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Oral history interview with Hale Woodruff, 1968 November 18

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Transcript

Interview

AM: AL MURRAY
HW: HALE WOODRUFF

HW: In terms of a biographical or chronological approach, I suppose we should start in the Twenties, about forty years ago, really. The first contact I had with, let's say, a real live Negro artist was Will Scott -- William Edouard Scott, who now lives in Chicago. But my meeting Scott was often in Indianapolis. At that time he had just come back from Europe and frequently talked about his having met and worked with H. O. Tanner. This was a great thrill for me. Scott and I used to talk a lot about painting. I was a student then in the John Herron Art School in Indianapolis and just a beginner, but people like Scott and Tanner thrilled me a great deal. So, a few years later when I went to Europe to study, one of the first things I did was to look up Henry O. Tanner. At that time he was living outside of Paris, so I took a train to Etaples on the English Channel where he lived, and finally found him there in his studio. We spent a day together. He was a very hospitable man, and very elegant, and knowledgeable on the subject of art and its traditions.

AM: How old was he then?

HW: Well, this was in 1927. He died in 1937 at the age of 78. That would have made him 68 years old. He spoke about his early life in America, why he left there, after having been born in Pittsburgh and having studied under Thomas Eakins in Philadelphia -- it was for the same old reason -- prejudice. He was able to go to Paris and just live as an expatriate, with occasional trips back to the States, until he died. Tanner was a real inspiration. During those years in Paris, I knew people like Eric Walrond, the writer; Claude McKay, the poet; Augusta Savage, sculptor; Walter White of the N.A.A.C.P.; Alain Locke, philosopher and art critic, etc. These and many others made up what was known as the "Negro Colony" in Paris which included the "whirlwind" Josephine Baker, who had just come over from the U.S. with a musical troup called the "Black Birds." I stayed in Europe for four years, until about 1931 when I came back to this country to go to Atlanta to teach. My closest artist-friend there in Paris was really Palmer Hayden. He and I had won the Harmon award in 1926. Naturally when I came back and went to Atlanta, Georgia, these former associations were sort of lost sight of. I had lost contact with these people; although I did develop, I think, a kind of root down in Atlanta. You may have heard about it. It was called the "Outhouse School" and, frankly, it was given such a name as this by one of the press writers because we used to paint landscapes in and around Atlanta in our art classes and the hillsides were just dotted with outdoor toilets. Somehow they always got into the paintings, so we were called the "Outhouse School." A lot of the fellows now who are coming along here and there throughout the country started out as my students in those days. Many of them are still in the South teaching. One very outstanding graduate whom I taught at Morehouse College is Wilmer Jennings. He's a very good painter but he's now chief jewelry designer for one of the big concerns in Providence, Rhode Island; Vernon Winslow, who's now teaching at Dillard University in New Orleans; Eugene Griggsby, who now has his doctorate, is a professor of art at Arizona State University. I could go on naming many, many of them who worked with me during the years in Atlanta.

AM: To get back to Paris for a minute, you were there during part of the period which is known in literary history as the period of the lost generation. In other words, many of the artists, the literary artists especially, and certainly many of the painters, the white painters, and people like Hemingway and Fitzgerald, Gertrude Stein, many Americans, were in Paris at that time. How aware were the Negroes of these other Americans?

HW: They were most aware! There were the painters, John Graham, Man Ray, Kisling, Foujita, etc. But to the Negroes at that time, they were only "names" whose positions in the art world one know about and respected, but with whom the Negroes had little or no contact personally. Occasionally events and circumstances led to your meeting people like Kay Boyle, Raymond Duncan, Eva Le Gallienne. But usually that's where it ended. I shall always remember having met George Antheil, a true musical genius and a man of great human sensitivity. I was deeply impressed by him, as artist and man. Back here there was being published a magazine concerning blacks called "Fire" -- you probably know about it. Eric Walrond, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes were among those contributing to this magazine. There was a race consciousness and this was stimulated in part by the late Nancy Cunard. You probably know of her activities.

AM: Right.

HW: I knew her over there. But there was this rather exciting and challenging give-and-take between the blacks and the whites. The whole problem of antipathy and challenge and name-calling didn't exist as it does today. We

all recognized our problems as we faced them as artists.

AM: In terms of aesthetic obligations there was an awareness of the sort of problems that they were grappling with on the part of the black artist, right? I mean, the problems in music and the experiments in verse, in paintings, which were going on. There was a direct awareness of this, and an involvement?

HW: I would say an involvement more in the aesthetic problem than in the social or in the political aspects of social problems which characterizes our activity today. For example, Paul Robeson had just come on the scene. Marian Anderson was signing for twenty-five dollars a night. And this, you know, this dates these people. But it was a kind of seething activity here and abroad. Alain Locke was one of the leading minds. He was a teacher of philosophy but his interests in the arts were very unusual, and this is a point I'd like to make right now. There were a number of scholars, including W. E. B. Du Bois, who concerned themselves with the arts. And I find that this is relatively lacking today among our so-called Negro, or black, intellectuals. They're concerning themselves more with the actual character of America in many ways, like big business or law and the civil rights movement. Pure scholarship has given way largely to a more practical concern with the solution of our everyday problems, certainly the problems of the little man. But Locke and Benjamin Brawly at Howard, people like that, wrote books on art. They were very scholarly and were highly regarded by the whole community -- certainly by Du Bois and his editorials in the "Crisis" of those days. I used to do covers for the "Crisis." You might also be interested in knowing that I began in art as a newspaper cartoonist, a political cartoonist.

AM: Romare Bearden once told me that's how he started out.

HW: Yes, when I was in art school out in Indianapolis I did the weekly political cartoon for the Indianapolis "Ledger." Where those cartoons are now I don't know. We were concerned with all problems, but we didn't have the kind of organizations of today. The only kind of organization we knew about was the N.A.A.C.P. But agencies like SNCC and CORE didn't exist so we had no such organizations through which to work.

AM: What you're saying then is that there was a primary emphasis on the arts in terms of the people we mentioned who were in Paris. But this does not mean that they were not involved with political problems, because people like Du Bois who were concerned with art were nothing if not political. And a person like Locke, who wrote a number of things on art, was involved with political movements.

HW: That's right. Even the poems of Countee Cullen were protest poems, as you know. In this context I think it's important to mention that many of our so-called leading black people (or Negroes), were patrons of the arts. They were followers of the arts. They were encouragers of the arts. I must say that it was Walter White himself, at that time head of the N.A.A.C.P., who helped make it possible for me to go to Europe to study. When I came back, my employer, the late John Hope in Atlanta, had always been a collector of art. He owned many paintings by the late E. M. Bannister, one of the leading 19th Century black American painters. So this is what you had. Du Bois, even Chandler Owen (a lot of people don't remember him) was the editor of the "Messenger." It was a magazine in which Chandler Owen used to write editorials on art. Du Bois used to. I was really a contributor to the "Crisis," of which he (Du Bois) was editor, in the way of art. There was always some sort of a feature, drawing, or article on the arts in the "Crisis," So this is the kind of climate that you came up in. This is a part of the reason there was a blossoming of new promises in the Twenties, went on into the Thirties, and America was just finding its roots, the blacks and the whites as well, here and abroad. And this was the day of the so-called expatriate. Many blacks and whites went abroad to live permanently. But this was the day when the new art emphasis was taking root and in which people in all walks of life concerned themselves. Wilbert Holloway, who was a cartoonist for the Pittsburgh "Courier," and I went to art school together. We had a funny little studio together back in Indianapolis in the early 1920's. One day he said, "Man, this fine art is too much for me. I'm going to get into something where I can deal with the people." So he wrote to Mr. Robert L. Vann, who was editor of the "Courier" in Pittsburgh, and got a job that paid him $50 a week as cartoonist. These are the kinds of things that went on. Now this began really in the early Twenties when I first started in art and I mentioned that I was a newspaper cartoonist at the time. I had begun my cartooning career when I was in high school. We ran a little paper down there in Nashville, the "Pearl High Voice." George Gore, who is now President of Florida A. and M., and I were classmates. He was the editor of the high school paper and I was the cartoonist. We had a terrific time. We were great news gatherers. The "Nashville Globe," the so-called Negro Weekly of Nashville, used to plagiarize our little high school paper for news because of this. Like many people I was an only child and, not that I was lonely, but there were times when I found myself by myself. So I'd just sit down and draw. My mother was very, very skillful with the pencil and the pen in drawing, and I soon found a satisfaction in this very exciting way to pass the time. So in a way you might say I made a career out of a hobby that I developed very early in life

AM: Where was this?

HW: This was in Nashville.

AM: Were you originally from Tennessee?

HW: I'm from Tennessee, but I was born in a little town, Cairo, Illinois. My mother brought me to Nashville at a very early age and I grew up and went to school there, through high school. Then I came up to Indianapolis with George Gore, whom I've already mentioned. He and I were very good friends in Nashville. He went to DePauw University and I went to John Herron Art School, after we came to Indiana.

AM: How did you happen to decide to go to art school? In high school you decided that?

HW: Well, when I finished high school I wanted to get away from home and George Gore said, "Come on, let's go up to Indianapolis. I have my family there; we can pass the summer." So we came on up. I saw in the paper that they had an art exhibit at the John Herron art School. I went out to see it; it looked good, the school looked good, so I decided to stay there and go to school that fall. I got a job as a waiter in a restaurant, and I spent the next seven, eight years in Indianapolis. Then I went off to paris to study.

AM: What about your family in Tennessee?

HW: My mother was a widow, alone. She stayed in Nashville and I was off on my own in Indianapolis.

AM: Did you have brothers and sisters?

HW: No, I'm an only child. I had cousins, but they were down in southern Tennessee. They didn't figure in those early days. It may be interesting to know also that when Hayden and I won the Harmon award in 1936, the first year it was established by the Harmon Foundation, it was published widely in the national press. It was important news at the time. And, incidentally, I was staying at the Y while I was going to art school there. The governor of the State of Indiana, his name was Jackson, I think, was the leading Ku Klux Klan'er of the State of Indiana, but he was so proud that he really came down and pinned the medal on me for this award, which was a big thing in those days. Later a group of people in a little town, Franklin, Indiana, read about me and put on a play to raise some money for me. They invited me down to see this play, and to have a little one-man show. They cleared about two hundred dollars. Very few, if any Negroes lived in this town, but I was a great honor to the State of Indiana at that time and they awarded me the two hundred dollars as a sort of "nest egg" for my trip to Europe to study. These are some of the things that happened early. Incidentally, $150.00 of the $200 paid my trip to Paris, 3rd class, in 1927. The whole matter of aesthetic ideology and aesthetic approach came up, too. As I say, this was the beginning of the so-called modern period. Modern art was just taking root, especially in America. Also in Europe, yes. But it was only just a few years before, in 1913, when they had the famous Armory Show; this was the great jolt that shook America out of its sort of placid way of painting. And there was also the matter of how one should think, whether one should "go" modern. So I, so to speak "went" modern. Being in Europe on a shoestring I was trying to get a scholarship. The Rosenwald Foundation was flourishing then and when they learned that I had gone modern they didn't consider me for a grant. So I plugged it through and when the Depression hit I had to come back, and I took the job in Atlanta as a teacher. To get back to the Rosenwald people, I stuck it out and I painted as I saw fit and some years later they offered me a scholarship, which I accepted. And with that grant I came to New York in 1943. Meantime, in the Thirties I had gone to Mexico to study with the late Diego Rivera, the Mexican painter. I had a wonderful time with him there in Mexico and learned a lot about fresco painting, which is what I wanted. All the while I was developing a kind of movement among black artists in Atlanta. We were called the "Atlanta School," or sometimes, as I said previously, we were called the "Outhouse School." In the early Forties we had developed to the point where we put on a national show. We invited artists from all over the country to show at Atlanta University. This was for black artists alone. Incidentally, this exhibit is still held every year in Atlanta. I had some discussion about it with the President of the University in later years. I felt that the black, exclusively black, show had served its purpose by the early Forties and I proposed that they expand the scope and include artists of all races. But this was not approved and it was never done, so even to this day I think it is still a segregated show. This was just about the end of my stint in Atlanta, in years of service, that is to say. I came, as I said, to New York in 1943, found a studio and worked for two years on the Rosenwald fellowship. While I did go back to Atlanta in 1945, to teach, I was invited back to New York to teach at New York University in 1946. I was there as a teacher until I retired just a year ago. But sandwiched in -- this I think is a very important thing -- was a mural I painted for Talladega College in 1939. This had to do with a slave mutiny.

AM: It was the Mutiny of the Amistad.

HW: That's right. President Gallagher, now President of City College, was President of Talladega at that time and he commissioned me to do this mural because, out of this slave incident and the subsequent events, Talladega was founded soon after the Civil War. The mural was painted in honor of the slaves and their mutiny and their final freedom. It dealt with the mutiny of these black Africans on a slave ship. It's a very moving story; a novel has only recently come out describing it.

AM: Another interesting account and one is therefore a ready reference is to be found in Muriel Rukeyser's book,

Willard Gibbs.

HW: Josiah Willard Gibbs was one of the defenders of the Amistad slaves.

AM: Right. And in this biography, which was a prize winner, I think, back in the Forties, I've forgotten the publication date, there is an interesting popular historical account of the Amistad Mutiny. I first became aware of this mutiny as a significant historical event because of what was being said about the mural in Talladega in various high schools in Alabama where I went to school.

HW: So it's not new to you then?

AM: No, we come together here . . .

HW: That's marvelous.

AM: . . . in this particular way.

HW: Then you know the tie-up between Talladega and the mutiny. The mutiny took place in 1839. My mural was painted a hundred years later, in 1939, the one hundredth anniversary of the event. But out of this mutiny people like Josiah Willard Gibbs, the Baldwins, Tappan and so forth, formed what was called The American Missionary Association. That was about 1840. They maintained operation then, and today as you know they're located here in New York on Fourth Avenue. But it was out of the efforts of this organization that many of the Negro schools in the South were founded -- LeMoyne, Talladega, and so forth. So this mural was a gesture of appreciation, or whatever, on the part of Talladega for the A.M.A. which had engineered its efforts to establish Talladega as one of its schools. I think this was a very great thing. Many of the youngsters today, young painters and sculptors, seem to believe that we old timers didn't concern ourselves with the Negro problem. This to me was a great Negro problem. Because these Africans comported themselves magnificently, you know, and finally won their freedom. Another such thing was one of my own making. I was commissioned around 1950 while here in New York to do a mural for the Atlanta University Library. This mural is six panels, each about 11' x 11' square feet all around the rotunda of the library. It portrays what I call the "Art of the Negro." This has to do with a kind of interpretive treatment of African art. I think it's worth knowing that I've always been interested in African art. There are many artists, and other people, today, who believe that we have no part of Africa's history. I look at the African artist certainly as one of my ancestors regardless of how we feel about each other today. I've always had a high regard and respect for the African artist and his art. So this mural, which is there now, is for me a kind of token of my esteem for African art. Also, I wanted it to be something of an inspiration to the students who go to that library, to see something about the art of their ancestors. Another mural which was undertaken by my good friend Charles Alston and myself was one we did for the Golden State Mutual Insurance Company. Did he tell you about that?

AM: No, he didn't mention it.

HW: Well, anyhow, these are three murals by me in which the activities and the life of the black man are portrayed. I mention these simply to again point to the fact that we can defend ourselves against the accusation that we were not concerned with the black people. but we in those days, when it was not popular, were doing this. Look back over Alain Locke's book and you'll see many of the paintings by artists of the Twenties and Thirties, black artists.

AM: There's no question about it. And it must be pretty exasperating to you to see a movement such as the present black consciousness movement, which is wonderful to have, overlooking so much that is already there. For example, they're young people who, when they think of a celebration of blackness or of heritage, think of this thing that you see on television called the Wall of Respect of the Midwest and they forget about the Amistad Mutiny. They forget about the mural that you did for the rotunda. These things which have been in the consciousness of generations, at least class after class of college students, so that those who have gone to certain colleges and have spread out all over the country do reflect this preoccupation. Even as a preoccupation which you alluded to later was reflected in the "Opportunity" and in the "Crisis." Now when I was in high school in the Thirties I thought of the "Crisis" and the "Opportunity" in terms of seeing illustrations of art, of African masks, and what I later found out to be something that was related to Cubism, and various other things like that. There was a great deal of consciousness of good design, of contemporary sensibility, in those magazines. And they were political magazines.

HW: This is also important to understand. Until 1943, which was twenty-five years ago, I never lived in New York. I lived in the South and the Midwest and Europe, but I never lived permanently in New York until I came in 1943. I knew about all of the art activities that were going on, I mean people like Aaron Douglas and Countee Cullen. I used to travel around; they used to travel around and often we'd meet each other. But, during those years previous to my coming to New York, there was (I'm sure you have a record of this already), what was known as the Harlem Artists Guild where the black artists up in Harlem got together as a group to set forth their ideas and

to defend and promote them. And this is what went on. Not that any great turnovers were made in the minds of people, but these efforts were there and the were put forth. One thing about my own work, my interest in African art has remained throughout the years. My early works were based on African forms and some of my later works, too. And I'm still working at this kind of approach now. I must say that much of my time was consumed in teaching. It'sbeen my problem and I'm attempting to solve it, to reconcile being a teacher on the one hand and a painter on the other. I'm of the feeling that one has to take a little precedent over the other; it's hard to carry them both along in equal balance. So I'm known as much as a teacher, if not more so, than as a painter. One of the things that hs characterized much of the work of the black artist during the years leading up to the present was to find for himself, let us say, and aesthetic groundwork or foundation which he could pursue right on through. As I look over the works of many of my artist friends, they've changed. Their quality and their character and their styles have changed a great deal, as have mine. This was typical, I think, of the very rapid changes that were taking place even in American art generally. Now it's a little different and probably a little more substantial in that the civil rights movement has become such a deeply rooted factor and it seems to be moving on in a very, very ongoing way; financial way. I have on my desk now all kinds of things by black artists and they all have to do with the so-called black image. I think this is very, very good. The one thing I think that must be guarded against, that must be kept in mind, is that, in our efforts to create a black image nad to assert our quality, our character, our blackness, our beauty, and all that, the art form must remain one of high level. I think of Ralph Ellison who always said, "I want to be the right arm, the themes of my people, but I want to be a great writer regardless." I think this is really what we are facing. This sort of problem today. And now that I'm not teaching this is what I'm working on. It's very important to keep your artistic level at the highest possible range of development and yet make you work convey a telling quality in terms of what we are as a people.

AM: This involves meeting the challenges which exist for the contemporary sensibility, wouldn't you say?

HW: Yes.

AM: And in some instances you have what appears to me to be a regression on the part of some of the younger people.

HW: Right.

AM: There is a sort of, with all of their political good intentions, there's a certain amount of aesthetic naivete. More running away from the real complexities which painters must face or which all artists must face.

HW: This is true. I'll give you an example. It's not the greatest painting in the world, it probably is dated now, but I'm thinking of Picasso's Guernica, which is a great protest against war. I think it's a very moving work. But it's well known that Picasso worked days and days at making sketches and studies for this one painting. He painted out of his anger and out of his deep concern, but he had to believe, he must have believed, that in order for this thing to be a compelling argument against the terribleness of war it had to be a compelling work of art. He made hundreds of sketches, you know. I've seen these sketches -- who hasn't -- of the clutching hand. It's drawn again and again. Now anybody can do a clutching hand in agony or in anger, whatever, but to make it a real form of art, this is what I'm trying to say. And the spontaneous way in which many of these works are created today may not necessarily have the kind of quality which I think makes a great work of art tell its story convincingly.

AM: When one looks at the Guernica of Picasso, there is, when you come to think of it, a connection, a traditional connection, which goes back to the Spanish tradition of Goya.

HW: Yes, very true.

AM: These are great disasters of war, great paintings of protest, sketches and so forth, but they're also just great as art.

HW: That's right.

AM: And you get Picasso dealing with what is essentially the same themes updated, both in terms of sensibility, that is of form, experimental form, abstraction, and what not, and in terms of objects on a landscape. In other words, you get an air raid feeling about certain aspects, certain illustrative parts of the picture. The agony seems skyward a little bit more than it would to some of the executions in the disasters of war. More or less it is there, but you can look at Guernica simply in terms of the aesthetic problems which were solved, which were met there, right?

HW: Exactly. And I think what is required is what is called a certain amount of "artistic distance." In other words, to get at a thing, you've got to get away from it, and then come to it in our own terms. You know, I can go out on the street and become involved in protest picketing and what not, but this has nothing to do with painting a picture about the protest that is being made. This protest can be done by shouting or haranguing, or whatever, on the one hand. But, if one is going to make this protest through pictures, then this is another medium and is

not the same thing. This I think is what the young artist involved today should really consider. As I said earlier, I was in Mexico back in the late Thirties, about thirty-two years ago now, and I had the good fortune to see many of those protest paintings that people like Rivera and Orozco and Siqueiros and the others had done on the walls of the schools and public buildings there. All the artists were doing it ,but strangely enough, only a few of them hang on, people like Orozco and Rivera and Siqueiros and Tamayo. the others are just journalistic kinds of reporting, so the great agony that was gone through subsequent to the Mexican Revolution and during the Revolution is there. For example, Rivera's portrayal of the great Mexican liberator --- I'll think of it in a moment . . . .

AM: You mean Juarez?

HW: No, not Juarez, I'll come to it, but it shows an understanding of form and a powerful portrayal of this man and how he died in his effort to liberate his people. Zapata was his name. I saw some of this, interestingly enough, out in Detroit during the summer. I went out with two other fellows to jury a show by Detroit Negro artists, who were to have an exhibition at the Detroit museum. It was during the time when people were riled up about the assassination of Martin Luther King and there were a number of sculptures there. I noticed that the sculpture submitted that really got into it, the portrayal of all the agonies and successes and failures of Martin Luther King, were truly treat works of art. This was just a general sensing of those sorts of things coming together. This is the point I'm trying to make and this is what I think the youngsters coming along must do; that is: create a unity out of art and the facts of life.

AM: What were your first paintings like? What were your first preoccupations as a kid beyond the cartoons, and so forth?

HW: After my cartooning days, or during those days, I just went to art school and did the normal art school kinds of activities. But in Europe where I was more or less on my own, which was just a period later from my art school days, I began to study the works of the masters -- old and modern. I went over there with one thing on my mind. When I was a student back in art school I used to take my pictures down and try to have them shown in a little gallery in Indianapolis. It was run by a German named Herman Lieber. One day Mr. Lieber gave me a little book on African sculpture. He said, "Woodruff, I want you to have this book." (It was all written in German; I couldn't read it.) He said, "I want you to take this little book because it records the great work of your great people; African art. You will learn something about it." So this struck me. This was my initial introduction to African art. I used to see African art in the galleries and in the shops in Paris. Alain Locke used to come over. He and I were friends and we'd go to the Flea Market together. He was buying African art then and I bought a piece or two. I have those pieces here now. This was forty years ago. Then on seeing the work of Paul Cezanne I got the connection. Then I saw the work of Picasso and I saw how Cezanne, Picasso, and the African had a terrific unique sense of form. The master I chiefly admired at that time was Paul Cezanne; then Picasso, who was certainly bolder and more courageous in his Cubist work. Then when I saw his painting which is now in the Museum of Modern Art called Les Demoiselles d'Avignon -- Cubist-like girls with black masks on -- the whole thing was clarified for me. I studied the works of these men and, as I said earlier, I was associated largely with a group of younger artists. We used to sit around and talk about art and then go off to our studios and paint. My painting consisted largely of figures and landscapes. They were done in a manner of the structural style of the African sculptor and of Cezanne, who was a forerunner of Picasso. I was painting more or less this way. I was chiefly called a Romantic, I mean the Romantic style as opposed to Classical style, in art. Then when I came back to America in 1931 and went South to teach, I was back in The Southland once more. About fifteen years had passed since I'd left the South and gone to Indiana and then to Paris. I realized that here was my country again. So this is why we set out to paint the red clay of Georgia and the red clay of Alabama, you know, the erosion, etc. I spent a whole summer in Mississippi on a Rosenwald grant -- part of my grant enabled me to paint the soil erosion in Mississippi. This was a sort of comment on the terrible state to which the land had come in those years. You may be interested also to know that through the President of Jackson College, a black college in Jackson, Mississippi, I was commissioned to paint this portrait of the then governor of Mississippi. I went down there to paint this portrait but something happened politically and I didn't have the opportunity to go through with it. But at least he had previously agreed to sit for me in the State House. So therefore the Southern scene and the people became something that I was very much interested in. You see, I'd gone through art school, then the sort of structural Cubist concept in Europe, and down there went into a social conscious form of painting. This was pursued further by my going to Mexico and working as an apprentice of Diego Rivera, in 1936. He was a social conscious painter, in a way. Soon after I had stint out in Colorado and painted the Rocky Mountains. So you see I've been around in different places, all of which have left a chain of various styles in my work. But I somehow always come back to the so-called black image, however I had tried to portray it. I did a series of paintings on the Southern scene, one of which was a very large one showing a one-room school and how these little girls had no equipment, nothing to work with, no books, and how they were trying to learn under these very adverse conditions . A collector bought the painting some years ago. This is what constituted my work. I did a series of woodcuts on the Southern scene and a number of these woodcuts dealt with the old problem of lynching. Two of them along with some others are now on view at the Studio Museum in Harlem, this show that is protesting the Whitney Museum show which did not include black artists of the 1930's, who are practicing now

because the organizer of the Whitney show felt there were none qualified.

AM: During the time that you were at Atlanta quite a bit of social research was being conducted there and many of your colleagues on the faculty were very much involved with gathering information, right? People like Ira De A. Reid?

HW: Ira De A. Reid? Yes. He just recently passed, as you probably know.

AM: Yes, I saw it.

HW: Ira De A. Reid was there; Du Bois himself was there, Mercer Cooke, Rayford Logan, the late Alonzo Moron -- many others.

AM: You were there during the time they founded Phylon, weren't you?

HW: Yes, yes, Du Bois was editor of it.

AM: Right.

HW: I can't refrain from repeating my awareness of people like Ira De A. Reid and Du Bois. You see, the mural I did for Talladega was during 1938-39. Du Bois was so much interested in this that he went out and found money somewhere to have these mural panels reproduced in full color. They were about this size. These were inserted as the art contribution to one of the first issues of Phylon. Phylon was a literary magazine but this is evidence of Du Bois' interest in the arts. Ira De A. Reid bought paintings from me. I went to Atlanta just a year or so before he did. When he first got there he said, "Hey, I want to buy a painting." Dr. Mercer Cook, a teacher of French was there, and the late Alonzo Moron, who later was made president of Hampton; these were the people who were active at the time. It was very, very exciting. These were the Depression days and somehow much of your great talent found itself in Atlanta because there were few other openings for people during the Thirties when jobs were scarce and hard to find. But it was fortunate for the beginnings of Atlanta University, and Spelman College, and Morehouse, where this unusual talent and these people congregated. The Atlanta School of Social Work, one of the best in the world, was there right on the Atlanta University campus. And our own Whitney Young, as you know, was director of that School until he came here as director of the Urban League. Previous to him there had been Dr. E. Franklin Frazier and Forrester Washington, both of whom are now deceased. But this is the tradition of Atlanta. And while I'm for integration, somehow it was the fact that there was this matter of segregation that fired these people up, stirred their imagination, challenged them. And they really dug deep into these problems.

AM: You're establishing quite an intellectual basis for work on black consciousness, black identity, and what not.

HW: That's correct.

AM: What I was referring to a while ago was a sort of exasperation, that it's not used to the extent that it could be. Many people go on as if this didn't happen, as if there are not files of Phylon available in libraries, certainly in Harlem and almost any Negro college. There are copies of Phylon just as there are the publications of Carter G. Woodson, the journals as well as the books which he wrote. In Washington there were people like Benjamin Brawley and Woodson, and others. There was a journal of Negro education also which was involved in that. It's an interesting thing; I would think that's almost impossible -- that a Negro painter, like a Negro writer, would not be checked out in the discipline of sociology as a method of gathering information for his work.

HW: Well, I'll tell you what: This did happen, you see. The group of students I had (I was a one-man art department in Atlanta), and I used to talk about these problems. Not only talked about them, we experienced them. And their paintings -- if you can find a copy of Alain Locke's book published in 1940, The Negro in Art, you'll see that many of my students are mentioned there: Robert Neal, Lemar Weaver, Fred Flemister, these and others have reproductions in this book. They are mentioned as being my followers. Also, their work reflects our interest in the Negro sociological theme, or scene, therefore there was this awareness. It took on interest not only through the sociologists but through the late Willis James, music teacher who recently died, who used to go down into the "sticks" of Georgia and Alabama and dig up all these old folk songs. And who's your music man, Lomax, who's a musicologist?

AM: John and Alan Lomax.

HW: You talk to Alan Lomax about Willis James and you'll be surprised at the richness of the material that James got together.

AM: Wasn't James also that magnificent unsung hero of the Bama State Teachers College band?

HW: Oh, of course!

AM: Well, this is one of the very, very interesting stories because -- what became the nationally and internationally famous orchestra of Erskine Hawkins . . .

HW: Erskine Hawkins, that's the man!

AM: . . . was really Bama State collegiate.

HW: That's right! That's exactly right!

AM: Somebody told me that Willis James was instrumental in starting that.

HW: He was really the great moving man with Erskine Hawkins, you know. Each man had to do it in his own way; there's the librarian, there's the sociologist, there's the research expert, there's the musician, there's the artist. But this was in keeping with the tenor of the times. Much of that was recorded in Phylon and also in the general files at Bama University. It's some work to dig out all of these facts, but the youngster today will have to dig them out.

AM: It's true, I mean, there's a lot to be dug out. A study of Negro musicologists and Negro musicians would fit in well because these people did happen to know people in other fields, not casually but intimately. You're a very good friend of the composer William L. Dawson, right?

HW: Yes, indeed.

AM: For many years?

HW: Many years. What you had, not that I want to make a clear-cut distinction, but what you had in places like Alabama and Georgia in those years was something a little bit different from what you had at a place like Fisk University because the efforts in Georgia and Alabama were day by day, working, creative efforts. Those men went out and dug up the material with their "bare" hands, so to speak, and they brought it in. A lot of it was catalogued and a lot was not. But Fisk had probably done its pioneering much earlier and at this time it was more of a scholarly approach to what had already been done. But the findings of Willis James and people like him, in all areas of learning are, to me, very original, unusual kinds of efforts. A man like Bill Dawson at Tuskegee, same kind of fellow. Bill and I have sat in this room night after night and talked about the similarities of our efforts in music and in art and how it works. Bill is a great clarifier of things which we don't always understand. I said, "Well, now, Bill, you speak about the so-called 'Negro' aspect of Negro music. What is it?" He said, "Well, let's take one thing, like this gal in Porgy and Bess who's out singing 'Strawberries'. She ends 'Strawberries' on an odd note." [HW sings here.] He said, "Nobody can do this but black people. It's the way we do things. I've made a study of this down there." This is one of the reasons for his great success as a conductor and as a musician. This is what I mean. I mentioned also Ralph Ellison, who is a Tuskegee man, you know, and Bill Dawson really got him started out years back. Not necessarily in music, but as an inspiration. This was the kind of climate that you had in the South. And speaking of sit-ins and walk-ins, we did lots of things in those days which were generally unheard of then. They were unspeakable. When I first got to Atlanta I wanted to find out what was going on in the way of art. So they told me there was some kind of a museum way out on Peachtree Street. I got a streetcar and rode out there. I faced an imposing mansion. There was a Negro janitor sweeping the sidewalk. He looked at me and I looked at him. I walked up the steps nad went on into the building. To the receptionist. I said, "I want to see the Director." She almost fainted. But she went in and I met the Director. He and I had a very nice talk for about an hour that afternoon. When I came out the janitor saw me again and he said, "Come here, I want to tell you something." I said, "What's that?" He said, "You know, I've been at this place for I don't know how many years, but you're the first black man beside me that's ever walked through that front door." I said, "Well, I won't be the last one." Now this I didn't know, but it is significant now. Not that it was a great achievement, but in those days people just didn't do those things. You sort of kept "your place" and eventually these things begin to flow together, racially. But those were very exciting days in Atlanta and I think it's because the schools there did try to develop some kind of direction in the arts, in sociology, in the social sciences and in the physical sciences. They had those things fairly well organized and directed.

AM: So you didn't feel that you were out of things during the years that you were in Atlanta? You didn't feel you were out of touch with what was happening in the galleries in New York?

HW: I did feel that, yes.

AM: You did feel that, too? How often did you get up here?

HW: I came up, say, in the summers, or maybe on holidays. There was no fund to pay my way back and forth, and in the Thirties we didn't make a fortune teaching school so I just couldn't afford to come up as I would have wanted to. I kept in touch by letters and by what I could read and hear, but actually visits back and forth were made only very, very rarely. Occasionally, I'd go off on a lecture tour and I'd see lots of things. But during those

years I was really rather isolated from what was going on. This is one reason I wanted to go out to the Atlanta museum to see what they had there. On the other hand, we invited exhibitions down. This is one way that not only I but the whole community had a chance to see works of art. Those were rough years. In fact, the Museum of Modern Art had just been built, about two years before, in 1929. So even the New York scene was just beginning to develop. I would say the current emphasis on art really began to reach its height in the last five or ten years. Of course in the Forties and Fifties it began to expand. But the black artist has multiplied many fold in the last few years. And they're doing very good work throughout the country, which is very, very promising.

AM: The work which you saw in Mexico during the time that you were in Atlanta, or operating out of Atlanta, was a sort of relief from not being in direct touch with what was going on in New York. In some instances, you say Mexicans were having a good deal of influence on painters in New York, too, during that time.

HW: Oh, yes. Charlie White -- the Federal Art Projects. You see, during the Thirties, the Arts Project was in operation. The Mexicans had begun in the 1920's. I think they began their so-called renaissance around 1923 and they had already developed a great, exciting movement down there. As you say, the influence was felt back here. There was an upsurge during the Thirties of the influence of Mexican mural painters. Almost every post office in the country had a mural painted in it. This was the influence of the Mexicans. Right over here at the New School there is a mural by Orozco. And the mural by Rivera which is supposedly still on the walls at Radio City was one of the great events of the day when it was first painted. So there was a general social consciousness. This is reflected in the Roosevelt Administration. It was a rather pervasive thing. Most people were too busy fighting bread and butter problems to spend time fighting race problems, but we were all in there together, you know. And this was one of the characteristics. my going to Mexico was really inspired by an effort to get into the mural painting swing. I wanted to paint great significant murals in fresco and I went down there to work with Rivera to learn his technique. But then you know opportunities to do a mural are always rare. All the Mexicans were hired by the government and there was no problem. I think they made two or three dollars a day just to paint, eight hour shifts around the clock. But here most everything in the way of art in those days, even now, is private except the Art Projects. Almost everybody was on the Project and they'd get $23.75 a week. That was the general pay. It really kept everybody alive, certainly kept the artist alive.

AM: This was in New York?

HW: Everywhere, all over the country.

AM: Was there one in Atlanta?

HW: I was on the Project in Atlanta.

AM: I see. At the same time you were connected with Atlanta University?

HW: That's right. I don't know if you call it "moonlighting" or not, but during my spare time I did my project. The inspector would come around about once or twice every two or three months to see how you were getting on. One of my students was also on the Project. He and I did paintings. I did a mural in one of the high schools down there. It's an awful thing! So the Art Project was a life-saver for artists everywhere. And this helped to create the upsurge in art, for whites and blacks, throughout the whole country. What brought it to a temporary end was the outbreak of World War II in 1939. I was really finishing up my mural for Talladega around '38 and '39 and "Life" magazine heard about it. You probably heard of the photographer Eliot Elisofon. They sent him down to do a full feature on me and the mural. He stayed down there about ten days. He used to come to our house and we'd talk and have dinner. He got his photographs. On the week that the documentary was supposed to have been featured in "Life," Hitler with his army moved into Poland and that buried the feature forever. I can only surmise that the Elisofon photographs are on file somewhere in the "Life" magazine archives today. I used to see Eliot often in New York and he always expressed his regrets. He said, "Because I got such nice photos." I mention that incident only to emphasize the point that this brought an end to the Projects. During and after the war you had the Abstract movement. You come into people like Jackson Pollock, de Kooning, and so forth. The whole pattern of art changed. I had left Atlanta by 1943. I sort of felt that I had done my pioneering down there (I had spent just about fifteen years) and i wanted to get identified with the New York scene. Being appointed to N.Y.U. was looked upon with great favor by my wife and me; so we've been here ever since.

AM: But, coming back to this time, your circumstances were somewhat divided. You had your academic responsibilities, although you were in closer touch with the painters and the galleries and so forth, and you also had to spend a certain amount of time with your responsibilities at the University, right?

HW: this is true. There are other things you get involved with. The minute you become tied up with a university on a full-time basis, there are all kinds of requests and demands made upon you. I've done a lot of lecturing. I've done a lot of going around the country exhibiting and lecturing, which is time-consuming. A woman just called me from Denver Saturday -- wants me to come there in January for two days on a Title Three project. But I'm not going to do it. It's just too much. I mean, these are the things which distract you from your work. And when

you're a full-time person, you've got to be a full-time person. You just can't go there and punch a clock and come on home. You've got to do your job. So, as a professor, I had to take on the duties of a professor. I was a curriculum director; I was on student committees, on deans' committees. And these things take time. So the choice was up to me -- I could either have quit and taken a little part-time job and devoted my time to painting, or I could stay on and devote whatever time I could to my painting. So I've been a "Sunday" painter more or less throughout the years. And I've received honors. I received the honor of being the Great Teacher of N.Y.U. for 1966. I was sent to Africa on two occasions by the State Department of the U. S. because of my . . . . When you work with an institution like a university you begin to know artists and what's going on in the art world, and people have looked upon me as one who knows what the Negro artist is about. "Ebony" magazine came out in 1963 with its Emancipation issue. Do you remember that? Well, they carried a feature on art. I supplied all the information for that. So when anything about art comes up, people have frequently called on me. It takes time to get these things together. Trying to be helpful, and so on, all right. It just means that you don't have time for other things. I'm beginning to turn down things now. A woman from Michigan called me and said, "We're having a conference, will you come?" I said, "No, I"m not coming." But during the years you get involved in these things. I don't regret it, but I look upon these past years as time spent at something that might have been -- not more advantageously, necessarily -- but might have been, or could have been, spent at something else. Now I'm trying to unshoulder these activities and just spend time out in the studio very quietly, but it's hard.

AM: Well, the history of great painters -- the older they get the better they get.

HW: There's been a sort of interval here. You see, you move like this. Then you just sort of, I won't say mark time, but things come to a sort of standstill. Then you try to pick up. You've got to go way back, you see. All the friends I know have rarely had a full-time job like I've had. Bearden, Alston, you know. Alston said, "I don't want a full-time job." so this is the difference. Many painters I know are painters first and teachers second. But I think on the other hand my teaching has been rewarding. Very much so. While now we are emphasizing what we as a black people can do, I have taught many of the so-called outstanding artists on the American scene who were both white and black. Because in the Forties and Fifties, we were talking about integration. So many of the artists who are showing up on Madison Avenue now are people that I've taught at N.Y.U. The whole thing has been one of a lot of different kinds of experiences and what I'm experiencing now is very challenging, very challenging indeed.

AM: It must be built up of, if not tension, eagerness.

HW: I'll tell you what I've in mind. I've been searcher, and I've always felt that once you find, you're through. Even when I find, I've got to go searching for something else. This is how I'm constructed. Even in my own paintings, for me every painting is a new experience. I just go ahead like I've never painted before in my life. This is how I work.

AM: You were saying that during a good deal of the period when you were in Atlanta there was quite a bit of social consciousness. It was quite obvious in the painting that you were doing because of the context.

HW: Yes.

AM: Now when you came back to New York you went into what we call an academic situation. But you were painting, although you describe yourself as being a sort of a part-time or Sunday painter. What changes, looking back now, do you discover in your painting in that period? What changes took place as reflected in your painting as a result of the move from Atlanta back to New York?

HW: I think one thing that is, in Atlanta, I saw the black world more intently, or more specifically, than in New York, Not that it was less important, but what we lack, what I lack, was that which almost all of the fellows at that time were trying to do. We were trying to create an image, a very personal image in our own work. This becomes inevitably integrated in the so-called "New York" scene. And this was hard. So what you try to do is paint as you believe and as you think. Then create within the context of the totality, the competitive totality, of the New York art scene. That's why you see among black artists a lot of abstract work around; and interspersed the most figurative work dealing with the blacks. I did a whole series on black children at play and at school right in New York. (These paintings have since disappeared one way or the other.) But children at play like jumping rope, and so on. So what you try to do is paint within the concepts of your immediate interest and yet in such a manner that you become a part of a very tough over-all art scene. I think, not to diminish but to add to the importance of what youngsters are doing today, that many of our young black artists are getting into the swing more easily now than we did in those earlier days because everybody is aware of the swing and senses it too, and senses that it includes the black, no matter what he does.

AM: Right.

HW: They're getting a lot of support for the Repertory Theatre here, a lot of support for all these cultural things that Negroes are doing, black and white, on TV. But this sort of "open door" policy did not exist in the Forties and

the Fifties. This protest show at the Whitney Museum they're having: The director of that museum said that, "We have never really looked upon race as a factor in the in the selection of the works that we show in this museum." He said, "We always select work on the basis of merit." (Whose merit?) "If blacks show, they have to meet the same standards as whites." If this is all true, then well and good. But this has given way, a little bit now, to the fact that, "All right, he's black; let's give him a chance." So this is really what is involved. More and more you're getting artists, black artists, who have niches in the so-called big scene. Romy Bearden just moved up to the top in the last couple of years; Alston, Mayhew, and Ray Sanders who has now gone to California to teach. Well, Jacob Lawrence has been the leader all along.

AM: Of course, you've always called upon the code of experience.

HW: That's right.

AM: And the continuity will be revealed. It should; that's what it's based on, what it will be based on, on what will be discovered as a continuity.

HW: Many artists today, black artists, are doing all kinds of things, like Mayhew. Richard Mayhew is simply a landscape painter. You know his work, no doubt.

AM: Right.

HW: It's handsome work that he turns out. But Mayhew is not really involved in this thing. He is, I think, actually in support of these movements, but his work has remained, like always. Sam Gilliam. He paints stripes. He's like the Op artists. There are those who call him the "necktie artist" because he just paints a series of stripes right across the canvas. This is very far-fetched and has nothing to do with the so-called black idiom, yet he's accepted. These are some of the problems that the black artist faces today. I went to a concert yesterday, the New World Symphony. This is an integrated orchestra about five or six years old, full-fledged. The director yesterday was James DePriest, a Negro. But they played all Sibelius and Tchaikovsky. Not only Tchaikovsky but Rachmaninoff and so on, all classical music. Which is fine. I would have liked a little soul music in there myself. But I think the artist has to do what he has to do, that's all. Most of the people in his orchestra were black -- I would say seventy-five percent of them Negroes.

AM: This is a symphony of the New World?

HW: Yes. They had a concert yesterday at Philharmonic Hall. I sometimes wonder about these things in the movies. This whole business of a social revolution, when you get involved in the arts and the implication of the arts in the social revolution. I have a little book back there about the wall. I think of actors like Poitier and of James Earl Hones, you know, who is a terrific actor. But he's playing a part. I think even of Sammy Davis. He speaks about rights, and so forth, but he's still a clown. So worrying . . . there are those Negroes who say I don't worry about these things. I just go on and do my work. And they support the organizations, I am sure, but the question still remains -- what is the role of the artist? I still think the artists individually has to make up his own mind.

AM: Right. But one of the things I was thinking about as you were talking . . . when you were in Atlanta, when you had an involvement with these other things, that was another dimension of experience. But perhaps one difference, perhaps a very significant difference between being in Atlanta and being in New York is that you are constantly responding to the language of art. That is, new statements that are being made. If you were in New York during the . . . what was that? The 1940's when they had a big Miro show? You had to respond to that if you lived here.

HW: That's right.

AM: There was a magnificent show in 1940, let me repeat, Bonnard show, 1948. It was a different type of color, etc. Well, New York painters were responding and some answering. Like among musicians, a new record with a new style comes out, the other musicians have to respond.

HW: Yes.

AM: So there's more active participation in the dialogue of art itself.

HW: Yes, that's right; of art as a primary concern.

AM: Right.

HW: It's art regardless.

AM: And these other things are reflected in that, are they not? I mean, if they're going to be to the extent that

they're reflected in art with validity, they're reflected through this particular dialogue.

HW: That's right. There's a young sculptor, you probably know him, or know his work -- Richard Hunt. I guess Hunt is thirty, maybe a little over or less. Anyhow, he's a very able sculptor. He works in metal and his things are abstract. And he's a very well sought-after artist. He sells for high prices, always in four figures. He can't turn the stuff out fast enough to sell and he's in the Museum of Modern Art and all over the country. Well, Hunt, I've been on panels with him and he doesn't seem to be concerned too much with the so-called racial issues. He said, "Look, I'm just a guy. I like to make things. My father was a carpenter down in Georgia. He used to build things; and I'm building things with metal now. This is what I like." He's not aloof, but he just simply seems not to be caught up in these racial things. Now this is good for him, you see. While my painting has not always been protest painting, there have been periods when it has been such because I've been trying to reconcile what you just mentioned. It's like any other kind of profession. Let us say you're a banker. Your commodity is money, you know, you sell it or lend it, or whatever. With money you make money. Now what are the race aspects of this? Unless these people in Harlem come down and say, "Look, Mr. Banker, let's set up a black bank in Harlem. We need this, that and the other." He can give up his talents, he can give up his goods. Then it's got to be replaced, otherwise he can't do good to anybody. So therefore, he's got to work on a very calculating basis. But the arts deal chiefly with feeling and sentimental responses or sensory responses to experience. That is why they are more given toward protest. Even your writers are protest writers, you see, except for two, may three here and there. But the Negro painter like myself is involved in the protest. The Negro artist who is a designer fora television studio, CABS, these people aren't concerned; maybe out at rallies at night or something. But he's designing the set which you see. You know it comes on and there's Jack Benny, or somebody. This black man has designed the set. So wherein can the arts fit in the movement? Wherein do they, or do they not? This is all a part of the whole thing. Like in any profession, you move into it. I think this thing has to be attacked on every conceivable front.

AM: These things do tie in, in very interesting ways. Because one state to which much of the activists' image has arrived at this is a position where they can now see the importance of a mural such as the Amistad Mutiny because the blacks too, are concerned with the image of the black man, or the image of the black hero. This has already been done through another series of preoccupations. So each artist, it would seem, almost has to do his thing as he sees it. And then the reality . . . I mean, he will be in tune with reality simply because he's operating out of reality all the time or against the background of the same reality that says one man's a law school and another man comes out to listen to the same musicians, maybe going to the same parties but working in different mediums. But somehow or other these sensibilities might find similarities somewhere. What do you think of that?

HW: Well, I think this is a very good point. I think the similarities . . . you see, I think really not only do you have to fight on all fronts, but you've got to fight every aspect of this whole business of the black problem; well, the white problem. It really is a white problem, you know, because he won't loosen up. I think every aspect of American life is involved in this, not only the poor in Harlem, not only the job seekers, not only the kids who are poorly educated, but people who have talents of all kinds and who yet don't have opportunities. This is what I mean. And, therefore, I think it's important that all the efforts that we have in every respect are put forth. What we think of as a revolution, we think of the immediate upheaval, you know. This think went off in three weeks and this is what we did. But you see, to me a revolution is an on-going thing. They're still fighting the Russian Revolution, you know. And the American Revolution. So this to me is an on-going thing which I think has to be considered and considered as a part. Now your quickly written protest literature, and I'm just swamped with it all the time down here in this neighborhood, is good. It's persuasive; it's convincing; and it's doing a terrific job. But once it's read then you're through with it. It's not literature yet, you see. And either you're concerned with the problem of literature, of art, or music, and Dean Dixon and these boys, you know are musicians. Dawson is a musician. So this is what you're involved in. Now I've been painting. I've got a whole lot of stuff in my studio now that nobody's seen, that I'm not satisfied with. It's dealing with a black image, but it's not of the artistic level. You know, my image is there, but I'm not going to lay it down until I'm satisfied with it. It's like African art, you know. These are great pieces. On the other hand, you get what's called airport art that one can buy anywhere for ninety-eight cents. It's the same image but it lacks that inner quality. So this is the thing that I'm trying to achieve. It's kind of late in life maybe, but it's the thing I've got to do. Otherwise I just can't look myself in the face.

AM: This on-going revolution is also a process of continuous synthesis. So you keep making things on different levels and keep making refinements.

HW: That's right.

AM: You keep refining one perception and the expression of what one sees, I should imagine. So all that is simply a part of a biography. You know, a biographer'll look at it and see the inevitability of it all.

HW: This is true. [MACHINE SHUTS OFF FOR A MINUTE.] You were just saying that the universality of art is the

main thing. I think all art if it's worth its salt has got to be universal. But it comes from a local source, you see. That's it. It can be as local as all get-out, but it has to have this transcendental quality in order for it to be universal. Now it can be black art; it can be yellow art; white art; anything. But it comes from a local source. And this is the important thing. But in art criticism, which you mentioned also, casually, the art critic is sometimes unable to, so-call "dig" the local quality. Therefore, he's armed only with a set of values which he determines to be the values by which he measures universality. For example, when the Abstract school came on the scene ten, fifteen years ago, some critics couldn't dig it because the look of it was different. It didn't look like anything else they had seen say, ten years before, or even five years before. So if Abstract art is good, it comes from a local orientation or local motivation or some specific kind of motivation. But its impact has wide appeal. It's like Louis Armstrong. I don't go crazy for Louie Armstrong, but I know he's got something. Here's a man who has a highly specialized approach to making music. It's local. Let's say it's Negro, black, and all of his clowning. This is the localization. But it's got universal appeal. Let's face it. Everywhere he goes he brings down the house. Now this is what is misunderstood by the music critic who is unable to understand the local origin, say in black art. The critics for a long time didn't understand African art until the artist who understood the universality as well as the impact of its localization pointed it out. You see, any black artist who claims that he is creating black art must begin with some black image. The black image can be the environment, it can be the problems that one faces, it can be the look on a man's face. It can be anything. It's got to have this kind of pin-pointed point of departure. But if it's worth it's while, it's also got to be universal in its broader impact and its presence.

AM: That's just great.

HW: Now this is what all real art has been; this is what Greek art has been. What Mexican art has been -- you name it. This is what African art is. But if African art was long catching on it's because the people were blind to it. They just had one set of values. Then finally they catch up. This is why Van Gogh suffered so long. Then all of a sudden everybody knows him because your understanding of his source-motivation is what makes the art and its universal appeal. Here's my set of values in my arm. I don't come armed with this and then apply it. If what you have doesn't fit my values, then it's not good. This is all wrong. I've got to see the universality of what you do and then understand the source from which it arrives. This is literature; this is everything.

AM: An interesting thing about learning to appreciate this local aspect in order to understand the universal, I got the impression in reading some of the earlier essays of Roger Fry on Negro sculpture, or black art, that one problem that many Europeans had was that their aesthetic perception was really not as sophisticated as would be required to understand us. After they got up to a certain point they began to see how sophisticated, plastically speaking, the language of African sculpture actually was all the time. So an ordinary peasant had a sensibility which operated on cylinders which were far beyond the interest of the Greeks using what became the conventional conception of employing the torso as a model. And African sculpture became something infinitely more sophisticated.

HW: You know, I was mentioning earlier, Murray, the lack of someone from our group -- this is by way of leading up to the next point -- most of your criticism directed at and about Negro art produced -- dance, music, literature or whatever -- is by a white man. What Negro art critic do you have? Who are your critics of Jazz? White people. They are the purveyors of Jazz. Who are your critics in the theatre? One black man, Patterson, has been writing recently on the Negro theatre.

AM: I don't know.

HW: Is there a -- Lindsay Patterson -- ? Well, anyhow, I read his critique. I think there is one thing that we as a group must develop and that is a scholarship which is applicable to art criticism.

AM: Right.

HW: Now we've got the brains. There's no question about that. But our youngsters today are directed toward something else. Most critics do other things. Like Andre Malraux, a politician, maybe a reactionary one to boot; he's a Gaullist, you know. But he's an art critic. Elie Faure, who wrote one of the finest documents on art, I think, was a doctor. It doesn't mean that you have to be a full-time art critic like Canaday. But criticism is a very important thing. Romare Bearden does a little bit of it; Jimmy Porter down in Washington has done some. But this is the thing. I think that you as a literary person might develop. I listen to you talk and you've got an eye and you have a critical sense. This is about all it takes, plus sensitivity, with involvement.

AM: Well, Ralph, incidentally, has recently done a forward to a catalog for Romy's up-coming show.

HW: Oh, that's good. I'd like to read it.

AM: Let's say a sort of synthesis of Romy's preoccupation. And I am concerned with appropriating some of these elements of the, what they call black idiom.

HW: To assess it in terms of its aesthetic quality. Locke was able to do this. Du Bois probably less. Du Bois was sensitive to it but Locke had that artistry about him like, oh, Braithwaite, you know. They were good friends. This is a quality which -- take Kramer in the "Times" has, and any of your critics that write for "Art News," and so forth. Dore Ashton, who is an international critic now, reviewed my shows years ago when she was writing for "Art Digest." She was coming along, and has developed. I don't say you develop only a vocabulary, but you develop an "eye." This is what it takes, a critical eye in terms of vision and the ability to put it into words, whatever the words are. I would like to see that, you know, criticism developed and carried through by our people. We make art. We are great art makers. You know that. We can make the dickens out of our dance, our theatre, our music, you name it. But who assesses it?

AM: This is quite interesting because one essay which I have in mind is just a short piece that Roger Fry did, on a note of misgiving. He says, in effect, "all this wonderful stuff," and yet in the absence of a critical context or a certain amount of critical consciousness, all this magnificence is at the mercy of the most banal things form the outside. And this is true. We've seen this in music. You've seen people go from the popular, or popularization of something in the absence of an infinitely original. Somebody smooths out the tone of Lester Young and some uninformed person responds more to that. Well, what he was getting at and what I think you're getting at is the fact that the artist is helped, inspired, and so forth by a critical context which means by astute perception or appreciation. Because he sees that he's been appreciated when people who are looking at his stuff are responding on a level, or somewhat commensurate with the level that he's operating on.

HW: That's right. Let's take Marian Anderson, who used to sing like nobody else the great aria, "Ave Maria," you know. When a critic wrote about it the next day he would say how a "transition from this note to that seemed to hesitate." Or he said, "It's the smoothest thing I've ever heard." This critic has just got an ear, that's all. He says "She seems to be pressing for her high C's; they don't come with the fluidity and the ease . . ." and other such things. This is what you've got to do. I don't say it's all, but this is an example of the critical evaluation of a piece of music. What I envisage is a "guardian of the culture," so to speak.

AM: Right. Well, at least a mediator between the creator and the appreciator in the audience.

HW: Now that this is a purpose, but Clement Greenberg and his writings helped to establish the artist Jackson Pollock because he (Greenberg) was very critical and wrote profusely on Pollock's work. It's like the critics who wrote on Renoir and Cezanne and Lautrec. The critics who could see beyond the immediate public indifference to their work and said, "This is what these artists are doing." And this is, I think, very important in terms of developing this whole aspect of culture, any culture, including black culture.

AM: Certainly true and certainly would help a number of young artists to get things in focus, probably with a little less switching, as to what art is about. Sometimes they sort of stumble forward. Of course, the problem of discovering identities isn't enough in itself with all the help in the world if you are actually tied up with a misconception of what art is and the possibilities of art. You've got an even longer way to go.

HW: I'm waiting to see what happens with the Studio Museum in Harlem. It should develop into a very important undertaking. They've got some money. And it's relatively new to try to do something like this away from Madison Avenue, but I'm interested to see what will happen there in developing a real program, in terms of promoting art on as high a level as possible.

AM: What you assess it to be will be highly significant in view of the fact that many years ago you did establish in another part of the country a sort of movement. So you would know what a genuine movement looks like when you see one.

HW: Well, if you've given your efforts to a common purpose, if what you believe has a meaningful end or purpose, then you kind of let people know about it. One of the things that helped us down in Atlanta was the local daily newspaper, the "Atlanta Constitution," which, as you know, has always been a kind of liberal paper. Its editor, Ralph McGill, was a liberal Southerner. I don't know if somebody told him about the black artists out there on the hillsides in Atlanta painting outhouses, but he came out and talked to us. And the next day there was a long editorial in the "Atlanta Constitution." Then "Time" and other magazines picked it up and before you knew it you had a national interest in what was going on. So you never know how those things will happen.

AM: That's good.

HW: We have this very living consequence and awareness of blackness and how we can make it functionally significant, how we can share in it, how we can contribute to it. And how long this so-called revolution will last nobody knows, but I don't think it will last forever. There'll be another change in attitude. It may be that some day it'll be like the young soldier coming home from the war. When he comes home, then what? What's he going to do?" The war's over; the revolution comes to a time when we won't need CORE. We won't need Martin Luther King's organization. What will happen? Now you cannot foresee or foretell or anticipate, but I do believe there's a sense of ongoingness. You cannot solve this problem tomorrow, or in two weeks, a month, two years. But that

"ongoingness," you see, is what is important in our efforts and in our work if we try to meet and face these problems day by day.

AM: When you speak of beginning with the image of the black man, the black image, you're also saying in a sense the beginning, well, you're connecting that with what you were saying about the universal in particular. The image of the black man has got to be as high at the same time as the image of man.

HW: Right. This is true. I think this puts it more clearly than anyone could hope to do. I think it's the image of man in whatever role, whatever state or position or condition he is found. And, again, the dignity of man, this is what I find in African sculpture. There's always the dignity. There's always a very great sense of self. And the significance of the self. This is why you'll find this very frontal, monumental, austere quality in all of their sculpture. It's never "gut-bucket," you know. This is the kind of image that we should strive for. A self-image of the highest possible order, and the highest possible image of human dignity.

AM: This is in that blackness that every man can see himself.

HW: That's right. And this is what you see in Bearden's painting. It has a real dignity. Its characterization is of a black world, but it has a sense of real dignity, and power, and integrity of a genuine, personal kind.

AM: How do you expect to spend your time now when you work?

HW: well, I have my weekend and the first of the week to myself. I'm teaching three days a week, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, out on Long Island. I go out Wednesday morning, and come back Friday afternoon. This is a little college, Nassau Community College, in Garden City, Long Island. Then Saturday, Sunday, Monday and Tuesday I have to myself. I paint; I help around the house. Right now I'm just trying to get over this flu. I have at least four days to myself and three days out there. This is how I parcel out my time. So I usually go to my studio on these days; it would be today and tomorrow, or Sunday even. I work Sundays a lot there. This is what I'm doing.

AM: You feel comfortable in this routine that you can really, if you have to, follow an idea on the campus?

HW: Well, I feel that I've got to do it. I've got to really structure my time and my work so that I do devote my time to these things. Because there are so many little distractions, all kinds of distractions, like spending an afternoon with you, you know. (Laughing) But seriously, there's always something and you have to sort of say "this has to be done now," or "this will not be done." And even when you do that, other things are tugging at you, you know. I've been putting you off for weeks! I said, "I've got to see this man Murray." But you try to put first things first and you sometimes wonder if you put the wrong things first. One weekend my mail had accumulated and I spent all day Saturday just catching up on correspondence when I wanted to be painting.

AM: Well, at least we can say that this afternoon did tie together a number of aspects of your career because you have spent a lot of time teaching, that is, dealing with art in terms of other people, in terms of initiating people into it. What we have made a record of today will go into the Archives of American Art and will continue that type of work. So maybe this afternoon actually saves you many other afternoons for your studio.

HW: Very good, very good.
[END OF TAPE]