show?" "Well, yes I did. Wasn't it marvellous?" Or, "Lousy wasn't it?" Or, "Was it worthwhile?"

Mark also, after telling me about his relationship with Bob Motherwell, I said, "Well, don't you guys ever talk about art?" And he said, "Well, Bob knows what he wants to do and I know what I want to do and it doesn't do us much good to talk about it."

SUE ANN KENDALL: There are other things one does talk about besides art. What about between you and Hilda? Has there always been a lot of dialogue? Do you look at each other's work and bounce off each other's ideas, or do you stay pretty separate?

CARL MORRIS: No, we bounce off one another a great deal. I think to such an extreme that at the time we met we were both doing painting and sculpture. Since we've been together she's done mainly sculpture and I have done mainly painting. I know for my part there's a great deal of vicarious pleasure and participation in what she's doing. Sometimes I get a little impatient because if I was doing it myself I would do it differently, but never mind.

The communication we have about one another's work is seldom on what's happening to the pieces of work we are working on at the time. It's usually about a body of work. When we were both living and working in the same house, I was using the one part of the studio and she had to walk through my studio to get to her work. There were frequently these periods of time when she knew she wasn't allowed to say anything as she went through, but there were other times when I would say, "Well, why didn't you say something? Didn't you like it?" So you're damned if you do and you're damned if you don't. But no, we would make dates with one another as far as looking at each other's work is concerned, and then, quite selfishly, we expect more than a casual observer. Often these discussions are very easy but sometimes they can be very painful because a person can say the

wrong thing unintentionally, and it's not easy to undo it right at that moment. But it's necessary and we do this by appointment almost.

SUE ANN KENDALL: It must be a rich interchange, though, that you have between you.

CARL MORRIS: Yeah, it's very important to me. And it is to her too. [Sound of rain almost obliterates tape--Ed.] In case you didn't know it, it's raining.

SUE ANN KENDALL: A downpour! What about the influence of the poets that you know, or have known, like Robin [Skelton--SUE ANN KENDALL]? Is there an actual influence or is it just that you like their work?

CARL MORRIS: I think that there is that interchange I was speaking of. Two friends have a painting that is the meeting ground. In this case it would be the poetry that is the meeting ground and we know one another and our experiences through the work. All too frequently when painters meet painters it falls into shoptalk-- what kind of paper are you using, what kind of brushes, where did you get your pen, that kind of thing. That never happens between a painter and a poet. There is more of a chance of talking about ideas there and I would much rather have a poet's interpretation of another painter. It's more valuable to me, because the painter is going to look at it in an entirely different angle. But chances are if it's a good poet, that person is also going to be a good critic. Not always, but if they're interested in the visual, the chances are very good and then they're going to be far more articulate than the artist.

SUE ANN KENDALL: That's right. Often some of the best critics are poets. I notice that there have been essays by some of these poets on your work.

CARL MORRIS: Yes and it's far better than I could do, and they should be. There is only one that I know that does some painting and sculpture. That's Robin Skelton. Aside from that there isn't a poet that I know very well who also paints. But they know what painting is about. And far more objective than the artist is likely to be.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Sure, they deal with words, but they don't react the same way _____. You had a rather harrowing experience, when was it, 10 years or so ago, when you were fishing? [Morris was in a fishing accident and was almost drowned--Ed.]

CARL MORRIS: Oh, out on the Columbia River.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Yes, that affected the whole Channel [Channel Marker] series, didn't it?

CARL MORRIS: Not really. No, I don't think that it did. I've never been able to find that experience coming out in my paintings.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Really?

CARL MORRIS: They may have some vague kind of reference there in that Channel series but I'm not sure that it has. There's a painting recently that may speak of that a little bit but in some ways I think that the experience is one that I never will be able to put down. I can't verbalize it. I can't say what it looked like, only a tiny little part of it.

SUE ANN KENDALL: So you don't feel like you are materializing what it was that happened.

CARL MORRIS: Well, I know something happened to me and subconsciously something may have happened to my work. My friend Bill Ivey has even mentioned that he's noted it in my attitude. He hasn't talked about the work, but he notices it in the attitude. It's much more difficult to get an argument out of me now than it was before that accident. I'm likely to be much more kindly towards [everything--Ed.] than I used to be, because I've outlived them. But I think he's the only one who has spoken of his awareness of it. Bill and I go fishing together a great deal and so we have ample opportunity to observe one another and our thoughts.

SUE ANN KENDALL: So you've known Bill for quite a while?

CARL MORRIS: Yes. And at least a couple of times a year he will come down here and we will make a trip over to Idaho. Then maybe several trips over on the Deschutes River in eastern Oregon. A year ago Bill and I made a long trip together up into Canada. These are very rich experiences because both of us, I think, have an indebtedness in a different way to that kind of experience. We share a great deal of that. Many times, more often than not, I will point out to Bill a painting of his that I see in the sky or in the hillside or something and he will point out to me my paintings that are here or there, someplace. We rarely ever identify what our own work is out there. It's always the other guy's.

SUE ANN KENDALL: It's easier when you are looking at someone else's. Well it's interesting in a sense because he has not really been a part of the Northwest School either. I always set him apart in a whole different category

and don't identify him with the so-called "Northwest Tradition" people; and you don't quite fit in there either.

CARL MORRIS: Well, I think the danger of those things that become the "Northwest School"-- always the toll is a heavy one in the sense that a group of artists may get together and may want desperately to work together and care for one another considerably. Then if they expose themselves collectively to the public through a museum show or gallery or something, whoever comes from the outside says, "Take me to your leader." And there is no defense; the members of the group can't say, "Well, we don't have a leader," because one will be named at the expense of all the rest of them.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Then things get distorted.

CARL MORRIS: Yes, and then as a result of that you get a lot of this kind of infighting that went on between Callahan and Tobey and Graves. It's terribly unfortunate that at the moment when there should be rewards coming, that's the moment when it's at the expense of the friendship. It's very costly and it's far more costly than it's worth.

This goes with any group I've ever known. To go back to the time that the so-called group of people who gathered when Gertrude Stein was together with the writers and poets and so forth. The fact is that that period was not more than about five years altogether. Then they hardly spoke to one another after that. There were often very vicious exchanges, like the one between Picasso and Matisse. Matisse wanted to make some kind of a friendship with Picasso and I think Picasso wanted it also. Matisse was Catholic and Picasso was a Communist. At one point Matisse brought one of his-- he was a pigeon fancier-- so he brought one of his pigeons as a gift to Picasso, and Picasso used it as a model for his poster for the Communists. That was the kind of little infighting that was going on. And no matter how hard they wanted to be together they couldn't resist it.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Yeah, they just had to do it. Can you talk a little bit about your own work, even recently, the changes? As you say, you see it all evolving gradually. Can you be more specific about how your work develops?

CARL MORRIS: It's not easy but I will attempt to.

SUE ANN KENDALL: I guess if you could say it you wouldn't have to paint it, right?

CARL MORRIS: Yes. Well I can say only peripherally what is going on. As I may have mentioned to you before, sometimes if I paint very large and a series of very large paintings then I may very well turn to very small things. If I'm working with acrylic or oils, then I may turn to just black and white sumis and go back and forth. One time-- it was again a very difficult thing-- I started doing sumis. I had a lot of large canvases but I did have this desire to do things in black and white and to do smaller things. Well, a period of about 15months went by and I couldn't approach a canvas. I was getting scared because it was going on far too long and I didn't know what was in the way. And to this date I don't know what was in the way; all I know is that all this time I had canvases available and I couldn't approach them. One day I picked up one, put it on the easel and the problem went away. Maybe that was the problem-- I never picked it up.

But I had been working for quite a long time on a series of paintings that I presume might appropriately be called chapel paintings, although I never thought of them as being chapel paintings at that time, except that I did tell you earlier that I had this awful time imposition put on me when I had to do these paintings for the Hall of Religious History and I did the commission and at the same time resented very much the time pressure. After all, they had a long time to think about this, and they could at least have called me earlier. I did it because I think of myself as being basically a religious person and hating religiosity, hating the doggerel of-- well, I don't need to tell you all the horrible aspects of religion. There are basically some things that I do embrace. In a sense it's a whole attitude of brotherhood of man, or compassion for one's fellow human being, whether it's religion or whatever it is I have it, in that sense. And in this sense, yes, I did feel that the idea was a challenging one at the intersection of light and man.

[Break in tape]

CARL MORRIS: So a couple of years ago I thought, well, I don't have any pressure on me, I liked the assignment before, I just didn't like the conditions; and I started doing this kind of thing for myself with no commission in mind, no place for them to go or anything. I worked on these for about two years, even longer than two years, I guess. It was an experience-- heavy, heavy, heavy. I have found myself turning in the opposite direction now, not from large to small but to something that is in a sense in the work more organic. I hope it's playful. There is that aspect of it, not that I'm taking it lightly-- I'm taking it very seriously, but I don't mind finding a humorous animal or a humorous bird or whatever suddenly appear in the canvas somewhere. I'm allowing this to come in, whatever way it is. Well, that's about as far as I can go, because I don't know where this is going, I'm just letting it happen as it will.

SUE ANN KENDALL: And you're referring to this [current--Ed.] series, with the calligraphic kinds of things going

on. I didn't realize you were calling it the chapel series.

CARL MORRIS: No. The series before that, that came just before...

SUE ANN KENDALL: ...is the chapel series, and these evolve out of that.

[Tape 4; side 1]

SUE ANN KENDALL: Now, I'd like to ask you once again about your choices of where to live. You mentioned that you and Hilda once thought about buying in New York. Can you talk about that?

CARL MORRIS: Yes. At one time we made a great effort to go around and find a studio. I suppose one who has lived outside of New York gets spoiled in terms of space and one can hunt and hunt. We finally found what had been a carriage house, and it was quite beautiful in terms of space-- would have provided a street entrance, a studio, a little garden in the back, and access to the alley. The rest of the building would nave been turned into rental space. We did have an architect go with us and investigate the technical aspects of this. Well, I won't go into the whole detail of why that fell through but we did get to the point of putting our first earnest money and it did fall through and...

SUE ANN KENDALL: This was in the late sixties?

CARL MORRIS: Yes, in the late sixties. In hindsight it would have been a remarkable financial investment and so forth. It would not have been easy but as I say, in hindsight, it would have worked out and then could have also been a lot of financial return. From my point of view right now I find that I am very glad that it never went through, that it never happened, because it would have taken a chunk out of time. It would have been demanding, it would nave directed my life in such a way that it would have been a decision forever to be there and I'm afraid be owned by the building at the same time we had title. I am enough of a westerner to feel very uncomfortable in that kind of situation; even though it had been successful, the very success would have been a defeat to me.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Why were you looking in New York?

CARL MORRIS: We were looking in New York-- as you know, Hilda came from New York and it has been-- I can say this in an unqualified way-- her desire has always been there. It has been a sacrifice to her that we have lived in the Northwest as she really would be-- rather, that is home to her. It's not that she hasn't enjoyed being here but inevitably the person wants, I suppose, to return to one's roots. And hers were there, mine were here, and so I found that, while New York has always meant a great deal to me and of course is a very important part of my professional life, at the same time it's not a place in which I feel comfortable working. I find it difficult there to do what I do in my own rented studio here. I don't hesitate to tear out walls or build in or do whatever I do, and I feel totally out of my element in that kind of environment. I know perfectly well that it's quite the opposite with artists who live there. They feel the comfort there that I feel here.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Do you think your reputation as a painter has been affected in a negative way by not being in New York?

CARL MORRIS: Well, that is relative. Probably, in the sense that my peers there were all very close to their gallery and there is without any doubt the handicap of being out of sight, out of mind. It's not like going down and being within a telephone call from a gallery. There is also that aspect of it which frightens me very much. Some artists that I know in New York are often controlled to the point of being almost command performance during the summertime. Wherever the dealer goes, they may be asked to go-- up to Long Island and meet people _____. In a sense the gallery has an exclusive over that person's work because he is living there. In any gallery some artists are not going to be the ones that the dealer is pushing at that time and there is nothing that the other artists can do. They may wait their turn and it may work out well, but if it doesn't they are still absolutely controlled.

In my arrangement with the Kraushaar Gallery, anything that happens in my life in my studio, west of the Hudson River, is my business. What goes on in New York is hers and she feels that is her territory as far as my work is concerned. But I have my entire freedom with anything that happens with my work outside of there. So I've been free to have shows in Seattle, Portland, San Francisco, and I feel a great sense of freedom and comfort in that kind of independence. So it is a trade-off, and, speaking in hindsight again, I would make the same decision all over again. I am not unhappy about the choice at all.

SUE ANN KENDALL: You mentioned an instant when you were in Mark Rothko's studio when there were a group of artists...

CARL MORRIS: This was in the early fifties actually. Mark Rothko and Bob Motherwell and de Kooning and

Baziotes and Milton Avery-- practically all the group that we know of as being an active group today. They were all fairly well unknown artists and one of the reasons for it was they were being pushed out by the Museum of Modern Art. The Museum of Modern Art was showing nothing but European work, mostly French artists, and so this whole gathering was the matter of attacking the Museum of Modern Art. All of this I agreed with very much. I felt, yes, it was time the Museum of Modern Art recognized that there were artists in this country and not just in Paris. Again I was confronted with this decision of joining a group which in principle I agreed with, but again I felt it was going to tie me if I was a part of that. Again, I have to say in hindsight, I am not sorry about my decision. But it was a turning point. Because when I turned my back on that I was making a decision to do my work where I felt comfortable. I have always found it impossible to work in the marketplace and that was the feeling that I had. I have to go out in my own seclusion and proceed on my own.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Well, that goes along with your choice to live here and stay away from that. It seems to me that you were choosing what you wanted to do. I'd like to go back and talk more about your own work again. Your choice to live out here, I wonder too if it relates to landscape and, if so, how you bring it into your work.

CARL MORRIS: The whole idea of abstraction in its first definition I think I had adhered to. Perhaps it's my own definition because of the connotation that it has taken on as it applies to a painting. Abstraction became, or has become to a great extent, totally removed from environment or subject matter or anything of that sort, and is turned more into a sense of non-objective art or art for art's sake and denying everything that one is. I have felt that, to begin with, for me this was an impossibility and in many instances is a lie on the part of artists who assume that they're not being influenced by who they are and where they are and what they are. I choose to be in an environment that excites me as the Northwest does. The trips that I do into the mountains, the desert or the beach, wherever, are experiences that are not recorded directly as landscapes-- I do not sketch them when I am out; I don't work directly from nature at all. Often the experiences are the material of my paintings. They come back to me as much a surprise as they do to other people. I suddenly see on a canvas, I've been there. The canvas may be entirely finished by the time I recognize where it came from. This has been almost a constant theme for the past 20years, of working and depending a great deal on the subconscious to supply me with material to work with. I have no problem about that because of the working habits that I have. I rarely ever start a canvas and then finish it, if a canvas is ever finished, and then turn on to another. I always work with several canvases simultaneously and let them build and grow and work together. I will often have a canvas at a certain point, and it offers me two or more directions. With that decision some destruction is going to have to take place, some illumination; hopefully it will be constructive destruction but there will be destruction to bring it into a unit. And at that period I have found it has been very helpful to me, just as a working mechanism, to try to bring a second canvas up to where that first one had come and presented the crossroad decision. Then I don't have to make a choice; I go both ways. Then I allow these two canvases to help me by racing one another. There might even be a third one come in to join the race. And this goes on at the end of this encounter with the canvases. They may look very close together or they may be entirely different, but I must admit to a certain sinking feeling every time I get to a canvas and there's nothing else to do with it. Because I never have the satisfaction of feeling that a canvas is finished-- it's just that I can't find anything else to do with it. I must admit that I have a little sinking feeling about it. I've got to approach another white canvas.

SUE ANN KENDALL: You feel like you're moving on with something else.

CARL MORRIS: Yes. Or that I haven't recognized in that canvas how it could go further. Also in my own working habits, having more than one canvas at a time that I am working on removes the sense of time entirely. I have no idea how much time I have invested in a canvas. I am frequently asked by people, "How long did you work on this canvas?" Not answering that question is not to dodge it; I frankly don't know. I will sometimes work on a canvas and it will be months and months before I pick it up and keep it going. I am fortunate now in the size of my studio that I am able to have a number of my canvases around. Even those that I feel I have carried as far as I can, maybe three weeks or a month later will tell me, "No, you're not finished with me," and I will pick it up and continue. I did have a problem when I was working in my studio at home. I had a space problem and any time that I had a canvas that had gotten momentarily to a dead end and I didn't know what the next step was going to be, I would put it in the racks. It was a problem child. I found that every time I went to the racks-- and I did so periodically-- and pulled it out, the problem just stared me right in the face; it was always there. But when I came into this studio and had a lot of space, I started hanging my problems on the wall and, without any time involved, at all, the canvas, when it was ready to say something, would shout it out and I knew what had to be done and would carry on with whatever the problem was at that time. So in this sense I have no idea which canvases I have spent the most time on or how long it has taken me to do a canvas.

SUE ANN KENDALL: It sounds like it's been freeing for you to have this large space.

CARL MORRIS: Absolutely. This is another world of work.

SUE ANN KENDALL: When did you come here?

CARL MORRIS: I have been here eight years. Don't remind me, my lease is up this year. (laughter)

SUE ANN KENDALL: Sounds like it's been worth it. So you don't really start out with an image in mind? It's something that happens once you begin to work. Is that right?

CARL MORRIS: It's not as cold as that. Every time I do a canvas, and at the same time have that more or less sinking feeling that I am not through with this [last] canvas or the canvas is not through with me, it's a matrix for a dozen other canvases. So what I was not able to do on that last one is an immediate challenge. I have never been in that spot where I had the feeling, well, I don't know what I'm going to do next, because I think every canvas spawns more ideas than it eats up. In that way I do not know what my next group of work will be. There is something of a convolution in the work that I do. A maverick will spill out of a series of work sometimes, with no relationship to the other work that I am doing at all. I will put that aside and it may come back and be the matrix for a whole group of work later on. I have different series... The series that I am working on momentarily, for instance, probably started with long panels that I did just occasionally. I mean a foot by six or eight feet, and I did those almost like recreation for a long period of time. Slowly they have come into my conscience to the point of demanding my full attention and this has become almost the major direction that I am in now. They no longer are long panels but what I am doing is growing out of what was happening on those panels before. In some ways the panels themselves are an echo of what I did perhaps around the early sixties in a series that I called Stone Stele and Inscription Writing. They were like the Oriental stone steles in the sense of monolith form and almost calligraphic writing on the surface and that has crept back into the present series of work too.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Always these unfinished _____ which keep recurring. Speaking about ideas recurring, I want to go back to the idea of mysticism that has so haunted the Northwest tradition and ask you how important you really think that is in the work of the school?

CARL MORRIS: Well, I think that the whole group as a group was named by things that were happening on the outside. At the end of the second world war I think there was an awareness of what was happening in the East that we had known from the commercial side of imports from the Orient. It was after the war that idea exchanges came, and there was an interest in Zen Buddhism and mysticism and so forth. This was coincidental with Watts and his writing and Suzuki and others. The fact that some of the work in Seattle in particular had the technical influence of rice paper and calligraphy and so forth-- that was not the first time it had been introduced to the art world. As you recall, at the time of the Impressionists there were a great number of prints that came in and influenced the work of Manet, Monet, Bonnard, the whole group. It was purely a technical thing. In my opinion the influence that the Orient had on those of us in the Northwest was exactly the same thing. It was a technical thing. I've always felt that there was a closeness in the affinity of the Northwest and the Orient, purely in a physical sense. The landscape is very similar. Now the fact that mysticism as a philosophy was being imported into this country and was coincidental to this particular group working in the Northwest-- I think it was an imposition which was picked up and abused by those who allowed themselves to be called mystics. Because in my opinion it's all a bunch of crap. I think that the influence was purely a physical one.

SUE ANN KENDALL: There wasn't a real understanding of Zen Buddhism...

CARL MORRIS: A real understanding of Zen Buddhism was not there. I'm not saying that the artists weren't aware of Zen Buddhism or that they weren't aware of the philosophies of the Orient, but I think no more so than artists are aware of the philosophies of the Western world and of the Eastern world at any given time. They are. But I do not feel that this was a movement of any genuine substance. And in a sense I think it was a terrible abuse. I think it was a moment at which our Western world needed some contact with the non-materialistic religions and philosophies of the East and a kind of exchange was necessary. We were ready for it and everything, but I think this other fallout from it was of no substance.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Is there anyone in particular who you think perpetuated that myth about mysticism, if it is a myth?

CARL MORRIS: Well, who actually named it I don't know. I know that there were those-- writer Holger Cahill, for instance, who was married to Dorothy Miller, who was at the Museum of Modern Art. He was, in my opinion, very taken with the superficial aspects of the philosophy and it was easy for him to search and find gods in that sense. I can't say that he was responsible for naming this group; I know he wasn't, but he aided and abetted the idea. It also, I think, made for awfully good copy and I think this is the worst kind of trap that an artist can fall into-- to get that kind of label. Naming names. I think Kenneth Callahan, for instance, has suffered tremendously from this in his own work. His earlier work had much more of a sense of who he was than his later work which seemed to be a pretense of an image that he wanted to create. And the others to a more or less degree.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Changing the subject again, I'd like to ask you where certain of your works are. Are there major collectors that have a large body of your work?

CARL MORRIS: Well there is a collection of my work and Hilda's work at Reed College.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Can you tell me about how that happened?

CARL MORRIS: Well, we had a very close friend, Dr. Lena Kenin. She's a psychiatrist, and her husband Harry is a lawyer and a musician. We spent a great number of wonderful hours in exchange with one another. They were both associated with Reed College; they had both graduated from Reed and they had both taught at Reed. We became extremely close friends, and during the time that we were building our house, they were also building a house. And there was a great deal of assistance given to us by them at that time. So inevitably they got a lot of our work.

SUE ANN KENDALL: They bought works from you?

CARL MORRIS: Well, it was not a money exchange. But they had given us in time so much that all we could do was give them our work and we gave them our work. They did buy some. But the money part was not as important as the things that they did for us. And what we had was our work to give them.

[Tape 4; side 2]

CARL MORRIS: Harry Kenin died when he was about 55 and his wife Lena before that time had quite a successful practice as a gynecologist. At this particular time she was at a crossroads; she wanted to go back to school and become a psychiatrist, which she did. But as a doctor, 20years later, when she realized that she did not have many years to live-- a self-diagnosis and it was accurate-- she came to us and asked us what she should do with the work that had been collected by them. Since our son had graduated from Reed and both of them had graduated from Reed, and Hilda and I have always had tremendous interest in the college and programs they run, the decision was made to give the entire collection to Reed College. Then from time to time Hilda and I committed ourselves to update it in their memory. So that is what we have continued to do.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Are there any other collectors who have collected a lot of your work-- been patrons, so to speak?

CARL MORRIS: There are people who have collected my work and have more than one work. My work is not owned by any collector who collects my work all the time, that sort of thing. I cannot point to one collector who had an outstanding group in terms of numbers of my work. I am pleased to say that of the people who have my work, they often have more than one, but since they are not primarily collectors, there is a limit to how far they go.

SUE ANN KENDALL: How about the [Howard] Vollums? Don't they have quite a few?

CARL MORRIS: The Vollums have also collected work of mine and have also given work of mine to the Portland Art Museum and to Reed College. And then there was until recently a long time friend, Margery Hoffman Smith, who was, at the time I first met her, the director of the Federal Arts Project in Portland. She was almost solely responsible for Timberline Lodge. It was one of the projects she did.

We later became quite close friends. She, with her husband, moved to San Francisco and she collected works of mine that later went to the San Francisco museum. Those are the principal ones: Reed College, San Francisco museum, Margery Smith, and then works that are at the University of Oregon. I might say that there are some works at the Seattle Art Museum-- not a good representation, because they were things that were bought when Fuller was there and we were in Seattle. Then a great hiatus and nothing happens for a long time. But his responsibility was and continued to be to the artists of Seattle, as it should be. We moved to Portland. I know that often people felt that he had too great a control over what was going on in the art museum, but, from a human point of view, he bailed out artists quite frequently without any personal involvement at all. He knew about the personal problems, of the illness of the artist, or whatever. In some instances, it may have been clumsy on his part, to just go out and buy that person's work, but on the other hand it was his way and he did it without asking any sense of reward from it. And that kind of faithfulness went on throughout his lifetime.

SUE ANN KENDALL: That's interesting, because I've heard it said that he sometimes only bought the lesser works and was really much more interested in Oriental art, than in supporting the local artists.

CARL MORRIS: Well, I won't contradict that statement because I think that he was very much interested in Oriental art, and it's true that was his major love. But there were such artists as Bill Cummings, who was not, I think, considered as part of the mystical painters. As a matter of fact, at one particular time he was secretary, I believe, of the Communist party in the area. He had a very nasty pen and the nasty pen, at one particular time, said that the Morrises and the Tobeys and the Graves and the Callahans and the Dick Fullers were going to be the first ones to be lined nd the Tobeys and the Graves and the Callahans and the Dick Fullers were going to be the first ones to be lined up against the wall. Well, he had already made that statement when he became quite ill. His wife-- I don't remember whether she was pregnant at that time or whether they had just had a child. In any case there were responsibilities that Bill couldn't meet and he went to the hospital. Margaret Callahan went

to Dick Fuller to explain the situation and he paid the bill. In that sense I would say he wasn't asking anything in return for that. I happened to know about it but it was an anonymous picking up of the bill. In that sense he was responsible to the artist and I think that was a great assistance.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Uh huh. He was genuinely concerned for them as people.

CARL MORRIS: He was genuinely concerned for the artists as people. I know that at times it was extremely annoying. I can remember an incident of a jury in Seattle. He always put himself on as ex-officio in the Northwest Annual. There was always to him always some sacred cow and his way of taking care of the sacred cow was, if it didn't get put in the show, he would immediately buy it. Well that, in a sense, we can laugh at now, but it infuriated the people who were involved, to have their decisions as jurors overridden by a pocketbook.

SUE ANN KENDALL: Well, I think we maybe can end here. I know you're anxious to get back to your painting. I appreciate your time.

END OF INTERVIEW

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