



Smithsonian  
*Archives of American Art*

Oral history interview with Merle  
Armitage, 1964 February 6

**Contact Information**

Reference Department  
Archives of American Art  
Smithsonian Institution  
Washington, D.C. 20560  
[www.aaa.si.edu/services/questions](http://www.aaa.si.edu/services/questions)  
[www.aaa.si.edu/](http://www.aaa.si.edu/)

# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Merle Armitage on February 6, 1964. The interview took place in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and was conducted by Sylvia Glidden Loomis for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's New Deal and the Arts project.

The original transcript was edited. In 2021 the Archives created a more verbatim transcript. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

## Interview

SYLVIA LOOMIS: This is an interview with Mr. Merle Armitage at his home in Santa Fe, New Mexico on February 6, 1964. The interviewer is Mrs. Sylvia Loomis of the Santa Fe Office of the Archives of American Art, and the particular phase of art to be discussed is that of the Federal Art Projects during the 1930s and '40s. We have heard from Mrs. Dalzell Hatfield of the Hatfield Galleries in Los Angeles that you were head of the committee that set up the first Federal Art Project in California, Mr. Armitage, is this correct?

MERLE ARMITAGE: That is correct.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Is it also true, as Mrs. Hatfield wrote us, that Mr. Hatfield and Millard Sheets were on the committee with you?

MERLE ARMITAGE: Yes, among others.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And was this the Public Works of Art Project or the WPA?

MERLE ARMITAGE: It was the Public Works of Art Project.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And that started in what year?

MERLE ARMITAGE: 1934.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And now, before we go further with questions about the project, we would like to know something more about you. Where you were born, where you were educated, and so forth.

MERLE ARMITAGE: Well it's kind of a difficult story to tell. I have to give you a little background on it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Go ahead.

MERLE ARMITAGE: My father invented the idea of taking gaunt range cattle who'd only been grass fed and feeding them corn for about two months and then sending them to Chicago and selling them at a great premium as corn-fed beef, which is of course much more tender and juicy. And he had these big ranches and cattle feeding operations in Wisconsin, Iowa, and Kansas. And I was born in the Iowa stage of the thing, although later I lived in both Wisconsin and in Kansas on these ranches.

I was ill as a youngster and was sent to Boston for treatment by a famous Dr. Warren, who was a relative of ours, and while there, I studied with tutors and—to the point that I could hold down a job as a civil engineer. And I was sent by one of the Hartford Insurance Companies to the south coast of Texas, down south of Galveston as an engineer, and because I wasn't a full-fledged graduate engineer, I had to study every night over drafting board paper. And after a few months of working out in the sun all day and drawing at night on paraffin paper, I had a temporary blindness. And I was blind for 11 days and laid in a tent with hot—cold compresses over my eyes while they determined, the doctors, they tried to find out what had happened and whether I was going to be permanently blind. And they found that I had burned, through too much light, my optic nerve, so I had to give up that profession. I went back to Detroit where my people were at that time living. And got

interested in stage decoration, which led to the fact that the man next-door who was interested in a little theater movement in Detroit had me meet a New York producer who was coming through, and I was very diffident about meeting him. I didn't think I had anything to offer, but what I had done, I was—this was in the time of David Belasco when he tried to put everything in the world on the stage. If he had a street scene, he had all of the trees, and all of the branches, and all of the leaves, and you couldn't see the actors for the props and the scenery.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MERLE ARMITAGE: I said I think that theater is a place of illusion, not reality, and I had made drawings where we could do *Tristan and Isolde* with a flying buttress of a Gothic church and the rest in drapes. And it seemed to me more right. And this producer who came to town with whom I had lunch was named Charles L. Wagner and to my great surprise and almost embarrassment, he took these drawings with him and a month later, I got a check from *Cosmopolitan* magazine for them. They had used them as—to illustrate an article on new trends in the theater. Well, when that happens to a 17-year-old, you know, it's pretty heady.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MERLE ARMITAGE: So, about a month later, I got a telegram from this same Charles L. Wagner saying can you go to Appleton, Wisconsin and manage a festival? So, I telegraphed him back that I was leaving that night for Appleton, but please write me there and tell me what a festival was.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: [Laughs.]

MERLE ARMITAGE: And of course it developed that he had sold, to the Conservatory of Music in Appleton, he had sold Madame Melba and Godowsky, the great pianist, and Ysaÿe, the violinist, and the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra for a week of music. And I had to raise the guarantee among the merchants and then stay there and run this thing. So that started, the next one was Cincinnati, and for three years, I did this on the road and then became a partner to Mr. Wagner. And we took on great artists such as John McCormack, and Mary Garden, and later Galli-Curci, and of course, a whole group of people that came after that like E. Z. King [ph], and John Charles Thomas, and so on and so forth.

[00:05:09]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MERLE ARMITAGE: So, I had spent so many years on the road booking these people and sometimes going with them that I decided that I wanted to live somewhere and get my roots down, so I went out to California. And I became manager of the Philharmonic Auditorium, the largest theater there, and had a big concert series, and then with Gaetano Merola, founded the opera in San Francisco and Los Angeles. Do you want to stop it?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: No, go ahead.

MERLE ARMITAGE: So, I had always been interested in art. As a matter of fact, my mother was frightened all her life that I was going to be one of two things, a painter, or a locomotive engineer, and I don't know which she feared the most. And I began collecting very, very early and used to put 50¢ in the bank by going without my lunch once a week until I got five dollars, and then I would make a payment on something that attracted me. And later, when I became more affluent, and had ample money to spend, I still kept up the idea of buying on payments. It always seemed to me that they were more valuable to me if I had to make some little sacrifice to get them.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MERLE ARMITAGE: And dealers got very intrigued with me because one day they'd get a five-dollar or ten-dollar bill from me from Havana, and the next would be from Berlin, and the next would be from San Francisco, and so on and so forth.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MERLE ARMITAGE: And they got so intrigued with me that they used to save things that they

thought I might be interested in to give me the first choice.

So that led to my building up a very fine contemporary collection. I think I had some of the first Picassos ever in America, and certainly, the first Paul Klees.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MERLE ARMITAGE: —and Braque, and so on and so forth. So, it was when Bruce—Edward Bruce—started this Public Works of Art Project, he telephoned Mr. Hatfield, and Mr. Hatfield recommended me for the—to head the committee. And I recall it very [well] because such a striking thing happened, I got a three page telegram through the Naval wireless from San Diego.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MERLE ARMITAGE: I never will forget that thing. And we had quite an interesting time with our project. We put 126 people to work, after very carefully finding out that they could do work that would be of credit to the government. And we put these paintings in schools, we did murals in schools. We did a big mural in the Los Angeles Public Library, and then we built a monument 46 feet high to the astronomers up at the planetarium in Los Angeles. We had six of the great; you know, Copernicus and all the great—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MERLE ARMITAGE: —sculptors were there. And many, many big projects in the way of murals, and I don't know how many hundreds of easel paintings, and a great deal of sculpture. I suppose we must have had 18 or 20 very good sculptors working on the project.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Do you remember who the other members of the committee were?

MERLE ARMITAGE: Millard Gage, I remember very well, was the other member, but actually, Millard Gage, and Millard Sheets, and Dalzell Hatfield, and I were the committee that practically made all of the decisions and handled everything.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

MERLE ARMITAGE: The rest of them were sort of—they come occasionally, but we were always there.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. And where were your headquarters?

MERLE ARMITAGE: Well, they were out—we took an empty store building near the Hatfield Gallery, which at that time was on West Sixth Street in Los Angeles.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. What happened to the records that you kept during that period?

MERLE ARMITAGE: Well, they were turned over to the committee that followed us, which I think was the—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: WPA Art Project.

MERLE ARMITAGE: — WPA. And that was in charge of MacDonald-Wright, the painter.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh yes, well, now you've—Do you remember who sponsored these projects that you set up and how you went about getting sponsors for the projects?

MERLE ARMITAGE: Yes, we had, I recall, Mr. Louis Danz, D-A-N-Z, was very active for us in going around to interview schools and public buildings, like the library, and other places and arranging all of the technic—getting the letters, and the permissions, and that sort of thing—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MERLE ARMITAGE: —for many of our projects. Many of the artists were very inventive, and many of them had ideas themselves of what they wanted to do. I mean, they see walls, like the Customs House, and other things, and they were just dying to get on that wall. So, when they'd bring those—that information into us, and then we'd negotiate to get permission.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: So, it was the artist who would initiate it, but many of them—

[00:10:02]

MERLE ARMITAGE: Many of them, I would say at least 50 percent of them were initiated by the artists.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Is that right?

MERLE ARMITAGE: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative] And then, the others were ones that you found?

MERLE ARMITAGE: We found, or Mr. Danz found, or people—by the time we got going we got a great deal of publicity in the papers, and the papers were very interested. The newspapers were very interested in what we were doing. And we'd get telephone calls from people.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MERLE ARMITAGE: For instance, the Los Angeles County Museum, we did—Mr. Napolitano, Giovanni Napolitano, did two enormous graffito. I say enormous, they were 10 feet high and 18 feet broad—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MERLE ARMITAGE: —in sgraffito, you know that process—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

MERLE ARMITAGE: —where they put on three layers of plaster and while it's still wet, with a tool, they scratch through it, and they can expose that way three colors, you see?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, yes.

MERLE ARMITAGE: It's probably older than mural painting.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MERLE ARMITAGE: It's one of the ancient processes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Did you just have California, or —

MERLE ARMITAGE: We only had the southern half of California.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: The southern half. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MERLE ARMITAGE: From San Luis Obispo south.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, yes. Do you remember the number of that region? You know at that time they were all—

MERLE ARMITAGE: I've forgotten.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: They had it all divided into regions.

MERLE ARMITAGE: I know. Somewhere I have a magazine. One, I think, it was a magazine published by the—what is it? The American Association of Art, or whatever it is, did an article on all of us, and all of our pictures were in it, and all of our regions were listed, and all that kind of thing. In the move over here, I don't know where I put it. I couldn't find it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. Well, I have a great long list of items—

MERLE ARMITAGE: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —that appeared in various periodicals.

MERLE ARMITAGE: I'm sure. Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And it probably is in that.

MERLE ARMITAGE: There was a great deal of attention given to it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, well, I'm sure they have that in their records in Detroit anyway. Were there any main art centers in California under these auspices that were set up or was it all—

MERLE ARMITAGE: Centers, no, it was—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —directed by one.

MERLE ARMITAGE: We only had one office.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: So it was directed then, probably [cross talk].

MERLE ARMITAGE: But, you see, southern California is heavily, densely populated.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MERLE ARMITAGE: We had the—the transportation was simple, and you could reach almost any place in southern California in a half a day. So, there wasn't any real problem. From Los Angeles as you go north, there's very little of activity. Actually, there weren't many cities. You see, the nearest town of any size was Bakersfield that was, oh, 150 miles north. So actually, the work that we did was right around Pasadena, California, Santa Monica, Long Beach, and down as far as downtown San Diego, Santa Ana, and those other cities down the coast. That's where the bulk of our work went.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. These, I suppose, had the art colonies.

MERLE ARMITAGE: Yes, there was one at Laguna Beach.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Laguna Beach, yes.

MERLE ARMITAGE: And however, I don't have a high regard for art colonies, they usually are the more or less posers down there.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

MERLE ARMITAGE: I can't think of any great painter that lived down there at the time. Now, that may have changed, of course.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative] Well, I wondered if there was a concentration of artists there.

MERLE ARMITAGE: There is around Laguna Beach.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Of artists.

MERLE ARMITAGE: But as to the quality, it didn't use to be anything. It could have improved. I don't want to libel them.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: [Laughs.]

MERLE ARMITAGE: But at that time, we took very few artists from there.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

MERLE ARMITAGE: We tried to give the government a real value of what they were spending by getting the top people.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. What percentage would you say were non-relief or were they —oh, that's really—

MERLE ARMITAGE: You mean, non-paid? They were all paid.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I'm sorry. I forgot that this was not WPA.

MERLE ARMITAGE: No.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And I think at that time—

MERLE ARMITAGE: Everybody was paid.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —it was not necessary for them to go on relief in order to—

MERLE ARMITAGE: That's right.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —get a job—

MERLE ARMITAGE: That's right.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —from the WPAP. That was later.

MERLE ARMITAGE: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: That came in.

MERLE ARMITAGE: No, they didn't have to go on relief to get it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: That's right. Well, do you know of any currently prominent artists who got their start on the Federal Art Projects?

MERLE ARMITAGE: Well, there are several people. You know, it's the funniest thing. Some of the people that we had have gone to New York and changed their names.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, really.

MERLE ARMITAGE: I think there's an artist named Guston in New York, who's done very, very well as a modern painter. He was on our payroll. It was under another name.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MERLE ARMITAGE: And—but I can't think of—I think Napolitano and the—let me see. Who else would there be? Well, I can't think right off of anyone that went on to do anything really big or stunning—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MERLE ARMITAGE: —or made any big reputation although many of them have good reputations around southern California that sell very well.

[00:14:59]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MERLE ARMITAGE: Milford Zornes, I remember, was an extraordinarily talented fellow, who was— I don't know. He's an art director at some big New York advertising agency, I think, now. He's done fine art for more illustrated-type commercial.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Was there much experimental work done by the artists or were they restricted by the sponsors and—

MERLE ARMITAGE: No, there were no restrictions at all. We encouraged them to do experimental things, and now, here's a chance to do something. You're going to get paid anyway. And here's a chance for you to work on ideas that perhaps you've long wanted to do but didn't have any client for or didn't feel that you could waste the time on it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MERLE ARMITAGE: So, we had a great deal of experimental work going on.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, was the procedure for the artists to present sketches?

MERLE ARMITAGE: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And then—

MERLE ARMITAGE: Our committee met—I think we met twice a week to review what was going on. And then, we took turns going around to the murals that were being painted and

checking on them.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MERLE ARMITAGE: We made everybody work.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MERLE ARMITAGE: One of the things that we let it be known immediately that this was not any gravy train, you know.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

MERLE ARMITAGE: That they were going to have to produce, and we wanted their best work.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, now, this was soon after the Modern Art movement hit America.

MERLE ARMITAGE: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And were many of these artists interested in the—

MERLE ARMITAGE: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —so called modern art?

MERLE ARMITAGE: Yes. There were quite a few. Names slip me now. It's been a long time ago, and I haven't given the thing any thought, you know, for years. I haven't even thought about it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Of course.

MERLE ARMITAGE: But there were, I would say, six or seven people, who were, for that time, very far out in abstract work. All very different. Some were geometrical. Some were, like, little things [by mural (ph)], and others were architectural kind of abstractions.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, did you have any trouble getting these past the sponsors? These sketches?

MERLE ARMITAGE: I don't know quite what you mean by sponsors.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, the—

MERLE ARMITAGE: We didn't do any abstract murals on anybody's walls that I recall.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, that's—

MERLE ARMITAGE: These were easel paintings.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

MERLE ARMITAGE: And actually, many of the schools that had art departments always welcomed those things, the experimental things—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: They did?

MERLE ARMITAGE: —the abstract things, yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, the reason I brought this up is because here in New Mexico, the procedure was that the sketches would be submitted by the artists, and then the sponsors had to okay them.

MERLE ARMITAGE: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And there were some artists in Taos, particularly, who wanted to do more modern things.

MERLE ARMITAGE: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: But the sponsors wouldn't have it.: They wanted something that was



representational [cross talk].

MERLE ARMITAGE: Yeah. Well, most of the murals that were done out there had— usually connected with a theme of early California, or the days of the missions and the padres, and that sort of thing, which didn't lend itself to abstract treatment. So, we had no trouble that I recall.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: So, the experimental work was mostly on the easel paintings.

MERLE ARMITAGE: Mostly easel paintings. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And then what happened to those paintings after—?

MERLE ARMITAGE: Given to schools, mostly.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: They did, yes. Well, what were some of the major problems that you encountered as the director?

MERLE ARMITAGE: We didn't have too many problems. We had one, I recall, that created a great deal of comment and a lot of publicity. We were doing a mural, a big one, in the Frank Wiggins Trade School. And they decided to do a—a Siqueiros-type of murals where the workers were all being beaten down by the capitalists.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

MERLE ARMITAGE: And I went down to look at it one day, and I—I just froze when I saw what was going up there, because it was so obviously a left-wing group that were working on this thing. And they were going to leave their mark. They were going to show the horrors of capitalism, you see, in their eyes. So, I told them that they were going to have to start over, were going to have to change it. And they started giving us an argument one day, and we fired them all.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

MERLE ARMITAGE: And then we had Leo Katz. Do you remember him?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, I remember the name.

MERLE ARMITAGE: Well, he was supervising that particular thing, so we gave him three more artists and they ended up doing a very nice thing down there. But one of the newspapers attacked us for dictating to the artist, you know, what he was going to paint, and said we ought to be glad that somebody was setting things right about oppression and so on and so forth. And I said, Now look, this is in a school. And I said, I can imagine you as a newspaperman running a big headline about something one day, but you wouldn't run that headline every day, would you? But, I said, the pupils that come in this school—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MERLE ARMITAGE: —over 1,800 of them are going to walk right in that thing every morning of their lives, and there's blood dripping all over the canvas, and people being stabbed, and people being choked to death, and people being shot. And I said, I just don't see it as a mural in a public building of this kind. And we won our battle.

[00:20:15]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, well, I would imagine that the newspapers would have been more on the conservative side.

MERLE ARMITAGE: Well, they were, except one. This was one of the radical papers that took the issue.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Do you remember what it was?

MERLE ARMITAGE: It was—it was called the *Los Angeles Record*.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

MERLE ARMITAGE: But, it's long ago since it went out of business.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I would imagine so.

MERLE ARMITAGE: Of course, we were supported by *The Examiner*, and *The Times*, and all the other papers.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Of the 126 artists that you mentioned, about how many were mural painters? Do you remember?

MERLE ARMITAGE: Oh, there wasn't over five or six of them, I think.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, is that right. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MERLE ARMITAGE: Yes, now they—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And then—

MERLE ARMITAGE: —however, many times they'd be in charge of a mural, and we'd give them easel painters to assist, you see.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

MERLE ARMITAGE: So sometimes, there'd be a crew of four or five working on a mural.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MERLE ARMITAGE: Under the direction of a man who was capable to handle it—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MERLE ARMITAGE: —a big thing of that kind.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And how many sculptors did you have?

MERLE ARMITAGE: We had about 16.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see, and were there any other types of projects that you had besides the easel painters, the murals, and the sculpture?

MERLE ARMITAGE: No, I don't think so.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Graphic arts or any—?

MERLE ARMITAGE: Yes, we had one man that did a whole series of drawings, which I think he actually turned into lithographs, on the building of Boulder Dam.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MERLE ARMITAGE: The record as it went up.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, yes. Do you know what happened to those lithographs or to the drawings?

MERLE ARMITAGE: I think that one set is up at the dam in the administrative office.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MERLE ARMITAGE: And the artist, whose name was Willett, William Lee Willett's son, the architect, I think he has a set of them. I don't know what happened to them. They went to schools, too.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MERLE ARMITAGE: Copies of those drafts.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, well, did you have any other difficulties with the left-wing element?

MERLE ARMITAGE: Oh, after we fired those fellows, everything quieted down.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: [Laughs] I see.

MERLE ARMITAGE: [Laughs.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Just that one group—

MERLE ARMITAGE: I remember, it was very amusing, because we had them all come in one morning. And I said to them, Now, there's certain situations that you cure by giving pills, and there's certain situations that you cure by osteopathic or chiropractic treatments, and there are other situations where you have to go to a sanitarium, and then there are other situations where you have to amputate, and you are being amputated.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. [They laugh.] Well, what do you think were the major accomplishments of this project in California?

MERLE ARMITAGE: Well, I think, I would say that the major accomplishment was making the big public aware that there was such a thing as art.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MERLE ARMITAGE: I don't think that we did anything of astounding aesthetic value. We did an awful lot of good things, and things that people admired and liked, and schools were awfully glad to have. But I don't think that there was anything that we could regard as any outstanding masterpiece that was done.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, it sort of set a basis, though, for the—

MERLE ARMITAGE: It set a basis, and it got a lot of people interested, and stirred things up. It gave a lot of people a new incentive.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

MERLE ARMITAGE: And it gave—the galleries were all very cooperative, I recall, in Los Angeles and Beverly Hills. And later on, many of the artists that we had on the project got one-man shows and it was a boost.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. How long did the project last? Do you remember?

MERLE ARMITAGE: About a year.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: About a year.

MERLE ARMITAGE: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And it sort of laid a foundation for the WPA—[cross talk.]

MERLE ARMITAGE: Laid a foundation—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —projects—

MERLE ARMITAGE: —that's right.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —that came on later.

MERLE ARMITAGE: Yes, they took right over. It was a growing concern when we turned it right over, you see.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Did you have anything to do with it after that?

MERLE ARMITAGE: Nothing, no.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

MERLE ARMITAGE: No. It was real sad for us, for me, to have to do anything—or to do anything about it, because I was producing opera, and presenting all the big artists in concert, and running a theater during all this time, you see—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

MERLE ARMITAGE: —in addition to doing books, which I've done over a 100, as you know.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, I know. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, I had wondered just what you were doing at the time—

MERLE ARMITAGE: Yes, I was busy.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —that you were involved with this.

MERLE ARMITAGE: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And it was—

MERLE ARMITAGE: Well, I had to sort of apportion my time, you know.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MERLE ARMITAGE: And—but, we were very active. We didn't slight it at all. We gave it every attention that you could. Even getting around, someone twice a week checked all the mural projects that were going on—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MERLE ARMITAGE: —first-hand.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Did you have many supervisors?

MERLE ARMITAGE: We didn't have any. Our committee did it all.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, I see. The committee did it. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. What do you think was the response of the general public?

MERLE ARMITAGE: Good.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: It was. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MERLE ARMITAGE: Very good.

[00:25:00]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: They appreciated—

MERLE ARMITAGE: Mm-hmm [affirmative] They did.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —what was being done and—[cross talk.]

MERLE ARMITAGE: And they felt, too, it was a time of great hardship for people—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MERLE ARMITAGE: —and that the artists had been up to that time, more or less, a forgotten man. And a great many people felt that it was one of the most valuable things the government did, because it was certainly more profitable and left a more permanent tangible thing than shoving dirt from one side of the road to the other, you know.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, yes. And what effect do you think that this project and the WPA project that followed had on the art of America?

MERLE ARMITAGE: Well, I think that would be a very big question, and I doubt if anybody just from one standpoint would know that. It would seem logical that it was a spur to all art activity, got many more people interested, both artists and laymen. And I know from our little group that the interest aroused on the part of the public, to my knowledge, there were six or seven collectors that got interested in collecting just because of that project.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MERLE ARMITAGE: But that is about all I can say, because that's about all I know. We, you know, had two meetings in Washington where all the directors of the Public Works of Art

Project met. And had meetings there with Edward Bruce.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

MERLE ARMITAGE: And were entertained at the White House by Roosevelts, and it was really a very, uh, handsome two or three days that we had there. We had a wonderful time. We went to all the galleries in Washington. We were entertained by the Phillips Memorial Gallery and Mr. Phillips, himself.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MERLE ARMITAGE: It was rather an inspiring thing to see all of these heads of all of these committees from all over America, you know. About 60 of us.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: What stage of the game was that? Did you say it was early or—

MERLE ARMITAGE: It was after the first six months.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MERLE ARMITAGE: We made a report—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, sort of a progress report.

MERLE ARMITAGE: —on our activities, a six-month report. How are we doing?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: We're doing just fine.

MERLE ARMITAGE: Good.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: When was the second one of these meetings in Washington?

MERLE ARMITAGE: At the end of the year.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: At the end of the year, and then it was soon after that—

MERLE ARMITAGE: —that we turned over to the other people.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: The WPA Project. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MERLE ARMITAGE: I think we were all aware at that meeting that this was going to happen.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MERLE ARMITAGE: We were sort of being prepared for that.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. Well, did the man who took over the direction of the WPA, did he consult with you?

MERLE ARMITAGE: Oh, yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: He did, so that it really was—

MERLE ARMITAGE: Yes, we went over with him, and his committee, practically every artist we had on the pay roll, you see.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MERLE ARMITAGE: And about their qualifications and whether you had to watch to see that they really were working, and you know, there were always—if you get a group of that size, there's always some who are going to soldier on the job, you know.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. How many did soldier?

MERLE ARMITAGE: Oh, maybe a dozen. But we made it very clear to them that if they wanted to stay on, they had to get to work.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And what form did this soldiering take?

MERLE ARMITAGE: Oh, they'd take the canvas home, and a couple of weeks later, they hadn't done anything on it yet.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: What excuse would they give?

MERLE ARMITAGE: Thinking.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MERLE ARMITAGE: So we said you had better start to really thinking, you know, because it's going to be too late if you don't start.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I've come across this criticism on the part of the artists toward the Federal Art Project that they expected too much and that—well, some of them said that they were expected to put out a painting a week.

MERLE ARMITAGE: We never put any limitations of that kind or requirements.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

MERLE ARMITAGE: We just wanted to know they were working.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, that was the thing some of them seemed a little bit—

MERLE ARMITAGE: We—Mr. Bruce, or no one that I know of ever had any such idea as that.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MERLE ARMITAGE: We would never have entertained such an idea as that, because artists all work at different tempos, you see.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MERLE ARMITAGE: And it would be too much like a factory to say a painting a week.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, apparently, there were some areas that did this.

MERLE ARMITAGE: Well, I suppose it was up to the area directors.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Possibly, that was it.

MERLE ARMITAGE: It certainly never happened with us.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative] Because there has been that criticism. Maybe it wasn't as often as one a week—

MERLE ARMITAGE: I remember that there was one girl that turned— that did two pictures in the year, in other words, one every six months, but they were outstanding things.

And she worked all the time.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, it might have been that it was—

MERLE ARMITAGE: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —just different interpretations—

MERLE ARMITAGE: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —or it might have been the [inaudible].

MERLE ARMITAGE: It certainly didn't come from Mr. Bruce.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. Well I had a question here about what effect if any this had on your own work, but I can see that the only thing it did was just to interfere with what you were trying to do.

MERLE ARMITAGE: Yes. It interfered though in a nice kind of way; because I enjoyed it, and I

was glad to see so many of the artists, many of whom were friends and acquaintances, get through this very difficult period.

[00:30:04]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

MERLE ARMITAGE: And I was very happy indeed to do it, and any sections of time I thought was very worthwhile.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, now, I also came across your name in some of the work on the Index of American Design in New Mexico—

MERLE ARMITAGE: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —in the preparation of the portfolio on Spanish Colonial art design.

MERLE ARMITAGE: I have a vague feeling that—you see, I did four books here right after World War II for the Laboratory of Anthropology, and I have a feeling that I worked with E. Boyd at that time on some covers for a portfolio. But, I'm vague about it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. Well, I'll have to check that, because I remember it in connection with—

MERLE ARMITAGE: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —some of those portfolios—

MERLE ARMITAGE: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —but whether they were the ones that were done—[cross talk]

MERLE ARMITAGE: I'm not sure. I'm not clear. I'm not about to make any statements.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Where you in New Mexico at all during the period of—

MERLE ARMITAGE: Well, I don't know what the period was.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —the WPA? Well, that was from 1935 to 1942. That was just before the war.

MERLE ARMITAGE: No, I don't think I was.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: World War II. You weren't in New Mexico. Well, then it must have—[cross talk]

MERLE ARMITAGE: It must have been something else I did with Boyd.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —been the later portfolios.

MERLE ARMITAGE: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, I can check on that. Well if the federal government—excuse me—should subsidize another art program, would you approve of it?

MERLE ARMITAGE: Well, I think we get into political things there. I think that if you start subsidizing artists, that there's an awful lot of other people that might ought to think they should be subsidized.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MERLE ARMITAGE: And I have a good deal of doubt about whether I would—unless we got into another Depression where people weren't eating.

I don't think I'd be in favor of subsidizing art.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: But, generally, you feel that the artists—

MERLE ARMITAGE: I think the artists, like all of us, should stand on his own feet.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

MERLE ARMITAGE: And make his own way.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MERLE ARMITAGE: That's the Democratic way of doing things.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

MERLE ARMITAGE: I always have a feeling that those things after a while get to be powerhouses where they're manipulated. And people get the feeling that the government owes them a living and all that kind of thing.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, are there any additional comments that you would like to make about the—

MERLE ARMITAGE: No, except I grew to have a great admiration for Edward Bruce, whom I regarded not only as an extremely fine public-spirited man, but a very fine landscape painter, you know, he's a very distinguished painter.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

MERLE ARMITAGE: And all my contacts with him were uniformly pleasant and cordial.

And the whole thing was a novel experience, one of which I enjoyed. And one which I think was—the government really got very good value.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, we're very grateful to you, Mr. Armitage, for these comments about the Federal Art Project.

MERLE ARMITAGE: I wish I could remember more things, but there's been no reason for me to keep them—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: No, of course not.

MERLE ARMITAGE: —in mind. I have so many activities that I'm amazed that I could remember as much as I did about it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, I think it's wonderful that you have. You said something about having a record of some statements that you made to the Society of Graphic Arts.

MERLE ARMITAGE: It was the American Institute of Graphic Arts.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

MERLE ARMITAGE: I had been—I had always, in my books, been interested in a contemporary design, in the sense that I thought a book ought to look like what it was talking about in the text.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

MERLE ARMITAGE: Of course, I understand how difficult it is to make a visual representation of something that is written. However, you wouldn't play *South Pacific*, and *Hamlet*, and *HMS Pinafore*, all in the same sets and costumes, would you?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: No, of course not.

MERLE ARMITAGE: Yet, all of our books were being turned out with just anybody making up their mind what it was going to look like, you see.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MERLE ARMITAGE: And often with no connection whatsoever, and often very stodgy, very—there hadn't been any change, and there's a whole group of people, you know, that don't believe that a book should be tampered with at all. It should just be type and nothing else.



SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

MERLE ARMITAGE: Well, I maintained that just type in a book would be like an architecture if all you considered was shelter.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MERLE ARMITAGE: I think it had other qualities that should be in there. And the American Institute of Art fought me for many, many years, and called me the bad boy of books, that I was destroying book tradition, because I used the end sheets for either decorations or for some utilitarian purpose. Like in my cookbook, *Fit for a King*, I used all of the different cuts of meat in the front end papers. And all of the different fowl in the rear end papers. And I used double-paged title pages when I had something big, like the word Stravinsky. You pull the word Stravinsky down to one page; you take all the dynamism out of that name.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MERLE ARMITAGE: So, they finally elected me President of the American Institute of Graphic Art, I think to impale me.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

MERLE ARMITAGE: They thought they'd put me where they could get at me, you see.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

MERLE ARMITAGE: So, I immediately said, I'll take it just on two conditions. I won't take it for more than a year, and I'm going to see that it is the American Institute of Graphic Arts. Because as far as I could see, it's just a little New York club. Nobody ever hear of it in Chicago or outside of New York, and it's a thing where all the honors are passed around between a very few people. So, they allowed me to do that, and we opened the first Fifty Books of The Year show, which is an old institution. I mean an old adjunct of the American Institute of Graphic Arts. We opened it in Boston, Chicago, San Francisco, New York, and at the Library of Congress in Washington. And I have a tape of the introduction of the speakers that evening, plus the talk that I made. Would you like to hear that?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, I'd like to very much.

MERLE ARMITAGE: Okay.

[Recorder stops, restarts]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Okay.

MERLE ARMITAGE: I'll warm this up a little so it will—

[Recording plays.]

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Ladies and gentlemen, during the next 15 minutes, we invite you to join us at the opening ceremonies of the 27th Annual Fifty Books of the Year exhibition presented by the American Institute of Graphic Arts. Tonight this exhibition is opening simultaneously in the public libraries of Boston, New York, San Francisco, The Newberry Library of Chicago, and the Whittall Pavilion of the Library of Congress in Washington, DC. The purpose of this Fifty Books of the Year exhibition is to make our books look better. The Fifty are selected for their excellence of design and manufacture. They are considered the most beautiful and best-made books produced in the United States during the year before that in which they are shown. To celebrate this event, *The Miracle of Books*, NBC presents a symposium with Clifton Fadiman, literary critic, William Benton, Former Assistant Secretary of State, now Chairmen of the Board of the Encyclopedia Britannica, Dr. Luther Evans, Librarian of Congress, Ben Grauer of the NBC Staff, and Mr. Merle Armitage, book designer and Art Director of *Look* magazine. You will hear first from Mr. Armitage.

MERLE ARMITAGE: A book is the most dramatic instrument man has ever devised. It is an escalator by which he has lifted himself from the black pits of despair and ignorance into the daylight of knowledge and liberty. A book is a product of a mysterious nature, which grows trees in a forest, cotton on a plant, and wool on a sheep. A development of men who designed the type-faces, and then invent, build, and operate the presses, and the complex

printing machinery, and a binder to incase the printed page in protective coverings. The way a book looks is extremely important, for the book is the vehicle, which carries the knowledge of the world. All that man has said or can say in medicine, aesthetics, law, science, engineering, ethics, literature, philosophy, in fact, every possible dimension or extension of man has been or will be captured between the covers of a book, and made available to this and future generations. The American Institute of Graphic Arts was established to maintain the finest standards of book design and craftsmanship, to keep the technical and physical aspects of the book abreast of the constantly advancing knowledge it must carry. Therefore, while entrenched the best traditions of the past, men who make books, and that includes publishers, and editors, as well as designers and printers, must embrace and use the new language of design.

This is a visual age, and today the book is facing competition it never had to meet before. A design which complements the text and which speaks eloquently as an appropriate treatment for a particular book will enhance that book's insurance of public acceptance. The book is the bridge which connects the past with the present. It is also the medium, which will preserve for future generations, the best thinking of this generation. It is our best bulwark against ignorance, intolerance, and the loss of liberty in this world.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Thank you, Mr. Armitage. And now, Dr. Luther Evans, Librarian—

[Recording stops.]

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]