



Smithsonian  
*Archives of American Art*

Oral history interview with George  
Biddle, 1963

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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with George Biddle in 1963. The interview took place in Croton, New York and was conducted by Harlan B. Phillips 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.

Poor audio throughout parts of the interview led to words and phrases being inaudible; the original transcript was used to clarify passages. Additional relevant information from the original transcript has been added in brackets with an -Ed. attribution. The current transcript is the result of a combination of the original transcript created and edited in the 1960s, a verbatim transcript created in 2021 from the digitized sound recording, and an audit of the 2021 transcript compared to the original transcript using the digitized sound recording as reference.

## Interview

GEORGE BIDDLE: [Inaudible] should I say—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: You know, this is exceptionally sensitive [inaudible] yeah, so that there's no—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: There's no—

GEORGE BIDDLE: No problem.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No. So much of what we become emerges out of that which we fall heir to, as we shape it and reshape to fit our own interests, but first, somehow or other, we have to get started. And, I think perhaps it's important to—for you to think back retrospectively, a kind of reinterpretation of what you understood the Biddle qualities to be?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, I'll assume you haven't—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —don't know anything about my past.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Right.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And you let me know when I've said enough on that subject and you want to go on to another question.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure. So, what is of interest to me is—from you, some—assessment of the qualities that you fell heir to. The tradition, what it was, how it—how it fitted the scheme as you grew to some awareness of what it was. So, in essence, what, what, what, what are the human qualities of the—of the Biddles? I know they've had a lot—

GEORGE BIDDLE: My background.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, I would say very much the cultured Philadelphia background in the 19th century.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm.

GEORGE BIDDLE: As [Nathaniel] Burt has brought up very well in that book of his, the

something *Philadelphians* [*The Perennial Philadelphians*], the—it—it wasn't at all the stimulating or creative atmosphere that you would get in European cities of that period. It was very much the conservative scholarly [atmosphere -Ed.], I would say. My father translated Demosthenes orations from the Greek—my grandfather. My father read Horace. It was a cultured society.

My mother tells me that my father at one time had thought of being a painter, wanted to be a painter, or sketch, something of that sort. And as a young child, when I, from time to time, had nervous breakdowns—or nervous—not breakdowns, nervous illnesses, she encouraged my painting. I painted when I was 12 or 13 at one time. I rode halfway into Philadelphia and then took the train and was taught by a student at the Pennsylvania Academy. And, so it was about that.

Now, that whole early background, of a healthy, normal, creative boy interested in stamps and collecting and shooting birds and skinning squirrels and so forth, and making little road maps, with a pretty fanciful life, stimulated very much by my younger brother who was—had a more [inaudible] imagination I think than I did. But that was—that whole possibly creative side of my life was interrupted by some 15 years when I went to a New England school—boarding school—and college, where, in retrospect, I was simply trying to conform to type. Not very successfully. I didn't realize that it was a—I thought of myself as being happy, very happy. Not quite successful, successful enough. And I didn't realize until 10 years later when I left to graduate from the law school and started painting, that it was a sort of an arrested development. I think that, very briefly, was my childish background.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: My father died when I was four—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: But I think of my relations with my brothers as extremely healthy and normal and we were always getting into trouble. Mischievous, a little silly.

[00:05:04]

And then for 12 or 13 years, I just tried to conform to the standards of New England boarding schools and Harvard College, with the grim determination to be successful and looking forward, with not wild excitement, to an opening that was kept for me in my grandfather's law office.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative]. Law has—was in the air, wasn't it?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Oh, entirely. It had been for three generations.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: In fact that—that was one of the—one of those childish memories that continually—I only realize now how much must have subconsciously influenced me. The number of older friends of my father or grandfather who would meet me and tell me what a splendid man my father or grandfather was. And I actually know that they were both talented, worthy, lawyers who fitted into that Philadelphia society.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. You went to a New England school—was, was Peabody then [the headmaster -Ed.]?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well he's worth a word as a, as a—one of the ships that pass in the night that leaves something in terms of paint as you go by.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, there again, he was just a symbol of the—my—that whole New England interlude of 12 years where I tried terribly to please him.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And I think I must have perplexed him as much as I misunderstood him. I think he liked my older brother who is continually getting into hot water and trouble; my

older brother was a misfit at school—and I think he liked me although I—he thought—must have thought I was a rather strange specimen, and didn't conform very well. We were—we didn't quite fight together. My first meeting him—I got 24 black marks, which I think the record that year had been six or something like that. And I was so terrified when he paused for three minutes and then said, Biddle, go to my studio—go to my study. In front of the whole school that I, just out of pure hysteria passed before him with a broad grin on my face. And he said to me, when I got into his study, George, if I didn't know you were a good boy I'd have sent you back to—sent you home long ago.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: Which pretty sums up our relation, I think. As long as—he was always disappointed in me. I wrote in my autobiography in 1939, when he was a pretty old man, a rather scathing attack on what I thought the weakness of the school and the—its high standards which were not mine. And I think he—all his family felt that I—it was a question of disloyalty on my part which they were willing to forgive.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: They missed the point, then. [Laughs.]

GEORGE BIDDLE: But I—no, it was—I think the whole thing was just attempting terribly hard to conform to a standard which wasn't mine, which isn't an unusual thing as you grow up.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And so I realized that I was never quite myself until the year I went abroad after graduating from the law school and started painting in Paris, in the Beaux-Arts [the Académie Julian -Ed.].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And that just opened a completely new world.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: You went from Groton to Harvard as an undergraduate. Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes, yes. And went to Harvard College—

GEORGE BIDDLE: And to Harvard College and then I got through three years in a brilliant class, many of the members of which remained my friends all my life. Jack Wheelock and Van Wyck Brooks, Sam Morrison, Ned Sheldon, George Howe, George Minot. And all of whom were in my clubs—various clubs I was in, all of whom I knew intimately. And still do. I still see something of Sam Morrison and Jack Wheelock. And then Van Wyck Brooks, who died last year, was I suppose the best, closest, and oldest professional friend I have.

[00:10:19]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Was your area of concentration English?

GEORGE BIDDLE: I dabbled in everything, in my efforts to be a joiner. I was on a good many minor teams. I was on the last cricket team in college. I was on the associated soccer football team, and one of the minor club crews, and so forth. I did belong—I think the healthiest thing I had in college as far as my later career, I belonged to a little club that since then disappeared. A tea club—literary tea club—that had—to which belonged all the talented writers and poets and artists and art critics of that period, just before and just after me. T. S. Eliot, and Conrad Aiken, Max Perkins, and George Howe and so forth. And that became a little interlude from what you would call the more conventional side of the college life, the athletics and the—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: —clubs. It was what made—at that time, made Harvard unique as the only university in America where people were rewarded, not by clubs and medals, but by the things they did.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: I mean, people respected Ned Sheldon because he produced a play while he was in college. But he was respected only by the small group that were in the Signet and the—and this little Stylus tea club that appreciated what he was doing in his particular avocation.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. But you suggest an exciting climate with—

GEORGE BIDDLE: It was exciting but it wasn't the Harvard standard. There was only one Harvard standard then, let's say as far as parents and older men went. And that was, first of all, the club you made—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: —and second, the—from the point of view of your contemporaries, the team you were on.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: I was—two friends—one of them was George Minot, I remember that, which told me that he never could feel that he was a success at college because he didn't make one of the two successful clubs to which his parents belonged. And more than one man—a friend of mine, said that sort of thing to me and those were the ultimate Harvard standards of the time.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: You—one was always a little bit, not quite ashamed of your standing in class, but it wasn't something you boasted about.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Did you run into Bliss Perry?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, I did, I took a course with him, and loved him.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I wondered about the—well, what you say of life outside the college or while living at the college is true, that is, by way of standards. Nonetheless, don't you have the sense that—

GEORGE BIDDLE: I—yes, I think—I'm glad you brought that up because I think that's the third thing that you should mention, and that is the stimulus of the galaxy of professors in the philosophical and literary department.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And that is perfectly true.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: But they again, from this, they—what you'd call the traditional outside standard. It wasn't the thing that made you successful in the eyes of your generation.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Or your father's. Your uncle's. They would want to know why, if they belonged to the Porcellian Club, you belonged to an inferior club.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure.

GEORGE BIDDLE: But those were the uncles and cousins and older men that weren't interested in the things that you were fundamentally interested in.

[00:15:06]

No, I remember the—Agnes Irwin, who was dean at Radcliffe then, and been a friend of my father, and I'd know her before she went to school. I met William James at her—had tea with him, once or twice. And Bliss Perry—who were some of the others in philosophy?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Josiah Royce?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Josiah Royce.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Is it Barrett Wendell?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Barrett Wendell [in the English Department -Ed.].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Had him in a course. And they—unhappily my goals weren't fixed.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I was set for the law school, and the law office and so these courses I took in which I tremendously enjoyed—was, so to speak—the way now I enjoy books and music. It wasn't my line. I enjoyed them because I enjoyed them.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: But, my direction—I suppose, my standards of success were like all my friends: clubs and athletics and pleasure that you got from the conversation of this brilliant group of undergraduates who are my friends and the brilliant group of teachers who were—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —whom you enjoyed.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And that residue is a deposit.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Very much of a deposit.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Very much so. Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I remember, I knew James well enough so that, a couple of years later in Paris, somebody told me the case of a double personality.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And I had the temerity to write him about it because I thought it would interest him. And I still have a postcard from him in which he just said, "Dear Biddle, your case sounds very interesting but, *mais il faudra le mettre au point.*" [Harlan B. Phillips laughs.] And he was—he did affect you that way as a warm, affectionate, simple, exciting human being.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, there's no substitute for this kind of process.

GEORGE BIDDLE: No.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: None.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And in my last years in the law school, I had determined to paint.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Oh, had you?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes. I was getting more and more unhappy. I had one—I had to take a year off. I got blood poisoning from the summer camp. I got—I had charge of and I had to take a year off and fulfilled a boyhood dream of doing a little cowpunching in Texas and going to Mexico. And, where—where were we then?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: This, this is—

GEORGE BIDDLE: I've lost my thread.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: This is somewhere in the law school, in the course of the law school you had—you already determined to paint.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, but I had determined to paint although I thought I'd be wise and finish up and get my degree—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: —just fingers crossed.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And Bill James, the—Henry James' son was—happened to be in my club and he was—I talked with him about the chance of painting. And he became a sort of a beacon whom I venerated. He was rather an extraordinary man. He was never as successful as an artist, he—for some curious reason, he was frustrated by some New England complex that pulled him back. But he—as an undergraduate, he was stroke of the crew, but resigned from it his senior year because he decided that football was—that intercollegiate athletics were bad for college.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And of course, this made him a pariah in his class at school, and I rather hero-worshipped him for it, for his audacity and the fact that he'd just come back from Paris, from Julian's—I used to go to his studio in Boston, where he was just finishing a head he did of his uncle. And he gave me a boost, started me off with letters and so forth. So I went with that entirely. Well, going into a wonderland, I mean, with every kind of feeling of excitement and reverence and also grim determination to make up for lost time which wasn't the right way to start.

[00:20:14]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes, that's not a very healthy companion, is it, that—

GEORGE BIDDLE: No.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No. No.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I remember I showed some of my sketches—I used to do caricatures sketches in the summer—to Henry McCarter [ph], you know, that Philadelphia teacher—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —and he sort of thumbed through them without paying much attention to them. And then said to me, George, you probably won't do anything as good as this for another ten years, which made me feel he wasn't a very intelligent man. [Harlan B. Phillips laughs.] I wrote him some—I think it was in 1923 when I was in Tahiti—I wrote him a postcard and told him I realized that he was right. He was a wise man but I was too ignorant to understand his wisdom. He said, When you go to Paris, spend lots of time walking in the streets, see the Japanese prints, you know. Collect bits of porcelain. And don't study too hard. I didn't take his advice. I've grown wiser since then.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Laughs.] While at the law school, did you have anything to do with James Barr Ames?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, I did.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: The dean?

GEORGE BIDDLE: I did.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Quite a figure, too.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, he was. I—he taught equity. I—they were big classes, 2[00] or 300, and I didn't see much of him but I spoke to him at one time and he asked me if—he had known my father who had introduced the case system in [the University of Pennsylvania Law School -Ed.], under Langdell. And Ames was a student of Langdell's and he—so that gave us that little rapport together.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Did you have James Bradley Thayer?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, now let me think. You mentioned just now—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: James Barr Ames.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Ames. Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Who was the dean.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes. Well now, Thayer, I remember his name but was he before Ames?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I believe—

GEORGE BIDDLE: I'm a little confused.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes, I believe perhaps he was before Ames.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I think he was. I think so.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes. Because—yes, there was a Thayer Hall.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: So he must have been—he must have died, or resigned.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Maybe the other person I have in mind is Ezra Thayer, who was on the faculty.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, there, yes, now. The name's a little familiar but I'm a little—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —confused as to—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: The only thing—the only thing that occurs to me is that while you had the guidance of a distinguished faculty as an undergraduate, you had an equally good guide—set of guides, as professors in the law school, though interest in the law school may have waned somewhat, wouldn't you say?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, I would say the—the great thing I got out of the law school was the break in direction from college.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: I told you what the—these college—what the standards were for the college undergraduate: clubs and athletics. Now, two or three of the men I've known in college who were thorough drunks and club men. When they got into the laws school, studied, 10, 12, 14 hours a day and graduated with As. And I respected it for that. It—but I've, I've always felt since then that is was an admirable training of a logical mind, of the way to use your mind but not much use to an artist.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: It may have been of some use to me as a human being and personal relations, I just don't know.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: In any event, you stuck it out and got the degree.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, I decided to do that.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: That again was my background of doing my duty and playing safe.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative]. Meanwhile, you had returned, as I understand you, to painting. Had you been painting prior to this?

GEORGE BIDDLE: As I said, I had this breakdown in college and it—I felt it became to some extent something like a mental breakdown as well as a physical one. I just got more and



more unhappy. And more and more nervous and more and more at odds—at, at end—at odds with life.

[00:25:06]

The year that—the two years before I graduated from law school, I took this year off, when I was—cow punched a while. Rode through Mexico—a 1000-kilometer riding trip with an Indian. And then went and joined George Howe in Paris—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: —where I saw something of Paris life. And all that threw me off my tracks, and made me—I then felt that art would be my hobby and avocation all my life. And began showing my work to artists and they said, Well, there's no—you can't possibly tell without studying for two or three years whether you'd be successful or not. And so I gradually determined to make the, make the attempt.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Did you, did you—when you finally reached Paris to stay, did you stay there for purposes of schooling or—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Oh, yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: You did?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Oh, no, when I went to Paris in the law school, I was just there for a month—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —two or three months.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Studying French and going around the Beaux-Arts, living with George Howe. I saw an exhibition of Matisse's. I didn't know who he was and thought it pretty silly, but.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Laughs.] Well, then you came back and finished at the law school—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Then I came back for two years and finished the law school.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And then went immediately to Paris. I stopped in Philadelphia one summer and got admitted to the bar.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: I was also just tying ends up. And then took the first boat I could get to Paris.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: There you were going to—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Then I went straight to Julian's.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And I'd been told by Adolphe Borie and Bill James and other friends it was the only place where you could seriously learn how to draw.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And so, although I saw the great—the first great cubist exhibition in that winter 1911-12, and became immensely interested in it intellectually, and because I wanted to know what was going on. I thought that my only interest in painting was portraiture, and kept pretty much at what you'd call the Julian's Academy, the French tradition approach of doing nudes and learning how to draw for about three years.

: : Until I left the Pennsylvania Academy, and then I considered myself on my own. Floated around in a vacuum for a couple of years during the war. And finally landed with Frieeseke and Mary Cassatt and between the two, they gave me, for the first time in my life, a start.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: I venerated Mary Cassatt, and then my whole direction switched from the Ecole des Beaux-Arts and Velázquez and academic drawing approach to impressionism.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And Degas, since then, has been pretty much my idol. He and—curious enough, which I forgot to mention, Japanese prints. Which I'd collected ever since I was 16 years old, very, very seriously. So that I really understood them. I studied and understood them. And, these twin approaches have, in a certain way, been my background all my life.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: Mary Cassatt and Degas, and the Renaissance French tradition of line and color and the Japanese print tradition of pure line and flat design.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Now, as I understand it, you studied in Paris and in Philadelphia?

GEORGE BIDDLE: I was one year in Paris, and then I was a dutiful son and my mother, for various reasons, wanted me to be back. Largely an influence for my younger brother who was about five years younger than me.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: So I came back and for a couple of years I studied at the Pennsylvania Academy and then would be three or four months in Europe.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. At the Pennsylvania Academy at that time, was —

GEORGE BIDDLE: Anshutz had left.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, he'd gone.

GEORGE BIDDLE: He'd just left. I was mostly influenced by—well, nobody at the Academy—I was never influenced by any of my teachers either in Paris or Philadelphia. Adolphe Borie—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Adolphe Borie.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —who carried out this tradition. He also—he was the one who had given me a letter to Mary Cassatt and Frieeseke.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And he was a beautiful, sensitive artist in the tradition of the late French movement, *Plein Air*. There was something that prevented him, as it did with Bill James, from ever getting over the top. Where Bill James remained an academician in a certain sense from the Julian Academy tradition, Adolphe Borie remained an academician in the French Impressionist tradition.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: But he was a lovely human being and cultured and aware of everything that was going on in the world. And he—artistically, he was a sort of an older brother.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: How did the—

GEORGE BIDDLE: There was an interesting group in Philadelphia then, although I didn't see much of them until a year or two later; Charlie Demuth and Arthur Carles. I saw a lot of Carles.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Demuth is a—is of interest—

GEORGE BIDDLE: This all happened—this all happened until the war.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And then I was—the war broke out when I was in Munich, wanting, expecting to go back to Paris where I knew Frieeseke and Mary Cassatt. And I drifted on in Munich for six months and then ended up in Italy, came back to America and was enlisted and was in the American Army for two years. So that again was another late start.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Inaudible], yeah. Was this—this was a well, there's several things: how did the family, in general, take to this alteration from the law as a—as an interest and as a—something to work at and with, to the art?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, my mother, in certain ways—she was, in certain ways, the very big, broadminded masculine approach, and I think it hurt her terribly that I had destroyed all the plans that had been expected—made for me for the last 20 years. But she took it very serenely.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, art, as you've indicated wasn't something alien to this—

GEORGE BIDDLE: No, no—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No.

GEORGE BIDDLE: See, my father had been a very cultivated man. He'd—he spoke French and German and Latin and had traveled all—all his family had traveled abroad—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: —every year. But my real start in painting came when I—after the war, when I realized that I was getting old, and I was over 30 then, and that I had to make up for lost time. And just buried myself in Tahiti.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: You did?

GEORGE BIDDLE: As with so many of that generation, it wasn't escape, it was the—what we were all escaping from was the war. And we wanted to get into any environment where we could do our life's work. And some went to Paris and—Nordhoff [ph] and Hall and I and Stinson, and two or three others ended up in Tahiti. I'd always had a hankering for something like the South Seas, Mexico or—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: —Negroes as a type had always attracted me. As an artistic type, something that model [ph]. And I had a friend—a club mate, as a matter of fact—who for other reasons, had decided to go to Tahiti. I corresponded with him and it seemed the place to end up. The only reason I went was to cut myself off from everything so as to avoid influences and become myself as fast as I could and make up for lost time.

[00:35:00]

I—while I was there, I became romantically attached to the island, on many levels. But, fundamentally, my whole purpose was just preparing exhibitions and developing myself.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And I think the—the first things I did that showed any real individuality and that you could definitely say were pretty much in the modern mood, I did in Tahiti. Well, I'll give you an example, that head under the wall—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —which doesn't show anything of the, of the academic side of that period. I mean, you'd never associate it with Julian's Academy or the Pennsylvania Academy or what was happening in Europe, before the modern movement.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Not at all. Color-wise or—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: No.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No. Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And then I—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But this shutting oneself off, that's interesting. That is, to make up for lost time, like putting on a set of blinders, in a way—

GEORGE BIDDLE: I—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —you must have been convinced about the role of painting as something you really wanted to do.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, I was, I wasn't young, I was very intelligent.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I knew what was happening in the world and very well.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: You see, during the war years and all that I was perfectly aware of what contemporary art.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And I was—I—people like Charlie Demuth and Arthur Carles were friends of mine. I—and so I just wanted to isolate myself, I—obviously was, to some extent, it would have been impossible for anybody with that background not to have had Gauguin somewhere in the back of my mind.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: I did but I don't think I was—for two reasons, I don't think he ever influenced me very much. First of all, because he belonged to the Fauves and I've always loathed the—what I think of as German Expressionism, and all that—I've always been antipathetic to that whole Fauve movement.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: I liked certain sides of Gauguin; Gauguin saw in the Tahitian face exactly the same kind of romantic beauty that I had found in Negro faces and found that in Tahitian faces.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: I came back and, owing to the decade in which I lived, I had two very successful exhibitions in New York. Was—if you want—got more acclaim than I get now, in terms of *Vanity Fair* and so forth, and that sort of thing, in newspaper reproduction.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: So what you could say was, that I had an established direction—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —which I've never entirely left. I've always, since then—it was in me before I went to Tahiti, I got it in Mexico, and that was a sort of a lifelong romance, or love affair with, what are spoken of now as the underdeveloped nations. I've always felt that I reacted most happily to backgrounds like Mexico or the West Indies or India, where I was four years ago. Or Tahiti.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Is that symptomatic of what you had in your show? Is that typical of the work when you came back?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Quite. I could show you the very earliest things—I can show you a few canvases in the other room, would recall French Impressionism. But that would be about that approach.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. But this is—

GEORGE BIDDLE: It was flat.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But portraiture, different. Yeah, in a—

GEORGE BIDDLE: I beg your pardon?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: That is, it's a portrait but—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Definitely.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Definitely. And I was just going to say that another phase in my life that I—I think there are two things that are always recurrent in my work. And that is I cannot escape—two or three things—I cannot escape the complete preoccupation with portraiture and the broad sense of character.

[00:40:13]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: When I'm doing a face, I just can't help, to the very end, being interested in the face. Apart from—which is quite proper. And then there's another characteristic that's always been in my work which I have to fight sometimes, always your strongest points are your weakest. And that is the lineal. It's a thing that always reverts me back to something like the mural approach. And that I get from the Japanese print.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Inaudible.]

GEORGE BIDDLE: Seeing things flat, in—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And I always have to fight it, in a way, recognizing that it's the most personal thing in me, or one of the most personal things. And you see it in that, you see it this portrait, which is a very conventional portrait but it's the same thing, it's the linear approach you see in that thing I did in India four years ago.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: You see it in those flowers below. It's always the—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: You said there were three things, two of which you've mentioned.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, the portraiture.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, and the—

GEORGE BIDDLE: The Japanese. Well, I fancy the third was the mural, which is the linear, too.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes, yes, yes. Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I think my work suffered over certain years, during the war years. I think I had an interlude where I didn't progress on account of the enormous influences—it was the wrong influence—but anyway, the effect of doing three important murals during those seven, eight years.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And when I would come back to easel pictures, which is a different thing from a mural, I had difficulty sometimes in shaking off the mural thing.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: In other words, some of my paintings became really like small murals. Which is a different—it's a different approach.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: It is.

GEORGE BIDDLE: It's decorated and flat.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And it's not sensuous and rich and atmospheric.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And then, again, in the war years when I was overseas drawing for the war department and *Life*, preoccupation with liberalism which is very deep in me. You could call that if you want, another thing.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Which has nothing to do with what I think of as line. The Japanese line, the Degas' line. Which is something, which speaks in itself and has nothing to do with the literalism of getting the shoe looking like it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: A sneaker not looking like a shoe.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. I understand.

GEORGE BIDDLE: It has nothing to do with the line.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And those things. But those things that are part of you and so you—I think one should try to use the things that's a part of you, not discard them.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes, I'm—you know, I'm very much interested in the way in which you closeted yourself on Tahiti. Cause it's that—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, I've always done that. I've always done that. I mean, I can only work well when I get away from everything. All my best work has been done when I've been, in quotation marks, "an escape."

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: When I first married, when we went to—when I was very poor, I had no money at all—went to Italy with my wife and we just did nothing but work all the time. And we knew the peasants in Anticoli [Corrado -Ed.], and Maurice Stearne sent us an introduction, we lived in his house. When we—when my wife and myself go to Mexico to do a mural, where we're completely shut off from all the—what I call the fleas of the American civilization you know, that crawl up and down your back. I mean the—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —letters you have to answer and the exhibitions you have to join or attend to, and the family parties, and the—all the paraphernalia of staying alive.

[00:45:10]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. This period initially marked a break with that. That is, the Tahiti—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well it's the first time when I think I could—when I think I really had become myself. I had done one or two canvases under Frieseke. I remember I used to joke with him then and say to him, Don't you think it's almost as good as a Mary Cassatt, or almost as good as a Degas. Made him perfectly furious. And I've said that to him about one canvas that I particularly liked and he got very angry and he said, No, it's almost a George Biddle [laughs]. Which—it had something subconscious. It was very definitely—if you—I've got in the other room, if you look at it, it was very definitely belonged to a period but it had a touch of mine that Carles, Arthur Carles, often looking at it later—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —said, There's something very personal, just the way you—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. And it's the discovery and reaching of that point that was important to you.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I didn't know it then, I was still working, definitely in a—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —in a groove of Degas, Mary Cassatt, and Frieseke.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: In color and everything else. When I did this it was entirely my own, I think.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Is this a painful process, too? The consequence of a painful process?

GEORGE BIDDLE: No, because I was very happy in Tahiti. I was working all the time.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: I and my friend Knapp [ph] who lived with me became absorbed on every level in the Tahitian culture. We studied the language very carefully. We collected old ballads—I knew Stinson out there, you know that—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —anthropologist, that died a couple of years ago? He was a brother or cousin of Van Wyck Brooks' first wife.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And the cousin of the secretary of state. And I felt very romantic about it, on every level, but I always knew that I'd be there for two years and never come back.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: You did know that?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Oh, yes. I was perfectly—I'm always in life—I've been perfectly determined about what I was going to do. I wasn't—I went there for a certain purpose.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And I knew it wouldn't pay me to come back. I wanted to—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Translate what was discernable into a new area at the end of two years?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, I didn't think that my work would be disjointed by painting other places.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I mean, I had no idea ever of becoming an expatriate. I went to Paris later

because I felt that I had had a lot of success in New York. I felt it was premature, it was too easy in that period, in 1923, to become known in New York—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —with *Vanity Fair*, you know—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —and I wanted to compete with French artists. See where I stood. So I went to Paris for three years, but it was never with any idea of ending up in Paris.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: It would just be acceptance of a new challenge.

GEORGE BIDDLE: A new challenge, or—because I had a—I always feel when I go to a place like that I have a definite reason for going. One reason I went to Paris, I'd seen a great deal in New York, in 1922-23 of Hunt Diederich, [Nadelman -Ed.], Lachaise, and others of that group. And I became very interested in formal design—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: —and sculpture. And I wanted to spend a year doing sculpture and formal design in Paris, which would be a better place, so I did.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I did—some of the sculpture in the other room is mine. I did enough sculpture to feel that every painter ought to do it so as to really understand what form means.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Is that the purpose, to discover form—

GEORGE BIDDLE: To me.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —and know what form—

GEORGE BIDDLE: That's what I would say to every painter, I would say—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —the great weakness of all modern painting is it has no sense of—ingrained sense of form.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And you get it from sculpture. And I realized pretty shortly—my wife's a sculptor—I didn't marry her for about seven years after that, but I realized that after, while I was a better painter than I was a sculptor and that there wasn't—I personally didn't have time for both. I think it was about that. I did a great deal of craft work, these—I've done these things since then, things that—marquetry, this marquetry over here.

[00:50:18]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: This—things like this. But I don't do them seriously, I mean, I—it's just 'cause I enjoy doing them.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. It's a means of expression, too.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Of getting it out. Building this house once, but not another.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: In that book I was talking to you about at lunch, Wheelock, he says, I think, a very beautiful thing, that, Every artist is apt to be born, with half a dozen aptitudes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].



GEORGE BIDDLE: But the artist who survives is the one that finally realizes the one particular aptitude in which he is—excels, or in which he has something to contribute to the art 'round him. And then Wheelock goes on to say, And if he has enough persistence to state his one aptitude in disciplined form, he has a chance of surviving. And I think that's very nicely put.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Picasso will never survive, or really, I don't think his plates are as good as mine. [Laughs.] You know, I think he's—it doesn't matter.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I think an artist ought to be happy if he has—of his three or four aptitudes, he has one particular thing in which he excels.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: I mean, and by excelling, Wheelock meant excels other artists.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: That's what makes him important. If he has one gift in which he can really say, I've contributed this to the world.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And then say it, which alas so few do, with discipline. Which means technique, fundamentally, wouldn't it?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Good drawing, good painting, good understanding of color.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Right. You then came back from Tahiti; settled in Philadelphia?

GEORGE BIDDLE: No, no, no, no. I—when I came back from the war, I was divorced.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: It was one of those over at war breakups, and I took those things very hard. And decided then, for that and other reasons, I never wanted to come back to Philadelphia again. Largely because—not just a broken heart but because I realized that Philadelphia was not the place where an artist would be successful.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: I—when I came back from the war, I wanted to be in New York but what propelled me was that I was unhappy enough so I had no possible urge to come back to Philadelphia.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: I mean, in other words, it was a defense against the family pull. The pull of all my friends.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Curiously enough, I had good many friends that happened to be in Philadelphia by chance. George Howe was the—I roomed with him all through college. Known him ever since he was six years old. But I didn't want to come back. So, from then on, New York, which I never, never felt romantic about, it became my editor and my market.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And where the challenge of one's contemporaries. So with rare, rare exceptions, all my artist and professional friends in other spheres, are all in—almost all is in New York.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And I made my friends in New York on purpose.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: It was a deliberate thing?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Let's put it rather romantically. I mean when I settled in New York, back from Tahiti, in '22-['2]3 exhibiting and then back from Paris, '26-['2]7. I was romantically happy to know as friends people like Bill and Margaret [ph] [Marguerite] Zorach, and Tom Benton, Hunt Diedrich, Gaston Lachaise. We were all very warm, close, professional friends.

[00:55:19]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. This gets—the translation of an idea or a technique discovered, doesn't really matter, the place?

GEORGE BIDDLE: I didn't quite—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I mean you get your opportunity, or you make your opportunity in Tahiti by eliminating the intrusions.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, exactly.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Or, put it conversely, finding the particular stimmung that you're happiest in.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. Or then, coming to New York and deliberately populating the scene with people, artists, friends, for a period of time. Not quite so isolated in existence as was perhaps true in Tahiti, though I don't know. Was New York—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Oh, New York's tremendously stimulating. I never could work well in New York.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: But it was the—New York's always there [to visit and to stimulate -Ed.].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And other friends, Kuniyoshi, Reggie Marsh, all the—Paul Burlin, whomever we've known, they were—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: They were there.

GEORGE BIDDLE: They were there, and you get them weekends, or you visit them up in, on the Cape, or wherever they are. Rockwell Kent, whoever it happened to be.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Is it as—how about subject matter? Is there continuity of the Negro face? The—

GEORGE BIDDLE: I've always had a good many themes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: That's what I meant.

GEORGE BIDDLE: One is strict portraits of family and artist friends that I've done all my life and love it. Like some of these on the wall, there are no artist friends here but it's that type of thing, the informal portrait.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: So that was one constant theme that I could get anywhere. And then, to use Jack Wheelock's expression of the—of the—things in which you didn't necessarily excel, as themes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: I've always loved doing flowers and landscapes. As a tune up of color.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And 'cause I love landscapes; I've always lived in the country, I mean I'm a country man. I've lived in cities but I could never be a city man. And so there you have three themes and then I would continually be getting what you speak of as the Tahitian face. The year I was in Brazil, the year I was in Mexico—or six months. I was one year there doing a mural and once just to paint. Uh, India. So, I could always renew that sort of thing from—and the West Indies, of course.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I've been a great deal to the West Indies. And would love to show you for a few moments afterwards, just hundreds of drawings that I have done series of them from the different [islands in the -Ed.] West Indies: from Guadeloupe, Martinique, Mexico. And I still work from those—oh, that will come back to your theme. I—more recently, I've realized the availability of old drawings. I always work from drawings when I paint.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And now I'm doing—I've done a number of paintings from sketches that I made this past year. From drawings that I did in Haiti in 1954, in Martinique and Guadeloupe in 1956, and again in Sicily in 1963.

[01:00:07]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: So I've got this bibliography here of just drawings that I continually use.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. As—

GEORGE BIDDLE: And then I'm always delighted to be able to enrich it. I wish I could draw the way [inaudible] did. Every day of my life. And you just—somehow life's too short, you haven't—well, you have to concentrate more and more.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I used to—the years when I first went to Italy with my wife, in Mexico in 1928. Different times, and Brazil. I'd paint all morning and sketch all afternoon so I could keep up. Or go on a month's steady sketching, when I'd do a couple of hundred drawings. Try to do 10 a day. Careful drawings.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And then paint the rest of the time. So I don't find that too much of a hindrance, the not going back to Tahiti.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Laughs.] No, no, but, I mean, you know, when you plan a route—

GEORGE BIDDLE: You've got to paint in your environment.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I lived there with the natives. I was—we lived about 22 kilometers from the nearest white man.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: Now, you can't repeat that kind of thing. I mean I'm married, you know.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No. You just cannot do that.

GEORGE BIDDLE: No, no, no. And it would mean there was something invalid in your whole approach if you had to.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. But did you find acceptance an individual thing or the desire to

share with one's friends and contemporaries? Something like this, or something comparable to this? I remember you saying at lunch time that when you showed some of your friends drawings that you had done, they—they wondered, you know, why, or subjected you to some measure of ridicule.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Artist friends, oh, no, no, no

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Inaudible.]

GEORGE BIDDLE: An example, that watercolor—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah?

GEORGE BIDDLE: —on the wall.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I remember I exhibited that in [inaudible].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: [Inaudible] back here. And I exhibited that in [the Weyhe Gallery -] in 1928, I think.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And he happened to have it in the window. And a cousin and very dear friend of mine saw it. And he thought it not only rather obscene but quite childish. It just filled him with joy. He just giggled and giggled and giggled. And I'll be perfectly frank: too many of my friends giggle when I show them things now that I think of as quite tragic.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I'm doing a whole series of—they're not at all like Bacon's, but—the Englishman.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: But the—his name would most easily recall there's something like the theme of a series of heads. I did them—they interest me enormously. I started doing them in Sicily two years ago. I did a great many drawings in the catacombs of some of the monasteries. The Cappuccini. And thematically, they excited me terribly. Because these crumbling mummies—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —hung in little niches in a darkened—crypts below the church with a Rembrandesque light. And the falling figures, the decomposed faces, the strange gestures of the broken hands, became tremendously dramatic to me. The way [a splendid actor would - Ed.].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: Just the poses—exactly the same sort of thing that, during the war, I found on the battlefields. I was fascinated by doing sketches of dead people because they take—as the rigor mortis comes over a corpse when he's on the battlefield, he takes these grotesque positions—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

[01:05:17]

GEORGE BIDDLE: —of the mannequins [inaudible].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Oh yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And the people, from my war drawings, used to always accuse me of being a necrologist or whatever you call it. It's just they dramatically excite me. When I did

this series, I wanted to—I was casting 'round for some way that I could use them for theme in painting.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And finally, I evolved this series that I can show you later if you want, where they—where a mood of the tragic age we live in can be represented by one of these heads that isn't quite a head. And fitted to it by quotation from Conrad Aiken, from T.S. Eliot. Do you know, from Dante.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And it's not all of life but it's just as much of life as some of the charming little things that I've tried to do of little Mexican or Indian children, or flowers or landscapes. It's part of the picture.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Right.

GEORGE BIDDLE: But they again, when my friends see those, I never quite understand it. So many of them giggle. And I suppose it's fundamentally, they're not sure of themselves. It's fear, to that extent. They're not, they're afraid of their own critical faculty.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Do I make myself clear?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes, and maybe, you know, being seized by what they regard as the warm or the familiar. And this, you know—

GEORGE BIDDLE: They either giggle and say, Why do you—I don't like your unpleasant things—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —they use that word, unpleasant.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Of course, yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Like, I got a little scolding from a neighbor here. Awfully nice fellow. A week ago, he'd seen this series of drawing I did in New York. But he said, I like your—I don't like your unpleasant pictures, George, I like your pleasant pictures. But it's always with that, dividing life into—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, its maybe fair enough in a way but I think of our civilization as very complicated one—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —full of horror and full of beauty.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: But essentially full of fear and moods.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. But this what was intriguing to you not the fact that to someone else they seemed unpleasant.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Oh, no it's the mood. It's—I'm always looking for mood, I thought, I did lots of—when I was in Brazil, I did a whole series of dances of the Carnival.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: Where the Negroes are quite mad.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: Not only they intoxicate themselves with ether, but any Negro dance is, from our point of view, mad. Their gestures, their grotesqueness.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And I thought them as just representing the mood of the world we live in. Something rather frightening, terrifying.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Not comical at all.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Right.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And that is a side of my work but, well, in most of my paintings that—how could you describe them as your paintings? What would be the English word for that? [An Expressionistic? -Ed.] At any rate, I think it's a mood.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And it may be gaiety, despair, love, you know?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And I love to have always that in the back of my work as much as I can. I think it's the last thing that the audience ever sees. They—even the—you know sophisticated friends that appreciate the color and design and composition, they rarely appreciate the mood.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I mean the sort of a mood I get at that, which isn't gay to me at all.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No. No.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Or yes. That—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —you know, it's—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —or these Indians over here which is a very solemn mood.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Now, when I was in India, as in Mexico, I thought of everything as horizontals, and what do you call the other? You know?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Perpendicular?

[01:10:04]

GEORGE BIDDLE: Perpendiculars and horizontals.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And that—and anything you paint with perpendiculars and horizontals has a tremendous force.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes, it has enormous force.

GEORGE BIDDLE: But there is a difference, isn't there, in mood, from the design—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Oh, yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —of those two?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. But the discovery of mood, did this begin initially in Tahiti?

GEORGE BIDDLE: No, I doubt it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No. No.

GEORGE BIDDLE: No, I was—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Was that—

GEORGE BIDDLE: No. It—oh, well I—let's see now, I'd have to think for a moment. It almost surely began—it certainly was clarified very, very definitely, with my murals. The war mural I did in Mexico.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: The antifascist mural I did in Brazil. And even the mural I did in the Justice Department which is [concerned with poverty, social injustice -Ed.].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: There my work was somewhat stereotyped, I mean, I didn't entirely get it, but I think it began then—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: —the interest in mood. And then became very, very conscious during the war.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. You know, I'm thinking almost entirely, and this—Tahiti as experiments in color, too. And use of line, so that the color comes in this also.

GEORGE BIDDLE: In the bottom one or the top one?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: The top one.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, when I was in India, I found that all my colors were dark and a great many of them brilliant, but always in dark colors.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I mean, dark reds and dark blues.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And then more recently, I've gotten into very, very high colors. A rainbow, sort of like that lower canvas.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. But there you see—or so it speaks to me is that the color also conveys that mood.

GEORGE BIDDLE: In the top one?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Oh, very much. Very much.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: As it does over here. As it does, I think, to some extent, in that portrait. There is—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, there I was quite frankly, I felt then, and I think it's true that the color of the tropics and the design of the tropics, influenced me enormously.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I said to myself that it did.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: The great difference is with the harshness of color. I rarely felt in the tropics that you have a receding horizon. I mean, roughly speaking, you know, all Western landscape painting, European landscape painting, your foreground is warm and you gradually fade out to a cool white, bluish, greyish background.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And you feel horizon. A vanishing point. In the tropics, colors are so brilliant that you feel that the color in the background has exactly the same color as the color at your feet. I mean, everything is bright yellow, red, green, blue. It's in its highest intensity. And that in turn, as you see a little bit in that thing there, that turned everything into an immediate flat design.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Because the background coming right up—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Inaudible.]

GEORGE BIDDLE: —into your face.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: At least I rationalized it without any question that way. I felt that. I believed it, and felt it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And felt that my sense of color and design was very much affected that way.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Now, you said, I think initially, that you didn't have any difficulty getting a market for your paintings, or did you? Initially?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Tahiti thing?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: No, they—how much of it was due to the color and how much to the—because the South Sea Islands were in vogue then, very much. It's pretty hard to tell.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Hard to tell. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: No, I—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, you know, I—

GEORGE BIDDLE: My things have never been particularly popular. I've never sold well. I rationalized that very comfortably because I feel that it's—we hadn't got a really cultivated audience in America. The people are told what to buy. They're not told out loud. [Laughs.]

[01:15:03]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No.

GEORGE BIDDLE: In other words, they buy names.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And so it depends entirely on your dealer and your museums. And by and large I've had bad luck with both but it's not important at all but I mean, I think that's really the thing that affects sales rather than the popularity at a given moment of any particular theme.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Is it—it's not necessary, as I understand you, for an artist when he puts something down on a canvas to have it necessarily appreciated by either a buyer or a museum. It's enough for that creative urge to have found its way onto the canvas. Or is there the added thing—the need for—



GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, of course I think any human being wants to be successful and wants to be loved.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And that applies in art, I'm absolutely positive, is just as much as anything else, any other sphere in life.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: I think you've got to—if you're worth anything, I think you have to learn to do without both. You have to. I think there's no question about it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: So, I haven't got too much sympathy with artists that tell me that they're not appreciated or that their things were—sold better 20 years ago, what have you. Or that abstract art has hurt their sale, that sort of thing. I think they've just got to do without it. You have great sympathy with any artist who's not able to work.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: But I don't think it fundamentally—it shouldn't make the—any—any—I'm trying to think of the word—any decisive difference to him. Whether he get his money from sales to museums or from an aunt that's supporting him. I think what an artist wants is health and three meals a day and a studio, you know? And those are the only thing he needs.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: But of course he wants love and popularity and success.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: But that's his business, I mean he just—you can't all—everybody can't have everything they want, you know?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Wouldn't you say that that's successful even though no one necessarily, perhaps—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Oh, oh!

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, that the satisfaction that makes your own echo at its most profound.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Oh, I—if I think I understand what you mean, I think I know what are my important canvases.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I'm sure I do.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: The thing you're never quite sure of—I don't believe, any artist, they—you know, artists rationalize terribly. I don't believe any artist knows how important they will be to the world.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: He guesses and he hopes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And his guesses and hopes vary from month to month, from year to year.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And they certainly—his guesses and hopes, must be affected by what artist friends say to him and what museums say to him, of course. But he—I believe every artist thinks he knows what is good things and what is less good things. That far, he should be able to do by himself.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. I'm going to put a new reel on, cause we're almost at the end here.

[END OF TRACK AAA\_biddle63\_9254\_m.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Before we turned this on, we went into the studio, and we looked at some sketches of frogs, and a small painting of some frogs, which you had done, and an enlargement which was in process. Now I asked you, at the time, if we wouldn't spend some moment on the process that you go through in the generation of an idea, and making an idea walk, as an artist, from sketches that you have into composition and into an enlargement. So, maybe this would be a good place to include this, as we just returned from the studio where you showed me these things.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, I've always worked that way from the very beginning, or from my—after my immediate student days of doing—going on sketch binges when I had a chance. Going to some sympathetic environment, and just sketch all day long. And then later on, do paintings from this material. To what extent I may have been influenced then by Degas, I don't know. I certainly—it was very obvious [inaudible] later on. In fact, I have an awfully interesting charcoal drawing that I bought, oh, 30 years ago in Paris for about \$40. It isn't actually a charcoal drawing, it's the offset of a charcoal drawing that he ran through a etcher's press.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: So it's really a monotype.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: Now, I'm absolutely positive in my own mind, that this was the—an example of the way he worked which is exactly mine. And in some composition of horses he was using, he wanted to use this charcoal sketch, but the horse was going the wrong way, and so he turned it upside down and ran it through the press. I can tell that because—in doing it, running it through the press, the plate was too small for his paper and it's cut the jockey's head and shoulders off in a straight line.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: Now, I'm sure if he were doing this so as to get the different effect—because the offset of the charcoal has a softer quality than the original—he would have kept the whole drawing. I'm positive that he was doing this because he wanted the horse in reverse going the other way. And actually, in a lot of the drawings you've seen of the frogs and of the paintings I do for them, I find I'm up against the same problem.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: But what I do is to hold the pen and ink paper sketch up to the window, so—with the sketch turned away from me, so I can see it in reverse backwards and draw through that.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: This is all anecdotal. Pascin worked the same way, and at one time, I was very interested—very much influenced by him. It's a classic procedure, that is working from sketches, or enlarging them or so forth. During the number of murals I did, of course, I resorted to the same thing of making innumerable sketches before—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And then tracing them up.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: What interests me about the frogs, though, is this the memory of a frog scene or an actual frog scene, when the sketch is made?

GEORGE BIDDLE: No, it's—I gather the material, that's the first step. I'm interested in frogs and I think that'd be fun to draw.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And then I begin to cast around in my mind. And often, as with these frogs, over a period of about eight months, before the idea in color and picture size—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: —germinates—clarifies in my mind, that's a second step. Now, when it comes to the color, to me, line has always been the skeleton and rock bottom of the visual arts. And it's the—perhaps I exaggerate, but I feel that it's the only reproduction—artistic reproduction that in any way visualizes or states nature.

[00:05:15]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: Nature, to me, is not stated by color. I think it would be inconceivable that in color alone, you could suggest, representationally, anything in nature except a sunset, a blazing fire, a black night. It's only the use of line that delineates form. And to me, color has been the personal, subjective artistic approach.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: To make myself a little clearer, I can have the same drawing, let's say of a landscape, and decide I'll make it a night scene all in blues and browns and blacks. Or I can say to myself, now in this landscape of Turner [ph], of which there was a little watercolor just above my easel, there's certain combinations of dark red, blues, and blacks—or yellows, doesn't matter what they are—that become a scale in which I'd like to explore.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And so, I'll often do the same landscape in two different tones or three different tones of them. One may be a night scene with blacks and browns and blues; another in lemon yellows and lavenders and grays; another in bright reds and blacks.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: It's—to me, color is a subjective thing, and not a way of copying or learning nature.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I don't mean that's the right way, it's my personal approach.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes, yes. But then having made a—from the sketches, having drawn or used, then painted a given one, there's an enlargement that comes in. Like this last thing we saw which was some [inaudible]—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, I actually had—I work just the other way. I start with the original size.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Oh.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I draw the size I want it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And then if—quite often, less and less now, but always if I'm uncertain about my color scheme—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: —or value scheme, I will scale it down to, say, a quarter the size, and do it in color.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And that is—often these look as if they were worked out very carefully, like a finished thing. The only thing I'm trying to work out very, very carefully is the color and value tones.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And so, it gives it a certain—often, a certain dryness and coldness and hardness, which disappears in the larger—in the larger, freer, looser painting. Another reason I do this is—and here again is a personal approach, there's every way of skinning a cat—I like to always to work on the on a virgin canvas. It's partly because I glaze, and I want the white of the canvas to show through, after which I load it with opacities as much as I want to, but also because it disturbs me to work over something that's already in. It's very hard for me to correct a canvas if I have something where it's—I don't like the painting or paint quality.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: I usually bite it out with some sort of acid, paint remover, so forth. Or else just scrap the whole thing and start over again on a new canvas.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And many finished canvases, I've painted all over again—as that large one in the studio—because I'm—as I finished it, in an effort to get my values correct as I judge them, I lose the freshness and looseness of the paint quality.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And so, I just start the whole thing over again. Although, usually, starting again can never be a copy because you were—your point of view was altered after you've seen the—your first finished start.

[00:10:10]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes, yes. And, moreover, you've changed a few variables, it can be the next day.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And if nothing else, you're 24 hours older. And it will be a memory that, you know, that would add it, too. Why choose this kind of content in the first place? The part—that is, why sketching frogs as early as, let's say April of 1963, that will convert themselves or work themselves into a fresh canvas in 1964.

GEORGE BIDDLE: You mean how do I have to choose it?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, the—I suppose the different approaches—in this particular case, the frogs absolutely fascinated me both as a drawing material that, just like certain animals, like elephants, like cows, they have such a strange relation of bulk to extremities and so forth, that they become a fascinating graphic material. And then in the background, I suddenly realized that they were very beautiful. The—among the leaves, in the water, the way they reflected different qualities. But when you get to put that on the canvas, you face another problem, which has to do, for instance, with the size of the frog; it's a very small animal. And can I make an interesting painting out of things that size?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And then, things may be very beautiful in nature as, for instance, the change in color of the water, whereas it gets shallower or in relation to the sky and the color of the frogs, the variations of green and grays. But when you face the problem of putting that in color on the canvas, you just may not see it in paint.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And so often you have to think and wonder for five or six months until it

suddenly becomes alive, not as something seen through your eyes, but as something on the canvas and in paint. You face another problem if you wanted to do them in sculpture, in relief. How can I accommodate my model to life in a picture?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: When you accomplish the change from the sketch to the first canvas, do you see the result whole before you reach it? How do you know at what point it's completed?

GEORGE BIDDLE: The drawing on the big canvas?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, the painting. When is it finally ended?

GEORGE BIDDLE: The painting itself?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I think that's the—a very difficult problem that every artist has to face. You always cling to that proverb—I think it may have been said about writing—a work of art is finished when the author has said everything he has to say—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —and hasn't added any unnecessary word. And it's exactly the same thing in painting. But in practice it's—in theory it's very simple, but in practice, it's one of the most difficult things in the world, because on a finished canvas, I always know that there's one little spot could be done better. But the question is, if I do that one little spot better, will the canvas as a whole be better?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And you just don't know.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: It's just guesswork. So, in a big canvas, what almost always happens, I—and there are three or four in the studio now in that condition—I put it aside often for periods as much as three, six, eight months. And then I come to one, let's say three, conclusions: either it's all you can do at the time, it's a statement, it may not be one of your best, but leave it alone.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: You'll never make it any different from what it is. You may change the detail. Another—the second thing is, you can improve it by just little bits here and little bits there that won't fundamentally change the painting as a whole, but if you work on it without hurting it, it gradually will get richer and fuller and have more impact.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm.

[00:14:58]

GEORGE BIDDLE: I think that's another of those proverbs that I think of, is the longer you stay with the canvas without actually hurting it, the better it is. Then the third thing you do, of course, is just pile right into it and paint the whole thing over, perhaps, and often it will be immensely improved.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. This suggests that the creative process is sustained over a much longer period of time, it can be. You mentioned that you could set aside an idea for eight months, on the sense that as of that moment it was as far as you could go with it, still thinking about it.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I think in another sense, it's a much longer period than that, because—although, again, every artist works differently—I always work in what you could call a series.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Either you go to a new Stimmung, a new atmosphere, another country, or

else you are preparing for an exhibition two years from now and say, I have to have so many canvases of such and such a thought—sort. Or maybe just a simpler thing, you suddenly get interested in doing flower pieces. You may say, I haven't done still lifes or flower pieces for a couple of years, and it's exactly what I feel like doing now to jazz up my feeling for color, just to explore color relations. And so, you really set yourself out something like a book of short stories, not just—not just one little piece.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. In short, when you entertain the creative process, then it's more than a single work—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Very much.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —its related—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Very much.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —[inaudible] it explores an area, whether it be color relation—

GEORGE BIDDLE: I'm exploring something which will last over a period of one or two years.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I would think that would be closer to the truth.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. And yet, what I saw in the other—in the studio, was a drawer full of sketches which may date back 10 years, 15 years, or further.

GEORGE BIDDLE: More and more, I'm apt to rely on sketches I did long ago, for two different reasons. First of all, I try to think of my work, on the whole, as less and less topical—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: —and more and more having to do with, let's say, humanity itself. And the second reason, is that I realize the sketch I did in Haiti five years ago, of a little Colored girl, may be admirable for a sketch I want to do now of a little white girl with blue eyes and blonde hair.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But this is a—

GEORGE BIDDLE: It's all comes back to that thing I said, that I think of color as a personal and emotional thing, and the skeleton of the draw—of the work of art is always line to me.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: The artists I care about are what I call the line artists. And that's where, although it may seem snobbish to say so, I feel as—well, I'm unsympathetic to—I'm trying to find the right adjective—abstract art as I am to the work of Winslow Homer and Homer Martins and John Sargent, George Luks, [Robert] Henri. That whole great tradition of American painting, which I suppose would go back to the—our earliest directions in realism.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. But all these sketches are a—and over a long period of years, remain for you, a source—an eternal source—endless source of ideas?

GEORGE BIDDLE: More and more, yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: More and more

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: The sketch is the springboard?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Even as long ago as the sketch of the little Negro girl, who can now be seen, color being what it is to you, as a white girl with yellow curls?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Springboard in the sense that it's the immediate means. Of course, the—I suppose the real springboard would be my particular direction, for six months or two years

or whatever, to do a series of children, let's suppose, that would be the springboard.

[00:20:13]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: In a certain manner.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And then I just grasp whatever material I have. And of course, the perfect thing would be the right sort of little blond child with blue eyes at my disposition, but that's the— more and more, the limitation of the artist's means.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: It's not easy to get models. That partly answers your question.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. I wondered, you know, as current sources of sketches, are they more memories? I'm thinking of the sketch, for example, that you may have done in Haiti, of a little Negro girl with a real little Negro girl when you sketched—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Oh, yes. Oh, I can only work from nature. Or draw. I can only draw from nature, or I draw very, very badly and clumsily and with enormous difficulty, and never subconsciously the way it ought to flow—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: —from memory.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. You do not—you do not sketch them from memory, it's a real—

GEORGE BIDDLE: But I have to, but with the utmost difficulty. And I never if I can—if I can sketch from—if I can have a model.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: It's a pity, I wish—my son works exactly the other way. I mean, his line—he's a beautiful draftsman, and his line flows out of him, right out of his elbow—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —as fast as he can think. As a small child, he once said to me—I said to him, Mickey [ph], why don't you draw? He said, I can't because I have no ideas. Well, I wish I could work that way, but I can only respond—my elbow only responds when I see somebody sitting in front of me.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, this is that—and, you know, working with a sketch pad, sketch paper, canvas, and easel, what are the problems of translating this process into a much larger area, a mural?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, I think of a mural as an entirely different art form for painting; it isn't just a bigger painting. In the first place, it has to embody an idea.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And that's why a real—a real mural can never be private. It's got to be for some wall which is the symbol of some public function, I would suppose. I think a mural for a dining room is almost a contradiction in terms. It can—it can decorate the dining room, but a mural isn't just a decoration, it's—well, you could—I'd have to stop and write a whole essay on this subject, it's a—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I know, but it's a—it's part of whatever [cross talk] [inaudible]—

GEORGE BIDDLE: It's a social idea—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —which becomes part of architecture. I think very much, as I was saying to you at lunch, a painting on a wall is the only kind of painting that to me, has—you can speak of, sensibly, as having three dimensions, and three-dimensional design. That is, that it changes the shape and size and feeling of the room by the way you paint. A black ceiling will bring the wall down, a white wall will extend it. And the lines in the—in a mural will add to it. And of course, the subject matter on a mural certainly has as much meaning, it seems to me, in the—in the room and in the building, as a particular design has in embodying the spirit of a particular civilization. I think a mural on a wall can express the meaning of the building as much as a spire on a church can express the meaning of the building.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: Then I think the other—of course, many other differences apart from this meaning that way, I think it's got to have the kind of drawing and the kind of color which is as monumental as decorative quality.

[00:25:06]

I remember much to my utter amazement, when I was president of the national Society of Mural Painters, there was some sort of a competition of artists to do murals. I've forgotten the—what it was for, but I remember the design of Kuniyoshi, who was one of the artists of that period for which I have the utmost and deepest admiration. And I've forgotten what the wall was for, it may have been a post office or water park or something, but it was of three tiny little angels floating in the air; they might have been drawn out of one of Pascin's notebooks, and I was just amazed by it. But the thing is, apparently, Kuniyoshi had just no particular mural sense.

Another thing that surprised me very much about this whole subject, when I saw the exhibition of sketches that was organized by the Museum of Modern art for mural paintings, I was astounded to see how many artists who had a very fine sense of design on the size of an easel painting, had none at all when it came to mural conception. So that I realized that the mural conception has nothing to do with simply a feeling of linear design.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. You still operate at a—when you wanted to choose as a subject, frogs, and you begin to sketch them, you sketch them with a canvas in view and the process that you're going to go through to realize it. But with murals, when you begin to sketch, is it the sketch of a part of a total picture that you wish to convey, or is it the total impact that, itself, in terms of—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —content and color?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, perhaps I can answer your question better by saying this way: it seems to me, the only way to start a mural is to, first of all, study up the background history of the building that it's for, and you can do that in books and conversations. And then, you've got to sit inside the room that you're going to decorate, and wait for a process of visualization—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: —until you see finished, in your mind's eye, the impact that you want for that room—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I see.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —and in that building. I would say that's the way it—so, usually the two processes work together. In other words, you've studied up about that particular building, let's say it's going to be something—the Cannibalism of War, which is the subject I chose for a mural I did for the Supreme Court building in Mexico—Mexico City. Well then, you pretty much—you've been through war, and you know pretty much exactly the emotion you want to state, and you have a pretty vague idea of the material at your disposition.

Then you see the arcades in which your space is divided, you would study the distance that you will have to stand when you get the longest view away from the—the mural, and you'll see— you'll also see, what detail would be too small for the nearest approach you've got to



it, and already your idea begins to shape up.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: In other words, you've got scale in your mind. You say, this particular wall — if I have a theme, we'll say of a battlefield or something of the sort, will—there'll be sky above it. Now, how can I fill the—how can I relate sky to that wall and space so as to make it interesting? Well I may have to avoid sky, choose something else. You, isolate, in perhaps half an hour you'll suddenly have the solution of the major problems made, or you might have to go back and think it over for a month, and let it germinate in your mind, and then suddenly [it will flash out -Ed.].

[00:30:02]

I do remember that—I've forgotten just how long this process took me, but I'm seeing the thing done before I put pencil to paper. But I remember when I had it done, I made these small sketches, almost without change, for the mural I did in Mexico and one in the National Library in Rio de Janeiro in a couple of days.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: That is almost immediately. But that was luck, it just—in each case, I happened to see one big symbol that would fit the space, and then I could approximate the others around it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Everybody's approach must be different, but I think that would give you a fair idea of the—of what—of the problems that a mural artist has to face.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. And how does color and line make itself?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well that, of course, depends entirely on your room.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: It does, yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: That—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: That's the visual impact to it.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, line on the space, and whether you want horizontals, perpendiculars. : Or how the lines will mesh in with the—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —the edges of the painting, that is what is below, above, and above it—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —and to the sides. And the color, of course, is—it may be very arbitrary, maybe you just decide to do it in blue and white, but it must have—be a color relation which is effective in the room.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Now, that's why, again, I seen—I was shocked when I saw the Miró ceiling in the graduate building at Harvard and also, I think, by Milko [ph], the ceiling of some big UN building in Rome, I've forgotten just what it's—but it was connected with the UN, because they were both very fine things, but they just, each one of them, destroyed the room. It came down on top of you, it didn't give you any feeling of space, it was inconsequential. And both these artists have the most exquisite sense of design when it comes to a piece of paper. Now, whether Miró saw—whether Miró was actually in Cambridge or not when he did it and studied it, I don't know. I know Léger did it—his mural for the UN without ever coming from New York, which to me is just outrageous. Because it's, to me, an impossible thing for an artist to do. Effectively, at his best.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Léger, as a man curiously enough—I knew him fairly well—who told me in the 1920s that he dreamed of doing some big building like a railroad station. And anybody who looks at his sketches would feel that he's born to do a mural. That they may be all very dull as easel paintings, but they're, almost all his things, you'd say that's a sketch for a supposititious [ph] mural.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Inaudible] too. But the problems are different, aren't they? From—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Completely, completely.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. Totally, yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And they're different in more ways than one. I think in certain ways, the three years, pretty much, I spent doing murals during the war years had, on the whole, a rather bad effect on my easel paintings for several years afterwards.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Really?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, it's not surprising if you think—it's the effect, the influence of one man going from one medium into another. In the first place, it was the preoccupation with thematic matter. I spent much too much emphasis on trying to get series of easel pictures on subjects, such as the Bible, or early American folklore, and so forth and so on. And that emphasis on theme—although it would have fitted admirably into, let's say, a renaissance approach to painting—you could easily see, might be—hold one back or be a liability rather than asset to a man painting in our period, where the greatest impact or great—much more impact, comes from the color, line, and design, obviously, and much less from the thing that is painted. I think that is true.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:35:37

GEORGE BIDDLE: And then, more obviously, uh, I think my paintings had more and more the quality of a small easel—a small mural panel without the right room to put it in.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: In other words, they were—they were flatter—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: —and more interested in a continuous texture, a certain richness over the whole thing, without regard to the life of the painting. I think texture can be related to the life of the painting more than the surface quality that you can think of as being sympathetic to a wall. For any wall.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. How did the possibility of the mural at the—is it the Supreme Court in Mexico?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: The Department of Justice, the Supreme Court—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Actually, it's the—they call it the *Corte Suprema*.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: It's, really, the justice building.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: It's where the judges reside.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. What I wondered was, how did the possibility of this mural come to your attention?

GEORGE BIDDLE: I got it through—I wish I could remember his name. He was a Guatemalan poet.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: Who was a great friend of my sister-in-law, who's a poet. And I knew them in Washington and he met me down there, and we had long—he became a very sympathetic friend, and we had long talks together. And I told him—we talked about the whole renaissance in Mexico, and he happened to know them all, and spoke favorably of me to the secretary of education down there. And I was offered the job during the war, when Mexico may have felt that it was a kindly gesture to ask some—invite some American artist there. Actually, I had been invited to do a mural in Mexico some 20 years before, when a friend of mine [Manuel Toussaint -Ed.] was Minister of Fine Arts. And, at the time, I think Moisés Sáenz [ph], who then must have been in the government, had to [inaudible] [resigned -Ed.], had to give up his job. And I got a telegram from him saying that it was too late to go down.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. You have—

GEORGE BIDDLE: I'd always hoped for a mural of that sort.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. But you've had continuing contact with Mexico?

GEORGE BIDDLE: I would say so. It was a love affair I had when I was, really, 16 years old in California, when I used to go to the roundups with the Mexican cowpunchers. And I went there for some six months after getting out of college. I got rather run down, had to be away for a year. But I've always had a love affair with Mexico.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, where mural paintings are concerned, Mexico is famous for at least three. Three we talked about at lunch time, Rivera, Siqueiros, and then Orozco. All three of whom you knew rather well. And, you know, poaching in their area, in a way, doing a mural in the Palace of Justice or the Supreme Court, I wonder what you can tell me over the years of these three very interesting, uh, Mexican artists.

[00:39:55]

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, they're *sui generis*—Mexicans and Mexican artists. They, all of them had a touch of genius. They, all of them had a renaissance quality. The country was, at the time, a little savage, disorganized. They have the passion for art, which you find all through Latin America without ever much art being produced by it. They—these three men were three individuals, three—they were all quite different from the other. They all had a touch of genius. I think they all deteriorated, all of them, for different reasons.

I had a long talk with old Dr. Atl [Gerardo Murillo Cornado], who—about a year ago, year and a half ago—who, in a way, was their godfather. He was—he now is—must be well on into his 90s, so he would be 10, 20, 25 years older than these men.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: He always was in and out of politics. In fact, they call him down there—his nickname is the Friend of the Presidents. He even had fairly shady—he's had fairly shady relations with politicians during—over the course of years. But he was a very wise man—or intelligent, deeply intelligent. He'd been educated abroad, and he helped these men getting started, and he helped them get jobs. And I think his analysis of their characters corresponds with what I've heard from various sources, but I felt at the time it was the most objective and honest.

Briefly, he felt that all of them had a touch of genius, and all of them went, pretty sadly, to pieces in their work before they—two of them are dead now. I asked him why, what it was, and he said, Well, they were all children of the Renaissance. They all studied in Italy. I think I'm not sure if—I know Rivera was, for many years, in France and Italy; and Orozco was in Spain and, I think, Italy; about Siqueiros, I'm not sure.

But they were, without any question, they were grafted on the Renaissance mural painting. And then, Old Atl said they, for different reasons, they went to pieces. They all became popular, and their work became more slovenly, they did it more rapidly, they wanted more jobs. They took outside jobs when they could. With—then he said there was another reason. He said, I think there was with—each one of them had a moral emotional deficiency which helped ruin them.

With Orozco, it was the loss of his arm that gave him some sort of a persecution complex, and as he grew older in life, he got more and more bitter. He became something of an anti-Semite, something of a fascist. He'd always hated democracy, he always said he hated the people, that he had no particular romantic feeling about Indians at all. And so gradually with him, his work lost its positive, Nietzschean passion for strength and vigor and health, and became simply sour and destructive.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: Then, with Siqueiros, he went on to say Siqueiros is the only one of the three that really was in the Revolution and wounded. And I always wondered whether that wound had something to do with the fact that he, in a certain way, became a deranged man. Siqueiros—I'm very fond of Siqueiros. He's deeply intelligent, has enormous charm. But judging by his life, you could always—you could only say that he's a very evil man.

[00:45:04]

He boasts of having been part of the group that tried to assassinate Trotsky. He—a dead American was dug out of his yard, and he had to escape the country for a couple of years, and then it was patched up with the Mexican government. His intimate friends tell me that it wasn't a question of an unhappy childhood, as might have been the case with Orozco, something that could be psychoanalyzed out of him. He simply was born without any feeling of between the difference of right and wrong. And from my knowledge of him, I would say that that's it.

The—when Orozco did a shabby act, it was done by a petulant child who lost his temper. When Rivera did a shabby act, he was—gloated over it. But with Siqueiros, you just wonder whether anything ever rings a bell.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: They're all Renaissance people. Rivera had the intellect of the three, but he was a past master of public relations. He'd have been famous if he'd been nobody at all. He couldn't come into a room without exciting curiosity and building up a picture. And he spent his life sedulously doing it by anecdotes, by lies, bravado, or charm—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: —of which he had a great deal. Orozco was—he stayed with me at times out here when he first came to America. I would think it would be—well let's see, around 1927. And then I was down Mexico later, then I—he visited me [here in -Ed.] Croton, may have been '28, '29, something of that sort. I felt he was the sort of the man that might have some deep mother complex; that was very much his relation with women, somebody who could baby and look after him and take care of him. He was a violent man, passionate, withdrawn, utterly sincere, utterly honest, but with the—again, the prejudices and bad temper of a naughty child.

I—they clung together and fought in a curious way that would only happen in Mexico and constantly makes you think of Benvenuto Cellini. They would protect each other as triumvirate, and really stifled any attempt to create any new expression of art in Mexico, and I think that, largely, the three of them are guilty for the little that's been done since then. But at the same time, they would do all they could to knife each other in the back when any occasion arose.

I remember I felt very badly, but they double crossed me in—I felt, in certain ways when I was doing a mural in Mexico. Because where the question of dollars and pennies come in, they can—they can be perfectly savage with any intruder. And I mentioned this once to René d'Harnoncourt, who knows Mexico as well as any other American alive except for Bill Spratling. And René said to me, Well, George, I don't see why you should take this thing so personally. It's the way they always treat each other, and why should they make an exception with a foreigner?

I remember what Mary Heaton Vorse said to me, which I think puts the three of them in a—more dramatically, where they belong, in a nicer way. When I complained—when she told me that she never wanted to return to Mexico, since Rivera was now dead, and I said some pretty disparaging things about his character, and she said to me, Ah, George, but you must

remember, they were—Diego was a Renaissance man. And a certain way with their genius, their childlike quality—childish qualities also—and false, I think all three of them were Renaissance men.

[00:50:36]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. What of their work? You said their work deteriorated?

GEORGE BIDDLE: And you mean in what ways?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, to me, this all is personal.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I think, perhaps Siqueiros, the most obviously, he—his very few, very few really fine mural things had a bigness about it; they were just great, over life-size—what's the word for it I'm thinking of—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Super—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Heroic.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Heroic.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Newness [ph].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: They had a bigness and nobility, a mural quality—a mural nobility about them that, with three or four, you felt that man is one of the giants, he's tremendous. And that quality, it's hard, in a way, to analyze, because it's something you feel just by one glimpse at it and you say, that's a big man.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I thought that about several of Portinari's work when I first saw it in Brazil. Now his late work is—I don't know how you describe it. It's—first place, he's become involved with all sorts of new media, plastic paint, and all sorts of things. And he does these things that look to me—it's what I call the macaroni spaghetti school; it looks like the inside of a calf's brain. It's these queer, strange, distorted messes, which, certainly, they're very different from the simple early things, and that's the effect they have on me.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And as Atl had said, he's left the renaissance tradition behind him. And, I think Rivera, too, is—it's pretty obvious his early things, from a plastic point of view, had a simplicity, a monumentality, a bigness about them that none of his recent things have. And, emotionally, they're the only things of Rivera, that I know, where you felt that he had a deep and real compassion for the scenes he was painting, of Mexican—poor Mexicans going down to the mines, soldiers in the war, and so forth. His later things, you feel that he's just so delighted with his enormous dexterity—mural dexterity and draftsman's dexterity—and the anecdotal quality of his propaganda, that he's just lost in it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And lost all the big quality, both plastically and emotionally, of his early work.

With Orozco, it's a little harder to say just why. Perhaps you feel that with age, he sort of shut his boat. That is, that he's made his first statement, which was a splendid pagan glorification of qualities—of human qualities, strength, courage, the bearing of adversity, the pity for poverty, the woman's role as a mother with her child.

[00:55:01]

And in his later work, you feel that he's—the emotion no longer comes from the heart, that he's trying to think up some new symbol which will—and rather cloudy symbol—which will express his growing hatred of everything in mankind. He did one mural, I remember, on this—in a small chapel on his way to Guadalajara—I've forgotten just where, it's a small village—where he simply, it's devoted to the masses. Just the people, as I remember it. And the people are nothing but sticks with open traps, their mouth, they're all mouths, talking. And it's just what he feels about the people. : The justice—the meaningless chatter of humanity, he seems to be saying. The—his mural in the Department of Justice in Mexico, what does it represent? It doesn't represent justice at all, it represents only the disgrace of justice, justice unfulfilled, cruelty, lies, the condoning of poverty, hatred. And as an older man, the way I think you feel he shot his boat emotionally, that is in his ideas. I think his—technically, he becomes a little weaker, a little thinner, a little more dissipated. You say about Orozco, though, that I think with all his faults, he remained utterly honest to the end.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: He never truckled [ph] [compromised -Ed.] either for money or for taste [or for public applause -Ed.]. Rivera truckled [ph] [compromised -Ed.] for both purposes of propaganda, that getting on with a political party, and money. And I think, poor Siqueiros, who is now a very ill man in prison, where he—no question about it, he deserves to be—his work has dissipated into, a not very carefully spelled out what he feels party line, hatred of democracy.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: I may exaggerate in all this. It's a point of view, and I feel it because I have—still have such absolute admiration for the early work of all three of these men, which I think is incomparably finer than any national movement mural painting since the tag end of the 18th century.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: How much effect would you say they had beyond their own borders? If I understand you, the net effect of these three people was a kind of—within Mexico, was a stranglehold on developments in Mexico: new people, new thoughts, and so on. What about the radiating effects that they may have had on other younger non-Mexican artists?

GEORGE BIDDLE: They had enormous effect on all the young artists of America, I would say from, oh, 1925 up to the war. In other words, it corresponded with the generation that were taken over by the New Deal, and took part in the—in the New Deal Art Projects.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: It's for some curious reason that whole movement was—I won't say it was killed, but abruptly ended with our Second World War. So today, I would suppose they have no so-called public influence in America at all. By that, I mean recognition by the art forces that be, that control. And I would fancy, although one can't tell, very little among young artists. Simply because we know very well the artists that have influence on the young students today.

[01:00:03]

No, it was—a chapter was very—was closed even more rapidly than it was opened, the chapter that began about—well, I would say not long after the Armory Exhibition in 1913, because although that was supposed to have introduced modern art to—French art to America, *École de Paris* [ph]—what it really did was to inspire a whole generation of young men. And very soon—I think the critics make much too sharp a line between that earlier movement and what do they call it, the—what do they call the movement of the '30s? The regional movement.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And I think that was just a growing awareness and interest in art all over America. I think all art is regional. It always has been. I mean, the eight that are now very much in vogue were all, of course, regional artists. The French Impressionists were all regional artists. Claude Monet was more of a regional artist than anybody I know. And Renoir and all of them. You very, very seldom get an artist that is above the thing we call regionalism. Michelangelo was. Blake was. But it's—you could say, in a way, those three

Mexicans were all about regionalism, although they all relied so heavily on the Mexican-Indian culture.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. Yes. They rather made it popular throughout the world, I suspect. I said that they rather made the Indian culture somewhat more popular throughout the world than it had been if but for them.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, I suppose so. The—I've never understood why—I actually have never met a European artist that didn't downgrade all three of those Mexican artists and the whole Mexican movement. I—they have gotten medals at the *Biennale*.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: But of course, one doesn't know who—I don't know who is on the jury. The jury may have been—may not have been Europeans, I don't—I don't know. But apart from that, I've never known—I have many friends among the French *École de Paris* of the '20s and '30s, so on. And I've never known any of them who didn't rather pooh-pooh and downgrade the Mexican art.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: You mean from a sense of design?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Oh, they just thought it was amateurish, not important, not to be taken seriously. I would say very good example, that would be the way our artists might think of Haitian—of the Haitian murals if we should spend a couple of weeks in Haiti. Just awfully amusing and just not terribly important. All of them amateurs, you can't take them very seriously. Well, it was almost that line with—that any of my friends that I know [inaudible], and I've spoken to men like Lionello Venturi, he feels the same way—and he's been to Mexico—just can't see it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Well, you don't have any sense, do you, that this was some sort of a flash in the pan movement?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Could be, could be. I forgot to mention the third reason that old Atl gave why these three men disintegrated and he simply said, We haven't got the Mexican culture—and he was right—to sustain any growth in the movement.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: He said, Here, sparks came together that ignited a blaze. You had three men that were—had enormous talent with a European background, and then you had a revolution that tore the country to pieces and vomited up a dozen or so intellectuals that had been brought up in Europe and were able to give this movement an organizational start.

But it—although Mexico sells an awful lot, now, to American tourists, I've been down there twice in the last two years, and I've seen nothing except the work of Tamayo that I thought really important, or anything you could dignify as an important school. Important movement. And Tamayo, of course, for some curious reason, is—I've always thought of as was entirely French. Curious because he was the only one of those four who was, as far as I know, is pure Indian.

[01:05:07]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: I knew him as a young boy when he was just starting working on the public schools in about '28. But he came to America shortly afterwards, was taken up Edith Halpert at the Downtown Gallery. And I remember seeing his work then and he'd entirely thrown over any Mexican thing. He was competing with the French.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: Which is quite all right, but it makes him a little hard to classify. I think he has great talent, along the lines of—I don't mean comparable, but along the line of a Kandinsky or Miró or something of that sort. Delicate. He knows what he's doing, but you see nothing in his background that suggests Mexico.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes, yeah. An interesting school, that Mexican school of mural

painters.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, I think there's many lessons for us. I mean, one is, of course, that a really great movement can never outgrow the educational level of the country.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And by educational, I mean the artistic appreciation.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And the other thing is, of course, what fine public monuments can be done if artists are left alone. I've always said and written in any discussion I've had with the effort to get something out of our art programs in Washington that Mexico and Brazil produce far more bad work than we do for their governments. But occasionally, they produce the very best work of their very best artists. And you could say about us that we never have. That's as far as painting goes. I think in one or two cases we may have gotten the best work of one or two of our architects. Has Saarinen done anything for the government?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I don't believe so.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, the—Ed Stone's embassy at New Delhi, I think, is this is a thing that any—that we could—our country could always be proud of. But that I would call exceptional. It was—I think he was chosen under exceptional circumstances for a building outside the United States, and most of the best work done by our architects are outside of the United States. And I'm skeptical enough to assume that it's because they're not interfered with as much.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But prior to the Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros, was there an identifiable American mural?

GEORGE BIDDLE: No, [inaudible]. I'd say it was bad, anything. Bad French academy, very bad.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But was there a Native rumbling for something which was American as distinct from some imported impulse like the Rivera?

GEORGE BIDDLE: You're talking now about mural painting?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I don't see it at all.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: You don't?

GEORGE BIDDLE: I don't know of any American mural that I wouldn't think of—even La Farge's best—as colonial, if you can call it that. You know what I mean by that. Sargent's things in the Widener Library are just—they're pitiful because it's just the work of an old man, and it's very sad. La Farge—who else is there—Trumble, I think you'd have to go back to Trumble before you could get—I can't think of anything else. Who would be there be, Thayer?

I know, I don't think—we've produced occasionally, I think, the very finest painters, the very finest. Ryeder, Whistler, [Mary Cassatt -Ed.] few others. I mean, in our past—and Copley, I think Copley, is—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

[01:10:05]

GEORGE BIDDLE: —in certain ways, is fine as you get, because I think he has a hard, compressed feeling, and a feeling for portrait, you know, that gives them a great distinction in a way.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Was there deepening experiments with color as consequence of the Mexican, you know—



GEORGE BIDDLE: Did it affect the color of this country?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No, were there increasing experiments with color as a consequence of the—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, very much. Very much. And that was—yes, I think you could call that one of the healthy offshoots of the of the Mexican bureau movement. There was a book written by Dorna, you know it?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: That was gobbled up by the artists, so that must have been about 1930, something of that sort—'28, '30, '35, in there. And ever since then, there's been a growing preoccupation here among the artists in experimental work. During the New Deal Ned Bruce, I think through one of our government agencies, was able to do a good deal in the exploration of sound colors. [Leonard] Bocour and others in New York are doing it now.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: But of course, that's on the very technical side, and it really has nothing to do with painting. But it's a necessary and a healthy thing.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure.

GEORGE BIDDLE: To have good colors and good canvases.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure. But, you know, with a person—and in the late '20s, certainly Rivera, Orozco, received favorable treatment in the American art press. They were items of conversation, both from the point of view of excitement and content [inaudible]—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Very, very, very much with the whole student artist element.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: Very much, very much.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: So that the effect outside their country was a kind of stirring up—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Oh, very much.

HARLANPHILLIPS: A re-examination, perhaps [inaudible]—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Very much. Of course, anything—anything done of any lasting value in the New Deal mural projects, I think would necessarily have been affected by the Mexican movement. I mean, as utterly different artists as Boardman Robinson and Maurice Sterne and Ben Shahn, Bill Zorach, a sculptor, they certainly studied and were aware of the Mexican thing very, very much.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And I mentioned these men because none of them you would affiliate with these with these three in any way.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No. No. And yet it was an experience that enriched the air in which they [inaudible]—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Very, very, very much, very much.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And, you know, items of conversation if—if, for no other reason that Rivera's conduct was so horrible or, you know [inaudible] [cross talk] commentary—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Oh, oh, no. Oh, no. It had a very, very warm, close influence and participation backward and forward.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Because they—all those Mexicans were in America and treated very generously and warmly by American artists, and many American artists went back for closer

— shorter or longer period to Mexico.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I think that's all very healthy. I think the tragic thing is—one of the tragic thing is, the way, in our civilization, we take things up so quickly, and then throw them overboard so rapidly and forget all about them. I wish there were more traditional permanence. The thing that Van Wyck Brooks is always talking about in his, in his books, in American culture.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. But we tore down the Ritz in New York, that gorgeous old hotel, without so much as a tear and a weep for it. You know, the old dining room with the wood and the panels and so on—

[01:15:05]

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, don't talk to me about that, because I just see red, when you talk about what American—the bulldozers and the real estate—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —people are doing to American—our American past. I just see red, I can't talk about it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Laughs.] Well, I understand what you mean because—but this other thing in the—you know, in the '20s, the late '20s and the early '30s was an enriching thing, a freeing thing.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, it was. And it's really sad that none of that survived. It's the—apparently we have one movement and then you almost feel as if somebody wanted to kill it, and the new dynasty comes in.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: It's the—it's the way—I'll, frankly, admit I although people don't think that of me now as affiliated with all the modern movement, when it started over here.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I mean, I exhibited with then. And they were all my friends, the young artists of the generation of Zorach and Max Weber and Maurice Sterne and Kuniyoshi and so forth. And our group—this is hard to believe, but it's a good example of what I'm saying—would not willingly have exhibited with Bellows and Speicher and Sargent. Now, that's hard to believe. We didn't—we didn't want to be affiliated with that. Now it's hard to believe.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: That's interesting; what was this, the independent show?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, I think in our case, I think you can understand it. Let's say, if I wanted to justify it, and that was, we were so abused by everybody—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: —by our friends, by the papers, by the museums. You know, none of us exhibited at museums, none of us were invited to museums. That it built up a certain defense.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And, whereas the—at that time, let's say the Manships and Sargants and Bellows were very much in the museums.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: But that is perfectly true. I remember a little party I gave, a cocktail party, lasted all night, but in which Bill Zorach said to me—he was there—and he said, Never mind. I'll bet you one of the—one of the days, our work's going to be in museums." And that shows, I mean, not that anybody could say he was a young man. He was not so young, he was

approaching 40. But he said it—he was the—he was the young artist that was sure of himself —

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: —and had not been recognized. Now, imagine. And that, again, is another way of saying what a different atmosphere it is now, because now the—not only the young men of 40 are admitted to museums, but the museums cultivate, often, men that are—only the men that are under 30.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: It's the—when I say I'm sad that these breaks between different movements, instead of the love of tradition, which you find in all French literature and art, it may be that—simply another way of saying—of saying how fast our age is moving. That in terms of intellectual periods, what is a decade now, might have been 50 or 75 years, 100 years ago. Would you think that some—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: We tended to telescope time.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: You know, and we're—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Because now, it's almost laughable the way you talk about the Pop artists having destroyed the action art. I mean, action art is, so to speak, it's—we're wondering whether it's dead.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: The past. Not interested. That's unbelievable, that kind of thing.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And, again, I think it shows that mistake in our culture that there's no—that without tradition, no movement is in any way connected with the movement that came before it. Which it should be. I remember years ago—oh, I think when I was a young student, I was reading Zola's *L'Œuvre*, and in it the painter—uh, Cézanne and Manet whoever they were supposed to be—are talking together, and they're talking about the boldness and innovation of one of them. And then the other one says, Ah, no, but you can never be modern because you were always fighting in the revolution to destroy, and so inevitably you're tied up to the thing you were trying to kill. It's only our young generation that are coming after you, young revolutionists, that can do anything really modern.

[01:20:36]

And that—I've often thought of that since. There's something of that in what's happening all the time with us. We're so anxious to kill the thing that's just gone before us, that we can't really do anything ourselves.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: It may well be that the flavor of our own communications system is such that what formerly was only gradually discovered, is almost immediately available today.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I'm a traditionalist in that I feel that any good art must be—have its anchors in the past.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: I don't see how you can revolt, unless you do.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, certainly the scene has shifted from the late '20s. No question about that.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Oh, God.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And—

GEORGE BIDDLE: I think it's shifted, if you want, from the early '50s.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, but we're still in the '20s. And as you know, the—what you—what you just said, Zorach's comment.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: That, you know—the aggressive self-assertion that would indicate that we will be discovered by a museum. And here on a whole, oh, flavor in America, in essence, trying to discover an American expression, through the folk art. Kuniyoshi was a great savior of folk art. Alex Brook, all of them, all the people you mentioned, Peggy Bacon and so on, went back to something historically important. You said roots in the past, folk art, as symbol and as design and as composition, whether it was Shaker furniture, somehow or other this young group—this so-called modern group in the '20s—had an eye cocked for the past in terms of source. Hamilton Easter Field—

GEORGE BIDDLE: I know.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, all of this was intensely interested in the folk art. It seems an incongruity, in a way, that as modern people who are trying to wrestle with some new design, some new expression in the '20s, as yet unrecognized by critics, art magazines, dealers, collectors, by and large, as a group, we're thinking historically, for roots. Something identifiably American, as distinguished from something which was bruited about the land as, let's say, as a consequence of the Armory show, however good that was in terms of a release. But something deeper.

GEORGE BIDDLE: May I ask you a question?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: Apropos of just what you're saying, I—for years, I used to think, until about the time of the, all these new movements that is, as we call it, Abstract Expressionism.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: I used to think that American art, as such, had certain identifiable qualities, as different from the European. That it was—and I was thinking largely, not of folk art, but of the early American art. I thought it was realistic, romantic, deeply interested in our culture, our background, with a strong linear sense.

[01:25:04]

And looking at the art today—that is of the last 15 years, 20 years—you'd say in those terms, American art has none of the qualities you talk about and you cannot in any way differentiate it from Japanese, French, or African art—German art, or whatever. Would you agree with me more or less?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: In other words, so that you would say, for instance—well—[Telephone rings.] [Audio break.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Inaudible.]

GEORGE BIDDLE: I'll going to have to quickly check in my—

[Audio break.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Before the telephone rang, you were saying the progression that has transpired since the '20s to the current time, has been the fact that American experience—had indicated that the Moderns were thinking in terms historically, finding in American folk art, something which was an American expression.

GEORGE BIDDLE: You were saying that.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes, and you indicated that, while this may have been so in the '20s, the net effect is that Moderns can operate today indistinguishable from what is produced in

Africa, Japan—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Wherever.

GEORGE BIDDLE: In other words, we've forgotten our tradition. Or we don't need it, we don't need our tradition.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Or we've gone beyond it, yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Or unaware of it. Yes, whatever you want. Yes, it's—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Which I think is very sad.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: Because I think, although all art is universal, none of it is national. Yet you only speak in your own language. You can—I can only write poetry in English.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And so, in that sense, the greatest art is always local and always traditional, isn't it?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I mean, Dante could have only written in the Middle Ages as an Italian.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes, I mean, there is that element to it. One difficulty, however, is the impossibility of—let me—let me dilute that. It's the fact that whatever is experienced in the world is immediately available to us.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: So that, as our communication system has expanded and grown in efficiency, in projecting these experiences vicariously for us to sample, it's made it almost impossible for any given person to climb on top of it all, and to relate an occurrence that happens, let's say, in Vietnam, and it's a front page item, to the context to which that occurrence is an expression, namely Vietnam. It's wholly different than New York, as New York is different, let's say, from Iowa, and so on. I mean, there are varieties and variations, even within our own context. Local, regional.

GEORGE BIDDLE: But how then—if that is true, how can Vietnamese art be exactly like American art?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: This—unless the reverse is equally true, namely the communication from here to there, is such as to get us to share in something, the nature of which we really don't understand. Therefore, it appears fragmented, a piece of something—

GEORGE BIDDLE: So you don't—you don't like the idea?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I think there's a kind of a—I won't go that far—I think there's a kind of collective expression growing. We may not have the means to either encompass it or understand it, namely whatever else modern art is, it is the composite of all modern artists, however fragmented, their experience—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Doesn't—does your statement or theory or whatever you want your—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —sound to you a little phony? I'm just wondering, this is not a—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No, I think it's discernible in the scientific field.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, that is true, that is true.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I think it's discernible in the administrative field, where a pooling of administrative resources is necessary in order to determine the specific problem that comes up, that is you sample other experience—

GEORGE BIDDLE: No, no, that's true.

[01:30:02]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: In short, it's running smack up against the limitation one feels as an operator in a given context. We just don't have enough.

GEORGE BIDDLE: What you're seeing now, is that in the realms of science and national economy, say—nationalism—there's one world, only one world.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes, yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: It leaves me a little sad, because—or perhaps I feel that although I agree with your statement, it can't tell the whole story.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No, I think there is this kind of drive toward a unitary thing.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yeah, but that's not enough.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No, and I'm not entirely sure that it will be successful, to the extent that it will dry up what will become, increasingly in our society, as aberrations or departures or mutations from what this unitary will demand. That is the—for example, it may well prove be that the so-called beatniks of our own age are the last survivors of that period which saw some virtue in being oneself as distinct from something composite, you know, where the ingredients are arrived at by some process other than individual. It's almost a sales thing. Like the kind of lipstick you wear, the color scheme you have with your blouse or your skirt or your suit or otherwise. It's almost removes certain choices, [George Biddle laughs] where taste is concerned. Whereas a beatnik is probably a holdover from the kind of individuality which we profess is no longer available to us. The person who will—who will grow himself a beard and read poetry and spout poetry, play a musical instrument. Um—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Because he needs the kind of civilization that we haven't got any more to give him?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Right. And this is an expression which is quite real for him.

GEORGE BIDDLE: It's also sad, isn't it?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Terribly. Terribly, that we have to make exhibitionists out of our people. Well, but this may be no—another corollary on the nature of communication. There must have been a time somewhere where a person could simply read poetry without calling attention to it, just for the sheer love of reading poetry, or playing a musical instrument, or singing in a tea shop or arguing over a glass of wine, as I used to on the East Side in New York all night long, was a safety valve. Now it's become a kind of museum itself, a museum of the strange, the bizarre. I call them the unique. The non-carbon copy people. I don't know, you know, they're the last, maybe it's—

GEORGE BIDDLE: As a friend of mine once said, those—the beatniks, referring to the types you used to see outside *Le Dôme* in Paris, that reminded him of "an edition of one and the the plate destroyed."

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Right, that's neat, that's nice. That's really nice. Really nice. But your notion is that the—that whatever experience is, it's indistinguishable or has become increasingly so, whether it be African, Asian, Japanese, American, that there is some way, if you think in terms of art as an expression of a language, there's some way where these people are speaking a comparable tone.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Everybody was—everybody rationalizes. And everybody looks back fondly to the days they grew up. Now, I may be just rationalizing the fact that I loathe the

civilization where there's no uniqueness.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: You know, when you haven't got New Englanders and Pennsylvanians and Down Easteners and Frenchmen and the whole thing is—as somebody said the other day, what the—I think it was Bunny [ph] Wilson, Edmund Wilson—what the radio is doing for America, I think it him. That it's improving the accent. You know, the accents better, it is more cultured; it's true.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: The radio commentators are better than ten years ago, but there's no individuality left. It was Steinbeck said that. Steinbeck in *Travels with Charley*.

[01:35:09]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: *Travels with Charley*.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And I—to me, it saddens me terribly. It saddens me terribly that you never get a Boston accent from a Boston commentator. Nobody knows what it is.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And you—the whole thing is a mishmash, you know, you never get—you get Southern food, you know, anywhere in Paris. The corn on the cob, you get—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, distinctness is some—

GEORGE BIDDLE: You get strawberries in the middle of January, but they're all tasteless.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Distinction's gone. I mean, distinction in the sense of individuality, and distinction in the sense of a better accents a proof.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Slowly, but it doesn't it doesn't give me any pleasure. Because the better accent was always—it was whatever you considered the Harvard accent or an Oxford accent. It wasn't a better accent.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. That's not a very pleasant thought, is it?

GEORGE BIDDLE: No, I was—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Are we driving toward a new synthesis, as yet unreached? Is this all pouring itself into something—

GEORGE BIDDLE: [Inaudible] the better accents of the French society and the Oxford College.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mmm.

GEORGE BIDDLE: They're not easy to understand. They're very hard to understand.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: It's terribly hard to understand.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, we're getting far afield

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No, it's a challenging thing. Well there are a couple of people that you put down here. You mentioned—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Uh, I think Mary Cassatt is at the top of the list.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, she's one, Mary Cassatt.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Did I—I didn't mention her last time?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Just briefly, in passing, as being instrumental in a sense of direction and deepening in terms of experience. But she's, it's more than just—

GEORGE BIDDLE: The reason why she had a—really, a life influence on me.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And curious enough, three or four other people that have had most influence on me are very, very much older people, Berenson and Santayana. But with Mary Cassatt, it was her extraordinary idealism—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: —and standards and masculine mind, which she kept—and this seems like a very petty thing to say, or unimportant—so utterly apart from her own private individual life in which she was always a prim, old Philadelphia lady. With—loved to chatter about family relations and that kind of thing. But when it came to art, I never—I have never known an artist with such passion for idealism, and such rectitude. She spoke about Degas with veneration. And I remember little things, the way she pointed to a little landscape of his on the wall, you know, said, He's got everything, said, He—there's nobody that could have—had a feeling for atmosphere since Vermeer of Delft, like Degas. Anything, anything, you know. And yet, I never—like all Philadelphians, they always—you wondered what their relation to Degas were because she just idealized him. And I knew a good many of them in Philadelphia. I'd come back between my trips to France, and they all jokingly, one—a niece of hers, Mrs. Jacobs [ph], was always wondering whether she was his mistress or not. And I didn't think so, but I just didn't know anything about it. And I—she once spoke of some incident between Degas and Mrs. Havemeyer, in which she thought Degas had been slightly untrustworthy, dishonest, something—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[01:39:58]

GEORGE BIDDLE: —financial. And she said, And after that, I just never allowed him to come into the house. Never—never saw him. And I thought she was talking about him exactly the way you talk about a chauffeur that you'd had for years—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: —and had to let go. In other words, with her, it was a question of rectitude. And I knew, then, what her relation was, it was just utter admiration for his genius.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And it was mostly that, because she was continually quoting him in an amusing ways; she said once to me—not of Degas, happened to be of Claude Monet—talking about Sargent, I just met him in London, and she said, You know what Claude Monet said about Sargent, said, [*"C'est un brave garçon, mais avec lui je ne parle pas de la peinture"* - Ed.]. And that's continually on that—she said—I asked her once—I had been copying Velasquez, I think, and I asked her—she copied a lot when she started as a young girl—I asked her if Rembrandt would be a good man to copy. I was then—I was very much interested—I thought I would be portrait painter. And she said, No, you know what Degas said—it was always that that made her so exciting—[*"Il faut se plier devant les primitifs"* - Ed.]. She said, If you copy, go to the source. Rembrandt was the [*"le dernier mot."* -Ed.]. And in ways of that sort—these quotations sound a little anecdotal or sentimental, but it was her—I think you thought of any other word, her rectitude—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: —in her own field. And of course, that's a very French quality. I mean, in art.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.



GEORGE BIDDLE: And I think, through her, I imbibed all that, call it the French tradition for line, rectitude.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: The masters. Tradition.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Weren't you fortunate.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Only that you cannot go through life without meeting three or four people that affect you very deeply.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Berenson had some of that, too.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Did he? Where did you—did you meet him in—

GEORGE BIDDLE: I met him very late in life.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Some 12 years ago, but we became terribly intimate.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: I don't know why, he liked younger people. I wasn't that much younger, but—no, I would say we grew to have great affection for each other.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: He wrote me curiously intimate things about his youth at Harvard, his background, some of his friends. Santayana.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Did you bump into him—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Stein. the two Steins, Leo and Gertrude.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But Santayana, did you meet him abroad or—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, I did, in the same way. I met him the same year, and also got very intimate with him, although—very intimate, he told me very intimate things about himself. He was—I admired him in an entirely different way. Berenson had tremendous heart.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: He was a naughty old thing, Berenson.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I mean, he could be mean as hell—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: You know, in ripping—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Oh, yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —to pieces. But then, Santayana was different. But what I—well, I met Santayana when he was so partially blind.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: That he thought I was 30 or 40 years younger than I was, just because he heard my voice and did hear me. I mean, he couldn't see me, in other words.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: He was so deaf that I did a couple of sketches when I was sitting

beside as near as this. He said, Come over the other side, I don't hear here. He was dying of cancer—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: —of the stomach. He lived on milk and toast, and he lived alone, as you know, in a tiny room apartment. And yet he—with all that, his conversation was such that you could remember what he said in different days, years afterwards, as if it had been the week before.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Wow.

[01:45:01]

GEORGE BIDDLE: I remember I brought a Harvard professor of Latin that I was very fond of in the last time I saw him, and they started—I thought they'd like to meet each other—started talking, and I told him who he was, and he said, Yes, I was just reading Catullus this morning before you came. But the—I think, the thing that, I won't say impressed me most, but everything he said, it had to do with two subjects, his detestation of Eliot at Harvard because he favored the sciences, and the fact that, at certain moments in his life when—for instance, I think the year he wrote, what is his famous book, *The Sense of Beauty*?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: He was only interested in poetry. In other words, I remember him saying something about—he said that Eliot didn't think much of me at that time, he thought I was a bit of a trifle in the sphere of philosophy, and I guess I was, tell you the truth that then I was more preoccupied with my poetry. And this would come up three or four times during his—he said—the last time I saw him, he said, "I remember in a talk with William James, which has often been attributed to me," he said, on entering the classroom—he said—it was a lovely April—he said, "Let's open the window. What we need in here is a little bit spring air." [Then he added -Ed.], "But the remark became apocryphal, and was attributed to me. Those days, I was mostly interested in poetry." I thought that extraordinary, don't you, with—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Inaudible], yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Because he's a—he's a pretty third-rate poet, isn't he? Or perhaps that isn't the word, but inconsequential.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Inconsequential, I would—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yeah. You'd remember him as a novelist ahead of a poet, wouldn't you almost?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: But I have never known a man whom I thought as utterly detached about everything in life. That man Corey [ph], that was his lifelong friend.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And he spoke on one day, he said—and he mentioned Corey [ph]. He said, There's a fellow I have who always does my—I can always count on him for doing my typing. And he talked about him that way, you know, and he was apparently the one utterly devoted human being when he died.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Inaudible.]

GEORGE BIDDLE: And Berenson said [about Santayana -Ed.]—I don't think they could've have gone on well together. I was talking to Berenson about it, once he said, Yes, but he's got a heart like a block of ice. It wasn't—it was simply utterly detached.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Utterly detached.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: In that sense, it was very difficult to meet him.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, he could be utterly charming, he could be utterly charming.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: I think he was utterly charming all the time. Mostly we talked about old Harvard days, that kind of thing, you know, to get him talking, reminiscing about James and so forth. But I—when I did the sketch of him, he was pretty blind. I was—it's a very good one, I think, as a matter of fact; I showed it to him and he just looked at it with just mild distaste, I would say.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: He didn't—he didn't say I don't like it, he said, Do you think it looks like me? )r something of that sort. But you could see that was just—and then he said, I'll show you a sketch that I've always thought good of, and drew a couple of things from a drawer, and they were the evilest looking drawings I've ever seen in my life. They were suave, well done, and might have been done 30 years before.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: But you could look at that thing and say that's an illustration for something *Turn of the Screw*, or what have you. And it just made me realize that people never want to look like themselves.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, I mustn't get afield with the—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No, but this is a little related to interests, to curiosity, people. It's also related to color.

[01:50:10]

GEORGE BIDDLE: [To come back to Berenson -Ed.], well, he said, I cannot—I think you will like this, though, even if it's not related to anything—what he said about the two Steins. I had written him something about it, and he wrote me back a long letter, in which he started out by saying, Gertrude Stein was a horrid proto-Hebraic woman, [laughs] and then ended up, she was utterly different from her brother Leo, who is in certain ways, as near to Christ, as any man I've ever known, but dull to a degree that, if I go to heaven, it will be because I stood him for those 40 years [laughs].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: That's marvelous. That's just marvelous.

GEORGE BIDDLE: He could be very good fun.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Well, you've got an atmosphere in a sentence like that, quick. Rapier—

GEORGE BIDDLE: I never quite know what he meant by a proto-Hebraic woman, because she was a great power complex, you know.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: She was a Byzantine, but I never thought of her as being proto-Hebraic.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Did you know them in Paris?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, I knew her once, but it was—it lasted a lifetime. I thought she was as massive and powerful and devious as a Roman Cardinal. She had that fine face, you know, great block of—and watching me all the time, I could feel that. George Antile [ph] took me there. And they brought out—there was high-brow talk, I was getting a little more silent all the time. She brought out a lot of rather witty dirty little drawings of Picasso; huge private parts, you know, and all that kind of thing. Little, tiny quick sketches, but amusing, but nothing more. And they would pour over them, you know, as if they were looking at something out of Leonardo's sketchbook, you know, one by one, very slowly and very carefully. Antile [ph] would say, Wonderful feeling for lines. And, you know, The weight she puts into the shoulder. And it rather—it rather irritated me, and we started shouting at each

other. She said, The trouble with you is you're too much of a lawyer; you'll never do anything in art.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: What'd she say?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yeah, she was a sly old thing, you know, she [laughs]—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Like a battering ram. [Laughs.] Maybe that's what he meant by proto-Hebraic type or—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, proto just means arch—

[Cross talk.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Inaudible] of a kind—

GEORGE BIDDLE: What? [Inaudible.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Arch. Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Arch-Jewish. I didn't think she was, in any sense, [Hebraic -Ed.]. She was power, power complex.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Devious.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. But the—yeah. Of course, you saw Santayana in Italy wasn't that?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: As you did [cross talk] Berenson.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Same year I saw as—same time I met Berenson, yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Which is a wholly different atmosphere, in its way, than Paris, isn't it? I mean, you know—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Quite.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Even though you can surround yourself with lovely things, as Berenson did, the—what is it—the prevailing winds that blow in Italian psychic development are wholly different than those that blow in a Parisian.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, I'm not quite sure I know what you mean, but I—as Paris—I was a young student—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —sucking up everything I could get in my contemporaries.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And when I was in Italy 10 years ago, I was just there to paint.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And here was the chance of casually meeting half a dozen terribly interesting people.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: On the side.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: But, from Berenson, I got—I think I started by mentioning him—that same feeling for scholarly rectitude that Mary Cassatt had.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Well, you—scholarly rectitude is good, because it's been something that you've been able to discern thereafter. Like, ten years ago, finding something quite comparable to—

[01:55:09]

GEORGE BIDDLE: He influenced me.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: His passion for life. His passion for life, art.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, how—let's see, we've mentioned Santayana, philosopher, a writer; Berenson, a—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Critic—art critic. Humanist, humanist

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Deeper than—a collector of humans and experience.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Also.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Quite, quite.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: A woman who had her hand at the tiller of whatever tiller she could grab hold of, Gertrude Stein. Leo Stein, who was somewhat different. But in this kind of galaxy, how would a Pascin?

GEORGE BIDDLE: How are they?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, how was—how were the Pascin, whom you did know, and whose radiance and influence in art—

GEORGE BIDDLE: I missed that one word, how is the—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Pascin.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Oh, Pascin, oh, yes, yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: How does he fit in this galaxy?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, yes, I—he was utterly different.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Laughs.] Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: He was exactly my age.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And I just loved him.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And for some curious reason, he became very fond of me, I think. He—I'll tell you how I met him, I—there was a little gallery called the New Gallery where I exhibited a lot of my work. They had modern French and modern American. This is 1922, something of that sort, '23. And Naumberg [ph], who is an old—one of the old owners of the gallery, he didn't take much active part in it, told me if I went over there and met Pascin—I had a letter to him from Hunt Diederich—he said, I'd like to buy two or three at this price. And I think Hunt Diederich had also give me a letter to Pascin, yes. So, I met him that way, and I'd seen his drawings, seen his paintings, admired them very much, and so I met him.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Went to his studio—went to his studio, asked him out to lunch, and I got to like him more and more. And he had a curious identification with America, the way so many foreigners have. You know, he became an American citizen, and he felt romantic about

America, tremendously romantic.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And he had a passion for American caricaturists. The newspaper men, you know, newspaper cartoonists.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And so, we just—and he was in the little coterie that would turn up at the *Dôme*, and my apartment was about four blocks away, and so I saw as much of him as I could.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And at one time, both of us organized an exhibition of the Americans in Paris, some half a dozen. I think that may have been Paul Burlin and Maurice Sterne. Who else? An American called Barber [ph], who was a Romanian living in Paris most of his life, he was on the early old Masses. And two or three others, and I saw him in that. Pascin said, If you get an exhibition here, I know a gallery in Vienna where we can org—where they'd like to have us, and so forth. So, I saw a great deal of him, and then when he came to America, he spent a couple of weeks with me in Croton, here. I was living across the street then. And so, I was devoted to him, and I really loved him.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: He also stayed—

GEORGE BIDDLE: He was completely degenerate.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I beg your pardon, you were saying?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I was going to say he remained—lived in the Brooklyn Heights.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes. Yes, he did. He lived in that—where—what's his—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Easter Field.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Easter Field; had a block of houses there—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —and Kuniyoshi and others lived there, Maurice Sterne.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Maurice Sterne.

GEORGE BIDDLE: He was there somewhere. He was—when I said he was a degenerate, that he was hypersensitive, hypersensitive.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mmm.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And very much essentially an aristocrat and a gentleman. He had great feeling for what is a gentleman.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: He claims that he ran away from home because he didn't like his parents; they came from a good bourgeois, I think, Bulgarian family, Romanian family that were born in [the Droubouja, is that the right name? -Ed.], something of that sort. He spoke Romanian, I think, and Bulgarian.

[02:00:12]

He claims that he ran away from home and lived in a house of prostitution because it was pleasant for him and he drew pictures. It all—it was—I think, to a great extent, he liked to build up this fantasy.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

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GEORGE BIDDLE: He certainly made his reputation on synthesis. It was before he ever came to Munich. And when I went to Paris in '23, he would be among the top 20 best, you know, with Picasso and Matisse and the rest of the crowd. But always—he loved bums, and he loved parties, and he loved being hospitable, and paying [the bill for the -Ed.] a crowd, white wine, Come along with us, the 20 of us, we're going into the night, you know. And I think it was all destroying something in his childhood because his whole life is a contradiction. He was this hyper-gentle and sophisticated. And when he started drinking, you'd think of him as rather bestial.

I know we had a little spat once, which is fairly characteristic. We were all at some dance at Bob Chandler's [ph] or someplace, [at some party in Brooklyn -Ed.], and I went home early. And my wife stayed, another wife [Jane Belo -Ed.], and she was young and rather liked to be provocative. And anyway, she did something that got on his nerves, and he knocked her down at the dance. I heard about this the next day. And, of course, he had been staying with me, and I rather resented it. And he—I've forgotten whether he wrote me or not, or whether we wrote each other, but quite stiff our relation was.

And I had an exhibition at Kraushaar, and was sitting there once after it opened. And he came in, and we nodded to each other in a very [laughs] formal sort of a way. But I noticed he went in and stood for almost five minutes in front of each picture, you know, then would go back and see another one. Then he left and nodded to me, and I nodded to him without smiling. And he wrote me a letter once and said, "Oh, let's forget this," something of that sort. "And I am giving a party in Brooklyn, and won't you come?"

Well, it was a terrible party. He had disguised himself, I would say, as an old syphilitic London whore. But he looked like it. Anyway, he had some sort of a bonnet on and black dress, purple spots all over his face. But he came up and embraced me on both cheeks [laughs], and then said, "Now it's all over." And I think that was his way, you know, of saying, I think Biddle is awful fussy and stupid, you know, but he's a terribly nice fellow, and I'm not going to let it interfere with our friendship. And wrote me a very sweet letter just before he—I think a week before he committed suicide. He knew I was building this house. He said, I will come and sit beside you. He wrote it in his very queer English. "Not do very much work. Pick up stones to help, but only little stones in case you get plenty white wine." [They laugh.] His liver was so bad he couldn't drink anything but white wine.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And then, poor chap—I had one letter from him where he told me that if I was interested in Khmer [ph] art, there was an article in the public library that I should look up. It was all those funny little surprises.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: He was—I think American artists all loved him. All of them.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes, he had radiation, didn't he? And influence and—

GEORGE BIDDLE: He talked in this slow, crackly voice, very slow, and terribly witty. He would say absurdly funny things, but he always looked as if he was going to burst out crying. I remember I'd introduced him to a much older artist at the *Dôme* once who heard about him in America. And he got up right away, you know. Pascin says, Sit down. I am not a debutante. [Laughs.] And I remember once—you don't mind these silly little anecdotes?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No.

GEORGE BIDDLE: It's hard to convey his charm.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: That's the sunshine that illuminates the man.

[00:04:56]

GEORGE BIDDLE: I was giving a party, not rough, but gay, with lots of white wine. Prohibition. And Alec [ph] Brook and Peggy Bacon and others were all around, Louis Bouché. And at the very last moment, my older brother came in, who was a very strange man. He

had a wax moustache, and he looked rather Eastern European [early Victorian -Ed.]. He might have been Bulgarian or something of that sort. May have been a little Celtic. I have Celtic blood. But he spent almost an hour with Pascin, telling him how to properly frame pictures. He had one of these extroverted memories, and he never stopped talking. And halfway through the meal, somebody put—gave him a second helping of meat or something, and Moncure [my brother -Ed.] was talking so fast he didn't notice what had happened and looked down and saw this on his plate and turned to Pascin, who'd been sitting silently, admiring him all through the meal, and said, Well, what'll I do with this? And Pascin said, You do this. And he took a very small piece of meat out of my brother's dish and said, I will put it right here. Put it on my brother's knee. Nothing else. [They laugh.]

That may not strike you funny but, I mean, with the situation is—Moncure woke up out of—just as if he'd been kicked in the stomach—out of this long dissertation, and then to have this happen to him.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: It was an incongruity, yeah. [They laugh.] But he was—as you put it, he was a gentle person.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Very gentle, very gentle, except when he drank. And then he got these terrible attacks of persecution.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Very angry. His voice would rise and get very shrill and angry, and always because somebody had been persecuting him, some dealer or something.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: He did it twice with me. Not about me personally, but—well, once it's this—I told you, this old Naumburg [ph] had sent me to buy his pictures. And Naumburg [ph] had said, "Buy as many as you can at \$200," I don't know. And when I saw this to me—Pascin—I had gotten him out of bed. And he came—he had—he had a nightgown, and it wasn't very long, so he was trying to pull it down over his crotch. And there were some cold chops on a plate, and everything was quite in disarray. And I showed him the—I just showed him the letter—we talked in French together—from Hunt Diederich. And then he said, Sit down, or something and Can we see each other? And then I had to also mention Naumburg [ph] to him. And then he just hit the ceiling. Perfect fury.

And it simply was that he had been poor in New York and wanted to sell his things, and Naumburg [ph] said, That's too much, you know, or something, and it bothered him. And he did the same in—it isn't worth repeating, except it's so tragic with many artists' friends, what makes them—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: In this case, it was a very good gallery that had offered to show our group, a little show. And Rosenberg—this dealer, [Paul's -Ed.] brother, Leon Rosenberg—had offered to write the forward. And Pascin was going by the *Dôme* once, and I called him over and said, Oh, by the way, did you get that notice? And he hit the ceiling again. And, you know, "I'll have nothing to do with it, and to hell with all of them, and I've been insulted." And I said, anyway, what was—what was the matter? That he'd gotten one of these blanks, saying "If you—as you are joining the group," you know, "to exhibit X, would you mind filling out the enclosed questionnaire? Name, age, what the, you know, your dealer, who—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. It's a strange thing, isn't it?

GEORGE BIDDLE: It's—it's laughable if it wasn't tragic because it shows what a gulf of something there is just barely covered up.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. What sort of influence did he have on the young artists?

GEORGE BIDDLE: I would say—although you'd find it very hard to put your finger on it—

that there were a number, to my knowledge, who were definitely came on his influence. They would be Alec [ph] Brook and Peggy Bacon and Kuniyoshi and John Barber and Ganso.

[00:10:07]



Now I can mention those off the bat. And you might have a little difficulty, but I can show you things on Brook, a certain drawing where you'd say, Oh, I see what you mean. I see what you mean. Because all these—or several of these were very definite personalities.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: It was more his approach. First of all, his refusal to take art seriously. He's drawing all the time.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: No, art had to be a joke with him. I mean, he'd do a painting of Max Eastman's wife when he stayed out here with me. And then she would say, Would you pose for me? And he'd think that would be a wonderful idea. "So, well, but then we'd have to exchange portraits. You'd have to give me your portrait and I'll give you mine."

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Hmm.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And that was a joke.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Hmm.

GEORGE BIDDLE: He did one—there was a speakeasy in New York—I have the address—where he told me the joy when he stayed with me that he was getting his meals and wine free because this speakeasy had said that he was an artist. And the man said, Could you do a mural here for me in my speakeasy? And Pascin said, Sure, but I'm not going to do it for nothing. Well, then this fellow was awful shrewd and tough, and he bargained him down, said he wouldn't pay him a cent except he could have red wine, you know, and cold cuts. Well, Pascin then thought it was perfectly wonderful. He spent a month there. [Laughs.] And he did a wonderful thing, and covered that whole wall. It was called *Lot and His Wife*.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And Lot was almost a self-portrait. This drunken old Pascin sitting at a table, a little French iron table. And then there were these angels, beautiful, life size, hovering above him, do you know. They were the ones that seduced him, do you know. And it was really quite beautiful. It was done—the paint—it was just squeezed onto of the wall almost, very different from his sensitive, delicate little things. But it was obviously Pascin. And so there was a terrible time [inaudible]. [The owner of the restaurant couldn't get rid of him. -Ed.] They couldn't get him out, you know. They were going to get the police or something. It was lasting too long. [They laugh.]

But that kind of thing. Now, some of the beatniks painters might do that nice, but the [inaudible] [very famous -Ed.] artists wouldn't do that, would we? Not the Bellows or the Speichers and the—you know, it's bad form that—we get paid. No one would appreciate, but he never—he left me some 30 of his drawings when he left. He said one he wouldn't sell, he said it was so bad. I had a Colored girl, old lady, very religious and very proper. I forget her name, Sarah [ph]. And I said—we'd always get models to draw each other or something. I said, Let's get Sarah [ph]. So I called her in. And she stood thinking it over for a long time and then said, I have to go dress. And she came down in about half an hour, and she dressed in purple velvet with gloves on and sat. She might have been Queen Victoria. And it was a pretty bad drawing he did of her. And he said, I won't sign this. And I said, Why not? And he said, Well, I was so terrified I didn't dare look at Sarah [ph] and I didn't dare look at my own drawing." [Laughs.] And it really was a very bad, it was a weak—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: But no, he was joyous that way. He was always looking for a party, always, "let's get up a party." He was—he was—he was a rough hand, you know, *la vie de bohème*.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: We better think about getting to the station.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Oh, heavens. What time does it go?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Five—two minutes after five.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Oh, gosh. Oh, my. Listen, you can [inaudible] here.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Why?

GEORGE BIDDLE: That is terrible because, oh, I—

[Audio break.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Last—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Is that close enough?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Last week we talked about the Mexican muralists, and then got off into some—oh, attempting to assess the quality of Pascin as a man, as aliveness, as a center of interest, and as having a kind of flavorful effect on the young American artists.

[00:15:11]

And we terminated our talk about him with a—with a—with a series of anecdotes to illustrate his interest in parties, the strange punctuation he gave to human experience, like the piece of meat, I believe, on—was it your brother's knee at the dinner table?

GEORGE BIDDLE: It was.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I mean, wonderful things, illuminating the—

GEORGE BIDDLE: His whimsy.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes, the gentle whimsy. And then we abruptly terminated—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Acute. Acute.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Were you going to ask any particular—were you—had you finished?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No, I thought we had interrupted rather abruptly so that we could catch the train, last week.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, yes, yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And I wondered whether, you know, in the summary I've given whether I've done disservice to what it is you had in mind to do about Pascin.

GEORGE BIDDLE: About Pascin.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Because he did have his radiation and influence on you as a—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, as you were talking, I was thinking that apparently—I was speaking most about a—speaking about him mostly as a human being and not as an artist.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mmm.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And I was just trying to think these last few moments what was the particular thing in him that had most influence on Americans. And I think it was possibly this: that what he had to give came out as completely easily and freely as turning water—as turning on a spigot and let the water run out.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: You think of certain artists and perhaps—

[Audio break.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Okay. All right.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I think we often think of many artists, especially American artists, as being constipated in their work. That is, there's a stoppage. There's not an easy flow. And Pascin at

his most disintegrated had diarrhea. I mean, the flow became so fast, you know, that there was no serious control of it. But I would think that freedom he had gave his friends a feeling of power that they could respond easily to any impulse in life, respond creatively.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: Then he had also a certain ease of touch, a certain facility that a good many artists, I think, picked up unaware of—little mannerisms that weren't important. But I think this other—his ability to respond completely freely. As if it wasn't any more important than just entering a conversation. It must have had a very loosening and stimulating effect on anybody who knew him well.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mmm.

GEORGE BIDDLE: He drew as easily and freshly as people talk. He was always organizing little groups to draw, or to do caricatures, to take in different themes. And I think all this gave American artists a feeling of freedom and looseness, the ones that knew him.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: He had exquisite taste in his sense of tone, of color values, of atmosphere. And it always came utterly spontaneously, subconsciously. You felt that, as an artist, his reaction to nature—and, fundamentally, he was an Impressionist. He had two sides. He was an Impressionist in his reaction to his model, the immediate reaction. It flowed out of the tips of his fingers. And then he was an illustrator in that he could switch that current off and do things out of his head.

[00:20:05]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Hmm.

GEORGE BIDDLE: With an equal ease.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: But always acute and utterly sensitive. His line from the very beginning—his weakness was that he never attempted control. He was the exact opposite of Degas. He never wanted—he never used the line that would bind like an iron band about the form he wanted. And as he became—as he went more and more to pieces as a human being—drink, disease, everything—his line got looser and looser. So at the end I suppose it was almost fair to say it was an almost meaningless scribble of an insane man of genius.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Hmm. You knew him over what period of time?

GEORGE BIDDLE: I met him in 1923 in Paris, when I had a letter to him and through two or three friends, Hunt Diederich and others that he'd known in America.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: Because he always had groups of artists round him. And then I knew him and exchanged letters with him, but I wasn't—but he wasn't living with me or staying with me until just a few weeks before his death.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And this was in this country too, because he—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, he stayed with me in this country for several weeks at one time, in Croton, when I was living with another wife [Jane Belo -Ed.]. He did a painting of her. I asked him to. At first, he refused to be paid for it. I insisted on it. And he kept on refusing and finally offered—and finally suggested a very generous price, rather more than I expected it would be. But he—I've seen letters that he wrote to Per Krohg's wife [Lucy -Ed.], with whom he was living at the time. And they revealed to me a side of his nature that I hadn't realized at all, and that was how his deeply serious, sensitive appreciation and analysis of his own work.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: He speaks about it in one of his letters as being extremely interested in

her as a model. He said, I usually sleep late because we've had too much red wine the night before and start working at 10:00 and then stop for a couple of hours and play for the rest of the day. And then he goes on to mention the facts that he's becoming more and more interested in the canvas because the shadows—reflected shadows, cast from the color of her dress, you know, makes an interesting quality on the brown floor or something of that sort.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: But very sensitively, and it recalls very much his light, easy, butterfly-wing quality of color that just flutters over the surface. Like many artists, he was a dangerous one to be too much influenced by because he had just that touch of personal genius where you could get something from his general approach but might be—and he did, of course, injure a lot of second-rate artists by trying actually to copy him, to be too much influenced by him.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. Did he work quickly? That is, once on the canvas?

GEORGE BIDDLE: He worked the way he talked, as if it was sort of an easy, fluttering conversation. He'd talk and stop and have a drink of wine and a few touches on the canvas and a joke with the model. And it was the most completely subconscious expression of almost anybody I know.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: It was—it was effortless. And I think it was that effortless quality of the creative artist, which is so rare, and which had a vivifying effect on anybody that knew him.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mmm.

GEORGE BIDDLE: The feeling that intuition doesn't come from gritting your teeth or praying. It's—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: That's interesting.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —something that either is there or it isn't.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. But from what you've said, he was an etheric [ph] person, an outgoing and out-giving person.

[00:25:02]

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, like—I could say that, as so few people, and like George Grosz in an utterly different way, you felt that during his waking moments he was never for an instant dead. There was always something churning, except it didn't—churn would be a better word to use with Grosz. With him it bubbled.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mmm. Did he have a capacity for outrage?

GEORGE BIDDLE: He had, as I think I said last time, this rather—he could—especially when he was drinking and toward the rest of his life when he became—end of his life when he became more and more moody, he would get excessively violent. Attacks of persecution.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: But I fancy he might—I fancy that even as a child he may have been subject to these—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: —fits.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Even the stories he probably invented about himself suggest that he had a rather frightful childhood.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: His running away from home, the way he—disparaging way in which he

always talked about his parents and background as a rather bourgeois quality that he wanted to escape and have nothing to do with. He tells there, again, I think it's probably apocryphal that some of his family—I can't—I think it was his brother came to look him up in Budapest and found him in a house of prostitution. Pascin goes on and embroidered a little bit by saying that he begged his brother to meet some of the girls, and that sort of thing, and join the party. But I think building up all those little fanciful—what I assume were fanciful stories was really—probably suggests a pretty bitter childhood.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, you know, he's a seminal figure.

GEORGE BIDDLE: He hated anything that he thought of as—a little like Hunt Diederich that way—as successful or polished or accepted.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: The crowd were with him [he always had a crowd of hangers-on -Ed.]. There were always artists, but rarely very fine artists. Much more in America than French. But he always liked to drag along, oh, little prostitutes and odds and ends and anybody who would allow themselves to be treated to his white wine.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: He loved life.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, and it's very hard to give the correct impression because he loved it in a very sensitive way.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: But he was always keeping the nice side of him down [he always hid his best side -Ed.]. And so they'd come out very unexpectedly. When he told me once to go to the New York Public Library if I wanted to look up some very interesting article in some bulletin on Thai art. The letter he wrote to Per Krohg's wife about the qualities of color in the background of the portrait he was doing that made it interesting.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: The way—when I took him on a walk up Spitzenberg Mountain here, which is, oh, 7[00], 800 feet high or less, and he sat on the top and immediately started talking about some of Brueghe's landscapes, the fields and squares below, you know.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: In the snow. All that side of him showed that sensitive intellectual who was very much ashamed of it unless it came out with a few dirty stories or drinks. And he really was never dirty. He was obscene when he was drunk, but he had too sense a—he had too keen a sense of what real humor is to be—he couldn't afford to be just dirty.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Right. Right. There is that fine distinction too.

GEORGE BIDDLE: You see it in his caricatures of Negresses in Cuba and—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Right.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —cowboys, that I always thought were—in a sense, were his best things. I don't think I was right. I think his best things were his particular creation of a side of girlhood. The Lolita, the little Lolita prostitute, and [apt to be (ph)] a pervert but had something sweet and sensitive and delicate always about—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: —his portrayal of that side of life.

[00:30:27]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And no moralizing in it at all, I'm sure. He was—he was incapable of that.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Oh, yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: His point of view was too ruggedly honest, I would think.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: It was European. There was nothing moralistic about it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Good. Of course this was in an era of expanding acquaintance, you know, the people that dot the landscape of one's own experience landscape, that not the bread of life, become the yeast of life, you know, the interesting thing. He's such of person, that's part of the yeast, the bubbling qualities, the—

GEORGE BIDDLE: The human being.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: The aliveness.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, I think it was a very exciting, stimulating period from 1912 on till 1925 and then again in the utterly different period that followed. The—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: —New Deal days of the consciousness of America of their own country, and their own art.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. In this same period, 1923 to, say, oh, 1929, roughly, did you know Max Weber? [Inaudible]—

[Cross talk.]

GEORGE BIDDLE: I don't think I knew him so well. I'd met him just about that time. And I got to know him through the years. And at odd moments, usually at artists' meetings, the Artists' Union or the Artists' Congress, I got to know him best. He came out here three or four years before he died, I think, and I did a portrait of him. He spent a week with me. So then we'd take walks together in the afternoon. I got to know him very well.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: I think by and large what I remember most about Max Weber were—first of all, he could write, and has written me some of the most beautiful, poetic, spiritual letters —

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mmm.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —that I've ever gotten from any human being. The—on a spiritual level you'd think that would—could be appreciated by a man like Emerson.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: Just the spiritual beauty of life and the high place that art had and its whole significance to him.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Hmm.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And yet at the same time he could be due entirely to a deep-rooted persecution complex. And Bill Zorach—who knew him very, very well, possibly as well as any other artist friend of his—feels the same thing: that all his life Max could be the most warm, affectionate, honorable, lovable friend, and two minutes later could be capable of the most incredible jealousy, meanness, lack of generosity toward artist friends, toward the—toward his dealers, toward the museums that had helped him most.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: You think of this in a way as qualities of innocence. And I remember once

how surprised I was when the same innocence was brought out in some very important meeting of the Artists' Congress. I always get confused for a moment, the Artists' Congress and Artists' Union. This was the Artists' Congress. They broke it up. And what broke it up was the internecine quarrels between the Trotskyites and the Stalinites, which finally, for some reason or the other, burst into the open. And a lot of the members who had vaguely heard of this, as I had, made pretty strong, angry speeches about it.

[00:35:02]

And Max afterwards came up to me and said, George, it's impossible that this kind of thing is going on, that the— Because he was very left wing. He was probably one of these idealistic Communists himself, not necessarily a member of the party, but in sympathy. And I proved to him that it was going on and that that's what was breaking up the Artists' Congress. And he was simply deeply shocked. He couldn't understand it. He was like a bewildered child that couldn't believe that there could be such duplicity, you know, in any art organization.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Hmm.

GEORGE BIDDLE: But the week he spent with me out here, where he could be utterly sweet and candid, loveable, and then he'd walk up and down. We'd take long walks together, with his head shrunk between his shoulders, just pouring out bile against the Modern Museum, because—which had given him, I think, his—I think he was one of the first Americans that was exhibited there—because they were everything. They were shoddy and dishonest and hypocritical. About his early dealers. And he fought with all of them. He fought with Mrs. Halpert, and then he was with Rosenberg, he fought with him. And I think finally came back to Mrs. Halpert again. And the people who knew him best I think realized this. His friends did.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. But he was quite early on the scene, trained in Europe in a way. One of the—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, he was one—I think he exhibited—I'm pretty sure—at the 1913 exhibition.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. And I think the first—

GEORGE BIDDLE: He, Marguerite Zorach, Paul Burlin.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: One or two others.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. Some from the Henri school exhibited. Sloan.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, but they're all dead. Most of them are dead, though.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But Weber had Stieglitz as his dealer quite early.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes. Now, I never remember Stieglitz talking about Max, so I don't know what their eventual relation was.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: They had a falling out.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, you'd expect—you'd expect it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. But Charles Dana of the Newark Museum was the one who I think gave Max Weber the first one-man show that he had. Quite early.

GEORGE BIDDLE: That might have been when he was connected with Edith Halpert, because she had connections with the Newark Museum. I didn't know whom. I thought it might have been Cahill.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Eddie Cahill?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Because he was out there.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: But when I'm not sure. It was just that time.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mmm. Well, Max—did you see him paint or his work? Do you have any comment about his work?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, I've always had the—I would place him among the four or five artists of that group that I considered the finest. He never particularly influenced me because it wasn't quite up my alley.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: But I thought of him, and Maurice Sterne, and Kuniyoshi, and Charlie Demuth, Marin, and the sculptors: Bill Zorach, Lachaise, Baumann. I can't think of any others that I'd put quite with that group, but I thought these were the high-water mark of that generation.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. It's interesting that your comment about his—the quality of his correspondence, having that spiritual quality.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, and I might mention too, it's rather rare, his handwriting, which has always interested me. I've always—a hand and a handwriting means as much to me as a face. I don't actually read them, but you can't read a face. You react to them, and I react to people's hands in the same way, and handwritings. He had the large, round, solid, beautifully formed handwriting that you think of as belonging to somebody with a character like the Founding Fathers: Adams, Washington.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:39:58]

GEORGE BIDDLE: That is physique, strength, well-being, poised, an extroverted attitude, wholesomeness. And, of course, he had—curiously enough, there's another artist friend I have who has exactly the same kind of handwriting, and that's the St. John Perse Léger [ph]. Got beautiful handwritings. It's not a bit what we associate with the—with the artistic handwriting. It doesn't show humor, which is the rather jiggly, wiggly hand. It doesn't show much sensitivity, and it doesn't show softness, which I think in many ways Max was a soft man. I mean, he could be easily swayed, he was sentimental, romantic. And this had all the apparently opposite qualities.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, he was a—retrospectively, he's great. You know, his painting is just—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes. It wasn't, I say, up my alley because he was—he had something, well, I think you'll understand it when I say it was much closer to German Expressionism at its best than it would be to an artist like Degas or Pascin.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: Who stemmed from a very different school.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure.

GEORGE BIDDLE: The controlled line—the line.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And that was always the school that had mostly the artists with whom I felt more affinity. Now, Maurice Sterne would stand a little bit between the two types. He was essentially a draftsman. Very bold, fine draftsman. But it was also—it was the expressionistic line. And he was a painter's painter. But it also was the kind of paint that—like Max Weber's, that had an affinity, let's say, with German Expressionism rather than the—than the *bonne patte* of the French school, of the traditional school.



HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. When did you bump into Maurice Sterne?

GEORGE BIDDLE: I think—yes, I met him by correspondence in France in 1923 when Pascin and myself organized this little American group. And he was living in Anticoli Corrado at the time. And I wrote to him, and he came up to Paris that spring. I think that's when I first met him. And then we—over the years, we saw a lot of each other. We were going to, both of us spend a year together in Anticoli in 1930, just after my marriage. And at the last moment, after I got over there with my wife, I got a cablegram from him saying that he wasn't able to come. We lived in his house. He turned his house over to us. But he was also a man in many ways like Max Weber. He had—well, not quite. He was much more complicated. There was—in the nice sense of the word, there was a—there was a Byzantine side to Maurice's nature. He was subtle.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: A little devious, a little sadistic. He could be cruel in his remarks about people. He could be—he knew how to destroy a man's reputation in a few gently, gently worded sophisticated phrases. And he would only want to destroy him if he felt that the person whom he was talking about was competing too seriously with himself. On the other hand, he had great sweetness.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: Affection. Generosity, at times. He was a subtle and complicated man. He told me that perhaps as a result of his early struggle in New York when he was really poor, that he developed certain phobias or terrors that lasted all his life. He said that one time he was unable to drive—go into—get into a subway because it made him sick at his stomach, just pure nervousness.

[00:45:21]

Another much better example: after he spent two years doing the mural for the Department of Justice, and owing to the weakness, if you want, or—on the Section of Fine Arts at the time, or the pressure brought on them by some Catholic power groups, his mural was turned down. And he told me this quite unexpectedly once. It just cropped up out of the conversation, and I was quite horrified and said, Well, Maurice, what are you going to do about it? And he said, Oh, George, I'm just too tired and sick. I wouldn't be capable of doing anything about it. Well, that shows in a way this other side of his, the hypersensitive, the easily discouraged, under this façade of the—of the successful, powerful artist that could always dominate his audience. A man who at bottom was very fragile.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Hmm.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And I finally—to cut a long story short, I told my brother about it, who was Attorney General then, and he was able to bring the right sort of political pressure and tact to bear on the Catholic hierarchy, and gave them to understand that there was nothing—that their conception of Maurice's mural was simply a mistaken one. That there was nothing that could in any way be offensive to the Catholic dogma in it. And so the thing was straightened out. But that gave me a very deep insight into the—and I really—I don't think I ever got to love Maurice because he was a person who was too subtle to ever give himself away.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Although he had many friends, and many devoted friends and admirers. Was really when he was almost on his deathbed, he was—couldn't leave his bed for about a year—and I visited him once. And he told me this—well, he said something so charming, I thought, about himself, in his queer Russian Jewish accent that he'd never entirely gotten rid of. He said, You know, George, when I was a young man, I was very proud of my body, and I thought it quite beautiful. I was quite vain about it. And then when I got sick recently, I felt very badly that my body was not very nice to me. And I frankly could not stand it. But now we have been in bed together for a year, and we have gotten used to each other again, [inaudible]. [And we understand each other much better. -Ed.].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And I thought, any man with that gentle, philosophic sense of humor, you

know that there was something—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes, yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —very fine about him.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: He was a man of learning, deep culture, deep sophistication. He was an omnivorous reader.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: I lived in his house, and that's one way of getting a man to see books that are scattered round on his shelves. He had an understanding of music. He never could write well. That again was his inability to extrovert his own expression dealing with life. He wrote one little chapter that came out in *The New Yorker*, which was charming. It was his life as a boy. I've forgotten just what it said. But then he kept accumulating notes, and I don't think he ever would have been able to finish it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

[00:50:23]

GEORGE BIDDLE: He showed me passages of it, but it suggested this man who under—who behind a not entirely pleasant façade, a little byzantine, a little oversophisticated, not warm, not outgoing. It suggested a man who was perhaps just a little timid.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: Very gentle and appreciating the finer things of life. And perhaps protecting himself with the kind of things he could do, which were sometimes quite unpardonable. I remember once a lot of artists were—had gone up to—this must have been about 1930, when George Grosz had first come to America.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And we were all sitting in Maurice Sterne's bedroom. He had a suite, and having gin together with friends. Just a group of artists, been to some exhibition or something, night. And I had said—Grosz recently told me that he had an exhibition in Philadelphia. I said, How much did you sell? I said—he said, Well, just one painting. But I had good reviews. And I said, Well, what do you price your pictures at? And he said, Oh, \$175. Well, I turned toward the group and said, Isn't it shocking that a man of this reputation comes to America and he can't sell enough in a year to buy himself liquor? And then Maurice broke into the conversation, said, Well, I don't think that's so strange because after all it's the Depression. And we, all of us, have to reduce our prices. He said, Just recently I was forced to sell a small oil for \$2,000, and my dealer wants me now to reduce my drawings to almost nothing at all, a few hundred dollars. There [inaudible] somehow the need of protecting himself [to build himself up -Ed.] in public.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Hmm. Was he armed with self-knowledge?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Self-knowledge?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, how—what do you judge from anecdotes like that? I could only say he's a very complicated man.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: He could be gentle and sweet. He had men and women who adored him.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mmm.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I always thought the reason why women loved him—he had that—he could always bring out the mother complex. He needed a mother from everybody he met.

And he was a very attractive man.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: Intellectually and physically.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: No, I think he was just—and I say I loved Maurice.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: But you can love lots of people that have their weaknesses.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure. Sure.

GEORGE BIDDLE: He had the highest standards in his art. There's no question about that. And that is a thing that is rare, especially when it goes with intelligence. I think there are lots of people that have standards. But a standard doesn't mean much unless there's a deep understanding backing it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I don't think Maurice has much influence on other artists, any more than Max Weber did. Perhaps less because their work, in a way—although Maurice in a way was an academician.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: He started out as something that—his Bali work was completely, oddly, of the new movement. But then he reverted more and more to something—and finally, the last years of his life, the beautiful seascapes that he did up on Cape Cod were in a sense pure Impressionism.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: But somehow neither of them were artists that were easy to imitate. Perhaps it was because both of them were Expressionists.

[00:55:10]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: In the deep, broad sense of the word. And you can't copy an Expressionist as easy as a man with a—with a formula.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No.

GEORGE BIDDLE: They were both splendid painters, they were. And it's harder to copy a man who's just a brilliant painter, who's not an academic painter or a tricky [ph] painter.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: They were both the explosive type of painter.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Not only that, but the genuine subtleties are difficult to emulate.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Even on a clear day it's difficult. Those—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, you could copy a man like Kuniyoshi, and people did, because he had—you could say he had a formula.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: Now, if you ask me what Max Weber's formula was, I wouldn't quite know except you always recognized a Max Weber.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Right.

GEORGE BIDDLE: In his drawing, in his—the way he drew a little nude. You knew right away it's Max Weber.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Both those men were very generous in—because—I mention it because some artists are not in giving their work—in exchanging their work.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Now, George Grosz, who I think really was much fonder of me than either of them, I always would have liked to exchange something with him. And I always could feel that he didn't want to exchange.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Perhaps with anybody. But on the other hand, I got infinitely more grateful and passionately warm letters from George than I did from either Max or Maurice with the—whose approach was, let's say, a little more sophisticated, a little more controlled.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Grosz was much more of a child of the three.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: What—his—he came here in '31? Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, it must have been. Yes, because I was—a little later, I think—later, yes, because I had just come back from Europe, was living in this house with my wife. And it was then that he must have come back in '33, '34, something of that sort.

And whether—I must have had a letter to him, Pascin—at a guess, this is—because I contacted him right away, and he came out to see me at Croton. And from then on he became very, very warm, partly because he thought of me as a typical American. Why, I don't know. And he had a romantic yearning for identifying himself with America when he came over. He said that he'd read Fenimore Cooper when he was a boy, and he was so afraid that America had changed. In fact, he said to me, when climbing down the gangway getting off the steamer when he landed, he was saying to himself, It just can't be my America, that he was brought up on as a child. And then one of the officials at the dock said, Hey, buddy, this way for the—for your baggage, you know. And he then said, Yes. [They're all pioneers. -Ed.] He was—but he was the—he was the pure Berlin Germanic, sentimental, romantic, but deeply torn.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: How—when you think of those that you've named from, oh, Pascin and on to George Grosz, do they vary in their ability to articulate?

GEORGE BIDDLE: As in speech, in communication?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mmm.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, yes, I think very much. Now, Grosz was a man who had to talk all the time. He was always talking, and always fascinating and always in parables and images and hyperbole and imagination, do you know.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: He always saw himself in situations.

[00:59:54]

Well, let me give one tiny example I think was so charming in the way his quickness of mind, I think. I wanted—my brother was collecting—had begun to collect paintings then in a small way, and I introduced him to Grosz. I wanted him to know his work. And Grosz was showing him some of his watercolors. And one was the watercolor of a couple of bums sitting on a bench in the Central Park, and he was reading *the New York Times*. And my brother said to Grosz, jokingly, said, George, it ought to have been *the Daily Worker*. And George

immediately said, No, no. He said, First, the bums, [they don't buy newspapers -Ed.], they pick them up. And then he said, The bums, they read *New York Times* and [*the Wall Street Journal* -Ed.]. [Laughs.] And that was—Pascin could have gotten all the limelight. He was continually fermenting his mind.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Never stopped.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. What was the compulsion for conversation that Grosz had?

GEORGE BIDDLE: What was it?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. The wellspring of it?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, I would say the same wellspring that made him a great caricaturist. Cartoonist.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: He couldn't see anything without its—to me the caricaturist is a symbol-minded man.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: Very different from the—sometimes it's combined with painters as it was with Grosz, as it was with Daumier, and so forth. But he's a symbol-minded man in the sense that he sees in images, and he has a formula for an image and so that he can draw as quickly as he can talk. And his talking and drawing have a great affinity. They, both of them, are a comment on life.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And he comments with an image or he comments with words. Now, I think—and I may exaggerate this—that the painter, in contrast, is the purely visual person. And, of course, your cartoonist may be both. He may have both approaches. And whether he works from nature or completely from imagination, he's always seeing something in his retina that he's putting on paper. And the other man is using symbol.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: Now, I don't want to exaggerate that because one flows a little bit into the other, but in each case, I think of Grosz and his conversation as using symbols, identifying an idea with something. He was—he was always telling you, I have no sympathy with American workmen because they're fundamentally businessmen, or, If I come—I'm sorry I was an artist. What I—the most interesting thing in America is the businessman and Hollywood. And then he'd go off into a great—sparks would fly in the way of symbols.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: He'd see everything as something else, you know, the—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Marvelous.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And always kept you—kept you going.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure. Sure. This is, well, probing, stimulating.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Tremendously. Tremendously.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Oh, yeah. Exciting.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And in that way, Grosz was, I think, the most stimulating of the lot. He and Pascin.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Whereas Sterne—who was a very deeply intelligent man—he made you

think.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: It was philosophic. He inquired. He was probing. He wasn't shooting all over the place.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, the roman candles of life.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Pyrotechnics.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes. Yes, yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But [inaudible]—

[Cross talk.]

GEORGE BIDDLE: [Inaudible] as good as the other. One types as good as the other.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure. Real as can be.

GEORGE BIDDLE: One is shooting galvanic things at you all the time.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And the other is making you turn back into yourself and examine.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Reexamine, yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Think.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Or rethink one's thinking. Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yeah. Now, your Max Weber, if you take—if you want to continue along this line, was the—is the man that's probing at religious insight.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I think—I feel that about Bill Zorach. He's always looking for certain ultimate truths. May not be in words, but what he does to your own mind.

[01:05:05]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Goals, importances in life, the things that count.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Significant meaning.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Significant meaning. And that kind of a thing, I think, would have always irritate Pascin, you know. He would have said, I'm not significant. [Laughs.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, he was probably too busy being to worry about the consequence. That suggests shallowness, and I don't mean that.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, I think anything would frighten him with the way, being too serious.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I don't know what Pascin would have said if you said, I want to have a long religious talk with you, for instance.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Laughs.] But Weber might conceivably be receptive. Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: They'd have been receptive. I think he and—I could easily understand, he and Bill Zorach, saying, Well, George, tell me, what is it that's been troubling you?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Yeah. That's interesting. Well, how does—you know, within this Western European general flavor, how do you put the Orientalist Kuniyoshi? I better turn this over. [Laughs.]

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GEORGE BIDDLE: So that's off the bat.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Laughs.] Well, I had raised a question of sort of piecing Kuniyoshi into this general Western European impulse that you have.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes. He was very different on two or three levels. Like many Orientals, or what we think of as Orientals, and Japanese essentially, he was very sly and there was always a façade. At art meetings he used to speak what we call the Chinese English, and I think he just put that on. I think he had decided that the one reason for Kuniyoshi's popularity is dear old "Yosh" and never learned how to talk English. So I think it would automatically come out, this—he had an image of himself. And that he was—there was always a veil.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: He was politically a very astute man. And when I say a good deal of success was due to that, I don't want for a second to say that he didn't deserve it. But I think it helped him to arrive where he deserved to be, in dealing with dealers and agents and so forth. He could have a very bad temper, and friends of his have told me that he was quite cruel, and I could easily believe it. With his—with Katherine Schmidt, with his first wife, that he was perfectly capable of beating her. And it wouldn't surprise me, he had that sly [ph] quality.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: On the other hand, when you got back of all this, there was a man I don't think of any artist who had more scrupulous integrity, as only an Oriental could, about every flicker of his work. He didn't just see things in a broad way, of saying this is the best in me as Max Weber would, this—I've said what I have to say. But everything on his canvas had to be perfect. Every little bit of paint, every brushstroke, and in little things he would say to me about my work. I could realize how acute he was.

And he was once looking at a print that George Miller had made from a zinc plate that I did from a drawing on paper when I was down in Mexico, couldn't work directly on the plate. And he was very aware of the imperfections of the printing or line work, which was a little inevitable in this working that way. And in the same way his own superlatively sophisticated finish in his own work, which was never just finished because that would shock him, but it was left unfinished at just the proper moment.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: A complete sophistication of looseness and superb suavity.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And little appreciated remarks he made about some of my own work and little details that I was almost unaware of. In other words, he saw. He was a very penetrating observer. He missed nothing. I got to know him too very well. Well, in various ways. First of all, I was able to help him during the war. I've forgotten just how. I think through my brother, when passed through like any Japanese or Eastener [ph] in pretty trying times. And I thought he was very nice of him—because he's rather conceited little fellow toward the end—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: —to sit for me. To give me his time. And when he did sit, he sat, at moments very badly, so badly that I have to wash the whole thing out and begin over one day. Which infuriated him. And I said to him afterward when it was finished—or when he'd had forgotten about this altercation we had, Why did you sit for me, Yosh, anyway?

[00:05:04]

And one of the reasons he gave was—which I never would've suspected—he said, Well, one reason, you were very nice to me during the war. And he was such a detached little man. I haven't expected that at all. I think under all this, what I speak of in quotation marks is "Oriental qualities." He was a deeply patriotic American.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: He never slobbered over his sentimental feelings, romantic feelings. But I think he had a deep sense of loyalty toward America. He had great charm. He was a very wise little person, and talked very little. I remember when I first knew him, I—he would drive out with Katherine Schmidt and Alec [ph] Brook and Peggy Bacon and other friends and spend an evening with us. And they were a little group. They'd all been all together at the Art Students League, knew each other very well. He'd sit perfectly silent all evening, grunt a little bit, smile, little joke, but—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Strange fellow.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Very strange fellow.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: When these artists of which you've spoken—well, let me dilute that by saying periodically a man will dry up with reference to idea, something new. You know, reach the moment. I wonder how—or whether you know how each one of them conceivably confronted this kind of problem.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I think if I understand you—just what your question is, Kuniyoshi kept going until he was on his death bed, continually.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: He started out with the very much the whimsy, like that lovely canvas I have outside, is his cows. A tongue in his cheek. Being a little cute, a little early American. And he was very aware of it. He always knew what he was doing. And then he went on to what I think of as his French period with very beautiful, skillful use of oil paint, the glazing, and the impastos. He worked, incidentally, exactly the way I do, I think. Very, very thin. And if things went badly, well, I wash it off with turpentine and begin all over again. He would scrape down to the canvas and begin it all over again. He painted thin, although his work doesn't show it because he had such a sense of impasto and glazes that it often looks very rich and heavy but usually with Kuniyoshi's canvases, right up to the end, you can see the charcoal drawing underneath, which he fixed, you know, and it shows through, as with Pascin. As with most of my work. But it wasn't his last work, it was close to it—but a big canvas he showed at the Whitney Museum with a certain symbolism in the title, I forgot. It had to do with the period of unhappiness the world was going through.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And done in the broad, flat pastel tones have Ben Shahn. And he had been influenced by Ben Shahn. I don't know if people realize this because I saw while he was starting in this canvas he had a couple of Ben Shahn's things pinned up on his wall. And it started out very much like a Ben Shahn, in flat—and the resulting canvas is that way. In big flat spaces of pastel, high color, brilliant color. And yet it was—he could never be not himself. He would draw one hand, and you recognized the Kuniyoshi in this canvas.

So, he was growing all the time. He was getting something from—I don't think it's an original painted curiously enough. That is, when he comes to think his early work was based on American folk, and then he went on to based on contemporary French, and then he ended up being very much influenced by the Abstract work that was being done in New York, the big flat spaces.

[00:09:58]

But although he didn't, let's say, invent anything, I think he really utterly remained himself from the very beginning and with such an odor that it was different from anybody else. And at the same time growing all the time and absorbing influences roundabout him. And that's, of course, what the finest artists should be.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Well, it would appear that periodically he would change medium,



too.

GEORGE BIDDLE: He would change the use of medium.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, the use of medium. So in that way, I think you could say about Kuniyoshi that he grew from the very beginning. I think you could say that about Max Weber, I should say, except Max Weber defined himself much earlier and remained himself to the end. But I think he—and he went backward and forward to his use of blacks, pure blacks, to violent color, and from his use of the Jewish—New York Jewish idiom as subject matter to more generalized things, his nudes, and so forth. But I think you can say he grew steadily until the end.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: Maurice Sterne curiously enough, I think, reached his only creative and most exciting, and personal, original work around 1911- '12, when he was in Bali in India. Now he was born, I think, in '77, '80, so that would mean his very early 30s. And then although he always remained a fine painter, able painter, and honest painter, painter of integrity, he went back to an almost completely academic idiom, and then again slid onto something like the impressionism of Claude Monet, although it was not done in that particular mannerism. But it might've been a contemporary of somewhere in between Turner and Monet.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: Who else? George Grosz, of course, we know him so well that it's hardly worth mentioning. I think, as with the Orozco, he was one of those commentators on life that needs something in hate. And when he came from his own milieu that he loathed to a romantic setting that was not his own, he rather fell to pieces or was always casting around for something that could be his new self and never was.

But I don't think any of this is important. I always think that an artist only has one thing to give, and that's himself. And it doesn't matter much whether the personality is continuing to grow or whether he dies at 30, or whether it just stops at 30. His work will always be important just the way the early work of a very great man's important. And so the late work of a very great man can be important even though it's not his fullest expression.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But there's a distinguishing quality, I think, in a fellow like Kuniyoshi, where the continuity of growth is maintained.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, it's true. No, that is true. That is, I think it—that reminds you of something that Van Wyckt Brooks always harped on, and that is that both age important as a symbol. That is the continuing harping along on your message that somehow symbolically gives it more weight. And that with what something is very much like it, and about which he felt very strongly. And that was—what was the expression he used? He used to say about somebody he disapproved of: ["Il n'a pas de fond." -Ed.] And that—and he meant by that, a singly directed drive, a single purpose. And he felt, I think, that any man's—speaking certainly about writers or critics—that his work ought to have a beginning and an end and a continuity between the two.

[00:15:10]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mmm.

GEORGE BIDDLE: That he mustn't scatter in directions. That he must know where he's going. And so what you were just saying has its truth though I don't think it's necessarily essential. I think the more a person can develop and the more he can continue—it gives it a certain meaning, doesn't it?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Now whether you say it's more important than the man who comes to a climax and goes down or comes to a climax and stopped, wouldn't we have to admit that the thing that counts is the level which he reached?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, and the judgment here is one where we have a really insufficient basis for making. We can see a growth up and down.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And that's it. But I wonder, of these artists that you've mentioned, those who have an awareness and appreciation of the art and creativity of other artists or a set of blinders.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, I don't think that'd make a bit of difference.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: It doesn't?

GEORGE BIDDLE: I wouldn't think so. I would think that's more like the nature of the artists. I mean, an artist could be a good critic, or it's very possible that an artist doesn't know his best work. I think that'd be a fair hypothetical statement.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. You are a not a good judge, or a judge, [cross talk] good or bad—

GEORGE BIDDLE: You may or may not be. I would guess that's the truth. I think it's—when you come to something like imagination and intuition, I think it is just impossible to dogmatize. You can guess. You know what may hurt imagination.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: I think that would be fair.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: But to guess what will hurt it, I just wouldn't know.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And moreover, the thing that you have indicated with reference to the people we've talked about is the uniqueness of each expression, whether it be Sterne or—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yeah. Well, to me, that's the only thing that's important.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. And then really doesn't admit of generalization.

GEORGE BIDDLE: No, no.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No.

GEORGE BIDDLE: That's why I don't think an artist should ever be competing with anybody but himself. I don't see how he can. And that's why I think—and I've always said it, and I've written things about it too—statements about it—I think the little artists, the small stars in a certain sense is as complete as the great suns because they—that is admitting that they are themselves in a small way. Because they couldn't be anything else. That's what the French call [*un petit Maître* -Ed.]. It's unique. I think that's what the French word means. It's a unique expression, but just it's only that big.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Did Kuniyoshi, at any time so far as you're aware, make any mention of his teacher Miller?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, he did. It's funny when you said that. I was wondering if you were going to say Miller.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Miller, yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, they all did.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes, I knew they all studied with Miller.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I've forgotten what Kuniyoshi said, but as soon as you said that I assumed before you finished asking that question I was going to say you mean Kenneth H. Miller.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. Because he had a way of building up [surfaces -Ed.]—

GEORGE BIDDLE: I know. There must have been three or four more of that group that spoke

of what Kenneth H. Miller meant to them.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: So, he just period—[the influence -Ed.] he had on young artists. He must have been—for young artists, he must have been a great teacher. I knew him when I was older, when I wasn't his student. And I guessed it was pretty well on around 1935—or later, somewhere in there—when I had an exhibition at the Association of American Artists—this is as I remember it—and we had a very friendly talk together, and he said to me, George, would you like me some time to tell you what I think about your work? And then he gave me—I said, I'd like it very much. And he gave me a long schoolteacher-ish, serious, kindly talk.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:20:17]

GEORGE BIDDLE: You know, "I like very much this quality, and you're drawing here is this—excellent. But on the other hand, don't you think it's a pity that—and I believe here things you might improve." And I couldn't take it very seriously one way or the other. I felt whether I agreed with him or not, at this stage, it doesn't mean much to me.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Laughs.] Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: It was a symposium, you know. It was a symposium before the body a students. But I repeat that the artists that knew him as students all had a very warm affectionate feeling for him, so he must have been a great teacher, although his own work is just the most dry-as-dust, put-together.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, a fellow like Alex Brook was—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Influenced by him. Yes, I wouldn't remember specifically, but any of that group might have been.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. How did Alex Brook fit the pattern of acquaintance that you've been indicating by these people? I mean—

GEORGE BIDDLE: How did he fit into them?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No, no, into the pattern of your acquaintance. Sterne, Grosz—

GEORGE BIDDLE: How am I evaluating him as an artist?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mmm. He was a good writer. Didn't he write for the *Arts* magazine?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, he did.

[Cross talk.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [He had a flair for language. -Ed.]

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, he was an intelligent fellow.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And he is intelligent. He's a jack-of-all-trades. I mean, he's a good carpenter, he could be a good architect, he could build his own house. He's intelligent about people. He's sophisticated. I think he was one of the white hopes as he started out as a young man. A brilliant painter's painter. And he was in the mold of what was being done then, modern for its time. [And he was avant-garde at the time. -Ed.] I mean, he would fit in with Segonzac, perfectly to Segonzac.

In fact, I remember once—whether it happened to me or whether it was related to me by a friend I just don't remember—but Frank Crowninshield was walking down Fifth Avenue, and then Valentin's [ph] was on the northern side—one flight up on the northern side. I think—I'm almost sure it is Valentin [ph]. And Frank stopped right in the middle of the traffic as he would, and began expatiating—the automobiles hurrying by—"That beautiful Segonzac, we must go in and look at it," and came upstairs and it was Alec [ph] Brook. And then,

somehow, his enthusiasm quieted down. [They laugh.] But that shows, although it's hard to remember 20 years, 30 years later, Alec [ph] was one of the modernists, and belonged in that period.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: But what's happened to him, I think, is just very, very sad. I—[inaudible].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, I—you know, this is real. He's—he's [cross talk] [inaudible]—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, I think very roughly—Peggy Bacon was a highly intelligent and highly intellectual and idealistic person. And I think many of Alec's [ph] friends feel that he must've—subconsciously his work must've leaned on her perceptiveness. Because when they broke off both of them, I think, went through a rather trying period. I mean, emotionally upset.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: Although he was the one, I understand that—and I'm quite sure, he was the one who broke off. But he seems from then on to lose his bearings in life as an artist. He, I think, began to drink more heavily, or perhaps he'd reached an age where he couldn't afford to drink heavily. And he became more—much more of a cynic about his own work. And when I last saw him about 10 years ago—I was invited on a mission with him and a number of other artists [to Roumania -Ed.]—and I saw a lot of him during two or three weeks. And I simply felt the sour and disillusioned man, who'd lost his interest in American art, in himself as an artist of importance, and he would frankly say, "I paint because it's the best way I have of making money, and I never paint a picture unless I know it's sold before I started painting it." But that's the only way, which—I think it's sad because Alec [ph] is honest.

[00:25:32]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I think you could say that about him.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, there are two things that—that occur to me here. One is whether artists can really stand success in a financial way. I don't know.

GEORGE BIDDLE: That depends on the artists—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —I would say, entirely. I think that, again, this question of intuition, creative imagination, you just don't know what will destroy the human being who has it, and the quality in the human being.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: The least little thing, or for some people, the intuition, the creative quality, dies hard. And I don't think you can attach it either to the importance of intuition and imagination. I think it's conceivable that you might have a terribly important gift, and it's conceivable that it might very easily be killed. I think all of that would have to do with the human qualities in the individual, having nothing to do with art.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. The other point here was, oh, a terrific eye. A sense for juggler [ph] really.

GEORGE BIDDLE: In whom?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Peggy Bacon.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: The caricature I've seen—

GEORGE BIDDLE: She's gone to pieces, too, but in a very different way.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. But some of the caricatures I've seen—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Oh, they're colossal. They're wonderful.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mrs. Force—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Stieglitz gave an exhibition of caricatures in pastel, it was big, life-sized. It was tops. She was the—who is that Japanese artist that do the big heads [mostly of actors – Ed], the theater man? I'll think of his name in a minute. My favorite Japanese artist. The one who's always been too expensive to buy [laughs]. But anyway, that had that quality. No, and then—I liked the work so much I gave her a commission once to make one of the little, closely packed etchings of all our friends at my house. I wanted to give it to my then-wife [Jane Belo –Ed.]. And she put in it all of us: herself and Kuniyoshi and Alec [ph] Brook and Peggy, [Katherine Schmidt –Ed.], and a number of others. Pascin.

And I just loved her work, but now I think it's lost everything. Well, I don't know. My guess with her is that the spark died. Probably what she would think has killed it is the terrible need at getting bread and butter, and teaching people in the summer, and illustrating more children's books. You know, just—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure.

GEORGE BIDDLE: She's fought hard. I mean, she has courage. She's a courageous person. She lives alone up in Maine. She's taking care of summer classes, of teaching ceramics and that sort of thing, winter classes, illustrating books.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, I saw a caricature she did of Mrs. Force.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I wonder if I saw—what that—that must have been one of the ones at Stieglitz's 's exhibition that he gave her. No, she was—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Oh, man.

GEORGE BIDDLE: If only she could've stopped there and never done anything afterward.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Right. Or even some of the critics that she had, Henry—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Henry McBride, Bob Chandler, and, oh, they're all marvelous.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Laughs.] It was really an autopsy.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yeah. Oh, they're wonderful.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: She had that kind of gift.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Wonderful.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

[00:29:58]

GEORGE BIDDLE: Cold and biting, and not sadistic, but just—'cause she'd bludgeon [laughs].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: She must have been—

GEORGE BIDDLE: And such a prim little Victorian, with a delicate little voice, you know? Always—I think she'd have afternoon tea always at five o'clock, with the tea caddy on top of the tea and nice old-fashioned cups.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: She had a tongue that was very much like a caricature though.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I suspected that. I couldn't see how—whatever it was she was didn't add in sum to—

GEORGE BIDDLE: The prim and gentle.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. But boy, that one she did of Mrs. Force.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I told her once that I thought she was a pretty vicious little person. She said, Oh George, you don't really know me. I'm just full of nothing but corn mush.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Laughs.] Which is a relevant reply. Good for her. Well, there are several others. Once you have listed here is Marsden Hartley.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Oh yes, yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Who's—well, different. And anybody who's ever good is different. Different from anyone that we've mentioned so far.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Many of these are different from all the others.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, I'll try to be brief about him. His—I, among others—and many of his artist friends—think it's a pity that he thinks—believes that he was a much greater poet than he was a painter. And I think the poets all feel that—he's included in fine anthologies.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: But I think they all think that he was a much better painter. I knew his early work very well, and it seemed to me—he lived in my studio, when I was in Paris in 1926, '25, I had a huge studio, and he was looking for one, and I told him to come and work with me. And I saw a lot of him all that winter. And it seemed to me he was floundering around in the heaviest, clumsiest way. He was painting everything in black then. He was doing landscapes from imagination, from memory. In the south of France, he'd been in. There was practically all black and white and all the size of that picture [all large canvases - Ed.], and he'd start each one in the morning and finish into the evening, and I thought they were just God-awful in a way.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: He was—he told me a lot about his background, and, of course, I've known since then the periods that he went through in his early geometric, modern, high-colored stuff that he did in Berlin. And then his last ones that he did up in Maine, which I think were much the best things, finest things, that he ever did in his life. [Inaudible] in the way of paint. Because somehow I think somehow, I think—he got his artistic or imaginative roots in his early soil in Maine.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And it blossomed and became something that had some sort of meaning that I didn't think his early things—although they were rather brilliant little tricks in the various manners. Or this middle period that I knew him, in 1925, I thought they missed. But he was a strange man. He was hyper-sophisticated, hyper. You felt that what he really ought to've been was somebody who could be a foil to Oscar Wilde at a tea [discussing aesthetes - Ed.]. He was so sophisticated. And sophistication—artistic sophistication he felt was his goal in life. He was a man who was bitterly jealous and bitterly ambitious.

I know—I think one illustration's enough. He told me that, as an early man before he was recognized and trying to break in the Stieglitz circle, and standing in the Stieglitz group where there were all the others: Marin and Georgia O'Keeffe and so forth.

And Arthur Carles, that came up from Philadelphia, and showed Stieglitz a canvas, and Stieglitz or the others were so impressed and enthusiastic about it that Marsden said to me, I just couldn't stand it. I had to turn my back [away from the group to hide the -Ed.] tears that ran down my face. What he meant, frankly, of course, was jealousy. That he wanted that from Stieglitz, and he hadn't gotten it.

[00:35:33]

He was—I did a rather mean thing with him once. It was quite innocent. But I was genuinely interested in knowing about his past, and I met him once, and the thought developed through the course of the evening. I met him at the Dôme, and I had a little apartment. I was

alone, so I asked him to come back and have supper with me. I said, I've got—my concierge is making me a chicken, or something like that, and there's enough for two. And I'll get a bottle of wine on the way back. So I plied him with drinks. Not too many, but I wanted to get him talking. And I told some of my own stories that I felt anybody would have a right to be ashamed of. That is, early sex adventures.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: I wanted frankly to get him started. I had been in some of the—with a friend—to some of those terrible houses in Paris, where only exhibitionists go, and wear black masks and do everything in public. And I regaled him with such experiences. And then he regaled me with his own, which wasn't too terribly—I mean, nothing—and after each one, he would say to me, And Biddle, if you tell this to anybody, I will kill you. Which, it seemed to me—the reason I mention this, I think it was deeply characteristic of his deeply in-grown puritanical background. And the fact that he wasn't a normal man.

But I thought it all so absurd. I mean, I felt that I had told him much horrid things about myself. And why did he have to go through this performance? "If you ever tell this to anybody, I would kill you?" Well, that was that. And we left as the best of friends at about two o'clock [a.m.]. And the sequence was I met him the next morning about 10 o'clock or 12 [o'clock]. I was coming back. He had just gotten up. And as he approached me, I could see that he looked blacker and blacker. And when he met, he said, Biddle, that wasn't wine you gave me last night. It was poison. I retched and retched and retched all night [laughs]. Poor Marsden.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: But I think these anecdotes tell a lot about a man who was desperately unhappy. And the thing that made him unhappy was the puritan background. He was essentially a New Englander, and that explains so much about his art.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: His need of being the avant-garde artist in Berlin. His need of doing—of being one of Stieglitz group. Because his poetry was the most [*raffiné* -Ed.] kind of things, you know, what modern poetry does with cadences and—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —not a bit like his paintings. He was acute. He wasn't stupid. He said to me once, up at my studio, George, you have two things that you'll have great trouble in living down. One is the fact that you went to Tahiti, and the other is your name. Now that's very typical [inaudible], because it wasn't stupid.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

[00:40:00]

GEROG E BIDDLE: And at the same time, it was a little mean. A little, you know, a little [below the belt -Ed.]—he wasn't giving much. He wasn't—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: He wasn't conceding anything.

GEORGE BIDDLE: It wasn't that. He was a little close-fisted.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: But I like men for their positive qualities, and he had very high standards. I think they were confused. He wanted the very best. And that isn't bad. You don't see so much of that now in art, do you?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I think you saw it more in Henry McBride's period, in his time.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: In Charlie Demuth.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure [inaudible].

GEORGE BIDDLE: I mean, they didn't mind being a little [*raffiné* -Ed.]. They wanted something that was—because, after all, it was the period of all that surge of modern poetry in America and T.S. Eliot, and Gertrude Stein, and all that, and [in music -Ed.] George Antheil. And that's a little missing today, isn't it? That search for highbrow standards— put it that way, highbrow standards.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Right. Or, in addition the—

GEORGE BIDDLE: It's funny the word highbrow has lost its meaning, hasn't it?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: It's become now avant-garde. Do you know what I mean? It's one-ahead. It's not one more [*raffiné*, more sophisticated -Ed.].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No, it's lost meaning in the very same way that discriminating taste has.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes. Yes. Good point.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: You know. Yeah. But these—

GEORGE BIDDLE: You couldn't speak about taste anymore in painting, could you?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No.

GEORGE BIDDLE: It wouldn't make much sense to say has Rothko got taste?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Or Pollock.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Or Pollock, yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But Hartley and Demuth and some others, also, I think joined a group in—a Greenwich Village group at a place called Romany Marie's—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —which is also an expression of the time which no longer obtains, as a location, as a person, as an atmosphere where there were this aliveness and exchange of views.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I think it's worthwhile. You know, you mentioned that now, talking about Marsden and talking about Charlie Demuth, because in many ways there's such contrast and they were both Stieglitz men.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Right.

GEORGE BIDDLE: They were both exactly the same group, of little [inaudible], you know? And Charlie had the same sexual ambiguity as Marsden did. But he was so beautifully unconscious of it, or—I don't mean unconscious but regardless of it, unashamed, charmingly so, adorably so. And you couldn't imagine it blighting his character. You know, being a tragedy to it, whereas it so obviously was with Marsden. Let's put it this way—I'd rather put it in a broader thing—any difficulty with blight Marsden's character, because he was tied up in knots. It was the New England [Puritan -Ed.].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Right.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And Charlie was Pennsylvania Dutch. But anyway, as a human being, he was so—where he also had been through his—what would you would call it? His period of debauches. It happened to be London. He was just so proud of them. He'd kiss his fingers when he was talking about it, you know. "Oh, If ever I could have such again." I remember one of the last times I saw him, he—we had many friends in common, and when I was building my house here, he drove up with a friend from Lancaster and lunched with us.



Picnicked. And rode back, and it was a hot day, and the young Italian boys were all working, you know, stripped to the waist. They were good-looking, physically handsome kids.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And when I left—when they drove away, I said Charlie, you've got to come back again sometimes. "Oh, George," he said, "I wouldn't dare to, I wouldn't trust myself." [0045:05]

That was Charlie, you know. He was so completely unaware of anything wrong. And, well again, the reason I mention this, you see the same kind of contrast in his work, where poor Marsden—and I again think of him not as a natural man but unnaturally New England.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: That's his blight was New England, not sex. But where he was bludgeoning his way through everything, do you know, and never quite got there, Charlie was so meticulously perfect, where he knew he was an unimportant man. I mean, small. He knew he was just that. But he couldn't have been better. He was just perfect. And when he quit, he just felt he—he had—what is it where you got to take Penicillin all the time? He was dying of that. [When he quit he was dying of diabetes. -Ed.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Oh—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, you know. He just felt, I'm too tired. . It's not worth keeping on. And a woman who knew him very well at Lancaster told me—Blanche Steinman—that she was sure he just was tired of life and whether he stopped taking the insulin—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. That is strange, though. And you know—

GEORGE BIDDLE: But Charlie he was a completely normal human being.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. But—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Sunny, happy.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: What a desperate life he had, horrible life. Lived up in Lancaster with his own mother, who was 86 years old. And in this little tobacco shop that had been in the family for three, four generations. Oldest tobacco shop in Pennsylvania, I think. And then he was too poor to go anywhere else. He lived on his memories of a gay life when he drank too much and took dope and had every kind of adventure in London. And he knew it would never come again. And twice a year, he'd come—he was strong enough and had enough money to come up to New York for three days. And have a gay time with Henry McBride and the—what—the three sisters that one of them painted. Not Vertheim, but something like that, remember?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No, I don't remember.

GEORGE BIDDLE: One of them had an exhibition in New York, a friend of McBride's. But anyway, they were three old—wealthy, old New York society Jewish family. And he and McBride and a few other—Stieglitz, you know—would get together, have a few pleasant days. He couldn't drink much then. But he remained sunny and happy and cheerful.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: One of the ingredients in this picture is Stieglitz. What is the effect that Stieglitz had on Marsden Hartley, or on Demuth?

GEORGE BIDDLE: It would be very hard for me to make a just estimate.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. In the sense of—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Because I felt as—well, as with many things in life, you can say so much on both sides. I think he did a lot of harm, and of course, he did a lot of good. He didn't bring modern art to America. That's all nonsense. Mrs. Havemayer brought modern art 20 years before. But he was—of course, he was a great dynamic influence in his passion, his courage, his insistence on standards.

He did what similar people—it was about the same time, yes, a little later the—he did, like Sylvia Beach, in her bookshop in Paris. Like—what's her name? The old lady in Paris—Gertrude Stein with her little group [or Henry McCarter in Philadelphia -Ed.]. Admit that it wasn't fundamental, admit that there was a good deal of chi-chi [ph] about it, but it was a gathering up of certain creative forces, and an attempt to give them a shot in the arm and start something and become a central point. And Stieglitz, of course, was that in New York.

[00:50:20]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But his treatment of the men in his stable, like—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Bit lopsided.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure. Fastening on Demuth a watercolor approach so that the Demuth was suspicious even of his own abilities in oils, you know?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, I wasn't too aware of all that. I was thinking more about the way he played some for keeps and disparaged others.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And gave the impression that "it's my Stieglitz group." Really the only two people that I really think he helped in it were Marin and Georgia, I mean, those are the ones that he sold and plugged. And whether he did Marin or Georgia good as artists, I don't know. I think he gave them—I think he prevented Marin from selling on account of his ridiculous prices. I don't know, that's a guess, I've heard people say so. I think he gave both a very perverted sense of their own importance.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: [*A folie de grandeur.* -Ed.] And then I think he made the others—a good many—unhappy. I think he made Marsden unhappy because he never sold anything for him. I think he may have made Dove unhappy; he never sold anything for Dove.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Charlie was above that. He didn't depend on him so much, because he had his mother and his tobacco shop and his home in Lancaster. And then Kraushaar took him up. And didn't Montrose [ph]? I think he did. At first.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And most of those artists at Stieglitz finally left him and went to Edith Halpert, who didn't create any of them but had the intelligence to buy them, to get hold of them, and sell them.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. Arthur Dove was a case in point about Stieglitz. You know?

GEORGE BIDDLE: And he hurt Dove because I don't think Dove is an important person at all, and he gave him a sort of—I think Dove was—like many others, he was an illustrator that wanted to break into this game and had a certain little something, and played it up as if it was—as if he was one of the eight or 10 important people in America. It was played up for him.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And I don't think that's good. It preserved—you had the—he created this feeling, that I think is bad—and Gertrude Stein did the same—"Anybody in my gallery is important, and anybody outside it is not very."

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: It was an exclusiveness.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes, they even wrote copy about themselves in *Camera* magazine. That is, reviewing each other's work.

GEORGE BIDDLE: It was a club. It was a club.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. It was sort of an in-grown thing. But even within the in-grown thing, Stieglitz wouldn't market oils from Demuth—

GEORGE BIDDLE: That I didn't know.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —and from Marin, they were put off in the—they were to be the watercolorists. Georgia O'Keeffe was to have been, apparently, the oil painter. Well, you know this is an arbitrary thing on the part of a man who, in effect, really didn't run a gallery.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I never could take him seriously. I always used to joke with him a bit.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: But I'd meet him always in a very friendly way, as a person who is very close friends with some of his gang. I spent a night with him and Georgia once, and he even bought one of my lithographs once for \$10—I should feel very proud of [laughs]. But I can't, you know, entirely.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: But he was a warm old fellow, but he was [*folie de grandeur* -Ed.] too.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Yeah—

GEORGE BIDDLE: He was awfully amusing. I mean, as people would come, he'd be sitting having an intimate little chat—chat with me about poor old Marsden, or Charlie's not taking insulin, or this, that, or the other. And then you'd hear somebody come in and his eyes would squint, open for a second, and then he would say, But I was saying to that man that it isn't a question of price. It's what you can pay for it because, it's worth every cent you've got or nothing at all.

[00:55:03]

He was a real old circus barker.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Now that—this a side of him that is—you know, in the books about him—and apparently, he was quite consciously pursuing posterity, I'm sure, with the group of writers and so on.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And you don't mind. You don't mind.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No, no, no. This is—yeah, but then to run a gallery, seemingly, and never have a Dove for sale, though he would tell you that Dove is starving—

GEORGE BIDDLE: It was chichi [ph], it was all chichi [ph], yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Laughs] Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Complete, complete.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. It's very interesting.

GEORGE BIDDLE: But under that, there was this nice old—he was Pennsylvanian, wasn't he? I think so. But anyway, German-American, Pennsylvanian Dutch or something. Friendly, warm-hearted, motherly, you know, and alone with him, he'd sit down and talk over how much Marsden appreciated my giving him the studio, and someday he'd let me choose one of his paintings. You know, all that kind of thing, friendly. Nice, warm, friendly. And then somebody'd come in and, right away, like turning on the switch, you know. A voice would come up—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Circus barker. That's interesting. But look at the stable he had. And I don't in some ways. I don't suppose he was responsible for them either. Was he, or most—

GEORGE BIDDLE: You mean, they would come to him—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: That is, the person who selected them initially.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I just wouldn't know, but I would think this: he was a good promoter. And I think when he started his little photo gallery, whatever it was, you know, and started with one or two, anybody doing modern art, or the survivors of the 1915 show would be very apt to go to him because there wasn't any other place. That would be fair enough.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure. But then it was almost inaccessible. Up the rickety elevator, you know [laughs]. You really had to know where it was. It had a number. 279 or 297 Fifth Avenue, something like that. And you had to go up there in this rickety old elevator. And he had what the—

GEORGE BIDDLE: He was a character.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: The flowing cape and the—[laughs].

GEORGE BIDDLE: He was a character. And there are not enough characters in America.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Oh, I agree. This was no carbon copy, not by a long shot. And you know, this is the great part about it.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But now, whether a different context would've been more helpful to Marsden Hartley, for example, or Arthur Dove, I don't know.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I think, on the whole, you could say that Edith Halpert has the qualities that an artist wants in a dealer.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: She has, I would say, great taste discrimination, and always forward-looking. And she sells very well. And anybody in her group is a master. I mean, that's—and I get this largely from Bill Zorach who's been with her for—ever since the beginning. And he believes devotedly that she dislikes artists and don't want them around. And won't have women artists in her gallery.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: That's interesting.

GEORGE BIDDLE: In other words, what you could call—not particularly a loving and broad-minded approach to art, you know. [Inaudible] approach to art, but what an artist wants.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Intelligence and sales.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Right.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And "keep out of my galleries."

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, she had them all. She even had Kuniyoshi.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, she—you know, most of her art she got from Stieglitz or other people. She started—she had Kuniyoshi and Zorach. Now, who else? The others, she had a few—Stuart Davis. I never think of him as very important, but he's a great name. [Perhaps Max Weber. -Ed.]

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But what other artists did she have? She used—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Ben Shahn.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Ben Shahn, of course. Those three, those four. Three painters, and that one sculptor are really the only ones she discovered. I mean, that are important.

[01:00:01]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And the others, she had just a great intelligence.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, some of the younger people she was instrumental with. Jack Lavine.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yeah, but she got rid of him. She got rid of them all.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Yeah. And the others have been the—

GEORGE BIDDLE: The others she just—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Max Weber.

GEORGE BIDDLE: High intelligence, to get Max Weber when he left Rosenberg [with a big reputation -Ed.]; she got him twice, you see, when—he left her twice, and she brought him back twice. In other words, she's an able businesswoman. She hasn't gotten hurt feelings.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No [laughs]. No [laughs]. And she had Maren, she had O'Keefe—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Sure.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: All the works, didn't she?

GEORGE BIDDLE: It's my stable, but I mean, they're mostly—the horses came from other pastures.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, but they're quite a group.

GEORGE BIDDLE: It's the best in America.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: [Frank] Rehn had a very good group too: Burchfield, Henry Poor, and then Speicher, Bellows, so forth.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Burchfield is the—

GEORGE BELLOW: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: But I think actually, as a matter of fact, Poor and Burchfield both were [originally -Ed.] with Montrose.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Varnum Poor—Montrose.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes. Yes. Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But you know, for a long periods of time, certainly in the modern field, there were not very many galleries that were open to the sale of what we would call modern. Modern in the sense of Marsden Hartley—

GEORGE BIDDLE: It was that little gallery—there were a couple of them—and what was his name? Oh, it's just—started with Peter Blume and a few others. That little, little fellow. Funny little man with indigestion that started in there about 1923 or '[2]4. [There was the Daniels Gallery. He had Peggy Bacon, Peter Blume, and a few others. -Ed.] There was the New Gallery that had started about the same—a year or two later.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: This isn't MacBeth [ph]? No.

GEORGE BIDDLE: No, no. He was a funny, cranky little man with very bad indigestion, and very little money but he had a very strong group.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Carter?

GEORGE BIDDLE: No.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: He didn't last very long?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, about 10 years.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. 10 years.

GEORGE BIDDLE: He was a little ahead of Edith Halpert. I mean, when she was just starting, he already—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Was in-being.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —a very fine group.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. Kuniyoshi.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I think Kuniyoshi started with Eden Halpert.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: I think so. Oh this man's name—it's just on the tip of my tongue—Nat [ph] Daniels, Daniels.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Daniels, sure. Daniels. When he got out of the—about 10 years.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Daniels?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, he was ill. He was very ill.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: So there weren't very many agents to market modern American art. No.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Montrose and Kraushaar took in one or two fine artists. And then there was Edith Halpert and Daniels, that's about all. And for a short length, this New Gallery that had half European; they had Pascin, Matisse, and a good many of the French names. And then a good many of the Americans.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: [George Hellman -Ed.], Jeffrey Hellman's father, was president for a while.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: How did the Whitney Museum, or the Whitney, figure in with this group and—that you've mentioned, and the art?

GEORGE BIDDLE: At this—let's see. When I first came back from Tahiti—that was '21, '22, '23—it was just about starting, and that was the Whitney Studio Club.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And a very informal little place. And this Mrs. Whitney used to give dinners and ask a good many of the—[invite her artist friends -Ed.]. I never knew her until much later. Hunt Diederich was a great friend of hers, Lechay's [ph]. And so I couldn't be sure what were her other pals among—[Inaudible], of course. George Luks, some of that somewhat older crowd.

[01:05:09]

The club itself was for young men around the Village who were just making good, and they could exhibit at the club and with very little pretense, and they'd sell a few of their things. And Alec [[ph] Brook ran it at the time, under Juliana Force. And then it was a very simple, honest, little—oh, the was the sort of thing that in a very much bigger way, say, the Pratt Institute is doing today. It was a little gathering of local artists that I doubt if they got into the papers at all. She bought the things. She had little annual exhibitions.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Now when I came back from the first year in Italy with my wife in 1933, '34, '31, before that, before that. Yes, before that. Before I went over, it was a little more pretentious. Hadn't she built the building by then [her museum on 10th Street -Ed.]?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I think so.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And she gave Tom Benton—Mrs. Force— a mural to do. And she was giving her annual evening for artists that I thought were the finest thing in America; [to invite the young artists on a friendly footing -Ed]. Because I always felt the artists always look at each other with pretty knifing eyes.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: [Inaudible.]

GEORGE BIDDLE: Of course, dear. And here you fill him full of gin and give him a good time, and the exhibition was there. They each had been invited.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And they couldn't help being pleasant to each other, and I thought I was a wonderful, wonderful civilizing things and there's never been anything like it since Mrs. Force died.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: But it was very different than the Whitney Museum now, and every—they have no relation to each other.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: You mean that quality is gone?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Oh, entirely. And the thing it stands for is something that I think would have horrified her, [both Mrs. Force and Mrs. Whitney -Ed.]. Now it may be that was inevitable that it should not take place. I don't know.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But I was thinking of it as a force in the early period of the '20s where youngsters who are coming along could show their work.

GEORGE BIDDLE: It was very much of a force. That whole younger unknown group. I mean, everyone that we've been talking about.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Hunt Diederich, Kuniyoshi, Peggy Bacon, Alec [ph] Brook, that whole—all of them. Louie Bouché, all that.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Henry Schnakenberg.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Schnakenberg, all of that.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And the older ones, like Glackens [ph], who was a friend of Mrs. Whitney, you know.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Henri, Stone. Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes. And this—our younger group didn't see them at all, [wouldn't otherwise have none them at all -Ed.].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But it was an area.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, it was. And one very genuine, and then you see modern art and younger artists weren't fashionable, that's the difference.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Then these younger artists—they'd all left the Art Students League, there'd be '20 to '30 off that, about. And some of them were beginning to have galleries. But on the whole, they weren't in museums.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No. No, they weren't.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Utterly different period.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I mentioned—we talked about that, I think, too, earlier talk.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure. Well, I mean the number of galleries—or, now you've got 100 or 400 or more galleries.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And then there were a few that would take modern art. Scott McFowles [ph] would take—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: One or two.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —Hunt Deiedrich, and Manship [ph], you know, and so forth.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure. But other than that, very few. It was put it this way, to what we—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Montrose. Montrose.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. But pretty generally it was—

GEORGE BIDDLE: They weren't exhibits. They weren't exhibited.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No, it was. Not that it was hostile. It just wasn't open, available.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, none of these artists, I think, would get into the Pennsylvania Academy [Annual Exhibition -Ed.]. They may a year or two later, or a year or two [inaudible].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: So they had no place to exhibit, except little group shows in the Whitney.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And I think you know there was a sharing, too, among artists like—

GEORGE BIDDLE: They all knew each other.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Right. And if someone was interested in the purchase of a painting and bought one of their own paintings—like Alex Brook would take the purchaser around to see Kuniyoshi work and so on. There was this kind of effort to [cross talk] keep them all afloat.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes. It was unavoidable in a way.

[01:10:02]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Well, this existed by your friends in a way, which is good, in a way. Certainly doesn't obtain anymore.

GEORGE BIDDLE: No, it's not necessary.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No. No.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I think—I don't know if I mentioned to you that [August] Heckscher told me one of the great difficulties now, of getting any good artists to do any work for the government, is because the government, under no circumstances, could afford the prices that these artists would even look at. Now think of the difference.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Terrible. Sure.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Where then these artists were getting along by—through friends of Bob Chandler [ph], so forth and so on, and getting next—portraits, something for \$50, \$75, to, you know, tide me over.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Doesn't obtain [ph]. I think we've gone as far as we ought to go today. Why don't we—



GEORGE BIDDLE: It's only four.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I know but—

GEORGE BIDDLE: I feel I'm getting you out in false pretentious, unless you're tired. Do you think I'm getting tired?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Do you?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: Want to try another theme? I think you better not.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, I don't—it's a large one. It's the '30s, and the development of the Arts Projects. I think that we might get a fresh approach, don't you? We've been going—I don't know, a couple of hours.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Oh, have we?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And you think—it's just on account of you, I'm thinking?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, you know, time is—time is—

[END OF TRACK AAA\_biddle63\_9257\_m.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: All right, sir. You had something that you wanted to incorporate, as a consequence of some comments you made about your artist friends.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes. I had been thinking that a good many of the things that I said about my artist friends—all of whom I happen to be particularly fond of, might be misinterpreted, and feel that artists are morally—have less stability, morally and emotionally—are more neurotic. That there's more provision among them, so forth and so forth. Emphatically, I don't think this is the case. Whether I'm right or wrong, I think it's because artists in their virtues and their failings have simply more of the plus quality than other people. I think they can be more magnanimous, and more petty, and have far greater control, and be more easily upset, be more courageous and more cowardly, and so forth all the way down the line. I think that is the— fundamentally, the difference between artists and other people, and I think that is my apology, if anything I may have said about these men, all of whom I was very fond of, felt real affection for. [Artists are simply more vital, more charged with life and feel and react more strongly than others. They have more imagination. -Ed.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, the illuminating quality of the anecdotes sheds the light that you saw. You don't wish to erase that light, it's simply that you want to put it in the affectionate context which it really—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Oh, yes, I'm not trying to apologize for any of these talks.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Well, we come to, oh, possibly a point and period in our own history as a nation when, so far as art and artists are concerned, certain ingredients conspired, certain people, certain impulses, certain lacks, conspired to create a government receptivity to aid and need for artists on the one hand, and a possibility of the development of an American muralist school on the other. There are many facets to this. And I will just— being one of the prime movers in it, I wondered how you saw it in retrospect, and then we'll get back to the specifics as it emerged.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, I think there's one side that, certainly at the time, wasn't understood by artists that I would like to emphasize. I think, at the time, a great many artists felt that what was accomplished was a result, to a great extent, of their own efforts, their organized ability to march up and down in front of Mrs. Force's bedroom shouting, "We want jobs." Or writing to—in every way, trying to put pressure on the powers that be. I have felt a long time that what made this very important movement, phase, of our art possible was the result of two or three things. First of all, I think there had to be a certain—call it a historical moment. A connection—a combination of circumstances, social or otherwise, that could be used. And I

think of this as the—if you want, the leverage that somebody had to get hold of in order to create results.

[00:05:02]

Then, I think there had to be—I hesitate for the right word, but let's say in this particular case, there had to be a needed change for the artists. That is, at this time, there were many artists without jobs. They were—had been moved by the regional period—they were aware of the regional movement that had just occurred between the '20s and '30s. They were aware of the mural movement of Rivera. This all happened before the Depression. In other words, they had—the artists at that time were susceptible to be acted upon by this leverage of history, which was the Depression.

And then, thirdly, there were the—there happened to be, also, the coincidence of a brilliant number of people that could take advantage of it. In other words—first of all, you had—although—I stated it in second place—you had a body of artists, or artistic movement that was susceptible to a great and important change. Then you had what I always think of as a historical moment, that is, various sorts of circumstances. In this particular case, a depression, which could be used as a leverage to bring about this change on a created moment, a body of artists that were waiting for it.

And then the third, the very lucky fact of certain human beings of a group—of a number of human beings who were best fitted for the change. I don't think—I'm not a believer that either one of these three circumstances ever is enough to bring about an important change. I don't think human beings by themselves could ever create anything unless the moment's ready. And I don't think a body of artists wanting something desperately can ever get it unless it is the historical moment. Unless the circumstances are possible for them to get what they want, for a movement to become what it might be. You couldn't produce a renaissance in any South American country today because it hasn't got the ambiance for it, the background, the stimmung. You couldn't produce a great mirror movement today in America if there were—if today we had three Riveras, and Orozcos, and Siqueiros waiting for it. Because the circumstances aren't there that would make it possible. Well, very briefly, that.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. When—where were you in 1929? Were you in this country?

GEORGE BIDDLE: In 1929, I was in Europe. And, actually, the Modern Museum had written me to ask me if I wanted to take part in a mural movement, which the—by submitting sketches and things—which the museum was organizing. And it was very—I was very excited about the idea because I had been in Mexico two or three years before, and as I told you, I was very much influenced by that whole movement. So this merely suggests that, in my particular case, I was—quite blindly, of course, but the desire was stirring in me for this [movement that was coming -Ed.]—these circumstances that hadn't yet been on the scene.

[00:10:14]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, you already indicated that you had been in Mexico prior to '29. Had you done the mural in Brazil?

GEORGE BIDDLE: No, that was later.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: That was—

GEORGE BIDDLE: That was in '42.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: '42, yeah. But you had done one in Mexico.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I had been asked to do it, but it had fallen short. It had—because the Moisés Sáenz, who was in the government then, resigned, and his secretary of fine arts with him.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Who was the contact person at the Modern Museum [Museum of Modern Art -Ed.]?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Lincoln Kirstein.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Lincoln Kirstein.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I'm almost sure that he had a lot to do with the actual organization of the museum. I had met him before, at his house, through Bill Bullitt, up in Conway [Massachusetts -Ed.].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And we—we must have talked together about murals and my interest in them. And I got a telegram from him when I was in Italy in '29 or '30, asking me if I could submit something.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Was there then, in process, for the Modern Museum, a development of this mural school?

GEORGE BIDDLE: No. I fancy [ph]—I really know very little about it, because I was away from America then.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I assume it was Lincoln Kirstein's own idea. At that time he had—he was close to the museum. And I think one of the idea men about it. I didn't see the exhibition. I was—it occurred while I was still in Europe. I understand it was considered very much of a failure. I thought it had extreme importance for this region, because it shows—I think we talked about it the other day—how an artist can have a great sense of design on a small scale, and not have the mural feeling, which has to do with the architectural sense of space. Because I was shocked to see how many friends of mine, that I would have thought would have a great mural feeling—how they fell down when they were doing mural sketches, even on that scale. Even on the sketch scale without a given building for them to go in.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well as '29 deepened into '30 and '31, the condition of American artists was certainly not—well, let me dilute that. By and large, American artists were not, you know, living well or doing well in '29 and '30. Private philanthropy had disappeared. The purchase from museums had almost terminated. Well, there was one or two, like the Boston Museum, and so on. But nothing as what had been there before. Even the academy, while it didn't admit, necessarily, modern art, in the sense of modern artists, you know, nonetheless, they themselves were beginning to feel a kind of pinch in the '30s.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Incidentally, I realize now that I've been getting my dates a little confused. When I said '29, it was a couple of years later.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: It was.

GEORGE BIDDLE: It was the period I was thinking of—I was still abroad in—up to '32. Instead of '29, I should've said '30, '31, '32, in there. I think I went abroad in '30 and came back in '32. What you're saying about the condition of artists, I wouldn't be so sure in '28 and '29, but it was certainly true in the—during the next few years. At least I was—then was more aware when I was back in America.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And then there was no question about it, that American artists were in a pretty desperate way.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: A really desperate way. The days when you saw men selling apples on Fifth Avenue in New York, about that time, the American artists and the young men in the Whitney Studio Club, all the younger group, were in a very, very bad way.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Even the bigger artists, they weren't getting money.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. And you know, as the—

GEORGE BIDDLE: No, the artists desperately needed help, I mean, period. That's the only way of putting it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Like everybody in America.

[00:15:01]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, how did one—and what's the process that artists went through to take advantage of the leverage—Depression—and the combination of other factors which existed to work out a program which would aid them?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, now we're talking about the only period I remember that would answer to the fact that—that I remember about the question you ask would be, let's say, between 1932 and '35, something of that sort. And that was the time when they were beginning to organize in the Artists' Congress, and these other groups. There were other artist groups before that, I've forgotten just what they were called.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: But that was when they were becoming self-conscious and without any question, through some of the left-wing communist organizations, they were organizing themselves and being organized through these left-wing pressures to organize and do something for themselves about it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. Now, I wonder of this preceded or followed the development of—well, let me go back—there was something called the Federal Emergency Relief Administration.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: In New York, there was something called the Gibson Committee.

GEORGE BIDDLE: That I don't understand. [That I don't remember -Ed.] Bill Hudson was the head of New York relief, whom I knew very well. He lived in Croton.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: All through those years, was helping the poor in New York in every way, and through Audrey McMahon—who later on had to do with the art program under Roosevelt—was also a very wise, sympathetic, extroverted, able woman. And she—they all—instead of being all these men, who were humane and cultivated [ph] and intelligent, these people—Mrs. Force another, of course—were doing all they could to take advantage of the artist organizations, in order to help themselves in their—with their own relief programs.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: In other words, they were glad to have the artists organized, because that gave them a certain leverage to give the artists jobs—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —through politicians.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. This—as I understood it, the College Art Association, with Mrs. McMahon, in early days—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, I had forgotten that.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes, and—

GEORGE BIDDLE: So, she had a splendid cultural background for just this kind of a job.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. But there appears to have been—the initial one was not established under the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, but under something called a Civil Works Administration.

GEORGE BIDDLE: That's right. That was—was that under Hopkins or not? I'm not sure.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes, I believe this was under Hopkins.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I'm a little vague sometimes about these different political four-letter organizations.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I don't know, but this one—this is the Public Works of Art Project—

GEORGE BIDDLE: That's right, yes. PWAP.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —was the, I believe, to Delano [ph], Edward Bruce, and others.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Oh, well then that would be a bit later. That would be a bit later, then. Because Bruce came into the picture in the spring of '34.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Yes. That is a—there had been a meeting, I believe, in Bruce's house in Washington.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yeah, well that, again, was later. That was after I met him. The way I, at first, got implicated in this whole thing, was simply writing to Roosevelt, in May of '34—that was three or four months after he had been elected—and suggesting a mural program on the basis comparable with what—I don't know—I may have mentioned something, but comparable with what Rivera had done in Mexico. In which I said, You could get artists to work at plumbers' wages to carry out the ideals of your social revolution.

[00:20:25]

Now, you've got to remember that—I think in this whole thing, that I conceived of it, not primarily as a method of helping poor artists—which is really the way it started, as a relief measure—but as a method of obtaining fine mural art—which interested me—by modern artists through the leverage of a Depression.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes, yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: That's why I emphasize the plumbers' wages. And suggested to him that—also, of course, with the Mexican movement in the back of my head—but because I knew Roosevelt was an ardent admirer of his, I used that expression to suggest the ideals of your social revolution, or the revolution that you are carrying out, or words to that effect. It was perfectly undiplomatic of me, but it shows very much the direction I had.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: It turned into something utterly different. That is, through force of circumstance, it originally turned into a welfare movement to help artists, and not as I had conceived of it, as using a bad time to create a great school of the best liberal mural painters by offering very little money. And appealing to Roosevelt's—let's say, what I thought would be an idea politically sympathetic to him.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. Now, the group—were you a spokesman for a group of people?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, I was. As soon—I can't—I don't think I attempted to organize a group until I heard from him. And he suggested to me that I see Chip Robert, who was the assistant secretary of the Treasury, then in charge of Public Works. He said, Your idea—and this is also interesting—"Dear George, your idea in using—"and then "modern art,"—which I hadn't used in my letter to him—"in order to start a mural movement that's interesting, why don't you see Chip Robert about it?" And it was then that I started, again, with no thought of helping artists in need of money, but merely getting good artists to establish a school of fine mural painting, that I started writing and corresponding and talking to a dozen or more of my friends, and asking them to what extent they would sympathize with it, be interested in it, and so forth. And when I got them to—when I got a number of them to—interested in the idea, I then went down to Washington to see what I could do about it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. Now, you know, in talking about an idea, or extrapolating on an idea, it's an idea plus an object. The object could be another artist friend. For example, Henry Varnum Poor figures somewhat as an—in correspondence which I had seen—as a talking point. The same way that some of the others that I had gotten out of this list [cross talk] [inaudible]—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, well, he was one of the—Henry Horner was an old friend of mine. I admired him immensely, and one of the very first I went to.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, that one would, that is—

[Cross talk.]

GEORGE BIDDLE: Maurice Sterne.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —throw out an idea, and to see what would happen to it, and—

GEORGE BIDDLE: I remember his reaction to it. It came up later on, but it's, I think, interesting, in view of the way—the difficulties which the whole Project encountered. He said that the only thing I'm skeptical about was this notoriety you may get while doing something for a big, big building. It would be so much better if we could get our group to do some little, small building which would escape newspaper publicity. And where we could really accomplish something without disturbance, without censorship.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. Was there a real fear of government censorship?

GEORGE BIDDLE: There was, without any question, as it developed. I was naive about all these political questions at the time, and I had the feeling that, if Roosevelt was friendly, he could—I could do anything with that leverage. And I realized that Roosevelt was much too wise a man to stick his neck out and—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I think, where Roosevelt was wonderful—and it's simply very characteristic of everything about him—he could jump at ideas, and he always worked intuitively. I wrote him a pretty innocent letter and there's no reason why it shouldn't have gone into the wastepaper basket, because he was a pretty busy man, but for some reason—either he had enough of a memory about me to feel intuitively that I was a friend, and although I was—politically, perhaps I couldn't be trusted, I could—he could trust my loyalty. And that there might be an idea in it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. You had known him from—

GEORGE BIDDLE: I'd known him very slightly, in a way, but probably enough so he would remember me. And we both—at one time in school—he was just leaving school, and I was just coming there. We used to go to the infirmary together to get milk in the 11 o'clock recess in the morning. And I would chat with him coming back, so I had a friendly memory of an older man. Then, we were both on the college paper; he was editor and I was one of the editors, and I remember his chat [ph] coming back from college and talking to us about *the Harvard Crimson*. And then I rowed on one of the school crews, and he came back and competed with a school crew on a graduate boat, so I had all these—and I saw him once, hobbling down the stairs at his mother's house, when a friend of his mother had asked me to tea there just after his accident [illness -Ed.]. So, we had this vague feeling, [shared these memories -Ed.], that an older and younger boy can have.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. How was—I think you talked the idea over to some extent with an artist—Wagner.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes. Gerdt Wagner [but not an artist -Ed.]. He was the head of the Roman mosaics, a Croton neighbor. As some of my architect friends, he looked at it from the business point of view, of the architect who thought, Here was a chance at a Depression period of getting jobs through this entrée to Washington, through the President and Chip Robert, so, of course, they were—as Charlie Borie later, who was the architect of the Justice Building, and who's family I knew very well in Philadelphia—became interested, because he too was glad to do anything that would get a group of murals in his particular building.

He had planned the building with many mural spaces, and why I went to Charlie Borie, I don't know. It may have been that his older brother, Adolph, whom I knew very well, told me to talk things over with him. But as soon as we did talk together, he realized, Here's a chance for murals in my building. I'm a little scared of your list, but I trust you as a human being. I can teach you a lot, and you need a lot of education when you're approaching Washington.

I'm reconstructing what I know must have happened in his mind. I know the first time I went down to have a serious talk with him a couple of years later, he said to me, leaving his office

in Philadelphia, "George, there's one word I think you could omit from your vocabulary when you see Simon, the architect from the Treasury, and Chip Robert, and that is 'social revolution.' I don't think that will get you anywhere."

[00:30:17]

And all these men were—in other words, they saw a possibility, and they were willing to put a certain amount of money on the bet. But they also were a little distrustful, or, let's say, didn't have my confidence in either my program, or my choice of artists.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. But they—

GEORGE BIDDLE: The friendly ones were willing to go along. The unfriendly ones were simply hostile from the start.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, now, did you run into much in the way of hostility? This is just talking about an idea, now.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Before you meet Robert. This is just germinating the possibility.

[Cross talk.]

GEORGE BIDDLE: [Inaudible.] Yes. As soon as I ran into Gerdt Wagner, who was in the—in with the New York architects. He belonged to the architectural club [Architectural League - Ed.]. Oh, what is it? Down on 58th Street. It isn't the architectural club, it's the architectural building.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: As soon as I met his friends, I could sense a good deal of hostility. And also, I knew the things that he would suggest were not at all my aim. But he was intelligent, rather soft, shrewd businessman, and willing to come along with me. And I think, hoping all the time that he'd be able to ride the movement, and get mosaics out of it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Right. In short, exercise such—

GEORGE BIDDLE: A perfectly human approach.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure.

GEORGE BIDDLE: That's the way—every artist I met with, pretty much, would have that approach. I'm either with you a 100 percent, or only 15, but I'm willing to ride along if I can get a mural out of it, or a building, or meet the important people in Washington.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Did you run into anyone in the early days in the development of an idea that made you—that with their commentary, made you rethink some of your own thinking about the program?

GEORGE BIDDLE: No, I became politically a little less inept, I think—I guess, as I went along.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Ah [laughs]. That's a nice way to phrase it. I like that. Well, what then would be—I assume that when the idea was born, you somehow got in touch with a group you selected?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, I had written this all down in my book, so I'll go through it very briefly. I first got this group: there was Maurice Sterne, Henry Poor, Boardman Robinson, Reggie Marsh. Edward Laning was the only one in the group that was finally not approved of by the fine arts commission in Washington, a year or two later. Who else would there be?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Henry Billings?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Henry Billings.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Thomas Benton?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Tom Benton. [John] Steuart Curry That would be about that first lot.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. Now, they—

GEORGE BIDDLE: I met Chip Robert, and it dragged along for six months, writing backward and forward. I, using all the pressure I could through all my New Deal Washington friends, I knew—up here in Croton, there was quite a New Deal crowd. I knew Henry T. Hunt and Jerome Frank very well, and played them for all it was worth. They introduced me to Tugwell. He also was an idea man. He was—he spark-plugged many of Roosevelt's ideas. And he was friendly, and helped me along, gave me a push.

Through Henry T. Hunt, I had talks with Ickes. I remember—I think Ickes was a little dumbfounded when I told him the first time I met him that we wanted to, again, work for plumbers' wages. [Laughs.] He immediately pricked up his ears, and although he, later on, showed himself completely unsympathetic to any creative artist, in his dogmatic meanness and selfishness to them, yet, since he was the incorruptible, he was in favor of anything that only asked to get one percent of the building cost, as Ned Bruce and I suggested to him. For his building program to be used for mural decorations, so on the way he was another person who helped.

[00:35:46]

Later, I found out through Frances Perkins—I asked her—I met her several years later and said, How did you get interested in this sort of thing? And I had known that she collected paintings, and I had my eye on her from the start. And she said, Well, one day Roosevelt tossed me over your letter and said, 'Do you know anything about this idea of Biddle's?' And she looked at the group of names I had in mind—this must have been a subsequent letter to Roosevelt—and said, Oh, they're a good lot of artists. It's a good idea. So, those—so, gradually, I had built up a dozen or so influential New Dealers in the picture, all of whom were friendly, and friendly to me, and willing, on the side, to push this little—call it, intellectual hobby of theirs. To help along the mural movement that seemed to them might be a feather in the New Deal cap, and Roosevelt's give them a certain prestige, because they're all liberals and idea men, and they were willing to give it, here and there, a push.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And things were riding along this way with a great many people interested and nothing happening, because Chip Robert was an awfully busy man, and not particularly educated, I guess, himself, until one day he ran into Bruce, whom I knew of very well, and I just can't remember whether I'd met him or not. But I knew he was a great friend of Maurice Sterne's, and knew of him through many directions, and said to him, What do you know of this idea of Biddle's? I understand you're a painter. You've done painting yourself. What do you know about this whole thing? And then—from then on, Bruce took it in hand. He corresponded with me, told me he'd met Chip Robert, could I see him about it? And I went down to Washington again and just threw the whole thing in his lap.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I must have met him before, because I felt, from the very beginning, that he was the one man in the world who should handle this whole thing. He had been a banker. He had gone over—for Roosevelt—to London on the—wasn't there some discussion about silver?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: The London Economic Conference.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, the London Economic Conference. It may have been there he met—no, he didn't meet Chip Robert there. I think he might've. He might've. He might've met him there and talked to him about this thing later, but he was a born promoter. He knew how to spend money; he was a lobbyist. He knew everybody in Washington. He wasn't a bad painter. He had things in museums.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: [Inaudible.] [Side conversation.]

GEORGE BIDDLE: He was an intimate friend of Maurice Sterne, admired him greatly. He wasn't painting for the time. He was promoting something out in Washington, could it be silver?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Philippine islands.



GEORGE BIDDLE: Philippine islands, right. Right. And I was just delighted to let him take the whole thing off my lap. I gave him all the information I had, all the leads I had, all the letters I had. We went and saw Ickes together. We had many conferences together with various people.

[00:40:00]

And finally, he then, runs into Hopkins, and starts talking about his last baby, this project to help art. And Hopkins said, Well, I've just been given \$400 million to—wasn't it to start the ball, to prime the pump. I don't see why—if some of your artists are starving, they should have money just as much as plumbers, anybody. And so, then, through my original idea to get the fine school of mural painting beginning with a hand—what I thought a hand-picked group, it turned into a much solider program on an utterly different basis to begin this movement on a very big scale to help all needy artists during the coming four, five years of the Depression.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Somewhere along in this, there is issued, I think by you, but I think, possibly—well, I'm interested in how it came about: The Artists' Manifesto.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Now, who—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: This was a statement of principles, and it was an artists' manifesto, which was published by Benton, Billings, Marsh, Boardman Robinson, Maurice Sterne, and, I think, yourself.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I think, if that's the case, I must have written that myself and got them to agree to it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. This, in effect, was your plan.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And why?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, it must have been, yes. I had just forgotten that I called it a manifesto.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: The rationale for a group of mural painters for a—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Now, I fancy I must have written that as their—what would you call it—apologia introduction, to be used by the—when I tried to get something from the powers that be that—yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Right. Right. It was like a statement of this is [cross talk] [where we aim -Ed.].

GEORGE BIDDLE: [Goals. -Ed.] The aims, political, artistic, and otherwise.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Right, which you could present to whatever door was open.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. It was like a statement that had been pounded on the anvil of conversation with this group.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Now, for the moment, I don't remember what I said in it, whether there were philosophic aims in it, or merely a statement of immediate objectives.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I think the latter.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yeah, in order to start a broad American mural movement.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Right. You know, the people who were also signed into this—of course we talked about Maurice Sterne, but we never mentioned Boardman Robinson.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes. And you'd like a word or two about him?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: He was a tragic man, in a sense. Lovable, weak, enormous personality, tremendous warmth, could be petty, a mother complex, if you want. I mean, unsecure. A gusto for life, a great cartoonist, because he—well, I suppose—I just noticed he had the qualities of a great cartoonist, which is the ability to—first of all, the warm human sensitivity, the sense of the tragedy of life, and the comedy of life, and then the ability to find the simple. And he was a good draftsman in the good French tradition of Daumier, and the whole school of modern French illustrators of the end of the 19th century, which, I suppose percolated through by men like Kirby.

[00:45:15]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes, yes. Was he articulate?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Too articulate. He—I don't know exactly what his antecedents were, whether they were Scotch or Irish—you'd think of him as 100 percent Irish, everything about him. He was the storyteller, the performer. He needed an audience, needed a group. He was on of the *New Masses* with all that crowd, with Floyd Dell and Max Eastman. He—it's—he was such an obvious man, the way—I mean, so—such an obvious—such a warm and exciting personality. It's funny I find these adjectives to describe him. He, as I said, needed an audience, and he needed success, and he had had it on the old *World*, when he appeared in the front page. And then he, why he gave it up, would not—I don't know. He wanted—always—he wasn't satisfied with his work. He wanted to be an artist [painter -Ed.], although I don't think he ever realized that he was expressing art in the way he most successfully could. But when I first knew him, he was out of the job, living here in Croton, pretty desperately poor. I tried to get work for him through Walter Lipmann, who I knew very well, on some other paper. He finally got a job teaching out in Colorado Springs.

He—I'll tell you who, in a vague way, he reminds me of. I've just been reading Frank Harris' autobiography, *My Life and Loves*, and in a way, he has a lot of that—let's say, not Frank Harris, but Frank Harris' qualities: ebullience, charm, warmth, certain weakness, mental softness, great humanity, and pettiness, sometimes. But all this came out later when I lived with him out in Colorado Springs. He asked me, after we both had finished our murals, to come out and join him for a year.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: But he was a fine man for this work, and did—curiously enough—he—and it's symptomatic of him—he became very much under the influence of a—in more than one way, a very small man, and that's Tom Benton. And copied all Tom's little mannerisms and paint techniques: underpainting and emulsions, and so forth, and left his own simple, old-fashioned, if you want, just splendid graphic idiom. But he had bigness, and warmth.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. How does he differ from Reginald Marsh?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, they were quite different, and the more I think, in many ways. Reggie was one of the most tongue-tied men, in a way, I've ever seen. And one of the most completely persistent. He—I've almost—there are very few artists I've known—Raphael Soyer is one—who you can hardly imagine without a pencil in his hand. He drew so—Pascin's another—he drew so insistently that you almost—with Reggie, you felt that it was a sort of neurosis. That often with him, you felt like saying, Heaven's sakes, stop, Reggie. You're not doing anything. You're just drawing.

[00:50:12]

He was a craftsman. He was almost more interested, in some ways, in the crafts of art than anything else. He was a student. He had a reputation for being one of the stingiest men of our—of my acquaintance, that he would always somehow slide out and let the other man pay for the drink. But on the other hand, he supported more than one artist friends. He helped publish works on certain artists that he admired. He was extremely generous in ideas. He could be very mean and nasty, gossiping about his artist friends, but very big in helping them out in bad years without saying anything about it to other people.

He never understood the—what the French call *matière*, the ingredient quality, [the "body" - Ed.] of oil paint. He was a *dessinateur*, a draftsman. There's no English word for it. And his best work were his, I think, perhaps his engravings, because it held him in, and overcame his too-fluent, almost academic mannerisms of drawing. He almost developed a style through

his studies of anatomy, and teaching. He could draw with his eyes shut, the way he could almost sketch with his eyes shut, out of doors.

But, on the whole, I think he has very great significance, and I think he can come back some time—his reputation. Because almost as much as any man I can think of right now, offhand, he represented that whole movement of regionalism. Although his regionalism was 14th Street. He couldn't live away from 14th Street. The whole of life was embodied in what he saw in 14th Street. He had a reverence for art, of the scholarly sort. It wasn't the spiritual reverence that people like Zorach and Max Weber and Raphael Soyer had. It was an intellectual reverence. He poured over the lives of Thomas Eakins, and others whom he especially admired. He was always studying. And in that particular manner, art was his passion in life.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Did he have any humor?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Of a very strange sort. I think you'd spend a day with him, and you'd say he was so completely without it that it made him almost human [laughs]. But he had a queer little comical way of—he was observant. Anybody as observant as he was must have—he couldn't help having been aware of many of the funny things in life. You notice that in his rather assiduous gossip about all his friends. He must have had some—he was terribly human, Reggie. I was devoted to him.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Human—was he something of a mimic, this kind of observer?

GEORGE BIDDLE: No, he was completely without it. The one thing he couldn't do was to act or to show off.

[00:55:00]

We talked together once in Middlebury College, and he continued—he kept bringing down the house. I mention this simply because he had—could have no idea of his own mannerisms, he would get the loud speaking apparatus so close to his voice as he would bend over, twist around, that his voice would come out as a bellow. And then he would almost turn his back to the audience so that you couldn't hear anything, but see his—as he would turn around, his lips—could understand that he was mumbling something else to himself. No, I think he was completely simple, completely himself. And completely a person.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: With a keen eye. A keen observer's eye.

GEORGE BIDDLE: He was observing all the time. I think he observed the surface. I don't think he was—it was never profound or subtle. He was a keen delineator of the outside in his drawing, in his whole approach, his study. He admired the great realists. Eakins, above anyone else.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Would he be—

GEORGE BIDDLE: And he was devoted to art.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: He was. How did he take to the idea of the mural, as the program that you had sketched?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, exactly the way you'd suppose, that one should suppose. He found out that there was a fellow up at—up the Hudson here that gave mural—Nordmark, Ollie Nordmark—that gave fresco lessons and persuaded me to come up there and spend two or three weeks with him, just learning how to paint fresco, which delighted me, the idea. Because I'd—I felt as if I knew fresco. I'd watched Rivera and Orozco painting so often, but I'd never done it myself. And so I went up and he would—he'd just charge into it like a bull, the way he did any other technique, to his various, awful paint media and so forth, he just studied with Ollie Nordmark eight hours a day, and took down notes, and learned it all by heart.

When he came down to paint his fresco, we were both together. He got up at—started getting up at five o'clock, and being down at six and working 10 hours a day. I asked him why he did it—working Sunday, too—and he just said, Well, I want to get through. I asked him, What's the difference? Why not take one day rest a week? "Well," he said, "I can't stand it in Washington. I want to get back to 14th Street in New York." He was a one idea man.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Didn't he do—I'm sure he did—the customs house?

GEORGE BIDDLE: He—[In New York. But that was later. Another job. -Ed.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Post office.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: The post office.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: It was the bringing in mail, through the customs, maybe—something of that sort, yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. I see. I think there's a kind of history—

GEORGE BIDDLE: He made hundreds of sketches.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And just tore through it. It was—I don't think he had much mural sense, I think it was a big Reggie Marsh drawing, the—when scaled down, it might just as well have been for a drawing for the *New Yorker*. I don't think he had any particular monumental or architectural feeling about space.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: But absolute honesty.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Eager to return to 14th Street? [Laughs.] That's good. Well, how does he work with a fellow—we've had occasion to mention him in passing, and this is Tom Benton.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, Tom was true to form. He just said he'd have nothing to do with it. And we were all disappointed because he—we all felt that he would've strengthened the group and he'd always been interested in murals. I can't remember whether he'd done one for some state out there—not Missouri. But the reason he gave—I don't think he gave it—we were told by some of his friends—[I was told by Ed Rowan afterwards -Ed.], that he just wasn't going to work with any darn group. He wanted to do the whole show.

[01:00:07]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Huh.

GEORGE BIDDLE: He did write me the reasons. It was because he was convinced that you couldn't do anything important for the federal government.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: But why that should be the case, and to do something important with the state government of Missouri, I don't know.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: No, Tom, very humanly, just wanted to be the whole show. Not messed up with any groups.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No. Well, does he have the same, oh, comparable sensitivity that Robinson and Marsh had? And yet, theirs is different and unique.

GEORGE BIDDLE: No, Tom's a very hard man to describe. You'd have to go at it very one-by-one. First of all, he has, almost, egomania. Or put it another way, the inferiority of a small man from a Middle West state who's ambitious. And then, he has as an undoubted aptitude for one side of art, and that is illustration and caricature.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: That's undoubted. He had that as a very young man. And then he had left-wing idealism, ambition, whatever you want to call it. Progressivism. But started him out as—and he was very young as a radical in the new mode. In the new idiom. And some of his things, I think—I'm not sure, were bought by Barnes. I think so. I first met him as a friend of Louis Bouché in 19—yes, '22 or '23. Tom Craven, who was a great admirer of his. And he was then, I would think, one of the hopes of that early group of modernists that came to light just after the Armory Exhibition of 1913; that would be 10 years later.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: He started young.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: He went to Paris and studied there. And it was only 10 years later when I again knew him, around the 1930s, that he reverted to what was much more his own expression, which was a very realistic, somewhat vulgar, tortured, illustrative caricature.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I think in a vague way that's his real tradition. But with a definite mural purpose. And I think you've got to take that very seriously because all his best work all through his life has been these murals, and he started out, in fact, a year or two before this. That would be, perhaps, in 1925 or '[2]6, doing a series of murals in the studio, some of which were reproduced in Forbes Watson's *Arts* magazine. It was the *Life of America*. [It was to be the history of America. -Ed.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I remember the American Indian he did for that. So, all through of his life you can see pretty much of a pattern which I think is very important in an artist's life, and that is to connect himself with what he thought of as American history. Of course, a bit from the Western point of view: the Indian, and the cowboy, and the pioneer, and then all the way through to modern times, and the flapper, and speakeasy, and war. And done on a mural scale with murals, in murals, but with an idiom that was completely lacking in all the qualities that we see through the history of art associated with big murals.

[01:05:04]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: That is nobility of conception, the simplicity of theme, the use of space. All his murals have the same crowded caricature quality of the comic magazines of the times, in a way.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. He was a soloist, not a team player.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, and always has been.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. Is there a sardonic quality to this man?

GEORGE BIDDLE: No, he's—no, I don't think so. No. That's why I love Tom, with all his faults which are on the surface, there's something pretty decent underneath. On the surface, he's brash, and loud, and vulgar, and boasting, and making an ass of himself in his cups, and very noisy when he drinks. But underneath, there's something that's very generous, full of courage, pretty intelligent about history, if he'd forget all his—I speak of it as the Irish quality, I don't know if there's any Irish there.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: The cowboy boastfulness, all that. Warm and human.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. I mean, there is this—this is apart from the façade—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —if you dig far enough, this is what you find.

GEORGE BIDDLE: There's something underneath the loud voice—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —from the little man, the big gestures and all that.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: There's something rather—certainly, human.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And, I think, lovable.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. There's the other man that's mentioned here who is also of interest is Henry Billings.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, he's—as an artist, I think he's a much less interesting person. I don't know why he happened to slide into art because his—I don't know much about his early career. I only met him in about 1933 or '34, something of that sort, up at Woodstock. His art—it's an intellectual approach. I don't see anything deep, emotional personality, or deep drive, or—it's eclectic. Josh is a cultured man; he's a man of the world. He's always been in and out of what you would think of as the—not quite, the politics of art, but the organizational art bodies.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: He's been members and presidents of the Artists' Congress, and the Artists' Union, and UN committees, and all that sort of thing.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: I think of him very much as fringe man. A splendid, big, wholesome country gentleman-sort of a person. He's Southern; he comes from Charleston. His brother was the editor of *Life*, or way high up in echelon somewhere. He's a country gentleman man of the world. And a very civilized person.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Yes, he—

GEORGE BIDDLE: I don't think his—I've never thought that his art was important, and I never thought that his murals were important, although he has enough intellect.

[01:10:01]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And competence of control so that he can do a job.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Was his the kind of ego that suppresses the ego?

GEORGE BIDDLE: No, I wouldn't think he has any ego at all.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I mean, he's very—I think of as a completely wholesome man, if that's what you—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes, yes, yes, yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Wholesome and healthy.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And very civilized. I saw a good deal of him when he was married to Gladys Rice—Gladys Brooks. I saw a good deal of him when he was younger, on, let's say, undrunken [ph] occasions, out at parties up at Woodstock.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: When he was—got on with everybody, and with everybody, and completely wholesome, healthy, in no way deep, or passionate, or subtle.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: Or important human being.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: That's interesting.

GEORGE BIDDLE: But belonged very much in the world

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Well now, when you have to work through architects—I guess the one who figured most of all was Charles Borie.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, and he figured only as he gave me excellent advice. His—the qualities he dreaded most in me were, first of all, political incompetence. He was afraid I might wreck things by saying the tactless things to the wrong person.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And then he had that sort of a sunny disposition, where he deplored any unhappy expression in art. And, of course, all the artists in our group had a great, unhappy expressions—they wanted—unhappy feelings they wanted to give expression to.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And that—he would be always saying to me, George, can't you make them a little more cheerful? George, they look awfully hungry, your people. But he was—I think he was a very wise human being as a betwixt and between man.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: He knew that murals were important; he had that very intelligent flair. And he knew that the group I had was a very fine group, although they all horrified him a bit, in one way or another. But he showed great tact, and he helped us all he could with Simon, who was, I think, much duller, heavier, narrower, bureaucratic personality. I didn't see him often.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: But in my meetings with him—which was mostly to complain about the censorship that was going on in my own case, that sort of thing—I thought he was a rather bloodless, thin-lipped, bureaucratic type.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: There was no—I had no communication with him at all. While with Charlie I could say anything. He had the warmth of an old grandmother. I could confide my troubles and he would understand.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Right. He put them in there, yeah. Give them that emphasis, and what is it—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Of course, that's a quality that's awfully important to an architect in the world we live in.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure, but think of the advice.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I mean, in getting—I meant those same qualities got him jobs.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Oh, sure.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But by the same token, he thought enough of you as a person, apart from what you were saying, to indicate and advise you that you ought not to say certain

specific things, given this context.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Oh, yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: That's what a friend is for. Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Oh, yes. He couldn't have been more friendly. Of course, I was devoted to his younger brother, and he and his younger brother didn't get on too well; they were different in temperament.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: He was a very loyal man, Charlie.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. In the artists that have been named, is there anyone who had a sense of—oh, power? Anyone with a sense of power?

GEORGE BIDDLE: You mean an urge for power?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

[01:15:09]

GEORGE BIDDLE: A demand for power? Power complex?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, Benton, of course, and that's—that was all for himself, so that's not what you mean quiet, is it?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No.

GEORGE BIDDLE: To dominate our group? No, I wouldn't say at all. . No, I wouldn't say in any way, no. I'd say all this group were—showed—I wouldn't say in any way the jealousy. They showed the suspicion that you get with deep individuality, with marked individuality. The suspicion about ideas about—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: No, the only one in this whole group that had any power complex—and he had a great deal—was Ned Bruce.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: He had—in a sense—I'd have to think over before I decided how much, but in certain ways, a tremendous sense of power. He didn't like people to interfere with him. And he got furious if he thought he was being double-crossed. After that unfortunate stroke of his, somebody adopted—somebody told me that it was characteristic of that type of illness. He became, on one or two occasions, very suspicious of me. He thought I was double-crossing, which, of course, were the last of my thoughts because I just—apart from being very fond of him, I needed him terribly. I opposed Ned Bruce once or twice—and I opposed him and there Maurice Sterne was very helpful to me in two ways, in that, rather mildly, he helped me in opposing Ned where I thought Ned made mistakes. But he very honestly—although Ned was his oldest friend—was willing to tell me where he thought Ned was wrong and I was right. And I say he was helpful to me that way because often, I'm not sure of my own convictions.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And he convinced me I was right in quarreling with Ned Bruce, if you want.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Where I quarreled was simply because Ned, with his political sense and power complex, was anxious to succeed in his program. It was his not program, not mine. And he didn't it to be wrecked by my stupidity. And he didn't want it to be wrecked by the malfeasance of any one particular artist or any one particular mural.



HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And in that way, he was willing to censor work, which he probably knew he shouldn't censor. Or willing to allow it to be censored. And in those particulars, Maurice was helpful to me in convincing me that I had to continually oppose Bruce where I felt that Bruce was softening our whole concept. Incidentally, I'm sure that Ned was the man—or his group, his committee—that chose Josh Billings. I'm almost sure.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And I think, but I'm not positive, that he he was the one—yes, I'm quite sure—that chose Louis Bouché.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: Now, Louis Bouché would be a very acceptable to the architectural lobbies. He always worked through architects, and he'd done popular commissions for rich peoples' dining rooms and clubs out on Long Island.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And I didn't—in these cases, I naturally didn't oppose them because they were both friends of mine, and they were part of our group, more or less. I am quite sure that I didn't—would never have suggested their names as among the eight or 10 best men for this one building. For the building that I wanted what I thought was the best group of architectural and of mural artists in America to do.

[01:20:07]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: Because I was very anxious that this should be a successful effort.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Well, this would be in keeping with the original idea that emerged.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. But-

GEORGE BIDDLE: And they were all in these two buildings. Most in the Justice and the rest were the post office.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, yeah. But your notes in here is that-

GEORGE BIDDLE: Not that Ned chose these two, but that his committee did, because, after all, he had a committee that made the selection.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Ned was very wise, and I learned an enormous amount from him politically, in creating an organizational set-up which would have the confidence of the politicians.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And in which, his particular—and in which he would always be sure of the votes in choosing the artist in the program.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: When I think about that, that he made that, I thought, remark to me that I thought was really worthy of Lincoln or Franklin, when he put on, as chairman of his final committee, which is to run the whole show, he put the name of Charlie Moore, who was the chairman of the Fine Arts Commission and had steadily—who hated our work, and hated our group, and had already condemned it in his letter to the President. And I said to him, For God's sakes, Ned, what are you putting that old rascal's name on this committee for as

chairman of the group? And he said, Well, George, as long as he's there, I always think it's better to have a man pissing on the inside than pissing outside. Pissing from the inside out, than pissing from the outside in. Which was—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Marvelous.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —shows his extreme political cattiness.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Oh, yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Because he had Charlie Moore just sewed up then.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And on this committee, of course, would be Mr. Morgenthau, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Mrs. Roosevelt, you know—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure. Oh, sure.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —and half a dozen congressmen, and half a dozen of the best and safest artists in the country.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Leon Kroll. Paul Manship. Who [inaudible], you know.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Laughs.] Well, you know, it shows—he had legal training, Ned Bruce—had gone—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Oh, yes, he did. He went to Columbia.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Columbia Law School.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And then he was a genius for the job. He was a professional lobbyist all his life. He knew everybody in Washington. He had a house, and the present means as a lobbyist; he was lobbying in Washington for something or other. I've forgotten, to—well, you said Philippine.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Philippine independence.

GEORGE BIDDLE: To entertain in a big way.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: So he would get hold of any 20 men in Washington he wanted to, and give 'em a bang-up dinner, with bang-up food and plenty of drinks, fine house.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. Yes. He was—

GEORGE BIDDLE: And he was an artist himself.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And he loved artists on the side. He worshipped art. I mean, he gave up business, as soon as he made money, to devote himself to painting, but he did not want people to interfere.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Laughs.] It's an interesting set of factors that make—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, it was these circumstances, I started out by saying, that made this sort of thing a distinct success.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: How could he possibly communicate with a person like Tom Benton?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Oh, he could communicate with anybody. I mean, he was an artist himself. He was a politician. He was 20 years older than any of us, so he could talk to us like a grandfather. And he had been up to his neck with tougher men than artists all his life. They didn't worry him a particle.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I'm surprised because, you know—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Maurice Sterne was his best friend. He had a very sensitive side, Ned.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: This is what hasn't been [cross talk]—

GEORGE BIDDLE: [Inaudible.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: This is what you haven't brought out yet—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —namely, the nature of his sensitive side.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, a man who loved Chinese painting better than anything in life, who'd left a lucrative business, in when—at a guess, middle 40s— to join Maurice Sterne, to first go to Florence and study painting, and join Maurice Sterne in this little Abruzzi village. Where you could hardly get a woman who knew how to fry a chicken for you.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

[01:15:23]

GEORGE BIDDLE: And perfectly happy. And he worked that way happy is the day is long. When I knew him, he had a place up in Vermont, and he'd sit down in front of his landscape with a little stool, and work eight hours a day painting.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Pretty dull, pretty academic—but no, he had every possible quality. And a very wise wife who could hold him in check when he was drinking too heavily, getting a little noisy.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: This is the catalyst I've met, Peggy.

GEORGE BIDDLE: You know her?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes, Peggy Bruce.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yeah. Tremendously wise.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Witty. Witty and wise.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Tremendously wise, and hard as nails, in the best sense of the word. [Harlan B. Phillips laughs.] I mean, there was nothing mushy about her.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Nothing. Nothing. Nothing wordy about her, either. Sparing of words.

GEORGE BIDDLE: No.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Almost lean and sparse.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yeah. But he also was—had the Celtic in him.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative]. Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Just boiling through life.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: He was another Frank Harris.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I mean, working all day, you know, going to bowl, bowl for two hours, come back and drink until three o'clock in the morning. And that finally kicked him off. [Inaudible] life.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: It's an—yes. Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: [Inaudible] life, the pressure.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Because he never stopped. He was a bull for energy.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Well, maybe not the bread of life, but some of the yeast in it, he is. But it certainly is, I think, you know, a strange moment that he would be present in Washington as a paid lobbyist for the Philippine government, with this circle of friends—

GEORGE BIDDLE: And painting in the summer up in Vermont.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Painting, yeah. And have a feeling for—the sensitivity for the artist.

GEORGE BIDDLE: But not too much real understanding.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I think he liked Leon Kroll's work just as much as he would George Grosz', you know.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Laughs.] Fundamentally, it was a question of creating opportunity, and administratively.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, in all this thing, I don't think—I think there's one person we've left out who really became important, although he had nothing to do with—well, with me. That's Holger Cahill.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Because I think that whole other side of it—we've just been talking about the work which culminated in the committee of painting and sculpture in the Treasury—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —whose object was to create fine decorations for government buildings.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And Cahill's was just the reverse. His objective was that the work of any starving artist—any starving artist, period—could help make American more beautiful.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And at that particular moment—or in any moment, whether again at any moment there will be a depression—he did as much as Bruce. I mean, I can't—it'd be awfully hard to say which of the two sections, or which of the two men did more for the ultimate purpose of art in America. There's no question that Cahill's section, by definition, did much more to bring out and develop future artists. Because, by definition, Bruce's section only had to do with those who he considered the most competent.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And best mural painters in America. And Bruce's section had to do with how many? 4,000, 5,000. By definition, young artists, who needed help.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And so, of course, from the latter category came far more of the great artists of today. In fact, from Bruce's section did any—did it bring forth any unknown artist?

[01:30:10]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Inaudible.]

GEORGE BIDDLE: Not that off-hand that I can think of. There were one or two names at the Justice Department building. One or two that—half a dozen possibly—that were used for federal buildings in later years, but I—at a guess, they were also work for Cahill.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes, well, another distinction was that the Bruce formula involved a competition.

GEORGE BIDDLE: That's something I always fought with him about. In this original group of ours, no.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Then—from then on, Sterne and myself tried to persuade him that, although competition is always necessary to unearth the new and unknown, the personal selection of the competent judge and—of course, he must consider himself competent—is always more intelligent than a competition. Because a competition is only a method of— I've always felt—of eliminating the best and the worst. You get a high level of competence.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And then you eliminate the best and the worst.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. But this is another difference between the Holger Cahill approached.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Entirely.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Entirely, yes. Because all you had to have was need with Cahill. But I think, you know, the Treasury Department, somehow, somehow, were able, through access funds from Cahill's outfit, to employ, on some of the mural projects as assistants, some of the unknown people who later made their name.

GEORGE BIDDLE: To help Bruce's project.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: That I don't know anything about.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Because all I saw—my real contact with Bruce was in the beginning getting things started.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Which would go, say, the spring of '34 till the spring of '36. And then during the couple of years afterwards that I was back in Washington.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: After that, I was away from Washington. I was with Boardman Robinson in '37 out in Colorado Springs, and then I was in California in '39, and then war came on and I went down to Brazil, and so forth and so forth. So, the last four or five years, from the end of '36 until it's abandoned during the war while I was overseas with the department of artists in the War Department—the War Department Art Committee. I saw nothing of what was going on in the mural in Washington.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: The two sections. I'd hear about it—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —but no personal contact.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Yeah. I'm told that some of the funds that Cahill had were used by the Treasury Department to sustain assistants to those who did win a competition and got [a space -Ed.].

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, that I was unaware of.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And that this led, in part, to some of the difficulties as between Bruce

and Cahill. I suspect more on Bruce's—

GEORGE BIDDLE: And it must have been more fundamental—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —because it was more bitter when I was down there.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Cahill—I knew them both very intimately. I spent a week with Cahill once, living in his apartment. He had a big apartment in Washington that was loaned him by Hopkins.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Cahill had always said to me, I have nothing against Bruce. It's he has it in for me. Bruce had had his accident then, and he was very touchy about all kinds of things. He thought people were competing with him, and he became very jealous.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: It was part of his malady. But I don't think Cahill told the whole truth. I think there was an almost physical antagonism between them, and it's something— that physical antagonism seems to be prevalent among any two departments in Washington at all times.

[01:35:20]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: It's the curious, call it, complex that seems to be part of Washington life, of any bureaucratic life.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: The need of expansion in one's own department, and the feeling that everybody else is tearing you down. And I think that, fundamentally, is the difference they had between— just departmental jealousy.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Bruce—

GEORGE BIDDLE: He was a wonderful man.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. I always assumed that Bruce had wrote—that is, a healthy Bruce —had the wherewithal, the tone, the talent to stand up against almost anyone. Cahill, I'm told—I don't know; I never met him—had that kind of temperament that would avoid clashes. He was good à *deux*. He wasn't—

GEORGE BIDDLE: I can't imagine Cahill in a knock-down, drag-out fight. And you could Bruce.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Cahill could be fairly wittily cruel when he wanted to be. And I don't know him well enough personally to know whether he was—I won't say devious or not, but just temperamentally Irish or not. Of course, he wasn't Irish, he was—what was the—he was part Laplander or Finn or something of that sort.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Something—yes. Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: But he was a man of great charm, Cahill. And I think possibly more intellectual subtlety than Ned. He could—the way he would flatter me when he wanted to. I know he could be extremely intellectually charming.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. I've been told that he had a kind of litmus paper mind, Cahill. That he could hear you talk and absorb your idea, or absorb your thinking, absorb your point of view. And not in any malicious way.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: In subsequent times, you might hear him giving voice and expression to the very idea that you had in his own.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I wouldn't know that. The quality that you were most aware of was his expression—easy expression of intellectual sympathy when he took you in to his any of workshops, to introduce you to his artists, and to explain to you the importance of what they were doing, and the importance of that work to America. And then he could be a splendid and highly intelligent and highly vocal spokesman or call it a salesman.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: But did it with suavity, with charm. And Ned, I supposed by comparison, was more the typical political lobbyist. Full, if you want, with good, ruddy, wholesome, you know, gift of gab.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Slap you on the back and be a regular guy, you know, and an honest-to-God fellow, you know. With a personality, a dominating personality.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes, but—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Aggressive.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: That's right. That is the aggressive self-assertion that he had.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: The—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Carry you along.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, but he probably had all along—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Captain of the football team, "Now, fellas, let's get going." That enthusiasm, success.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: You know, "We'll get there. We're going to—don't worry."

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But a mind like a steel trap.

GEORGE BIDDLE: "I'm going to get you this job." All that.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, but with a mind like a steel trap that would catalogue things from an administrative point of view because he knew how much agony it took to get an idea to walk. He probably had that, that is, he was a shrewd administrator, to get it set up and established.

[01:40:04]

GEORGE BIDDLE: Ned?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes, whereas Cahill probably was sloppy when it comes to—sloppy's a bad word. What I mean is, he may have been no administrator at all, but the one rallying point for the myriad independent, individualistic artists in the nation who would look to him for leadership because he was—he, himself, was one of the boys and could bend a bit when he was with the boys.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, I've seen him—yes, I can recall two incidences of his charm. I spent a night with him at Hopkins and we'd sit up and have whiskeys. And he'd show me a brochure that he just published about Pop Hart. And he talked for 20 minutes about Pop Hart as a human being, and times they'd been together, and jokes, and so forth, and I'd come out thinking Pop Hart was a much more important man that I had before I went in. He had that quality, but on an intellectual level.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And then, I remember his joking once with Stuart Davis in front of some Artists' Congress meeting where there were regular guys, Artists' Congress guys, and he must have been introducing Stuart and myself and others to make five-minute speeches, something of that sort. And the way he could—after being with utterly different types of artists, the way he could turn to Stuart and strike an immediate rapport between himself and Stuart—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: —by a couple of wisecracks and how—"I knew you when you were on 14th Street," and all that, you know. And you felt that Stuart could also eat of the palm of his hand. The way when he'd say to me in front of my mural—and I say this very typically—I mean, because I'm aware of the implication: "George, this is the only mural I've seen in Washington that has any real mural feeling to it." And he'd say it with—so that I could believe him.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I mean, he had that. He was very, let's say, tactful—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: —through intelligence.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Or intelligence through tact, whichever way you want to put it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: He could get you eating out of his hand. And he could make you feel that it was all Ned's fault and not mine. And I'm not saying this for one second because it makes me feel that I may have been a little partisan the wrong way; I feel just as warm about Cahill as I did when he was with me.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I'm just trying to say that he and Ned were—make a different impression on me, which I never thought about much before.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. Yes, you know, I've wondered because there's a lot that lurks in inference—people with whom you talk—as to the quality of both men.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, they—I'll tell you one thing I've never quite understood: he [Cahill - Ed.] married Dorothy Miller. And I've never quite understood how—and this is a very silly thing to remark—his whole deep, passionate libido for the work he was doing under his section in helping poor artists of the—his passion for early Colonial and all that, and this group of realistic painters [could harmonize with Dorothy Miller's whole approach to avant-gardist abstract art -Ed.]—with the apparent sympathy that] I suppose, one—he felt for Dorothy Miller's feeling about the art.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. Yes, because it is strange.

GEORGE BIDDLE: The [inaudible] degrees, do you know, of the—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yep, yep.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —of the action [ph] school.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Right. Right.

GEORGE BIDDLE: So, he—would that be a Celtic quality? To be able to ride horses so easily? These contradictions and—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes, I would think so. Where you [laughs]—



GEORGE BIDDLE: I mean, the kind of thing you'd find in Joyce's Dublin?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. Yes. I mean, where you—

GEORGE BIDDLE: An intellectual awareness of both sides of the penny?

[01:45:05]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: All at the same time.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. Yeah. And really, in some respects, [dog barks] no real commitment to either side. [Side conversation.] That's all right, she'll come over like gangbusters.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Come back here [Inaudible.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: There's a dog, I think, across the way, or barking away up in the hills. Yeah. Oh, this is strange about—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Should I let her out or—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Might as well.

GEORGE BIDDLE: If you want to turn it off, just [inaudible].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: All right.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Okay, okay.

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Why don't you start as far as can you—

GEORGE BIDDLE: [Inaudible.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: [Inaudible.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, yeah. Because I have another reel, anyway.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I would like to say this about this whole movement: we've been talking about its importance, and at that time, what it meant to be artists and how many important artists grew out of both these New Deal projects. Now, I think, today, that it would be fair to say that the mural movement—the American mural movement, in which I had such hopes—is completely dead, and was killed almost overnight by the war. The war scattered the artists. And when they came back—I would say for many reasons, perhaps because the American action school was in the saddle. Perhaps because, for the similar reasons—the reason that created that—anything that was close to American regionalism, the American mural movement, representational art, was completely dead, for the moment.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: Now, you can't have a significant mural—in terms of what the mural has always been—without some sort of representational art, and without some sort of—the kind of awareness that one were to associate with a strong regional American feeling.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And I simply state this as a fact. I think it'd be unfair to say a great deal about the regional movement of the '30s, the New Deal art, and the short-lived American mural movement, no matter what its possibilities were and what its possibilities might have been, without admitting that is completely dead now and died overnight through war, through the scattering of artists at the time of the war, and through the total destruction and collapse of the federal aid to artists.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Which happened all at the same time, more or less.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: The other thing that I wanted to mention—although it is only very, very indirectly connected to this whole thing—is my personal relations with Roosevelt. And I mention them not because they're personal, but because I think they're a curious side glimpse of this extraordinary man. And they back up what my brother, who knew him and was intimately closer to him—knew him a bit better than I did, but never had the romantic and hero worship-feeling that a person not so close to him might have had for him, which I did. But my relation to Roosevelt, before I wrote to him in the spring of '34, were extremely tenuous.

[1:50:05.5]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: I had seen him once for five minutes since leaving school 25 years before — 25 years or so—1904—19—30 years ago. I had only known him then in this very tenuous way, the way—really, we knew who each other were and had certain memories. The reasons for his curious feeling about me was simply this: in my autobiography—a copy of which either I sent him or Missy [Marguerite] Lehand sent him—there was one chapter that I wrote about the school in which I described a talk that the rector made around about 1935, 1936, something in there, which enormously impressed and shocked me.

The rector, as he finished talking to the men, said very briefly, Boys, I have something very important to say to you. We've got to be serious now, for a moment. Our world has been going through some pretty bad times, and if some of us take sides too easily, we get rather excited. And sometimes we all say things that we're a little sorry for having said afterwards. I just want to tell you that I'm proud of being a friend of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and I think he's a fine gentleman. And for two minutes, there was a dead silence. May have been 50 seconds. And then, the school—the graduates—broke into a five-minutes clapping and cheering. And to me, the drama of it was simply this: not that they agreed with Mr. Peabody for a moment, but they felt, By Jesus, the old man's got guts, to say what he did. And after all, Roosevelt was a Groton man, and perhaps we shouldn't wash our dirty linen in public. The old fella's right.

Well, I thought this so tremendously dramatic that that was the school from which he came, at a moment when he was—could compare in popularity with any president we've ever had, was one of the three or four most beloved and important people in the world. And I stated it. [And I more or less wrote this in my book. -Ed.] About a week after I sent it to him, I got a letter from him in which he said: Dear George, your book is on the bedstand me. I've read that chapter. And I'm glad you said about the school what you did, and it ought to have been said.

After that, he never—I never wrote him a letter—and I wrote some eight or ten [in all -Ed.]—but I didn't get an answer from him within a week, or two. And he always signed his name a little more warmly than he had before, "With best wishes," something of that sort, "As ever, yours." And the reason was simply this: not because I was anybody that I hadn't been before. It showed two things: first of all, the utter loneliness that we've heard about so much from anybody in that position. And secondly, his particular bitterness he felt about his own class, and the comfort he got from anyone in that class, no matter how little he knew of them, whom he felt was completely loyal.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And thirdly—and I think this is really the important thing in this little anecdote—the way he always—his particular genius, was always to do things by intuition. It's the same reason that drove people that were with him almost out of their heads. My brother was one of them. The way that he did what he did with me later—which he shouldn't have done—to go over his departmental heads and, thereby, almost double-cross the efficiency in his government, you know, to play things by ear below them.

[01:55:34]

It's the same way with me, when sent me the attack [on my idea for the mural movement by the -Ed.] Fine Arts Commission, which he had no utter right to do, simply because by intuition he guessed that it was in safe hands. Or by intuition, he guessed that this thing [my idea -Ed.] might be worth playing with. Well, that's all for the moment. Just—I—after all Roosevelt had something to do with [the success of -Ed.] this whole thing.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And it was one little tiny example of his loneliness, his human side, because he must have stood—he must have—the mere fact that—Arthur Schlesinger told me—almost with horror, when I told him once that I always called him by his first name through his presidency. He must have realized my political innocence in more ways than one [but he knew I was loyal -Ed.].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Laughs]. Which was, in this instance, one of your great calling cards [inaudible].

GEORGE BIDDLE: It happened to be because it added up to the picture that "if he's loyal, he wouldn't behave this way."

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Right.

GEORGE BIDDLE: "I can trust him."

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Right. Right. There's another person, I think—I mean, the mention of the president, he did figure in this not a little, But there's another person, too, who figures in, and this is the range and depth of Harry Hopkins, who—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, of course, I had nothing to do with him, except I would hear all about him through Cahill—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —who adored him. I spent a long evening to him once when Cahill got our group—and by our group, I mean the—most of them were the boys on relief.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: To sit and just chat with them, and have whiskey and sodas. And of course, he'd been built up through Cahill's eyes to me as one of the great, exciting people of the time.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And I was charmed by his easy, club-like charm with which—his feet were on the table—he was in a big, armchair most of the time, with whisky and sodas round—and let everybody else do the talking. I remember I was utterly shocked the way he got the boys all talking, you know. And asked Stuart Davis what he thought about the situation. And Stuart, who in those days, was very much the profile of the fellow traveler.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: You know, be tough and if they give me something, ask for a hell of a lot more. And I just couldn't believe the way he sailed at Hopkins and told him how badly he was doing everything, and how the artists weren't getting enough money. [They laugh.] And Hopkins took it all very easily and calmly; didn't—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: He didn't seem ruffled one way or the other, he just sort of, "What do you feel about it?" That's about all I know about him.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But that's an instinctive thing. Must have been with him.

GEORGE BIDDLE: With whom?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: With Hopkins. To turn on a Stuart Davis, and to roll, and be

undisturbed.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, it showed—of course, I know nothing about him except what I read in the papers.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. Yes. We're almost at the end, here. Let me put on another fresh one.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes.

[END OF TRACK AAA\_biddle63\_9258\_m.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: You were commenting—one thing, which I'd like you to talk about, or give some expression to—I mean, we've seen the development of this idea of yours as a mural school, and how circumstance and the Depression shaped it a little bit differently than intended—then you intended it. It became something other, I think, larger and probably, on the whole, something more [inaudible].

GEORGE BIDDLE: Better, much more important.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And significant, yes. But I wonder—there are certain antagonists in the field. You mentioned one in passing, that's Charles Moore. And there's another group, the Fine Arts Commission itself, particularly, a statement and report based upon some commentary from a fellow called Eugene Savage, that was almost a—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, I knew him very well.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. Well, do you remember this particular—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Oh, heavens, yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I was shocked and, of course, very angry when I saw it because I—in retrospect, I don't think that he did anything wrong. I mean, he—this is a secret report, written—he was asked to write it by the head of the commission. It represented what he honestly believed was his—in the best interest of art and mural painting of public buildings. He—the expressions he used, from my point of view, were dishonest and unfair, but from his own point of view, I don't think you could say they were any more exaggerated than what anybody writing a report, with a somewhat partisan approach, might say.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: I'm sure his—what he wrote couldn't be construed as dishonest or unpleasant, as many of the things I've said about friends of mine during the past two sessions with you. Remember, it was a secret report, which he'd been asked to write, and which was to go to only one person, and that was the president of the United States. The Fine Arts Commission channels only to the president.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: So, although I was furious and thought it disloyal and dishonest and all that, in retrospect, I really can't criticize him as a human being. I think it represented what all his group—and that is the successful academic mural painters of America who represented the Beaux-Arts architect tradition, and the American Academy of Rome, as it then was—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: —who represented those standards. And that they happened to be diametrically opposed to the standards of group is not enough to accuse him of anything outrageous. I went directly to him and showed it to him, and we talked in a perfectly amicable way.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I tried to insist that he had made false statements in that, number one,

suggestion that our group were Communists. And number two, that they were unknown to their professions. And he simply—I could not persuade him to—so to speak, to make any apology or eats his words. He apologized in the sense that he was friendly about it, and may have—I remember the general tenor of our conversation, I don't remember exactly what he said. He probably said that he was sorry this occurred, and that he hadn't meant to say anything injurious to a person's representation, so forth and so on.

[00:05:18]

But anyway, there was no way I could convince him that what he should do would be to make some sort of a statement correcting what I thought was false in his report. So we left on supposedly amicable terms, and we still always are friendly when we see each other in public.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, I think this is part of the scenery. That is, the art, in the public eye, was dominated by such invested rights and vested interests—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Absolutely. Absolutely.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —that had sprung up, against which you were releasing, this group.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Was a releasing a freeing agent.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And in fact, the whole way Ned Bruce, I think, coined the expression of nudes in cheesecloth, something of that sort, to show these figures—these symbolic figures he and Barry Faulkner and all of them used.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And there was this—let's say, among the great many of them, the feeling of fury. The same quality that you felt in the criticism of Roosevelt's New Deal politics by my right-wing Republican friends.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: But I remember when the thing finally broke in the papers. I had decided I was exhausted. And when the news came out of Ned—of the program—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —under Ned Bruce, without mentioning names of artists, but saying that the government had decided on a program of decorating, with liberal terms, you know—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —the buildings under construction along the Pennsylvania Triangle. I think that night three or four men called me up on the phone long distance from the other group saying it was an outrage, that something should have to be done about it, that they couldn't believe it was true, had I been implicated, all that sort of thing.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Which, considering I don't think I knew them all except ex officio, it shows their just complete fury.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. Yes, the press—when the Bruce committee or program was first announced, the following day or two days later, the press is filled with statements from other more conservative groups—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, that I missed because I think I sailed the next day for the Caribbean.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. That had dominated the scene—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —and suddenly had to share it.

GEORGE BIDDLE: [Ernest Peixotto -Ed.] was one of the few that remained sane about it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Ernest Peixotto.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: He—I knew him—probably the coffee house club, but I'd known him through Frank Crowninshield, and he remained absolutely friendly and urbane, and willing to accept any new liberal ideas if they were sound.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. Well, you know, there are a few names here. Camamerra [ph].

GEORGE BIDDLE: No, I don't remember him. Camamerra [ph]?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Camamerra [ph]. I think he was on the Fine Arts—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Oh, Camamerra [ph]. Yes, yes, yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes. Yes. I remember nothing about him.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Yeah. But, you know, the whole route to the Fine Arts Commission seems to have been dotted with people with gifted vetoes, if they wished to exercise them. Like Simon had that kind of an administrative veto before you reach the Fine Arts Commission. Or seemed to have it.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, you see, he was the supervising architect—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah [laughs].

GEORGE BIDDLE: Now, that meant he had charge of—at that moment—all buildings under the federal program.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: So, of course he said something to say about what went inside the building. I remember chatting with him, but—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —I just remember he was one of the men across the table I think I was unsympathetic to me.

[00:10:05]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Laughs.] Yeah. Or Sheldon Coombs.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Sheldon Coombs?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, wasn't he also on the Fine—

GEORGE BIDDLE: No, no, he's somebody very different. He was a friend of mine. He was in one of those enormous, big advertising houses. One of the biggest—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Oh, yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —in New York. Public relations. One of the very big ones. You'd know the name if I mentioned it. No, he was just a personal friend. And I had—the only way in which he was helpful, and really none at all—when the thing started, I was—he knew a good many of Roosevelt's close advisors, Tugwell, and—who is the other fellow that resigned shortly afterwards when he went over to London and started talking on his own, and Roosevelt dropped him?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Oh, yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: He now runs some column in some paper. But he knew men of that sort.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Ray Moley, wasn't it? Raymond Moley?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Raymond Moley.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Sheldon Coombs would give me profile breakdowns of the people round Roosevelt. Gave me a long talk of when Roosevelt woke up in his morning, who gave him the papers, and whom he discussed the day's work with, and so forth—Moley and Tugwell, and so forth and so forth.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: But he had nothing to do with the—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Yeah. Well, did you find much help in people like Duncan Phillips in Washington?

GEORGE BIDDLE: No.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No?

GEORGE BIDDLE: No, he had—and I am pretty sure he was among the sort, like Mrs. Vanderbilt, whose life were devoted to art and artists, but who was pretty suspicious about anything being done by the government. Only that he was, at a guess, a Republican for generations, and that he felt that art was the result of—quite rightly—the result of individuals and not promoted by governments.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: No, I don't remember anything hostile he ever said about this. I've known him moderately intimately in other ways, just meeting him socially in Washington.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: But my guess is that he would be very polite but rather skeptical. And you can understand it. I mean, a man collecting Renoirs all his life wouldn't be terribly interested by a pretty good or pretty bad mural by Boardman Robinson.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. Yes. Now, you know, I kind of lost sight of your original group. Did the original group remain intact for the Justice Department building?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Pretty much, yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Pretty much?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, then, I think—

GEORGE BIDDLE: I think the outsiders—as I remember, the outsiders—that was the ones not on our original group, were Leon Kroll, Louis Bouché, and Billings.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And then there was one or two in our group that were in other buildings. That is Reggie Marsh ended at the post office building. I was trying to think who else in the post office, but that was pretty much—they had most of our group in the Justice building.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Now, in idea—the submission of idea, how did the work to divide up what was available inside the department?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, I did that as well as I could with them. Yes. With them and Ned Bruce.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: First of all, I got my ideas—that is, the conception of what to do in the Justice building, I knew there had to be some unity.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And I knew it would be important from Ned's point of view, and the Borie, and everybody, you know, and the lawyers and judges. Jerome T. Frank helped me a lot. He got some of the young [legal lights (ph)] down there in Washington with him, and Henry T. Hunt gave me others, and we had conferences together and worked out something like—I did this by myself.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Right.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Like a building program. And then I shuffled it around. I knew the spaces from Borie, I had the spaces. And so I shuffled that round myself as well as I could and worked it out with Ned Bruce.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Because, of course, he was the one that was giving the—I had to be tactful with him. I mean, he was running the show. At that moment, I was just an artist hoping for a mural.

[00:15:05]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And I got the place I wanted for myself because I knew what I wanted to do.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: It wasn't the—I'm very glad it wasn't the most important in size and space because that would have looked rather bad. I suppose the two most important, just in size and space, would be Maurice Sterne in the library, and Boardman Robinson downstairs that had the sort of a main entrance lobby coming in.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I would guess—and then there were other—they were all very fine mural spaces. Leon Kroll had two fine spaces, they were big semi-circular spaces over openings. At a guess, I would say about as wide as this room and six feet high, something that sort. And Steuart Curry had a similar space not very far from me. Henry Poor had small spaces, but he was very happy with them, the way he worked. He had, I think, eight small alcoves. They were very narrow. They were, possibly, three, four feet wide and six, eight feet high. And in two spaces of four each on each side of the corridor. And he liked them very much. So that I think everybody was happy.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: How much coordination and effort was there into, you know, adjusting the themes?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, I did that myself to the [inaudible]. Yes, I did that as well as I could.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And then, I can't remember artist by artist, but worked it out or talked it out with them, and I'm sure there was some shuffling. But I had all the themes—and it's pretty easy to find themes for justice.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Maurice Sterne's was—called it Freedom of Censorship. I mean, Religious Freedom Through the Ages, something of that sort. [*Man's Struggle for Justice*. -Ed.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: Steuart Curry's [subject was lynching -Ed.] was slavery, which was



freedom of another sort. [*Law Versus Mob Rule*. -Ed.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. They fit. But I wondered, you know, how—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Boardman Robinson had the great jurors through the ages [*Great Events and Figures of the Law* -Ed.], which gave him a splendid theme to do on a Homeric size from Hammurabi down—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Oh, yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —to Justice Holmes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: So, we were all pretty happy. I was very anxious to do something which is close to my heart, and that was [the social injustice of -Ed.] poverty, [the tenement and -Ed.] the sweatshop.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Purely the social problem. And got all my friends to pose for it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, this—

GEORGE BIDDLE: I couldn't—in fact, Roosevelt—I knew Maury Maverick very well, and he was an idea man. I put him in the mural, too. I loved Maury Maverick and I saw a lot of him down there, and he was a wonderful human being. He was interested in art not because he had any aptitude for it, but because he was a liberal that wanted to be interested in all the beautiful things in life. And with one of his flashes of inspiration, he said, By God, George, you got to do the president. You got to have him on here. [Laughs.]

He had a certain sense of publicity, too. "And you've got to have Frances Perkins, too, we'll put her in the sweatshop," which I did. She was delighted to sit for me. She's a terribly hard person to do, and I had an awful time with her face. It ended up pretty much of a caricature because frescoes a pretty difficult—it's not an elastic method which to do a portrait. But anyway, Maury said, Leave it me, leave it to me. I'll get the old man to pose for you. And he spoke to Roosevelt, and Roosevelt, always with his intuitive willingness to accept any idea, said, Well, why not? But then they looked up the law and found out that a president can't be on the coin or postage stamp or in a public, I think, before his death and burial. So, that had to be given up. [Harlan B. Phillips laughs.]

And Roosevelt said to me once—he was just terribly warm and sweet the few times I saw him—he said, I'll try to get over and look it, George. How's it coming along? He said, I'll get over one of these days. I think if I were wheeled up in the elevator, that kind of thing. But then I guess life was a little too busy for him.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: During what period of time was this mural—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Doing?

[00:20:02]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: '35 and '[3]6.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: '35 and '36.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I was—I spent two years on it. I spent about a year [here in my Croton studio -Ed.] on the cartoons. And then, just a short year down there. Yes, it was all of a year. I went down early in the autumn, and it took me through the next summer.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: This is when the Homer Cummings was—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Is it before Murphy and Jackson?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Oh, did you have people working with you on the mural? Was it —

GEORGE BIDDLE: No, no, no. I didn't want to. I was so anxious to do the whole thing myself and so afraid of mistakes, one thing or another. There's very little, I think, you can do in a mural. You can get—I'd hate to have anybody work on my fresco, except [an assistant could pounce the cartoon -Ed.] on the wall.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And you could blow up the drawing, the small sketch to scale. And even then, I'd like to correct it probably. And that's about it all. I'd hate anybody'd to touch the wall.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative]. And this is just, you know, a matter of individual choice. Another man might be willing to, you know, share, in the sense that having other people [cross talk] [inaudible]—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yeah, because you have that somebody to prepare the wall. Henry Poor is the only one I knew that prepared his own wall. He and Anne, his daughter—she did it with him.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: But in the first place, a mural is physically the most exhausting thing I know because you got to spend—on account that the way the plaster dries—you have to spend about seven hours on it. The water runs off very fast in the beginning and so you can work very slowly. This is under the normal way in which I work personally. And then toward the end, as the plaster begins to set, your water with the color in it sucks in terribly fast and so you can work at enormous speed during the last hour. And then gradually, as it has finished setting, your color—the water stops—the color stops taking. It won't set anymore. And then you got to stop in a moment, because anything you do after that will probably come off. So, it makes a day in which you have to work—call it, at a certain speed. First, very slowly and then very fast, during a period of about seven or eight hours. So, it's a long day and I didn't want to tire myself because preparing the wall takes about three hours before I got to put on the three coats, and then let it dry in a certain—[the final coat "takes" -Ed.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Inaudible.] I know laying in fresco is a touchy problem.

GEORGE BIDDLE: It's a monumental—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I can understand about the—the remarks attributed to Michelangelo and so forth about its being the most noble art, because it has a certain—it marries into the wall, which is very important. And by that, I mean, in many ways not, just because it's part of the wall, that's all nonsense, but because it—the surface you get is not an oil paint surface, it's the surface that you get from setting plaster. With certain qualities of luminosity and—and then it has, owing to its necessary stiffness, a certain monumental quality. You can't have bravura [in fresco painting -Ed.]—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Raphael did, and Michelangelo did, but ordinary man just can't. It's too difficult a medium—too rigid a medium. It's like saying you can't be suave and granite.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. There's another man who had a figure in this, who is not part of the original group. And I don't think we've mentioned him, except in passing, before. Who was a— you know, in a word, in the arch—perhaps in the arch conservative tradition, and yet open and willing in a more liberal way. This is Leon Kroll.

[00:25:05]

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes. I know Leon Kroll. I'm devoted to him. I think he's a fine human being, and a warm human being. Always generous to younger artists.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Always generous to new phases of art. Sharp, witty, tough as nails. I mean in a political—I've been in many—not in fights with him, rarely in fights, but political sessions with him with the various goings on of the left-wing elements that were always making trouble in the various artists organizations, and just in policy problems, in committees to see the museums. To get the museums to take more active part in American art, various things. In the wrangles and goings on with my dear friend, Francis Taylor, at the Metropolitan, you know. In getting him to accept the program in those three magnificent exhibitions, which I think were more important as landmarks than any other one exhibition in my lifetime, except the Armory show.

And now Leon Kroll as an artist is a different thing. I admire his splendid training, his competence, his mastery of drawing in the conservative sense. It's more than traditional, it's conservative, it's bad, it's Beaux-Art, but it's tremendous, honest, competence. He can draw a nude, he can paint a nude. But when you come down to another quality in his art which he's unaware of, it simply makes me cringe. And that is, to me, the utter vulgarity, largely in his conception—because that is one of his chief themes in art—the adolescent girl. And it's a combination of innocence and something you want to handle. Budding breasts and juicy everything, you know, behind, and so forth. And it really makes me cringe. It's vulgar, but I think he's unaware of that. I think he's completely unaware.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: To me his only fine things are some of his early portrait groups of family. Then in his early work, he—when he was considered a sort of a—in Bellow's footsteps—and there again, it shows where art was—I think all of us felt he had a touch of Cezanne about him, which is hard to understand now. It was the way he used blues, you know. And the way he broke up his foliage in the background.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. But he was a tower of strength in terms of the—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Still is, I think.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: In terms of—yes. I think in terms of his ability to be part of a more conservative tradition, and yet understand and work on behalf of the youngsters coming along.

GEORGE BIDDLE: No. I think he still is. I think he's—I'm terribly fond Leon.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And he's fun too. He could be a mean old thing. I mean, he's—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Inaudible.]

GEORGE BIDDLE: —mean and very clever. I mean, I think the way he said—when Francis Taylor had his exhibition of contemporary painting, there was one great section devoted to the Action school. And Leon's remark about that, when he said it's the one—best manic—is the one—it's the best exhibition—it's the best one man show of abstract art I've ever seen. [They laugh.] That was rather devastating. A one-man exhibition.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Francis Taylor was a—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, he was a card, yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But a knowledgeable boy in his field, wasn't he?

GEORGE BIDDLE: I loved him. My wife did too. We, both of us, loved him.

[00:30:01]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. But, you know, he played a role at that juncture in history, as though both feet were standing in the past, somehow.

GEORGE BIDDLE: He's a bit of a genius. Hélène always felt he wasn't—he was an archaeologist. He had no understanding for art. And I would think something of the same

sort. He was a bit of a genius. He interested me so much, and I knew him and his whole family so well that I asked many other friends at the Metropolitan—Bob Hale and others—what he was like. And they all give the same picture, as a terrible man to work with. No organization at all. Just spluttering with ideas.

An idea man who'd lay down on the floor and kick really. That's the way one of them described him. I think Hyatt Mayor. Always with a touch of genius. Always fighting with Redmond. Always fighting with the artists. Always fighting with me. And yet, such fun over drinks and such fun telling dirty stories. He had some incidentally and almost neurotic compulsion telling dirty stories without any particular, "that reminds me" kind of thing. But witty, amusing, loved good food, good drink. Deeply intelligent about everything in the world. He was just—he was life enhancing.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I remember this one meeting—we—you were talking about Leon Kroll, I remembered it—I was on a committee with Leon Kroll. And he [Francis Taylor -Ed.] met the whole group of us at dinner, I guess, or drinks, or something when he was thinking about these three exhibitions. And not sure in his own mind and he wanted to feel us out. And he—finally after a couple of his favorite dirty stories, he said, Well, now, how do we know that you're going to make a success out of this show? In the first place, how do I know that you're damn Communists in your organization aren't going to double cross us? And how do I know that the best artists will put in—will exhibit their pictures, because all of you are a lot of prima donnas. And we were able to finally convinced him, that from our point of view, it was so important that he make it a success, because he was allowing the—it was the first time in America they allowed the artists to choose the work at the Metropolitan.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Which Mrs. Force would never do. The Modern Museum would never do it today. Just imagine—or the Whitney. And we just persuade him, Leon Kroll and all of us that we—that it meant too much to us. Leon could persuade him that he knew how to handle the Communists, you know, in the organization. And I also tried to help persuade him that—that there was—that there will be no artists, even Tom Benton, that we couldn't get the exhibit because it was too important to us.

But to the end, he was always, "You god-damned to artists, you god damn prima donnas." And the reason I asked him—we were very fond of each other, but he was always bawling hell out. I asked him why he thought he had been so successful. And he turned around on me savagely and he said, Because I understand trustees, they're human beings, not like I you god-damned artists." [They laugh.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: This is one man who had—

GEORGE BIDDLE: I really think he felt he hated artists. And I think, perhaps, he did.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. But with respect to them—

GEORGE BIDDLE: I'm not sure he didn't hate art. I mean, modern art or something.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: He had an instinct for the juggler in words, though. He could reach for it.

GEORGE BIDDLE: He was just god-damned intelligent.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: He may have hated what we were painting, but he knew that that was the right thing to do. And he knew that he ought to get the kind of artists that he did. I mean, the most avant-gardist, and the most of everything.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Laughs.] He's a strange— isn't this the man who—

GEORGE BIDDLE: He's a wonderful man.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Yes. But, you know, the weight of his erudition was present too. This is a man with, you know, a wide learning. Cultivation.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes. Yeah. He was a scholar.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And part of the—

GEORGE BIDDLE: He was a historian.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. Part of the rudeness, the roughness was—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Now, that he couldn't help. It was just part of him.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, this was an expression of what he was.

GEORGE BIDDLE: He was a wonderful man. He was always—at the very end, he thought he was—he had a terrible persecution complex. He was having it with me all the time. At one time, he thought I wanted to be secretary of state. And he did himself [laughs.] I mean, secretary of fine arts.

[00:35:11]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes, secretary of fine arts, yeah. [Laughs.] He's a strange fellow. But, you know, part of the scenery, and an interesting part of the scenery. And he did, you know—those exhibitions, they were tremendous.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And then he ran the whole—I think he sold Roosevelt that idea of having an art's week. And he was the one that told me when he went—he told us all at that meeting. I remember, this meeting when he came down at the Artists' Congress. He said he was down there and someone—the English ambassador had just flown in, and told him—he said he spent two hours with him. Francis had to wait. And he said when he came in, the president was perfectly white as a sheet. And told him what had happened, what he'd heard about what was going on at London. But then Francis said, He spent two hours talking with me about what he wants this art week in America to be.

You know, I really felt that it's the kind of thing that made me feel—which I have said and written that, with all Roosevelt and Mrs. Roosevelt—that is, his wife—a very bourgeois understanding of art. After all, it went into engravings of old ships and that sort of thing.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Oh, sure.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I think he had a better understanding of what art should mean in the—for the life of a country than anybody I've ever known—as much as anybody I've ever known. And I think Francis either got some of this from him at that talk, or else, had the same impulse himself.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. What's the—see, how to characterize this? This is a period also of the collective organization of artists. Where the—you know, theretofore individualistic person finds at least some basis of joining with other similarly situated artists. It may have been no more than a social gathering. I don't know.

GEORGE BIDDLE: What do you mean, these different congresses?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I mean the Artists' Union, the beginning.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Artists' Congress, yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And then the Artists' Congress.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, I feel very definitely about their growth and place in history. I think they grew up from the need of artists organizing themselves as pressure groups to obtain certain benefits. Now, we may have mentioned this the other day—to what extent these particular bodies were influenced by the genius for that sort of organization, from the Communist groups, I don't know. I would gather that it certainly played into it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: That the Communist genius for that sort of organization and infiltration played in and assisted this need of artists to organize. And they filled it tremendously—once they had started it, tremendously—they filled a vacuum, put it that way.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure.

GEORGE BIDDLE: It was—something of the sort was needed. And you feel now, some way that they've—I feel that they've outgrown their need. I don't know why. I'd hate to think it's just 'cause I'm growing old. The there's a great difference between them now. At that time, all the important artists belong to them, and officered them, and took parts in the meetings. And now they—I think if you look at the various congresses all over America, you would see that they're run by the sort of second-rate—third-rate men as artists—quote "artists."—I don't mean, quote "human being"—that one's apt to find in the small democratic state organizations all over the country. Second caliber, that's to whom organization work have appeals.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

[00:40:10]

GEORGE BIDDLE: I hear very, very few of the artists that interest me now that take any part of them. Or much part, let's say.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: What was it that excited the imagination of the leaders? That is the—the known artist?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, it's—yes, I think I have to answer that by indirection, it was that the—all these groups excited artists as such. So, that they would be very apt to choose the best—whom they considered the best left-wing artists of the times for their various offices and the best artists were pleased to—flattered to be given that position and eager to attend.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: But Leon Kroll, Kuniyoshi, Max Weber, myself—I just—I don't mean as—I simply mean that I felt the way they did. That I was flattered and interested then. And I'm not now at all. And I can't explain it at all, except I think it may be true what I'm saying but then—then, they played a very important part. Now, they don't.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I may be quite wrong about that.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I wondered about that.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I think now they fulfill the function that all these literary organizations do. And that is purely on such many benefits—of such individual benefits as life inheritance and congressional laws to protect them in various ways, you know. The infringement of privilege and personal rights and legal privileges and health—they can get better health terms in these health organizations.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: But that has nothing to do with the excitement of the early meetings that were—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes, this was in a way working out the relationship that should obtain between creativity and a government. It seems—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes. And let's say resolving questions that had to do with the artists' own—what would you call it—his statement of his ideals. To what extent should or should I not refuse to exhibit in a country that's a dictatorship.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Right.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Questions of moral obligation. And then it turned little and little to simply the—what you get out of a labor union, of financial self-protection, physical self-protection.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Which is worthy, but it's not of any intellectual or moral significance.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No. What interests me in this early period is that the—I believe, it is the Artists' Congress really develops the first statement which is anti-fascist or anti-Hitler.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, I—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Quite early.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes. I was doing my mural in Washington. I guess that must have been in the winter of '35 and '36. And they telegraphed down to me and asked me if I would make a statement about that myself. So that's the way it happened with me.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And of course, I was delighted to do it because I felt I have been—for every region in the world, emotionally involved in all that question. My wife is Jewish but, I think, apart from that, it's—I've always been involved in—and through the tradition of my family, anything—infringement on human rights and so forth. So, I was delighted to do it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. Yes. But it interests me that the groups in our society who were making commentaries on this question—on these questions in those days, '34, '35, '36, are such outfits as the New York City Artists' Union. And later, the Artists' Congress. This is like the poetic creative voices in our society who are reaching conclusions about the structure of alien forces and alien winds that are operative in the world. [Laughs.]

[00:45:15]

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, there isn't any question about it—and I think we must have been covering that now the whole talk this afternoon—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —this period, beginning with regionalism. And then made very self-conscious by the Depression, by the tenets of Communism that were discussed by all the liberals of America.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: All my liberal friends were discussing the tenets of Communism. And they—I think all the American artists were involved in it so, apropos of this whole thing, I—a couple of years after this, in 1937, when I was in Colorado Springs, I was asked to write a book review—or some sort of a review—of the *Book of American Prints*. It was some Society of American Print Makers. And I analyzed it very carefully and came to some curious statistical observations. And, without remembering exactly the word, there's something of the sort, that I reviewed this in conjunction with a contemporary exhibition of very, very fine examples of the *École de Paris* that were going on there somewhere in Colorado Springs.

And I came to this—very, to me, exciting and interesting observation, that of the American group—let's say—although my figures may not be entirely right—that out of 100 prints, 80 percent had to do with poverty, soil erosion, distress, misery of various sorts. There were—out of the 100 prints, they were—let's say, though I may be wrong—no nudes, four what you'd call still lifes—flower pieces—and 15 landscapes. But with these very few exceptions, 85 percent all had to do with social, moral, and economic protests.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: I think I made a further classification. I think, let's say, that—suppose that there were actually 30 criticisms of contemporary American life—the Supreme Court.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Congress, so forth. And that 85 percent had to do with the subject matter. Only 12 percent had to do with such subject matters—landscapes, nudes, and still lifes. Of the—of this brilliant example of French contemporary art, every single one was what you would call art for art's sake. [Inaudible.] I mean, the finest examples: Picasso, Pascin, Léger, all the way down the line. And I thought that was, to my mind, extremely symptomatic of what I thought at the time much more wholesome in American art. Now, I would have to reevaluate, let's say, my philosophy, not necessarily my findings, today.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Is this traceable to an interest in satire on the part of Americans?

GEORGE BIDDLE: At that time, but it doesn't exist today.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Now that's the interesting thing. The social commentary is gone, in a way.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Entirely wiped out.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. That is the—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And that has nothing, of course, to do with the period we're discussing. It has to do with the—what's happened to the contemporary art. I mean, what has killed something in them. I don't say—what they've killed may be a bad thing, but it's killed equality.

[00:50:03]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: What existed then, it doesn't exist now. [Contemporary trends have killed qualities that existed in our art then, but don't exist today. -Ed.] In other words, the ones that—the artists that comment on American life today, they're hangovers. There'll be a Bill Gropper, you know, some of the leftover from—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: That's right. There's no new—

GEORGE BIDDLE: You know, I can't think of any. Of course, they—a lot of these contemporary artists think they're commenting on life, but not in terms in which they'd be in any way comparable with the critics of this earlier period.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. But it is a strange switch, isn't it? From a group where upwards of 80 percent or so, 85 percent, would be dealing with these—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, it's very much a [*constatation de fait* -Ed.].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Now, good or bad, that's—I wasn't going into that then, and I'm not going into it now.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No. Well, it does, I think, illustrate the atmosphere in which they were thinking of moving.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I don't know how you could illustrate it at any better.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Well, there's one fellow that we mentioned only in passing. There are two, really, and it may be the juxtaposition of the two. One is William Zorach and the other is Philip Evergood.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, I thought I mentioned Zorach last time, perhaps a little.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Just a little, in passing.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, I loved them both. I've known Bill and Marguerite since the 1919, 1920, somewhere around there. Hélène has known them, I think, even longer. We've known Phil, I guess—yes, I've known him in the early Congress days. I knew him not well. I would say, at a guess, when they were having those awful breaches between the Trotskyites and the Stalinites. And then I thought he was a rabble-rouser. [Laughs.] He can be a rabble-rouser. And by that, I mean, he knows how to hold a big audience in the palm of his hand. And he's an actor. He's a born actor, unconscious, see.

Well, to go back to Bill, I said last time that he had a deeply spiritual quality. He gets—it's a



quality—I've always felt it was a Russian Jewish. And I think I told you what remark that some friend of ours said about him, or didn't I?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I think I was talking about Walkowitz. And I said about him is also about Bill Zorach, do you know. I thought the Russian Jews had a quality of mysticism and sweetness and ability to talk easily with the ultimates of life, which you don't find anywhere else. I don't know who it was who said to me—some other Jewish friend, I don't know, whether—but anyway, I think it was Walkowitz—he said, George you are wrong. It is not Russian, and this is not Jewish, it is rabbinical. Bill Zorach's father was a rabbi. Maurice Sterne's father was a rabbi, and so forth—was a rabbi. It is a rabbinical and not Jewish. [Laughs.] And I forget—I'm sure—I may have gotten the fathers wrong with the artists, but I remembered it so well, and I think there's probably—I think it's probably true. I think it's a quality you find in certain types of Jew, and perhaps rabbis. But a sweetness and a gentleness and an ability to talk about everything that is spiritually important in life as if you were talking about the weather or anything else.

[00:55:01]

And Bill has that to a great extent. And Margaret [sic] too. They complement each other. Bill is a very pithy [ph] person. And Marguerite is different. Bill is not an intellectual. He's not stupid. He's emotional, spiritual, and with a deep sense of beauty in every direction. He's—I think both he and Marguerite, they patterned their life on beauty. The way Max Weber did, I fancy. Max Weber, I believe, was extremely musical. But Bill and his home—and I knew him when they were very poor, in the way they made their own clothes, or Marguerite made her clothes and the children's clothes, and embroidered vests for Bill, and decorated her house with murals and all of that.

You feel that, both of them, that art pervades their life. And Bill and his—with all his child-like qualities, his child-like vanity, and his child-like feeling that he is a tremendous seducer of the other sex. He is a very sweet and earthy person, and a very fine critic. He may be mistaken, but I think you can go under the surface of your work to what's behind it. And I think that's very important. And he cares for that. I think he's a man with a big vision. And Marguerite has been the masculine mind of the two, in a certain way, the one who's worn the trousers. Who's held the life together for both of them. She is the adventurer of the two. She's the one that wants to travel. That regrets the fact that she can't go to India alone the way she did when she was 17 years old. Bill is the one who is set in his ways and is horrified by the idea of having to leave Brooklyn and go to New York.

But Bill in that way, I suppose, is—you could think of him in terms with Max Weber in a certain way, but he's got more sanity. He hasn't got any of Max's persecution and violence. And he's got a greater breadth of warmth—a feeling of warmth for fellow artist.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, he is, in a sense, a kind of steady flame. Whereas Weber's is one of these, you know, these volatile things—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Emotional violence.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And Bill, I think, is a fairly wholesome man. Although he has his prejudices. We all have.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Now Phil is a different kettle of fish. He's a—I think Hélène and I both love him. And I fancy because a part—he is also—he is like something out of a Russian novel. Apart from his sweetness and goodness, he has that ability to create a mother complex—a mother attitude that everybody needs. He's—you almost feel he does it purposely.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Chemical and protective, this kind of way, or what?

GEORGE BIDDLE: While he's—poor Phil, he's always pursued by the Furies. He's always having doctors leave bits of cotton in his stomach. He's always having Negroes find an old, buried pistol that he bought as a souvenir, and kill a policeman with it while living in his

house, you know. He is always having one misery happen after another. He is always having high blood pressure and think that he's dying [inaudible]. And you almost wonder, sometimes, whether it isn't all the—or partly just imagination. That he creates it.

But seriously, he is—as an artist I think he has a touch of genius and a touch of madness in his work. I think it'll be frightfully dangerous for any young man to copy him, because his work is atrociously bad and atrociously vulgar at times. But it always has a touch of—a little touch of something like genius.

[01:00:20]

You don't know whether it's whimsy, you don't know whether he's coquetting with you, you don't know what it is. But just there it is. And is what gives his worst things life. And his best things, I think, are perfectly beautiful.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Is this an intellectual experience? His? Or is it, again, emotional?

GEORGE BIDDLE: His what? His understanding of art?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, or himself [inaudible]—

GEORGE BIDDLE: It would be hard to say. I think Phil's had a very strange background. His father was an unsuccessful Australian Jewish painter, who knew a few well-known artists in the '20s—early in the century. His mother, I have a feeling, was—came from a good English family. He went, I think, to Sandhurst, some good military school. He thought he was going to be an officer of the English army. He suddenly found he had to paint, and then drifted around and came to America and was desperately poor and, of course, created by—like all the men we've been talking about—had early successful and always had a horrible time. I mean, poverty and struggle and apparent bad luck, and making a mess out of things and so forth, and making life tragic whether it was not.

But when you're with Phil, you feel the way you do with these other two men I've been talking about, Bill and Max Weber. As if you were with something very fine and pure and lovable. And then he always has to be mothered. You can't be with him an hour without having to say, Now Phil, you've got to look after your health. You must stop worrying. Or, You must—Now, do try to make up that stupid breach you made with your last dealer, do you know? Always mothering him.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Is he is a play by ear man, rather than a thoughtful man?

GEORGE BIDDLE: I think he's like his paintings. I think he's just unpredictable. Just a little touch of madness.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. I wondered.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I wouldn't think—I think there's a good deal of the—how much I don't know. I was going to say the unconscious—the subconscious—self-promoter and barker and advertiser and good storyteller. Now, how much he knows it? Well, I don't know. He is so innocent in so many ways. I mean, the absurd things he tells you about himself and his troubles, and his own painting, and this and that and the other, and his misfortunes. You think he must be innocent about everything. But I think often people are subconscious. They will think subconsciously.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes, this could be innocence or candor, combination. Some people are painfully candid—

GEORGE BIDDLE: I would think both.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: But I think Hélène feels just the same way as I do about him. We love him as a human being. He's always fun to be with. He exhausts you. I mean, [laughs] the emotion that he, you know—that he loosens would exhaust everybody. And then we both feel the same way about his art.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Is he a short-fused person?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Is he?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: A short-fused?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, in just what way?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, I was thinking of—by comparison with Max Weber who has this deep religious thing, and yet, you said—

GEORGE BIDDLE: No, no. I would say, no. I would say on the contrary, that you could make certain very valid comparisons on a different line between them. Where Max, with all his idealism and spirituality, he was capable of these nasty, mean, vicious attacks on his best friends. Phil, with all his sweetness and goodness and idealism, is capable of almost equal violence coming from persecution complex. He thinks his deal is always double crossing him, that's one trouble. But also, just through his ups and downs about life. His buoyancy and his despair, his volatility. He sees—all you can say is, that he's—where Max could be only out of a Russian novel, you know, [Chekoff, Tolstoi, etc. -Ed]. But it might be many authors. You feel that Phil could be only out of *The Brothers Karamazov*. I mean, he's a creation, you know, that utter violence.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I'd say that—well, this is a great difference, physical—Phil exudes physical vitality.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: He does?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Where Max had the quietness [of a mystic -Ed.], you know, of a little—of an old Jesuit priest.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes, a sense of discipline even though it might not be in there.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, exactly.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: An acting in that sense.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, exactly. I'm sure Max's day was—or you'd expect his day to be orderly. And that he takes a 20 minutes walk but never half hour, you know, before supper. And then he'd always listen to good music, classic music, three times a week and so all that kind of thing.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. He would be shrewd enough to be organized and disciplined.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, shrewd enough—no, I think it'd be deeper than that.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: It would be.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I feel—I'm talking metaphors. I think you'd feel it as part of him.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Really?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Where Phil is completely explosive human being.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. That's interesting. Now you bumped into him during this period of the—oh, the—the Artists] Congress?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Very little, very little.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I remember once that this once—when he are orated on some very left wing [proposal -Ed.]: "We must organize," his fist in the air, you know. His voice descending into a whisper and then bellowing, and all that. But I never knew him at all until we got our house up in Croton, after 1940 [in 1946 -Ed.]. And then I saw him. He had a house on the

Cape and came for two or three years. And then we really both love each other. We were devoted to each other.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Did you, at all, in this period bump into Arshile Gorky?

GEORGE BIDDLE: No. I met him once.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: That's all?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Because he—from some of the things that you have said about Philip Evergood just remind me, vaguely, of Gorky.

GEORGE BIDDLE: No. A number my friends knew him and respected his work very much. But about him as a human being, I don't know.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Nothing. Well, if you look back retrospectively on the '30s— prior to the war, certainly—the artistic garden certainly was altered by the infusion of public funds, wasn't it?

GEORGE BIDDLE: By the breaking up or the giving—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Oh, the infusion of government funds—during—prior to the war—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Where skills were maintained. Opportunity was created.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Of course, you've got to remember, a lot of those years I was away. You see, from 1937 on I was only one year around New York. I was in Colorado Springs and then California. And then immediately Brazil as war was declared. And then I was overseas for two years, almost—no, eight months a year. And then when I came back [from overseas with the troops in 1943 I did -Ed.] the mural in Mexico. And then immediately in Nuremberg for eight months. So, between '37 and '46 I was a good deal away from New York City.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. I'm wondering—you know—to follow along on the mural interest, you—what was the nature of your work in Colorado?

GEORGE BIDDLE: I just took a job to teach out there to rationalize my life, my economic life. And then I always like traveling, being in any part of the country and just—it's just a new part of the country I love to see. I love traveling.

[01:10:11]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. But so far as your—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Teaching.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: The content of art experience, was it enriched in Colorado, space wise?

GEORGE BIDDLE: It was a wonderful material for me, the way traveling often is. But apart from that, no.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No? And then you—as I understand you, you are out there with—who was it?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Mike Robinson.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. This is for—he was out there at the school also?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, he was head of the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: That's right. That's right.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And I came out as an assistant for a year.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: He asked me to come out.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: How did you enjoy teaching?

GEORGE BIDDLE: I've always liked teaching, if it doesn't interfere with my other work. And I've always been able to arrange it, four or five years I've taught in different schools, institutions, that way. So I'll be teaching either every afternoon or three afternoons a week, or three afternoons or three evenings, but never in the morning.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. But you find—

GEORGE BIDDLE: I find younger people always stimulating. You know, very stimulating.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: It's the—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, you brush up against a different generation and you see yourself in a glass. You get a reaction talking to them and having them see your work and— my work, and seeing theirs. It's an oblique stimulus, but I certainly enjoy it. And I certainly think it's wholesome for an artist.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I think so too. It's a way in which one can be caught up short by, you know, the innocent question that comes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I think at a certain moment—at a certain period—as an artist gets more crystallized, more—that he needs less and less from anything outside. And I would almost suggest that what he gets from outside may do him as much harm as good.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: That's interesting.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, for instance, now, I like to go and see shows in New York, as fast as I can. And I always say it's for the same reason I like to read the newspaper: I just want to know what's going on in the world. But I think it would be almost impossible for an artist to see shows without them having some repercussion on him. It would be a contradiction of terms.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And I'm not sure that the repercussion you see from doing work which today is completely antipathetic to my standards does me any good. This would be a moot question. I think, conversations—it may be good for you. It may on the whole be more harmful than good, it may not make any difference.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: That's interesting. I think the role as teacher to the young, where one of the functions of teaching would be to kick open a window on the youngster's mind and project them into the world, the—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: The possibility of receiving something from them is great in the sense of a sobering re-examination, which in itself may not be useful. But it's—you know, you say you develop a momentum—a thinking momentum.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, we get contact.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I think that kind of a contact is always good.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I think if a complete layman comes into your studio, you get a kind of a reaction which is wholesome.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: It may not be important, but it's—because after all, you expect your work to be seen. And it doesn't matter who sees it, it's some kind of a reaction.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. But this was the first—

GEORGE BIDDLE: I never took my teaching very seriously because fundamentally, I haven't got a teacher's gift. I think I'm a very good teacher, good critic, but my trouble is that I'm not interested in bad students which a good teacher would be. [Harlan B. Phillips laughs.] And I feel if I've got—once in a while, when you get a student that you think really has enormous talent, I've got enough diffidence to feel that anything I may say to him may retard him as much as it will advance him. And so, I feel very careful about saying anything to him.

[01:15:14]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Hm.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I think all a teacher could ever do is to ramble along so that if there's something there, the student who wants it, can grab it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I see.

GEORGE BIDDLE: But I doubt if you can ever teach your student anything. I mean, I don't want to teach him anything, because I think if we teach the student anything he's not worth teaching.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Moreover, if you have to think—

GEORGE BIDDLE: If you let them to choose—if you let a brilliant student pick by showing them an awful big platter of hors d'oeuvres—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: That's a free lunch counter.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yeah, free lunch. He'll be stimulated by just talking.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Whereas, if you do the choosing and the selecting—

GEORGE BIDDLE: But if I tell them what to do—which teachers are supposed to—I say, I'm not interested if he's a poor student, if he's a good one I just may retard him, not much but—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, did you have any students out here in Colorado?

GEORGE BIDDLE: I've never had any interesting students at all.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Inaudible.] I mean, in terms of the criteria you've now advanced, teaching would sort of be like marking time, treading water—

GEORGE BIDDLE: No. I've met some nice young people who—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And that's—

GEORGE BIDDLE: I can't say with Tom Benton. He's had a Pollock. Tom is very proud of that.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. [Laughs.] Well, you went back off to Mexico. No, to California?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, yes. Just the same reason, I got a job to teach out there. I love California, and just to took that chance.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. What happened to—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Wait, wait. It wasn't that, as a matter of fact. I did that on a former occasion. We went again to California to pay expenses, to the Huntington Hartford Foundation, with Van Wyck Brooks for a year. That's the reason I went because he's my—was my oldest professional friend. And he and I were both given some sort of medals the same year, and invited out there.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, what happened to the threads of the school of mural painting? Did you maintain contact with them? Or once the Justice—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Here?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Once the Justice Department and the federal buildings had, you know, lessened, with Bruce, the Section of Fine Arts and the Treasury Department?

GEORGE BIDDLE: No. Frankly, after the—that year in Washington, I saw less and less of them. I—one reason was, I hadn't gone into that—I had hoped very much to get another good mural out of it. And I had an unfortunate misunderstanding with Ned when he had this illness and persecution. I—Geoffrey Hellman wrote a profile of me in *the New Yorker*. And he seemed to have a good deal of difficulty finding a hook in which to hang it. And finally decide to hang it on all this—what is happening in Washington, the mural program. So, I had to talk at some length about that to him and came out in this article. And although I leaned over backwards to give Ned all the credit, for some reason or other, in this—I can only call it the diseased state of mind that he was in—he thought the mere fact that it was written at all—and I didn't see the article, because I told him before it was published. He thought that I was double crossing him. Why, I just don't know. Because it was simply a statement done in Geoffrey's humorous way of certain slaps at the Commission of Fine Arts and that sort of thing. And the fact that I'd known Roosevelt at school and so forth, anecdotal. And giving as much praise to Ned Bruce as you'd expect in that kind of a profile—*New Yorker* profile. And he quoted me as saying that he was responsible for the whole thing. But anyway, after that, he wouldn't speak to me for some—practically for some six months.

[01:20:07]

And I once asked Henry Poor—because most of them got their murals after that, a year later, I had never gotten one. And Henry said it was just because, Ned Bruce still has it in for you. Now, I think he finally got over that. It took him a long time. So you could say in a sense, I had no follow up, you see. I didn't—my own chance of doing anything further seemed completely stymied. And I was—I just didn't have any more opportunities of doing mural myself. And then along comes this chance to go to Colorado, and later on it was really a question of supporting myself. To Huntington Hartford, and then along comes the war.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Did Ed Rowan act as an aid to Brooks [*sic* Bruce -Ed.] or no?

GEORGE BIDDLE: You mean, was he useful to him?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Was he an administrator and—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Oh, excuse—oh yes, indeed. He ran the whole section under Bruce. I mean, he was—especially after Bruce's attack, I would say Ned really did all the legwork. Now Bruce—and this is guesswork because this all happened after I left, but it was what was going on that year I was in Washington—Bruce would make the big decisions, but Bruce didn't—after this first bunch of murals that were given out by the post office and Justice and so forth, there were very few government murals for about a couple of years. And then gradually, he built up a few here, a few there, and a good many small ones in post offices all over the country. They were small post offices, but no big important ones. And so, I just—it was—I had nothing to do with it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I could see—I saw a lot of—Ned—both of us did—when we were in Washington. And I would say—how would you put it—as a small—as a not important chief of section, administrator bureaucrat—because, of course, he was that, he was in government—he was completely honest. Extremely conscientious. Very tactful, both above and below. Very tactful with Ned. It must have been difficult because Ned was a chair-ridden. He couldn't move. And pretty violent and—violent emotionally and not strong. And very tactful below. Now, I think, Ned, although not in any sense a big man—I think he was—he couldn't have filled the position he had better, more competently.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes, there's another person who is there in the office—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Forbes Watson?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: He one of them, yes. He's an extremely articulate and able writer. Also explosive with his peers.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Down there. Somebody else?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Watson is one person. Olin Dows is another.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Olin Dows, yes. But who else were you thinking of?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Olin Dows and Forbes Watson, the two people I was thinking of.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And Forbes is the one that you spoke about as an articulate writer.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Very, yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But he wrote—

GEORGE BIDDLE: I beg your pardon?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I say, he assumed the editorship from Hamilton Easter Field of the *Arts* magazine.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And that's where he was really great.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Very.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yeah. He was—in his later years, Forbes was obviously a bitter, frustrated and disappointed man.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Oh.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And in a way, he had a right to be. Because when he was the editor of *Arts* with Mrs. Whitney's money, he did a superb and necessary job. I think that the articles and illustrations in that magazine, I think, will remain an item of real importance in any art library of the period.

[01:25:03]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And he did it entirely through his—I think he reflected, editorially, the best side of that, what you could call the Whitney Studio Club period of American art. You know what I mean by that?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: From the older people—Glackens and Arthur B. Davies—down to the very younger—to the Rapahel Soyer's and Ben Shahn's and all that much younger generation. Well then she withdrew the funds. That's the reason—that broke his heart, I think. From continuing the magazine, and then he drifted into Ned Bruce. And then, of course, he had a much inferior job. He was really just, if you want, I suppose, a mouthpiece for the Section's policy.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes, he published, what was it? The Treasury Bulletin.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: That's about it.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And he—Forbes's heart is always with American art. And I don't think his critical faculties were anything very important. But I think his heart is so much with it. And his love of what was happening in America and his faith in American painting.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].



GEORGE BIDDLE: But I think he really became a mouthpiece for that whole generation. And in the same way, when he was with Ned Bruce, he—in a smaller way, as an older and more disappointed man, he became a mouthpiece for the murals that Ned was handling. But his life then was just drifting on to a pretty disillusion bitter end.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And I—his last years were passed in real poverty. I remember once, years later, oh it might—let's say at a guess, that the guess is it might have been around 1950. I was asked to write somewhere some review or statement—statement, I guess it was, about what the government could do in art. And he wrote me back such—he saw it somewhere and wrote me back such an angry—I think you can almost say bitter—letter. Saying how can you, who have seen what was done under Roosevelt and took part in it, have anything to do with that—or belief in that crowd? I forgotten now what it was about. It was—it might be a statement of what the Fine Arts Committee could do or something of that sort. I've forgotten just what. But I remember very well his anger with me was that I could simply take part in any discussion of the government program after having known what could be done under such splendid circumstances [under Roosevelt and Bruce -Ed.].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I'm really sorry to hear that bitterness that [his bitterness was the occasion of his, you know, anti-government approach -Ed.]. The heavy drag—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Toward the end, he was living in extreme poverty. I heard this from Olin Dows. They had to collect funds after he died, for his wife.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Well, Olin Dows was a much younger [man in this office -Ed.].

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes. I saw a lot of him. He again knew that—I'm very fond of him. But I think you would put him in the—very much, in the—about the mental and creative level as Josh Billings.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: He's a country gentleman with great wealth behind him, the best New York blood in the state. Colonial. Not a strong man. Dominated by his mother. Having formed this early attachment with Ned where he had a veneration for him.

[01:30:10]

And felt to him the way you would toward a father, except you rarely feel toward a father that way. He adored him with absolute loyalty, devotion, and was very happy, I think. And felt in no way that his life was being in any way wasted—sacrificed, just working for him.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But he—he wasn't—

GEORGE BIDDLE: He's an artist of sorts

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. But he wasn't a thinker on a policy kind of level.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Oh, no.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No, whereas Bruce would be.

GEORGE BIDDLE: No sense, none. No sense whatsoever. He would be working in Ned Rowan's office, [inaudible]. And I've forgotten just—I can't remember in what capacity.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: He was just a member of the office?

GEORGE BIDDLE: I don't mean clerical but—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No?

GEORGE BIDDLE: —it was beyond that, running some department in the office.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. But Forbes Watson was certainly capable of playing a role in the development of policy? Now, whether he did or not—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, he was a much older man. Now, let's see. When I was in Washington 195—I was 50. And I think of Forbes—he was a close friend of Adolph Borie—as at least 10 years older than me, 60. So late—he must have been going on towards 70, at a guess, when that—when the program ended. And he was not a strong man. He drank terribly heavily all his life. And he was a disappointed man, and he was penniless.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: That's not—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Forbes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, that's not a very good combination.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes. It's sad for a man who played such a really important role in the picture of that—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Of American painting in the '30s, in the '20s and '30s.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Well, the editorial competence he brought to the *Arts* illuminated the '20s, certainly, for the younger people. This is the Whitney Studio extension.

GEORGE BIDDLE: It was unique.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure, it was.

GEORGE BIDDLE: It was unique.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure, it was.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Because there's nothing else.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Nothing.

GEORGE BIDDLE: There wasn't really—now you think of at least 20 magazines with fake editors and fake editorial writers and critics.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. So, did you—you didn't then remain—or that is, having done a single mural, you went on out elsewhere?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, I did— actually, I did one small mural afterwards in New Brunswick, but it was under such restrictive circumstances. And I was so continually picked at by the Commission of Fine Arts. Notwithstanding Bruce, they turned it down twice. I had to correct the [horses' legs; one thing and another -Ed.].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Is this a censorship to which you referred earlier?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, I was under continuous censorship all the time I was in Washington.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative]. Even in the Department of Justice?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Oh, yes, continually. I was turned down twice. They took my sketch down twice before they accepted it. The commission—Bruce's commission finally overruled the Commission of Fine Arts. They had to go right up to Secretary Morgenthau to do it. And I was having a complete nervous breakdown. And then as the work went along, they would try to censor it from one month to another.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, in other words, the process of doing the mural in the Department of Justice is fraught with—

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HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —you know, this kind of experience where you were heckled by—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, I was continually on pins and needles all the way through.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Oh, well, this is something—this kind of censorship didn't—that is this kind of—what is the phrase—censorship or handling of artistic people didn't obtain in the Cahill section at all.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Didn't obtain—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Didn't obtain at all when my wife and myself, we did murals in Mexico and Brazil. In fact, that's when I—it was such an educational process to realize the weakness of our whole system toward art.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Wherein in Mexico and Brazil to a certain extent, the artists were continually trying to stick their knives in my back, and each others, purely for financial reasons.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And the government was always a month or two late in paying me the contracted price. But if—but they never interfered with what you were doing. And, frankly, weren't interested, which is even better. I remember once I was so terrified when I went to Brazil. I was—I'd been given a beautiful lobby to do in the national library and I happened to be a very good friend with Portinari, who had such a position of eminence in the artistic world that the government people really ate out of his hand. And I went to the secretary of education, under whom I was working then, and said to him—I was looking for looking for trouble. And said, You know, I'd be delighted, Mr. Secretary, if you'd get Portinari to look at my sketches and give you his frank opinion about them because I don't want to do anything until you feel satisfied with them. And he looked at me in his dazed way and said, Well, I could, but I could—I suppose I'd find time to go and see your sketches myself but why do you want me to? After all, you're the artist and really it has nothing to do with Portinari. So this was such a completely [Harlan B. Phillips laughs] new circumstance to be in.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, how did—

GEORGE BIDDLE: In other words, the—you were completely left alone which is all an artist wants of course. It's like being in your own studio, with nobody interested in you.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. How much interference did other members of the original group that you suggested have—received from the Fine Arts Commission, in the Department of Justice building?

GEORGE BIDDLE: They were all—they were pecked out for some good extent. Now, you can just—I don't know, of course.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: But let's come down to tacks. With artists like Louis Bouché, and Kroll, and Billings, whose works were—how would you say—the last two—I mean, Billings and Bouché of a purely decorated quality.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And Kroll, who—with them—with neither of them—no one of these three, you'd expect any criticism, they didn't get any I'm sure. They just sailed right through.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Now, to come down to the others. Maurice Sterne's—they refused to pass it at all, and were going to take it off the walls by the commission of—by Bruce's committee itself, on account of the pressure with Catholic Church. That's one example.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: Robinson was continually interfered with in his depiction of, let's say, Justice Holmes. [Inaudible.] Poor's work was criticized. They objected to shadows in one of the figures because they didn't look like shadows. He was interfered, when he worked for Ickes on a future occasion, because Ickes wouldn't let him work during day hours. Said it interfered with the people in the lobby. It was long corridor, it wasn't—

[00:05:01]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: Steuart Curry was interfered with—I don't know how much—because they didn't like the idea of dogs and the Negro being whipped. . And his—it was against slavery.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Right, yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: So, as far as I know, it was pretty much continual, but depending on the type of work that a person did.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And they refused to accept your sketches twice—that is the Fine Arts Commission?

GEORGE BIDDLE: They refused twice to accept it—yes, the Commission. And then finally Bruce was able to bull it through on his own, by going—and that was almost unique because I don't think the Fine Arts Commission almost ever been turned down that way.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Although their findings were pretty advisory.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And then he went up to the—right to Peoples, who was running the building section, and to the Secretary of the Treasury, Morgenthau.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. And this was—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Then later on when I did the second one, it was again turned down, even in this miserable little lobby of the post offices in—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: New Brunswick.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —New Brunswick. By the Fine Arts Commission again.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And was this then after Bruce's illness or—

GEORGE BIDDLE: It was—at a guess, yes, but I couldn't be sure because it was a couple of years later. Yes, it must have been, because Bruce's attack was while I was still in Washington and the New Brunswick thing came about two years later.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. But the Justice Department enabled you to see the artistic handwriting on the wall; [that this was something that you didn't particularly want any part of -Ed.].

GEORGE BIDDLE: No. Oh, no—I would—you mean [inaudible].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Oh, no, not at all. I was crazy to do more. But I just didn't get them.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I see.

GEORGE BIDDLE: No, [murals have not been popular -Ed.].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But then it was only in the retrospective experience you had some time later in Mexico and Brazil which illuminated what could be done, given [a certain context -Ed.], which was not permitted in America?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, of course, because even—put it this way, I think so. I was going to say something—I'll have to change it, I was going to say a little bit. I was going to say in America [at that time our government, our country -Ed.], as you've gathered—I might have said it before—they wanted a certain amount of sweetness and light.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: So, that Orozco could never done anything in a public building in America. I think that would be a fair statement.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Rivera could because he knows how—he would know how—he would have known how to please. But so, I was forced to—Borie said to me, As long as you're going to depict the ill conditions of life—the sweatshop, the tenement—you've got to have something pleasant in the middle. And that sounded perfectly fair, but it isn't always easy to [laughs] unite two panels by something pleasant in the middle [inaudible] sweatshop. And of course, that's where—in certain ways, there's no question about it, the mural fell down.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: Now—when you're in a Latin country, they don't care about sweetness and light at all. You know, they really don't care what's in the building. They're too busy to go and look at it. And that's why you have great things done under those circumstances.

You can never quite get the same in America. What I've always tried to do in my work with the Fine Arts Commission, and now, when I've been testifying recently about some of the bills in Washington, is to suggest a technique in the administrative setup of our government which will ensure, first of all, professional experts running the department. That is making the decisions involving the choice of art and the choice of programs. And second, to set up commissions having to do with all these problems, which as—acting on a purely advisory basis, not compulsive—which as much as possible will have the confidence of the legislature.

[00:10:16]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: Now, that's—in other words, it's simply an administrative direction which gets as close as is possible, I think, under our constitutional system where the legislation has the control of the purse strings.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, had there been any precedent, any experience for the Bruce approach toward [inaudible]—

GEORGE BIDDLE: No, not at all. No. His was worked out entirely by trial and error.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. Which may account for some of the difficulties.

GEORGE BIDDLE: No—well, it accounts for its success in a way.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I would say, any suggestions I have about government work is a combination of what Bruce's section worked out by trial and error—which is very important—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: —and on the makeup of the Fine Arts Commission under Senator Root's genius in 1910, which was really based on two facts which I think should always be incorporated in these commissions. One is that the members of the commissions are experts in their fields. And the other one is that they should simply have advisory function. In other words, as long as you simply, as experts, advise Congress, they have a very good chance of being listened to. As long as they control the Congress, they always will be [inaudible].

[When they attempt to control Congress, they always will antagonize. -Ed]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. What was the—the Section on Fine Arts, doesn't obtain anymore. [When did it really go out -Ed.]—

GEORGE BIDDLE: It went out—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —'38, '39?

GEORGE BIDDLE: No, later than that. Later than that. I don't know exactly what it was called then, but it was—what set it out—I was then chairman of the War Department's Art Commission—Art Committee—and oversees it at the time. And some statement was made suggesting that they had—that they were wasting the taxpayer's money because they were allowed to do whatever they wanted to at the front.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And this raised the whole problem in Congress. And that week, the whole thing was kicked out. Now, how much coincidence there was, I don't know.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: But I do know Reeves Lilienthal—who was running the committee after I went overseas on it—wrote me that, that in one week all the New Deals things had been killed in Congress. And apparently there was just this feeling that in the war, the money spent on art was a waste. It should be cut out of the Army and cut out of these art programs at home.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [I see. So then, you know, it was just a -Ed.] convenience of the wartime atmosphere—

GEORGE BIDDLE: That would have to be checked. I'm sure that last statement you made is correct. But what I've just said, you'd have to check on to see if it was actually true. I remember reading, certainly clippings—[I remember Reeves sent me -Ed.] newspaper clippings—and my impression was they were all thrown out the same week.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: How do they get—you were down in Brazil the time the war came on? Was this—was it—

GEORGE BIDDLE: I was sent down immediately just a week after—Henry Alan Moe sent me down just after the war was—about a week after war was declared.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And this is for the mural?

GEORGE BIDDLE: It was to—on Rockefeller's inter-American—Committee on inter-American Relations.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And I was to do any old thing down there in art, and I was able to [inaudible] the commission. I think I was able to persuade them that would be the most valuable thing I could do down there, and that I wanted to do a mural that had to do with war and fascism, and they agreed with that idea.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And you were down there, then during—

GEORGE BIDDLE: I'm down during '42, '43.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: '42 and '43.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And then—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: What was the—

GEORGE BIDDLE: I came back and immediately went to overseas.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, the first—were you part of the—you weren't a part of the military group when you were in Brazil, were you?

[00:15:07]

GEORGE BIDDLE: No, I was able to organize that when I got back.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. And what was the military committee?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, it was organized by the engineers. I went down to Washington to see how I could get into the war picture.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I had awful trouble always keeping out of a fight [laughs]. And I had a few friends down there. And I went round to Bill Bullitt and he said he could get me a commission in the Navy. And then I saw Jack McCloy, whom I know before, through my brother. And he—I think it was he that suggested—he said Why not get the artists—Why don't you do something about going overseas, and getting up—organizing the artists to go overseas? And I said, I'd be delighted to. And he—or Secretary Stimson—McCloy was then Assistant Secretary of War—sent me to the chief of engineers. And I think following Ned Bruce's technique, I pretty much suggested to him doing what Ned did. That is getting hold of a committee—creating a committee which he could rely on.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And I said we'll get an American businessman—that was Reeves Lilienthal, who was the dealer who was handling me at the time, but he handled a great many artists, he handled some 40 or 50 American artists—and we'll put Duncan Phillips on it. He was well known in Washington. So men—and who else? Who else could it have been? Somebody in Washington who knew about the artist? Was Ned Bruce going on then? No, I think he had had died.

Let's say, the Commission of Fine Arts—the head of the Commission of Fine Arts—a committee of that sort. And the chief of engineers and so forth. John Steinbeck—no, no, no. Somebody suggested to me Commager, who wanted to get into picture, he was a historian.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Henry Steele Commager, yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yeah. I put him on the committee too, because I thought that would sound well. And he—I had been told, I think through Reeves Lilienthal, that he was interested in doing war history. So the engineer was happy with that idea then. And I then said, We'll go ahead and I'll give you the list of the 40 artists. You see, they—I had my committee that was strong enough so they would approve any artists I selected. If I had people like the head of the commission of fine arts, and Duncan Phillips, and so forth and so forth, I probably put—and David Finley, of course. He was the head of the National Gallery then.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: The National Gallery.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And so, I had my committee all right. So he [the chief of engineers -Ed.] said, Go ahead with the artists. And they had to be all briefed and two or three of them were thrown out. Bill Gropper was thrown out. Almost got him in but—something about him. One or two others were thrown out, but I got most of them in. And so they were just sent all these different fronts. And the groups—there'd be four or five sent front. They had to be in the front line. They were not allowed to do portraits, but they could keep journals.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: So I gave them all directions. I wrote directions for them. I think it was some of the directions that may have gotten into trouble. I told them that they—you know, the unique opportunity there was to help America by giving their own unique observation of what was happening at the front line, that they would submit to no censorship. And there may have been words of that—when the Congress read—got hold of it, it scared them little bit.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well—

GEORGE BIDDLE: So, that lasted for about three months, then it was killed by Congress and *Life* magazine took it over.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: *Life* magazine took it over?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Took over the group.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: With one or two exceptions, they took over—there were 40 artists on the — overseas at the time and I think *Life* magazine took over about 38. The group has been at the front for about four months when this happened

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Oh boy. And their function was to record, artistically?

GEORGE BIDDLE: They could do anything that they wanted but they had—they had to do frontline work.

[00:20:03]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And the work had to be screened—went back to the War Department, to be used as they wanted for—as a history of the war and for propoganda. In other words, they could use anything that they thought would be useful. There was very little that could be useful to them at the time.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Gee, are the—

GEORGE BIDDLE: They got an exhibition in Washington, which I saw a year later when I was back, in the National Gallery.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. I wonder if the material, you know, has been collected in a single spot.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yeah, it's all in the Pentagon now.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: It is at the Pentagon?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes. For long time, *Life* magazine kept it and used it and stored it and hope to get a museum of—I think Dan Longwell and Luce hoped to organize some War Department museum. And they weren't able to do so. And it's finally—it's together in the Pentagon.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Was this sketches? Or paintings?

GEORGE BIDDLE: No, there was—the—*Life* was very generous about it. When we got back with our sketches—we could only do pen and ink at the front of course.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: They gave me a year, and I think expenses. Yes, of course, they did. They gave me a year and then paid me fairly after that. It might have been \$250 a month or something of that sort.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: They paid me—they paid the artists at a, I think, captain's pay, for about a year, in order to paint up their work [in order to do paintings from their sketches -Ed]. And then *Life* used it in many magazine articles, and stored it and has exhibited very, very—they had an exhibition of the work in the de Young Museum in San Francisco about 10 years ago. And in various other museums.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But these sketchbooks of these 38 artists?

GEORGE BIDDLE: The sketchbooks—I fancy *Life* let them keep all their sketchbook. They let me keep all mine. All my drawings.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Oh, boy. You know, this is a fascinating thing for material at the front. You know, in sketch form, from the 38 artists. You know, they were scattered in groups of—how—how large were they group?



GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, it depends. I think two went to Alaska, Henry Poor. There were—were there three or five of us in North Italy and then on to Sicily. Others in the Italian—other Italian campaign, and then some were scattered—Jack Levine was in the Ascension Islands, I think. Had a horrible time.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Because he was marooned alone down there. Some were sent to pretty dull jobs with the—training our troops in London. Olin Dows got over to the front. I think captured 40 German prisoners [laughs]. I captured three or four myself one time. I always went heavily armed.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, is there any record anywhere of this group? Probably be in the congressional hearings or—

GEORGE BIDDLE: No, none at all.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No?

GEORGE BIDDLE: No.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: It would be in the National Archives, if the Pentagon is—

GEORGE BIDDLE: I'll tell you who the—if—they should go right to Reeves Lilienthal.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: He took, over when I went to the front, as my assistant—whatever you call it. I mean, he ran the show. Which was simply keeping records. And at the end of four months—and siphoning the artists through as they were cleared by the War Department. Seeing that they had their materials and all. And he must have—then he negotiated with *Life*.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: A few of the artists, I think, went to one of his things for which he was advertising [one of his clients -Ed.], some medical association. Adams [ph] something laboratories. Was it Adams [ph] laboratories? No, it's somewhere—Abbott Laboratories, yeah. It's somewhat pharmaceutical drug business.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: But he would know what's happened to his material. The War Department must have the early communications with them. I—whatever letters I have, I deposited with the Library of Congress.

[00:25:14]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: They are there, in the Library of Congress?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: You mentioned Henry L. Stimson. Did you talk with him about this?

GEORGE BIDDLE: With Secretary Stimson?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: No, I met him a couple of times, but he was—I just—Jack McCloy introduced him to me once.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. But this was—McCloy was one with whom you talked?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yeah. And the chief engineer, I forgotten his name.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Well, this is something I didn't know anything about. [Inaudible.]

GEORGE BIDDLE: Very frankly, I think you can say this, I don't—I think all the experiences I

had, and the way I was able to brief them [the artists -Ed.] from the—because the engineer let me do all this—I don't think any committee was ever better organized in that way, because they had an absolute freedom. And their only orders were that they should try to get, emotionally and literally, the repercussions in frontline work and the GIs' life in combat.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Now, I'll have to say, secondly, that I think an artist necessarily, does his worst work at the front. For two reasons, first of all, on account of the physical conditions under which he has to draw—to work. And secondly, I suppose, because he can't help being emotionally involved. And I mean in this way: there wasn't a GI that I drew that wasn't aware of what I was doing, and didn't participate in it enormously. And it didn't give the artist, more than it ever had before, a sense of belonging and participating, to a [inaudible] more than I've ever had at any time. At the same time, you couldn't help having your sitter interfered with you the way a good-looking girl does if you're doing a portrait, you know. That you—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. Of course.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —wanted terribly hard to present him correctly. You couldn't have the detached feeling that you would if you were paying a professional model two dollars an hour and saying I want you to take this pose for some sketches I'm doing for a mural.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure.

GEORGE BIDDLE: But I think at the other hand, the sum total of the work if it's collected from the artists—I don't know what they've all done with all of the sketches—must, on the whole, would be very interesting because you do see what 40 artists did when they were at the front.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, that's what—this is what staggers me, because the War Department has done so many things in the way of publications about the war, whether it's the history of war medicine or what. I'm surprised that they haven't—

GEORGE BIDDLE: They've done nothing about this.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. Because this is—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, it will be very interesting to find out—you can do it tomorrow, I'm sure, if you went down to the War Department—and find out if they have literally all— that they haven't discarded or thrown away—that they got from *Life* and then go to *Life* and find out if *Life* gave them literally everything they have.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Now, what they got—what they have there is the finished product. As far as I know, they haven't got any of the sketches because as far as I know, *Life* wasn't interested in 'em.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: *Life* said to me, You can keep the sketches, but you've got to let me have everything you do in your Croton studio. That's where I did my work.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And during the next year when you're working.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative]. And then you work from your sketches?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, of course.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Certainly.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I did entirely—I mean others might have—I have seen some very fine work from some of them.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, you know, this is a side of experience which—

[00:30:00]

GEORGE BIDDLE: And I—I begged all of them to keep diaries in my—in this directive I gave them.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And Henry Poor and myself both wrote—had books accepted by Viking. Henry was a year up in in Alaska. I don't know whether any others kept diaries or not. That also would be terribly interesting to write to all these artists and find out.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. You know, I'm speaking from the—you know, from the point of view of the Archives of American Art.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, that's exactly what I meant.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, because—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, the first thing to do would be to get hold of Reeves Lilienthal in New York. And say, Have you—what did you do with all the documentation, which would have been the complete list of the artists and where they went.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And then you'd have to re-check with them individually—just write them all individually and say, Did you keep diaries and what have you done with them?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Oh, boy. Well did you— you know—what the—in this brief period of life overseas, where did you go?

GEORGE BIDDLE: I was sent to the North African front, in April. And just saw the very tag-end of the fighting, and then stayed with the troops while they were in training. And took part in the Sicilian attack. We went off to Sicily with the First Division and then the Seventh.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And then I—where was I again? I guess—oh, yes, then I was sent back to North Italy, and I was on a cruiser just before the attack of Salerno. And the cruiser—the last cruiser, at the last moment switched route and went down to Taranto. And we were the first cruiser to dock in an Italian port, and I'd gotten to know the captain very well. And he knew I spoke Italian. So when the ship came in, he got me up in the bridge with him.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And he would give me orders in English and I would yell down to these Italian [inaudible] that were warping [ph] us in , you know, what to do. And then during the night, there was an explosion in the harbor. A small English warship was blown up. And so the captain decided we better get out right away. So he got me up about three o'clock, told me we were leaving, and got me up on the bridge again. [They laugh.] Then I had to give orders in Italian how to warp her out. [They laugh.] [It was terrible translating 'fantail' in - Ed.] Italian, that sort of thing.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Laughs.] I guess you got out safely.

GEORGE BIDDLE: We got out all right. And then I just landed at Salerno about—that must have been over a week after the invasion. And stayed with our troops right up into—almost to—well, through Naples and about 100 miles beyond, almost to Caserta.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Oh, boy.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And then I was—by that time I was called home. And *Life* magazine was, I guess, tired of paying my bills.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, they had taken over the whole thing then, even while you were out in the field. Right?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes. Oh, yes.

[Cross talk.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Inaudible.]

GEORGE BIDDLE: *Life* took it over while I was still in the North Africa.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes, I see. Then you went up the Italian peninsula, which is a rough—certainly a rough combat terrain.

GEORGE BIDDLE: It was rough going.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Then you came back, and you had a year to convert this into—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, that's right. But I came back and had a year to convert—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sketches into paintings, yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes. And as soon as that was finished—immediately, as soon that was finished, I went down to do this mural—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Where was it?

GEORGE BIDDLE: In Mexico [commissioned by the Mexican government -Ed.]. That was in '45. And as soon as that was finished, I went right over to Nuremberg. Still the world fever was on and I just—[it may have been an awful waste, all this, but it can't help affecting me -Ed.]

[00:35:02]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I know, but I wondered then, the trip to Nuremberg, '45.

GEORGE BIDDLE: '46.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: '46. This was after the war?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And, might be—

GEORGE BIDDLE: I was then obsessed with this—in my work and everything—what you could call the problem of guilt.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And that stayed with me for three or four years, in my work.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And I was just obsessed by the idea of going to Nuremberg.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Had you seen—I mean, this sense of guilt had it—you know, had it emerged as a consequence of the war itself, what you'd seen or what?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Oh, I'm sure it did, of course.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. And so—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Oh, very strongly, I—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —if it had had roots and seeds prior to that it got its big expansive [cross talk] [inaudible]—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Oh, yeah. Without any question.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: This has to do with—

GEORGE BIDDLE: And war and fighting and guilt and what qualities it brings out in human

beings.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: The qualities our soldiers lacked, the qualities that Russians had, you know. Everything.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. And the trip to Nuremberg was the sense of justice?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, I was still down in Italy [*sic* Mexico -Ed.], and I was just ending my mural down there when I wrote to my agent and published my book on the war, and asked him whether he thought there's a chance I could get to Nuremberg. And he was able to get the job on the *Look* magazine.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Oh, I see.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And so, I stayed over there. And there also, it was the same experience that I did during the war. It was a tremendous emotional experience, in all these problems which, of course, affected my work and affected me in the long run. It me effects today, I'm sure.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: But one could make two observations: that this had prolonged my absence from the scene of American art.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: You know, the gallery, museum, all that stuff—to something like four years or so. And then that you don't do your best sketches when you're in the cell with a man who's told you that he's murdered 50 people by drowning—putting their heads in a bucket—barrel of water, you know, or a child that's been given a rifle by his father to shoot, and shot 51 inmates on his birthday, a little 12-year-old child. And you talk to the psychologists and psychiatrists at the trial, and you talked to our young officers who were—whose—boys who are herding these perverts and criminals. And we learned a great—and we talked to a great many of these rather Christ-like Jewish escapees [*inaudible*]. Prisoners, you know.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. The prison—did you—

GEORGE BIDDLE: And you continually—you get obsessed with the relation of democracy to good or evil, and the quickness with which the individual can return to bestiality, given the circumstances. And the fact that the GIs were no different from the young—the nice young Nazi that you chat with through a barbed wire, you know.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Oh, yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Closer to the boys you knew at a New England boarding school [than a good many of your own soldiers -Ed].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Oh, yeah. Well, you did this in kind of a reporting way for *Look* magazine?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Oh, entirely.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Did this involve sketches, or words, or what?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Both. I went over there to cover the trials in drawings.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And then I wrote a couple of stories about the inmates of these prison camps at the—and about the trial—that they published separately.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [*affirmative*]. And this is where the—where you had the—oh, a kind of transfusion in your own work of the—and thinking about your own work—of this—

[00:40:01]

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, I would say very briefly that in a certain way, I can look back at these four years and say, You didn't do your best work. These drawings aren't as good as you did before, and not as good as what you're doing now. But I could also say that it must have had a very deep and, to me, important influence on my point of view that I am sure has showed in my best work since. And so, it all adds up, you know.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I never think two years is wasted. Just two years gone.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Inaudible.]

GEORGE BIDDLE: A man is only a human being and—are you ending up your—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No, I'm just trying to see where we are. I don't think that lights going to work, because I unplugged that one. Maybe this one—there we are. I was just thinking about about—

[Audio break.]

[41:11]

GEORGE BIDDLE: I don't know what my own voice sounds like, you know.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: You never did?

GEORGE BIDDLE: I haven't the slightest idea what my voice sounds like.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: The last time, we left off at the—thinking about the why of Nuremberg and preoccupation with the kind of justice in—

GEORGE BIDDLE: With the, what—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Justice. And you had been involved with the War Department as an artist, a reporter, reporting things in process and existing things, the Army, during the war. I remember you saying that there was a kind of freedom in the variety of rigor mortis, remember?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes. Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: This was in strange shapes. Or the way nature would decol [ph], or whatnot. And there was a kind of preoccupation with this. And then there was going back to Nuremberg which is a kind of summary for all this upheaval. All this ill wind that came out of Nuremberg to distort and distemper our times for a while. A return to Nuremberg, I believe, for *Life* magazine.

GEORGE BIDDLE: *Look*.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: *Look* magazine, I beg your pardon, *Look* magazine. Now, I mean, apart from the fact that *Look* was involved, I wonder if you'd indicate how it is and why it is you got involved in this search at Nuremberg?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes. I think you could very briefly say—quoting that French word, [*engagement* -Ed.]—that I became heavily engaged with war and the state of the world. And so, probably not thinking of art at all, but just the human impulse, just after having finished my Mexican mural in the spring of '45, to be on the lookout for a new assignment in which I would become [*engagé* -Ed.] in the state of the world.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: I think it was probably more that—in other words, if you want— that like most painters at the time, you were at odds and ends with life, with your own work. It was hard to settle down into a studio. You somehow would—look—had gotten involved in the whole world activity having to do with war. And I think, frankly, that was the reason why I wrote to my agent and asked him whether there wouldn't be a chance that I could be sent over to Nuremberg for some magazine. It was partly, of course, because my brother was the—had just been appointed judge, partly because having talked with the justice of the

Supreme Court in Mexico at the time about the whole conception of this trial. I was deeply interested as a lawyer, with my legal education in what it was all about. And then I think, although I don't specifically remember it now, I'm sure I had become very much involved with the whole process of life and death and evil and guilt on the battlefields of Africa, and Sicily, and Italy.

[00:45:22]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Did you get on—were you enlisted in the war in a—or merely as an observer, or as a participant?

GEORGE BIDDLE: I had the position of a correspondent.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: I was acting as—under War Department agency. So I had an ambiguous position in that way. At the same time, curious enough, in the First World War—like all of us of that generation—I entered it romantically. I was simply scared to death that I wouldn't be able to get to the front in time to see the fighting. I'd have been mortally ashamed if I had—I was too old to be enlisted and I'd have been terribly ashamed if I had been physically unfit to go to a training camp.

And—but I ended up by being on the general staff during the entire war. And occasionally be at the front. Once was hit in the helmet by a spent bullet, and was subject to gas attacks once or twice. Mild. Not particularly dangerous. But roughly speaking, my involvement to the first war was all staff work and I ended up as assistant chief of staff of the First Corp.

In the—in my experience in the Second World War, since I had a—I could give myself my own traveling assignments, I was, most of the time, in the front and sometimes in No Man's Land, ahead of the front. So, on the Second World War, I—my whole time was involved with the GIs, with the soldiers. Up to regimental and sometimes divisional headquarters, but usually in battalion or often company. So, I saw a great deal of the actual fighting.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. But is this—you make much—

GEORGE BIDDLE: The horror of war. The horror of war. The deaths, wounds, dying soldiers, fear, the whole—rarely courage because the modern warfare doesn't involve much courage. It does at times—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: —but usually you're just stationed waiting for something to happen. You don't often see the enemy, but you often see men killed within a few feet of you.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Did you have reason to be in this war, the Second World War? That is—was there—you make much in this book of art deriving from life. But here were—there's an ideological enlistment, and I wonder if it reached you. A quarrel, let us say, with a method, an attitude toward a human being which was exhibited by Nazi Germany, let's say?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, I think—remember, I just finished—let me think now. My mural is finished in—you're talking now about the war, not about Nuremberg?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No, I'm talking about—yeah, I'm talking about one's commitment to—it's a choice presented.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I think I've said—I'll have to repeat what I said. It was mostly that I've just felt very [*engagé* -Ed.], very involved in what was happening in the world. And I wanted to get as close to it as I could, and I felt it was subject matter for an artist.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. And this would carry over into the—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Nuremberg?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —Nuremberg, in a way.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Very much, yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: That is a kind of period, paragraph, to what you had been involved in.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes. It was a direct sequence. I just—when I went to Nuremberg, I had just finished my big mural on the cannibalism of war as contrasted with the elements—creative elements of peace.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

[00:50:02]

GEORGE BIDDLE: And I—as I'd thought I said, although probably it was mostly emotional involvement just wanting to get into it and see it myself, I'm sure at the time I often talked about the problems of guilt and evil among nations and among human beings. And so, I'm sure at the time I went over to Nuremberg, I was very eager to see these criminals, to understand what made them tick. They were, of course—there were many involved reasons as in everything. I say my brother had something to do with it. It had to do with my general state of mind, one of unrest and excitement and wanting to see the spectacle.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And of course, I considered it, normally—I don't think you think much about these things—as theater for carrying on my profession.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: In a sense, it's simple as when Robinson said to me, Do you want to come and teach with me at the Colorado Springs? I felt, here's a splendid opportunity to carry on my profession by seeing the West. I love the West. It's a new theater for me. And here in the same way, I must have—without reasoning it out in sentences that way—I must have felt here's another exciting chance for me to carry on my profession.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: These—there's no question about—that I had plenty of time to think about life and death and the qualities that—in human beings the moral qualities that are apt, in the long run, to tend toward the survival of other nation or its gradual disintegration from the theater of history. And those had been the thoughts, of course, that went through my mind while I was at the front.

You couldn't help wondering why the Russians were fine soldiers. You couldn't help wondering why France—with which I had such a deeply romantic affiliation in my student years—why it had simply gone to pieces. You couldn't help observing the lovable qualities of kindness and generosity and decency in American soldiers. You couldn't help seeing the terrible tragedy of the innocent that were uprooted from their homes, their families, that saw death all about them. And it seems to me a natural consequence that, having been through all these experiences, you began to deeply wonder about the higher war criminals on trial, the SS men and the perverts of the concentration camps that had created these frightful crimes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mmm.

GEORGE BIDDLE: So it was a deep curiosity in the makeup of each human being.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. And then the—in a sense, the determination, for the moment at any rate, of a given complex. And in that termination, you have a new beginning, that is in the—you've been actively involved in helping to push back this scourge that came upon Western Europe. And having brought it to its knee—or being part of that impulse to bring it to its knees—there was a kind of reckoning.

GEORGE BIDDLE: It was all—yes, it seems to me it was all part of the same picture. I suppose, I've always been interested in human psychology, from the earliest times, even before I started painting. And naturally, having studied and become absorbed in the psychology of a soldier and a civilian war, you wouldn't—there would be—there was no hiatus between the involvement of the psychology of the prisoners and criminals that have made all this possible. Were they human beings or weren't they or—

[00:55:16]



What made them different from other human beings, how much was it education background, and so forth. I'd lived happily in Germany. I'd traveled so much all over the world, to some extent, that I never felt an alien really in any country I was in. I've always felt that there was no country in the world where you couldn't find qualities that would be helpful to oneself or to one's country. And I never felt that nations were evil as such. I've been in Germany before, or as World War I broke out. And I felt at that time that they had qualities of courage and poetry and idealism that were completely lacking in other countries. More or less, that human beings are the same all over the world. With different social, and juridical backgrounds. Historical.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And I—was there a kind of growing preoccupation with the kind of dynamics of contradiction which a stable society, like the Germany you knew and understood and poetry and so on, could create?

GEORGE BIDDLE: While I was at Nuremberg, I had a chance to talk with the psychologists that were interviewing the prisoners from day to day. And they convinced me—I remember one psychiatrist said to me that any nation or any individual who suddenly is confronted with some frightful act of this sort has to either justify it in his own mind or commit suicide. And that races and societies are the same. That naturally the Germans were convinced that they—each man, and the society as a whole—that they were not responsible because if they had been, they'd have, theoretically speaking, committed suicide.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: And so you got the phenomenon of everybody passing the buck. The men that I observed on the trial were the club man of the whole—of the movement. They were the social leaders, the Knickerbocker Club. They will all gentlemen. They couldn't understand that among them there were men like Streicher or Hess. One sort of a half-witted baboon, and the other a despicable little psychological pervert. And the better sort of the prisoners, [Rader, and the generals, the Von Papens -Ed.], you felt that they were men belonging to a club, the Knickerbocker, the gentlemen, the aristocrats. And looked down, and didn't know too much about what was happening below them.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: You got down to the lower echelons, and they—with them, it was the reverse process. They knew what they did but they weren't responsible. It was the fella above, the Nazis, the officers. When you got to the middle-class echelon of officers, it was the—they were obeying the generals or something and they were simply telling what our leader did to them. It was a continual up and down. It was—and this the—as the psychiatrist pointed out, this was not—in this sort of thing, they weren't different than anybody else. They were simply human. There were a few that rose above this type of going blindfolded, if you want, for the whole thing. And that's a man like—I just mentioned his name, the fat fellow.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Streicher?

GEORGE BIDDLE: No.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Göring?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Göring.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Who, in a sense was superb, because he was just a great amoral, swashbuckling, Renaissance extrovert. He was perverted, too, in various ways. He was a narcissist, thief, one thing or another, dope-fiend. But in a certain sense, he was the joy of the correspondence. He was the—he was—he knew exactly what he was doing. He was cold, hard, and cruel. Very human, sense of fun.

[01:00:44]

You got one or two cases—I've forgotten the names, my brother mentions them in his book—who had the intelligence combined with a moral background, to simply completely breakdown when they recognize the facts. And willing to get up in court and say, I was an

evil, and I hope I could expiate what I've done with my life. But that was very, very rare.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Down in the prison camps, where I sat with these quite horrible perverts, women who had tortured other women, one child who'd been given a gun by his father and shot 51 of the prisoners on his 11th birthday, I or something of that sort. The man who had some sort of a bag made for his wife by the skin of one of the prisoners, all these various sorts of perverts, the thing that struck you mostly when you were alone with them—although it sounds incredible to use an expression like that—was their middle-class morality. Tears would come into their eyes when they'd say, Do you think you can give a message to my wife? Or will anybody look after my child? They're sort of sentimental—I wouldn't even say German sentimental, just ordinary lower middle-class sentimental morality. And these are among just horrible perverts.

They would ask you for a cigarette and I was shut up alone with them. And as I wanted to get them—I use them as models, so I wanted to create an amicable relation as soon as possible, I'd exchange a few words with them, offer them cigarettes or something and then we would be moderately comfortable together.

They seem dazed, if anything, a little. But heavens alive, you can't blame anybody for going through what they had, these miserable creatures who had been in solitary confinement, do you know, and couldn't expect much more than anything but hanging. They must have had enough intelligence left to know that. So were dazed, but I don't suppose their mentality was very different from any of the criminals that we—young boys of 14 who kills his grandmother with a butcher's knife or so forth—that we read about every day in the papers.

I saw a lot of the young boys who were just out of the concentration camps—Dachau, Auschwitz—they were all herded in an American concentration camp for these wretched prisoners, most of them Jewish, Poles. Two things struck me when I saw them in—lunching together in great numbers of one time—how awfully they look like the—any of the men and women you see in the Garment Section in New York, and it suddenly dawned on me that it was simply because they were largely Polish Jews. But these—again, you were amazed by the—how little, in a way this horrible suffering and tortures of living in the camps had done for them. I spoke with a young one young fella—I remember very well—he was always jolly, gay, roughhousing, wanted to get to America, completely untouched, one would think, by it all, who told me that he had been either two or three times in line for the gas chamber and he knew it.

[01:05:04]

And then something—some ridiculous stroke of fate would come in. Either the officer who was counting them would have a stomachache, or something, or had to go to the phones, said, We'll close the line for today. And he went back and—but this happened twice or three times, I've forgotten which, to the same boy before the Americans came in. And they would describe the hideous scenes that we've all seen in photographs, the unbelievable scenes. And yet the ones that survived, at the moment—well, I would say, they didn't seem to me as much upset as I know you would find in some of the hospitals or homes for the delinquent. Or from some of the young Negroes or Puerto Ricans or other young boys who've gotten into trouble with the gang warfare and been sent to a home for psychiatric treatment.

I talked—I remember, I had a talk with a young, very nice young officer of ours, who had charge of one of the camps for prisoners before they were being tried. And I remember very well him saying to me, You know, there's—human nature the same. Our boys that are given charge of looking after these brutes get trigger happy. And I'm sure it wouldn't be very few months before they would descend to about that level. I've seen this sort of thing constantly in our Army with boys at the front. They get as trigger happy at shooting criminals as if you're out after rabbits or something like that. In other words, nature is the same the world over.

I never will forget a talk that—I was with a lot of correspondents, and we will suddenly be sent to some de-training place in Germany outside of Nuremberg, where a batch of prisoners—not prisoners, escapees had come in. And this man happened to be a highly intelligent, Christ-like, philosophic, Jewish doctor. He'd had one of these incredible stories. He'd been in some concentration camp, probably Poland—it was up there somewhere, it may have been

in one of the Baltic states, I think perhaps it was. But at a moment, when—he and his wife and child were, all three, in this concentration camp. And at a moment when the—he told me the SS sent the dogs in because they wanted to get the women and children. And he had been able to dope his child, who, at a guess I'd say may have been a couple of years old, and he got him out in a potato sack. The prisoners are sent out get potatoes from the peasants and, in that way, he was able to get out, and I think the escape—I've forgotten some of the details. He didn't see his wife for two years. His wife also escaped. But of course he didn't know what would happen to her. He'd had a rather horrible two days just before the time—two weeks—just before the time he came in running across fields being shot at, the German airplanes dropping shells on him.

And all the correspondents, for about two hours, talked to him, and largely about the psychology of the human beings who had made this possible—the Germans, the SS, and so forth. He said very quietly, You know, the Germans, they're exactly like anybody else. There's no difference. There are two or three things in the background. First of all, they're disciplined. They've been trained to obey. Then they have the father complex. They're convinced that—as they were when the former emperors of Germany—that Hitler is Papa. If he says it's okay. They're used to it. The German family behaves toward the head of the family.

[01:10:01]

And then lastly, he said, Of course, the Germans are far more efficient than other people, in business. And so when they commit crime, it's on a much more effective scale. But he said, Apart from that, I think it's nonsense to talk about a German human being as different than anybody else.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: We're all exactly the same, with different educational, social, historical background. And that's—I remembered that afterwards, it was exactly what this young American lieutenant had said to me. It's—the only things that prevent our boys disintegrating as fast as the Germans is that we've had a longer democratic brake [a longer democratic traditions -Ed.]. I mean, by brake—prevents us running away, holds us back. And that pretty much was the philosophy that I got out of the Nuremberg, just the way—the philosophy I got out of the war was: the nation that survives is a nation, like the German, if you want, or like the Russian, who has the certain moral qualities of courage, persistence, ambition, whatever you want to call.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: I remember how shocked I was once by one of our young officers. This is toward the end of the war who—when we had some little officers' dinner or something—who raised his toast and said, Here's to the Russians, God bless them, and let them do the fighting. Our boys just wanted to get home.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: You can call me to testify that American troops—I was with the infantry—

GEORGE BIDDLE: You would corroborate what I say?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, American troops would race for the Jeep to get the latest copy of *the Stars and Stripes* in order to see where the Russians were. Hopeful that they would meet the Russians at the Rhine if need be, and please—be elated that they would move forward 100 miles at a time, a whole front. Knowing that—

GEORGE BIDDLE: It wasn't GIs war. And we don't blame them.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No, it wasn't—

GEORGE BIDDLE: We don't blame them.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, it was a—there's an added wrinkle. It wasn't really an American military war. It was an American civilianized military doing [inaudible].

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: A desire to live until tomorrow if need be.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes. Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But there were 101 ways to skin this particular cat, and survival was the most important one and we'll use our imaginations. Well, I don't want to go into a lot of detail, but I could—the difference between the two was—that is the two systems was—that you could take a group of German soldiers out into the middle of an area and say, I want you to remain right here. I've got to go to headquarters.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yeah, they'd do it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: The wonderful obedience within the concentration camps. I saw, with the German soldiers looked after themselves, clean, setup.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Marvelous.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I'm sure they were a better lot than the—than we—than the American officers with bayonets outside the barbed wire.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Right. Or this—you could take the same number of GIs, and take them out on the—in the Hartz Mountains and say, I want you to remain right here. I've got to go to battalion headquarters."

GEORGE BIDDLE: "Oh, yeah?"

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And come back and you wouldn't find them. They'd have a three-room suite dug into the ground. They'd have stoves going. They'd be playing cards. [Laughs.] I don't know where to get the furniture.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, I remember when I first came to North Africa, there was some attack on a hill [inaudible]. And one of the officers said to me afterwards, you know, It's—if we can't train the boys to keep their heads down, they will stick it over the trench and then they get it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. [Laughs.]

GEORGE BIDDLE: You know, I love the GIs.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Oh, yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Always quarreling.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Always.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Always giving their things away. I mean, to the babies, the women, and everything.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Everything.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Always convinced that all Europeans were a lot of clodhoppers and bums and flat footed.

[01:15:04]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. And in a way, always carrying their culture with them. Overloaded with it from—you know, back at battalion headquarters is where it would be, in crates, boxes. [Laughs.]

GEORGE BIDDLE: And the long conversations between the boys that wanted to go back to—his particular God's country was somewhere in western Pennsylvania and the other man's God's country would be skiing out at Mount Shasta in the West Coast. They didn't want to see any other part of America.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I like it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: What—how did this the—that is, this seminar in humans that you covered, this continuing seminar in examination of the human story and all its variability through war and through the aftermath of war, what effect does this have in the artistic expression? Your own?

GEORGE BIDDLE: I may have alluded to that before. I think by and large, an artist doesn't do his best work as a reporter under these circumstances. One thing is physical. You don't draw as well when you've been slugging it—when you have—when you slept out of doors and under blanket, and slugging along in the rain, cold, or tired. And then your point of view, by necessity, is reportorial. And I don't think you do your best work when you—when it's purely reportorial.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: On the other hand, so I don't—so, I think the drawings I did in Nuremberg and during the war on the whole were less good than my best work. I'm sure they were, on the whole. But I think the experience, I had, both of the war and Nuremberg, had an emotional impact on me that shows itself in my work today. And you say good or bad, it's made me a different person. I think better. But that's—but it certainly changes you. It allows you to grow and I think that's the important thing.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I'm sure—for instance, I never could have done my Mexican mural— which is, without any question, the best mural I did—if I hadn't been through the war. So very simply, I think it's that—I don't think you do your good work, but I think that anything that has a profound emotional effect on simply a human being and an artist will change his work and it should improve his work. Not necessarily, but it should because an artist can have a profound emotional experience that may have a bad influence on his work. May deaden it, or change it, or stop it or—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But to the extent—

GEORGE BIDDLE: If it makes you grow, it's good.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. I mean, to the extent that one comes to grips with some understanding of what one has been at, as in a war—its purpose, its direction, its relevance to breathing—and to see a terminal facility like the Nuremberg Trial, the institution, perhaps, of a new precedent as between nations. I don't know. I think this is argumentative, but suggestive too, as a kind of a terminal facility. To see it terminated, ended. I don't know how you end ideas such as Göring or others. I'm not sure that you do. But it's nice to be part of it, and to see it come to a conclusion. And the residue that one carries with him is this psychic thing, I think, either toward optimism or pessimism or variations on either of those things.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, I feel—it's my whole philosophy of art. I think art is a reaction to life as stated in formal terms. Well then anything that makes you react in an important, if you can put it that way—that makes you—I've tried to be a little more clearly—that makes your—the emotional reaction to life deeper or more profound or more exciting is, of course, a healthy thing for the artist.

[01:20:06]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure. Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I think it's just simple as that.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I can easily imagine that that would be equally true in the case of as an abstract an artist as Hans Hofmann or de Kooning.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: I don't see why not.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I don't either.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Because admitting that their work is art—I mean, rather than, let's say, arts and crafts, as some would—or decoration, or pure decoration—admitting that it's an emotional reaction to life, then I think anything that changes the human being and makes him grow would certainly affect his reaction to light and abstract colors as much as it would a musician.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. I see no reason why that isn't so.

GEORGE BIDDLE: So I don't regret those years at all.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No. Well, it's a—you know, it's a vast storehouse of idea and experience on—to—

GEORGE BIDDLE: If you probe into this much further, I don't think it's—I think that's about the end of it, but I would say that in another way, it affected not so much my actual work but my position in the art world and that has a very indirect effect in your work. That during these half a dozen years when I was away from the art center—57th Street and Fifth Avenue—American art changed almost overnight from the—something like the regional '30s to the Abstract Expressionism of the '40s.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And I was away from that change. And so, the effect—or so the appreciation of my work by the 57th and Fifth avenue magazines, and so forth, changed very much and I was rather unaware of it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: It's as if I'd been living in China for those 10 years and suddenly came back where my attitude toward art were the same, and the idiom of the country had changed. I would of course be—it would have a certain effect on my prestige or work or so forth, but that would be fairly indirect.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, but it's a point which might have been overlooked had you not mentioned it. Namely, the very fact that you were preoccupied and busy, projected into the experience of the '30s and '40s, from a war point of view and from a justice point of view, removed you from—

GEORGE BIDDLE: From this movement.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —the continuity of seeing here locally, yeah, where the change—

GEORGE BIDDLE: You call it continuity, I think of it more as aesthetic revolution.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well the alteration, or the growing out of regionalism into abstraction.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Abstraction, yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: So that—

GEORGE BIDDLE: I was aware of it but much less so than the artists who attended the art exhibitions and the art discussions and all that who remained in New York.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Well that's—since this period then there have been all kinds of variations in art, the new, the so-called modern. You say in this book, I think—and quite positively—that there is room in the modern—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Idiom.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —idiom for great variety. Of working away toward some other synthesis, but the more variety, the better. Even if one does not necessarily react to it positively, there is a desire on your part to see a multiplicity of expressions, if need be. If this is the sincere artist exploding onto a canvas then the more variety the better. That is the richer the experience, the better. So it's hard, in a very strong way, to define—if it's worth defining—the sense of mission that an artist may have is, once again, if I understand you

correctly, now back really an individual thing where it has always been, away from the impact of the '30s of a kind of organizational approach, or an identity beyond oneself through others in a kind of organization.

[01:25:19]

Back once again, where artists are really the growing points of society. Individual growing points of society. This may not convey what you had in mind, and I may have misread what it is you had to say. But there's no other way to take, for me, the wartime experience, the Nuremberg experience, except to make it personal and individual and whatever residue there is, it comes out instinctively when one paints. It's the sum total of your yesterdays which also go through the wartime experience and Nuremberg to come out and the way in which it comes out. Which would be wholly different from someone who never had that experience, his would be something else again. But there's room for the richness and variety which I think is expressed in your love and admiration, which you've conveyed, for the individual GI. The seemingly absurd ways in which they would act, but the generosity and the warmth of it and the rich mosaic of whatever is American [laughs].

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, I don't think I misunderstand you. I don't think my—at least if—I'm sure my aesthetic philosophy has changed very little in the last 20 years. I think my approach towards human beings may have changed a great deal.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: But I think what I—my aesthetics—which first began to formulate when I was in Tahiti—have clarified, but I don't think they changed very much.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. That's a good one in here where the question is raised, in Tahiti, as to just what color does, you know? It finds its answer in a great variety of ways. And I think that's the burden of the last part of the book, namely, the richness and variety which America can encompass, by way of an artistic and aesthetic experience.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I've always had enormous faith in—or devotion to American art. I think at present the world's at sea and I think America too, but I think there's not an artist who wouldn't admit it—that he's affected by—I think all artists, they almost overdo it perhaps—on their insistence that the condition of the world is affecting their art. I think perhaps—I wonder if they're not a little too voluble on this thesis, that the world's mechanistic and so they have to be mechanistic. And the world's perturbed so their work has to look perturbed or be perturbed, and the world is floundering, so their art must flounder too. I think all that is a bit the aesthetics of a weakling or an adolescent.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I don't think our fine artists—and because they—they're more or less my age, I think they've still been through this world revolution. Such—artists such as, let's say, Faulkner, or Eliot, or Marin have to feel that their attitude must be that of an undeveloped adolescent because the world is changing. I think all those men thought of themselves as very mature artists with very definite feelings about the moral quantities in life and the aesthetic qualities in art.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: I'd never subscribe to the idea that because the world is floundering, a fine artist has to be—has to flounder too. He can express something very different from an artist in a different period of the—different history of the world.

[01:30:18]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But a society that can sustain a flounderer in keeping with the world floundering, is a society that can also sustain a more deeper—and you use the word sincere in here. That's where the flounderer and—you know, you also use the word a "fine artist," there is a distinction. But across the board, a society that can sustain the variety which we can sustain can also risk the luxury of the deeper—the person who is part of his time but removed enough from his time to be a commentary upon that time.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Oh, yes. Of course. Of course.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I always come back to the fact that I've read again and again, that our period—that the United States in our period, is in many ways close to the 15th century in Italy and the 55th century Before-Christ in Greece. That is, a world of adventure, experiment and where old philosophies are being thrown out of the window. Greece was discovering the world, and Italy was discovering the world in not very different ways, comparatively, the way in which we're discovering the world today. And they were both periods of dynamic inventions in art but also very profound art, stable art. We haven't got that yet but there's no reason why we shouldn't. And I think it's a sad excuse to say because the—because we think the doomsday is tomorrow as they did just before the heights of Gothic art is the reason why our art should be—flounder too.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, are you—I rather than that in terms of your deeper commitment that you're optimistic so far as future is concerned.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, I think so. I think most of the men of my generation are to some extent. I think, really, we're, both of us, skirting around an idea without quite facing it. I think there's an awful lot of sloppy thinking and sloppy talk going round in the—going about in the world today as far as aesthetics go. And I think there's sloppy talk and thinking by artists and sloppy talk and thinking by critics. I don't—I'm not an art historian so I don't—I'm not quite sure why. I know—I'd rather not go into that because that's a bit out of my province.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But you did make allusion in here toward the role of critics, criticism, in this book as one of the hurdles that a society must overleap to more carefully, or more reasonably, define its artistic expression. That one is hemmed in by critics. One is hemmed in by the choices which museum directors make, where tastes are being created by people who do the choosing and the selecting. And this—there are allusions in there to this as one of—a collection of growths, if you will, on the artistic and aesthetic of a nation. Museum directors and—

[00:35:02]

GEORGE BIDDLE: I think in some ways, we're at the end of a very big period in art—as I've said in my book—and in the beginning of another very big period. And you see periods in—all through art. You see it in the—I think it's called the euphemistic [ph] period in English literature, around Shakespeare.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: When the—you see it in the mannerism of art right after Michelangelo. Periods when art goes into curlicues and decorations and rather meaningless, unimportant little frivolities. That may be just at the moment when a new and very great artist is germinating. And I think when we have the perspective of living 50 years from now, and can look back on this art, we realize that a great deal more fine, healthy, important art was being done. But for historical reasons, we just—the period wasn't quite aware of it. You could point at some very obvious and clear examples. I think the strides that America has done in industrial design, in book packaging, in all sorts of little things of that sort, are an example of the great revolution in design that's happened all over the world in the last 30 years. And I'm sure in architecture we'll be able to say the same thing.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: I think our period may already—and America produced great architects, producing them now. Men like Saarinen and Wright, that are of course dead, and—but others of the younger men that are alive who just were a little unaware of what they're doing.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Right. Right. Well, I'm almost at the end here and I think I'm going to break in and turn it over.

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GEORGE BIDDLE: —Very quickly, because mostly I have very little to say except the censorship end of it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, there's some figures here—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, you ask and I'll say everything I can.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: There are some figures here that, sort of, the times projected.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: One of which, trained as a lawyer, a man of considerable promise in the legal field, in the business field, in government circles, and lobbyist.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Who is it?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mr. Bruce.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Ned Bruce.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. And the other, a kind of public relations man, well-trained with Charles Dana at the Newark Museum, in the public relations field: Holger Cahill. A man of wide acquaintance through modern artists. Acquaintance in museums—museums like the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum. Representing the polarities of two views in the '30s. Now, a great deal has been said about the context and the context in which they operated, the difficulties which they confronted as between the two points of view. There were two points of view. I think it's thoroughly documented that—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Go ahead.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —that each had its rationale. One a kind of unemployment thing, the other more in tune with the nature of standard and aesthetics. But this doesn't explain the pulsating personalities of these two people by any means. And I wondered—and I would appreciate it, whatever light you can cast on them in terms of anecdotes, illuminating anecdotes, which would tend to make these two figures—who can no longer speak to me—more meaningful, more real in terms of what they tried to do.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, I knew them both very, very well. That is, I saw them over a period of two or three years constantly and in a very friendly way, and I had the deepest admiration for both of them in what they did for art. I've always felt and said that I think every American artist ought to be utterly grateful to their memories. Because they were both devoted to art in different ways and did the impossible for it. Bruce had—I thought I had mentioned this the other day, but shall I repeat it in case I haven't—it seems to me every possible qualification for his job. He was a public relations man, in Congress, a trained lawyer, a vigorous personality. As a hobby he'd been devoted to—always devoted, was almost a dilettante, an amateur of Chinese art, Eastern art and Italian Renaissance art. As a fairly young man he made a fortune and was retired. Lived in a very humble simple way with Maurice Sterne, who was a devoted friend of his, in Italy. Became more than a reputable painter, he was recognized by the museums, he sold his things very well. He was quite without any particular originality or importance of his own. But he could put a painting together through a certain sophistication, background, and a certain amount of talent, ability.

He was a driving extrovert. He could work all day at his easel, drink heavily at night. He knew so many people that he almost couldn't move anywhere in New York or Washington without being invited out to dinner every night. Yet what he'd rather do than anything else, I think, was living at to live in Anticoli Corrado, alone with Maurice Sterne and his wife—and both their wives—or up in the Vermont hills in the summer.

[00:05:12]

He was, as I said, a born lobbyist. He knew everybody in Washington, he kept an open house. He was a politician and a driving extrovert, and when I met him and got him interested in this possibility of using my introductions and Roosevelt's letter to me as a way of doing something for artists in the Depression he just—it gave him a new leaf in life and took the bull by the horns. And I think the only thing he was afraid of was that the start I had

gotten would not—should not interfere with him. And I was just delighted to have a man like that carry the ball, because frankly I was a bad lobbyist and it bored me to death and I didn't have the vitality to sit up till three o'clock talking to congressmen the way he did. Or the money or the inclination. So, in this way he was just—artists never realize, they never do, that it was just God's luck that there was a man like that who had the entrée to all the people of importance in Washington, to—later on the president, but for the moment the Secretary of the Treasury and Mrs. Morgenthau and Mrs. Roosevelt, Frances Perkins, Harry Hopkins. He knew them all and was persona grata at their houses.

A pretty sly politician, a deeply ambitious man and an extrovert. And a man with taste in background. Now, nobody is perfect, and he had his limitations, and his close friend—my close friend—Maurice Sterne was aware of them. He was possibly willing to compromise for the sake of putting his program through, and accepting certain names for murals that he didn't think the best, or weren't exactly my or Maurice's choice. And he was always willing to compromise a certain amount with the powers that be, in order to keep his program alive, and of course he was very wise in doing it. And Maurice and myself were—or course, didn't pretend to be anything but amateurs in that field and if he had taken our advice, the program probably would never gotten started. At the same time, I think I was always useful—through Maurice's help—when Maurice would tell me I was right and his friend Ned was wrong. I think I was always useful in nagging, and pushing at Ned, and arguing with him. And unquestionably at times he got irritated with him. And that was my whole relation with him.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative],

GEORGE BIDDLE: If I could have left what I thought his lapses from the ideal—if I could have left them out, I think Ned and I would have always seen eye to eye 100 percent. But I was perhaps trying a little too much to be a guardian angel, and he resented that a little bit. And then with the—with his stroke, his tragic stroke, there must have been mud in his mouth. It must have left him—and did leave him—a bitter angry man. He was always on the lookout for somebody who might be superseding him. And he always—I won't say he saw me in that role because he would lack common sense if he did—but he, at times, felt that I was doing things that was interfering with his program, and he would get furious with me and not speak to me for months.

[00:10:03]

But I think it was largely due to the fact that he was sitting in a wheelchair, and he must have just been filled with bitter rage half the time because he wasn't able to do what he'd done all his life, and that is to sit up until three o'clock and drink and be up at seven o'clock, and put in a 12 hour day's work, then go bowling afterwards. Which was really the cause for this tragic stroke.

Now Cahill—before talking about Cahill as a human being I'll say that there was, from the beginning, a certain amount of jealousy between the two sections. And here again Cahill's section could be summarized by what he always said: There is no artist in America on relief that I cannot effectively use to make America a more wonderful country to live in. That was Cahill's whole—that was the justification of his program. Bruce's whole program would be justified by an entirely different ideal and that is: We will see that only the finest artists are used in America to decorate federal buildings. And of course, these two men each carrying—each, you could say, one horn of an advance of the whole Roosevelt—what is known now as the Roosevelt Art Projects, and each of them doing, I really think in the long run, an equally important job. They were always on the edge of bickering with each other, jealous—a little jealous of each other, a little afraid that each one was stealing something from the other, either in artists or prestige. Using different political approaches. And to cut a long story short the tragic result of any honest bureaucratic politician in Washington: the continual dynamic need to increase their section at the expense of somebody else's. It's just that's the dynamism of politics in Washington.

And every time Cahill kept one of the best artists, because he was on relief and so came into his section, but Bruce wanted him because he was one of the best artists and so to be in his section, there would be jealousy. And it's tragic, but that's all it is. You see it—anybody who's ever had anything to do in Washington will tell you the same story, that there's this—I used the word dynamic—that there's this dynamic growth in jealousy between any two departments, and the dynamic growth of any department to try to get bigger and bigger and more and more important. Now Cahill was—I fancy a much more complicated man than Ned.

Ned wasn't complicated at all he was just clear as a block of granite. Just a perfectly simple, intelligent, healthy minded, artistically sensitive extrovert. Cahill, I knew less well because he was a far simpler man, he could conceal his feelings. He had—he was more of an artist himself, I would think. He had many sides to him. He wrote, didn't he, one or two successful novels?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE BIDDLE: Hadn't he lived in the near east for a while, I think?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: This I don't know.

[00:14:53]

GEORGE BIDDLE: He was something of a poet, he sang charmingly, and sang ballads that he made up about the other section, that used to infuriate those who heard them. He was a museum director. He'd written books on artists, on Pop Hart. He had an Irish charm. I think he was half Irish and half Scandinavian, was it? Or Finnish? Or some—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Something like that.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —queer Nordic thing. Not Germanic at all. He was—I hate the word devious, I wouldn't say that he was so much devious—but he might have been a little because he was a very complicated man. He was subtle. He had enormous charm, he could wrap you around—Ned was a brutal man. "It's either I like you or I don't," there weren't many shapes to it. I remember Cahill once where, I think in retrospect, he said it truly for political reasons. He brought Edith Halpert to see my painting, and said such flattering things about my mural quality, that it was the only mural in Washington that had any understanding of what a mural was, and that sort of talk. But said it with such charm that he completely—I believed it. I mean he had that, he could say anything. I remember his talking to Stuart Davis the same way, of course, Stuart Davis, I always think of as, at almost any stage in his career, you could define as one of the angry young men. He was always scowling, and always, "well I won't stand for that sort of thing, I want twice as much or I won't do it at all." A little bit that bullying in. But I saw the smile enveloping Stuart's face when Holger started joshing him and jollyng him in front of a big crowd of artists. Sort of, "Stu, do you remember when you and me, in the early days," and something or other, do you know, and he had Stuart just wreathed in smiles, eating cream out of his hand. And I think he could do that with anybody.

He—now there was another side though with Holger that one mustn't leave out. He was wrapped up in his work, as he was a mother chicken—a mother hen with 4,000 chicks. He had the deepest belief in the importance of what he was doing and the importance, I think, of every artist on his work. And he took me around I think two or three times to see what the Index of American Design was doing and various things. And they were doing everything in the world except sweeping leaves. But he left you with a conviction that always that America was a much more wonderful place for what these men were doing, and that there was no artist in America that he couldn't effectively use to make our civilization lovelier. And I think he had tact and discrimination. He must have had a more difficult job than Ned, because Ned after all was dealing with at most 50, 60 artists. I don't think more than that. And seeing, let's say, a couple of dozen of the higher ups in Washington, Admirals Peoples, you know, and occasionally Secretary Morgenthau. Two or three times Roosevelt. As often as he could the wives: Elinor Morgenthau and Eleanor Roosevelt.

But anyway, a handful of top men. Holger was just traveling all over America. And seeing the Audrey McMahan's of every little town down in Texas, and doing it beautifully. He was a diplomat, he was a Jesuit, whatever nice word, one could think of the kind of work he had to do. And I don't—I often—Holger always said to me, I have nothing against Ned, but I wish Ned would leave me alone, he wouldn't always peck at me. Let's say I'm willing to have my fingers crossed, whether he was sincere or not I don't know. But anyway he was—he could be perfectly bland and affable about it. Ned was enough of a good old Anglo-Saxon bulldog, you know, so he'd always show his teeth. [Harlan B. Phillips laughs.]

[00:20:00]

But I do think they were—to repeat, I think each of them just carried one horn of the movement. And it would be impossible to say which was most important. I think Ned

established a standard, which I can always hold when the people that are sniping at the Roosevelt New Deals, and people say, Well, what did they do? They painted a lot of stuff that ought to be whitewashed off the walls. And then you could point to the dozen or so people, like Maurice Sterne and Zorach, and so forth, and Boardman Robinson, that did outstanding murals, that always will be—are probably as fine as any murals that our country has done for federal buildings, a dozen of them or so. He can—I think Ned has that to show for it; that it wasn't just a lot of stuff that ought to be whitewashed off the walls. What Cahill can show was—he can—if he were alive today he can point around at every museum in America and say, That kid I kept alive. I was the one that—before he got started. Jack Levine, any of them, you know. They all started under with Cahill. I think that's the story of those two, about all I can say. They both had charm and I think, God knows, American art ought to be grateful to them.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Then there was the problem of your competition for the Justice Department. There was a staircase involved and a mural, and the—

GEORGE BIDDLE: You want to talk about bureaucratic censorship?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, the heavy hand of administration.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well I can—I can't remember whether I said this to you in one of our talks together, but one of the curious things that—it's impossible for any artist to realize today—is that people should object to or censor is most extreme attempts at avant-gardism, buffoonery, or the pure obnoxious of any sort. And I don't think any artist realized 20 years ago when he was working—when he was painting a portrait for a sitter or trying to get a dealer, or working for the government, he was always under fear of venomous criticism, because he was making a fool of himself, insincere, or doing something hideous. Now with the public it didn't matter; it was just a question of, would the dealer accept it and would the public buy it. But when it came to the government, I don't know any artist that worked for the government that wasn't under a continual night sweat of terror of what the Fine Arts Commission, under old Charles Moore and all the federal officials, would do to prevent it being put up. And I won't go into detail, but it was just a continual nightmare.

Now in my own particular case, my sketches were accepted by Bruce before he bothered to send them to any committees at all. He said, That's perfectly okay, it'll take time, it's got to go through the mill. It was turned down by everybody that had to do with it, by the Fine Arts Commission twice, he finally had to go to everybody except the president to get it accepted. He—I was under continual implied pressure by the architect of the building, "Oh George, now let's get a little sun in the picture, let's try to be cheerful, do you know? A little—why are all you people so gloomy?" And the Fine Arts Commission that was always hanging over your head, and "I won't let you go on to that second panel until—" so that I was in a state of an almost nervous breakdown, and I don't want to talk about it anymore because it's just—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I think this is why we passed it by the first time. That it was a sticky period, a, oh a—

[00:25:09]

GEORGE BIDDLE: It's something that people don't understand today.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, well, it's impossible, you know, the kind of detail that can go into a man breathing.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, the kind of things that they—the kind of things they'd criticize you for.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Exactly this is the detail that is—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Because the knee in the horse's foot isn't properly drawn and I won't pass it. Unbelievable.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Laughs.] And to confront this on a continuing basis.

GEORGE BIDDLE: All the time. Maurice Sterne's things were entirely turned down on religious reasons. I just can't go into it. I think I did, at some other time, mention the difference in attitude when I did things for Latin American countries.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Oh, yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: That's just—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —to the advantage of the Latin American countries.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And that is a situation I will—in case I did not say it last time—that I think now accounts for the fact that we never get our best work done for the government in the realm of painting, never. And rarely get our best artists. Almost never. And why in Mexico and Brazil they get infinitely more bad work than we do, but they also in many cases get their very best artists to do the very best work that they are capable of.

HARLAN PHLLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Period. That's the end. Nothing more to say.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, I—you know, you are the first one with whom I've talked who has indicated that the government's role was heavy-handed, and it's understandable in the terms—that is, when you have to swim through the ingredients that you have to swim through in the Treasury Department section. This wasn't present in Cahill's section.

GEORGE BIDDLE: No, no, of course not, of course not. With him, absolute civility, absolute understanding, and that is because there was no censor. He had to see that his boys were there at nine o'clock, that they didn't spend too much time in the lavatories, smoking and joking, and that's all there was to it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, yeah. Well this is the—

GEORGE BIDDLE: But I think it is historically amusing because, as I say, the next well known abstract sculptor with an international reputation that's asked to do something to stand in one of the main lobbies of the UN buildings, or something of that sort—you can't imagine anything that he would do that would shock anybody.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Right. [Laughs.] That is one of the ironies, isn't it?

GEORGE BIDDLE: It is one of the—it's historically one of the great differences between today and 30 years ago.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: In the realm of art.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. Now has there been any relaxation of the—it's hard to stay off the subject. Has there been any—now don't get excited—has there been any relaxation of the effect—the paralytic effect—which the Fine Arts Commission had? Is its role with reference to art developing in governmental circles or dormant in public buildings [changed any -Ed.]?

GEORGE BIDDLE: Today? Today? [Cross talk.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: As concerning the—

GEORGE BIDDLE: It's varied from year to year. Very, very briefly it is this: that during the end of that period—I think Ned Bruce's was on the Fine Arts Commission, was chairman—but anyway, for about five or six or possibly ten years, the Fine Arts Commission took on more and more jobs. It approved of projects and artists overseas for the various war commissions. It took under consideration federal buildings in Washington, and all over the country. Then came another period when I was on the Fine Arts Commission under David Finley, when Finley's point of view was retract, retract, retract. The Fine Arts Commission was really intended for the beautification of Washington under the L'Enfant plan. And he had better leave everything else out.

Since then, I would say, very briefly, there's been a continual effort at reorganization, first of all, under Finley, the reports of the Commission of Fine Arts on arts of the U.S government, which is a splendid report, in that its covers everything that is done in the government. I wrote a dissenting report because I thought that the commission should be increased, that it was the commission to undertake the selection of projects and artists for any federal building in this country or abroad and it could be done.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:30:40]

GEORGE BIDDLE: Since then, under the Kennedy administration there's been a lot of talk, and I would say to date nothing done in this—what I think is the centrally important thing—to get such a commission composed entirely of experts—not necessarily artists, but experts in their field who, on an advisory basis, will be able to organize projects and select artists and pass on the results.

Now why isn't this simple? The fly in the ointment is this: that under our Constitution, Congress will never give up the purse strings. They always will insist on the final say, and the right to criticize or throw it out or supervise. The only thing that you can do—and it can be done—is to appoint such a commission of experts acting on a purely advisory basis that Congress and other departmental bodies will be only too delighted to act on their advice in matters in which they know they are incompetent. If they feel that the advice is no more than advice, that is, they don't have to take it. And I think, that in a nutshell, is the whole problem and so far, nothing has been done to touch it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. The '30s was also a period which saw the organized artist, through various organizations.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: There's an allusion in here to your going over to the CIO in an effort to throw up some liaison, some bridge work—

[Cross talk.]

GEORGE BIDDLE: Ben Shahn?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Ben Shahn, yes. And the astounding thing that you came away with.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well I don't think it was astounding. We—Ben and I both were sunny eyed, a little younger than we are today, and thought we could—that labor unions were liberal, and that they would be interested in liberal art. We found out that they were—liberal art was something a little subversive to them.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Laughs.] That's marvelous. This was a feature of the age, a kind of organized voice for an artist.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Very much.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Now I don't know the extent where organization still figures in the art world—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Today?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well there again, I think you can say it in a nutshell. I haven't followed it at all in the last 5 or 10 years. I think when the artists—the great difference is that when the artists started organizing—I won't say that it was necessary for them, it was, that's a long question—but when they started, the best artists, and the best liberal artists, took an active part in all of these art organizations and were constantly their presidents and chairmen and directors. And I would say more and more it's becoming, as I fancy is the case with Artist Equity and Writers Equity and all that sort of thing, that it is really a business organization to attend to the economic needs.

[00:34:52]

I don't—as far as I know there are no really important artists that ever go to those meetings, or go often to those meetings and take much interest in them at all except to pay their annual fees, and be very grateful for what they're doing in getting the copyright laws passed and that sort of thing. Sending delegations to UN meetings in Italy. I would say that, as far as I know, and I may be partly wrong, art organizations have very little to do with the creative art expression in America today. I would say nothing to do with it. And in the 1930s

the art organizations certainly expressed the trends and directions of the best of contemporary art.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes, it was a germination period, an idea.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, they were ideal. Their programs were ideal.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And by ideal I simply mean interested in ideas.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. Older organizations, I think, also acted to some extent as a brake on the new. Like the Society of the American Mural Painters, let's say. I don't know too much about it.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, I'll tell you what happened with that. Very briefly the—at the time the—before the Roosevelt project started, the mural painters were pretty much dominated by the same spirit—by the old fashioned École de Paris approach. And successful Park Avenue architects. It was a—and quite properly so, it was a professional organization to get jobs for their members.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Right.

GEORGE BIDDLE: It was very much that. They had standards, of course, such as any similar lawyers' body or medical body would have today, but it was about that level. And then, after the Roosevelt programs were in full swing, I was elected president of the National Society of Mural Painters, and for a couple of years was president of the Mural Artists Guild. Now I think probably the reason was—and this is not cynicism on my part—that the older members of the mural society felt that since I was close to the government—or thought that I was close to the government—that I—the more intelligent members—that I would be useful in getting more jobs. And these were liberal minded academic artists, such for instance—I'll only mention one—Ernest Peixotto. Who was a charming man, and did charming work. And he was a gentleman and honest and I belonged to one or two clubs with him. And I would suppose that there were many like him, that just realized that it would be short-sighted of the organization not to take advantage of this federal impulse for mural work. And that they should do everything they could to help it. To become part of it.

That lasted a year or two and of course a great number of younger men joined it too, for the somewhat similar reasons. They said here's a chance for we young subversive left-wingers to get a job. It didn't last long, I think, pretty soon, it just went back to what it has always been probably like—as Anatole France points out in his *La Révolte des anges*, there's always a swing back and the thing that gets over again where it was, but gradually the angles get smoothed off in the process.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Laughs.] In any event there were a series of platforms representing certain specific interests. Ultimately. [Cross talk.]

GEORGE BIDDLE: Sure, quite rightly,

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Organized, vocal—right, surely.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And then there's certain young—angry young men that are always dissatisfied and revolting and have no use for it.

[00:40:00]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And little by little it makes a change in the old organization, and—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure, it's of the order of life.

GEORGE BIDDLE: It's part of life, yes, the world grows and remains the same.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Of course the '30s gave rise to, I think in a way, more excitement because a common employer, the government—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well the government continued giving murals—I think they were still going on—Refriger doing, I think, the post office or War department in San Francisco.

Up to the war, and then they were ended. It lasted then pretty much from '35 until '42, something of that sort. So that's quite a period.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure. Well I was thinking of the Artists' Union under Davis attempting to pressure the Section into hiring more artists you know a kind of representation of artist's interest through a new organization—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, I think you're talking now about those left-wing organizations—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: —and to a certain extent communist infiltrated and all that. Which was part of the period.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And perfectly harmless. I think the—I don't think any of those organizations realized that they could have marched up and down until the end of time outside of Juliana Force's window shouting, "We want jobs," it wouldn't have changed anything. What changed things was there was Bruce, and Cahill, and Hopkins in Washington, with a benevolent president sitting over their head, who occasionally would touch a button and say, If it's not dangerous give it a push. But on the other hand, I think that the intelligent people like Cahill and Audrey McMahan—not Mrs. Force—realized that these boys marching up and down outside people's windows could be politically as useful as the politicians today realize that Negroes sitting in the streets will help pass bills.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure.

GEORGE BIDDLE: When I say not Mrs. Juliana Force, I say that out of no sense of invidiousness [criticism –Ed.]. I loved her, but she was very feminine, and just screamed to heaven about these awful men that were preventing her sleeping, do you know, and wasn't it an outrage. She just wanted sympathy. I remember one day I was able to persuade—Bill Hodson [ph] was a neighbor of mine, and he was a New York Welfare Commissioner, and I suppose spending a good many, possibly billions as far as I know, and possibly hundreds of thousands in relief men. And I thought that he might be able to help her, and brought—and Mrs. Force said she would come out to meet him, I think on a spring day. And she sat on the porch, she talked until about 11 o'clock. Didn't give him a chance to open his mouth and spoke about nothing about the fact she couldn't go on not sleeping with these retched Communists trailing up and down outside her window saying, "We want jobs." After what I've done for them. And Bill couldn't sleep either, and carrying a load, I suppose about 100 times as big, just sat patiently listening to her, Never had a chance to open up his mouth.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative]. Well you know, museum directors are a breed too. There's one in particular that intrigues me. You may have bumped into him, and that's Mr. Taylor of the Metropolitan Museum.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Oh yes, I knew him very, very intimately—we never talked about him?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Not at all.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well he was—I loved him, Hélène loved him. He could charm any woman. He looked like any short, heavy, late Roman emperor, with—the family, the [inaudible] are Jewish. One of Philadelphia's oldest families. Like a great many of Philadel— or a great number of Philadelphia oldest families are Jewish. I talked to many of his *confrères* in the Metropolitan, they all say the same thing about him: he was a genius. He was impossible to get on with when things weren't going he'd lay down on the floor and kick. He'd tell dirty stories. He was an idea man. Briefly, he was an idea man. And that's where he had genius.

[00:45:17]



He hated modern art. He'd tell any art organization he was sick to death of them. That, Why couldn't they be like other men? Why did they think they were different than other people? You know? He'd first start out telling a dirty story, always about somebody's tits that got caught in the washing machine. [Laughs.] But—didn't we talk about him?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Not at all.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well I remember when he—this is the kind of thing I think one anecdote is enough about him, why he was a great man. He hated modern art, particularly. His taste was very bad. At one moment he decided—because he had intelligence—that the thing to do was to give an exhibition of modern art conducted by artists. And imagine that at the time. When a former—Mrs. Force told me this—who was the former director of the Metropolitan Museum not so terribly long before Francis, who—when she said, Mrs. Whitney—it was something like this, she told it to me coming back on the train from Washington once. She said, Mrs. Whitney can't go on forever and she'd like her museum, her collection to—somewhere, to end the right place. And she sent Mrs. Force to—no, I guess she saw herself—the director of the Metropolitan, and this was suggested to her [*sic* him -Ed.] that Mrs. Whitney would leave everything to the Metropolitan. And he said to her, Yes, yes, my dear lady, but I don't think we could do that, now come in and I want to show you some of my things. And that's—that is the *raison d'être* of the Whitney Museum of Modern Art—of American art.

But it was not so long before that man was running things that Francis came in and said, By God, I'm going to have an exhibition of contemporary American art run by American artists in the Metropolitan. And he came down to see Artists' Equity about it. Artists Equity, or—I guess it was Artists Equity, but we saw him afterwards—Leon Kroll and I was on the committee of Artist Equity then. And he said to us, "I know what you guys are like, you know, how do I know—you know, I have to deal with trustees." He was always ugly that way. [They laugh.] "How do you know that you're not going to make a monkey out of me? How do I know the lot of you Communists aren't going to get up and march up and down Fifth Avenue when the show starts," you know. And we had a talk and just said to him, It's too important to us. The Artists Equity will guarantee you that every good artist in America sends a picture, and the Communists won't have anything to do with it.

So he delt that way. He was a straight shooter.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Bold.

GEORGE BIDDLE: With ideas. You know, I had never anything to do with him. I mean, I'd just loved to get anecdotes from his various—a few friends of mine, Bob Hale [ph] and [inaudible] [others -Ed.], who— they all had reverence for him, but they just say it was God awful working under him, because he was throwing fits and turning around and changing his mind, and saying he hated art all the time, and couldn't he go back to a job where he had a little peace of mind, and do some writing.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: A human tornado.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, he was, but utter charm. You know he was a very sophisticated man of the world. A complete man.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. It's a—

GEORGE BIDDLE: I remember, incidentally—this has nothing to do with art—it has something to do with Francis Taylor, just an anecdote. I remember very early in World War II, when I was down in Brazil and he came down and called us up and said, I'm here for two days that you want to have supper with us—with me? And said, George, do you know, you can't believe it, but we are building planes today that are going to revolutionize warfare. You know, they'll be able to transport whole divisions. I couldn't believe it. It's the kind of thing—I remember Harold Sterne [ph] once saying to me in Paris, Do you know, the American civilization is going to change within 10 years. And I said, What? Families are going to own televisions.

[00:50:09]

[Harlan B. Phillips laughs.] You might just as well have said, families are going to the moon, 10 years from now. The world changes awfully quickly.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. But Taylor is, while disturbing, nonetheless part of the local scene and—a maker of not a little of the taste, a molder of thought—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, how much I don't know. He put the Metropolitan on the map, didn't he, in a way? Because the reason he resigned—I've been told this, and so if its libelous—that he just could not stand Roland [Redmond]. That Roland felt that he knew more about it than he.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Was a clash of—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —personality.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I do know, personally, that he was just—I had never seen him so happy as when he went back to Worcester. I lunched with him then, just not long before his death, and he said, Now I've got everything that I like, I run this place, it's my baby, I was the one that made it. I think he started it originally. He said, I don't have to bother trustees, I'm the show. And I can write when I want to, I can do what I want. He retired into the thing he cared most about in life.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: The headaches were over. [Harlan B. Phillips laughs.] Had great charm.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But gee, when you think about the possibilities of an American collection, the opportunities that was missed—

GEORGE BIDDLE: I think if you could dismiss Francis Taylor with two words, say that he had great charm with a touch of genius. A naughty boy.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Laughs.] Well he's one of the figures. Of course, museums, and museums, and museums. I don't know whether we could get into that or whether it would be worthwhile to go into—

GEORGE BIDDLE: If you want just personal reminiscences in this, there's one little personal touch about Francis. At this particular dinner when he spoke to Artists Equity about the exhibition he hoped to put over, if they would help him, he said, I've just been down to see Roosevelt, who wanted to speak to him about art week, I think. When he made an art week in America. He said, I came into his office, he wanted to see me about it. And he was white as a sheet and he said, 'Lord Lothian,' I think that's it [the English Ambassador -Ed.]—'has just left, and he's told me about the London bombing.' And Francis said he'd been with Lothian for two hours and he was white when he came in. But he said—he sort of pulled himself together and said, 'Now Francis, I want to talk to you about art week.' And he sat there for two hours and talked to him.

And Francis—this is Francis' introduction, you know, when he talked to us. And I quoted that, you may have noticed, somewhere in my autobiography. And Heckscher—August Heckscher, you know—when he was casting around for a speech or paper that Kennedy had promised to *Look* magazine, I think, and used this quotation from Francis, mentioned my name in it. And that's in the introduction of—what's it called, *Art in America*, for this—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Now you were saying—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, I don't know, I don't know how fruitful it would be to go toward museums, museum directors. But, you know, you mentioned Taylor and the new impulses certainly discernable at the Museum of Modern Art, and perhaps the Whitney Museum. And they are as different as—oh I don't know—

GEORGE BIDDLE: —from the MET.

[00:55:03]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. And from each other, I think.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes. Yes, I think—it seems to me the chief difference between—I think you mentioned it too, the other day—between the Whitney and the Modern Museum, the Whitney, of course, is dedicated to Mrs. Whitney's principles. I think that would be of course — Mrs. Whitney might resent what they're doing if she were alive because— although they still always want new undiscovered Americans, in that sense they are completely loyal to her. I think she would have—when she was alive she did it in such a very simple way, in such a human way, and personal way. I think she would have perhaps resented the hullabaloo and the scale, you know, and the—the money scale, the everything, the scale of the prices of exhibitees and all that.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Because Mrs. Whitney had a little coterie: Jonas Lee, Hunt Diedrich, Speicher, Glackens, all that, that she'd wine and dine with, and have a good time—Mrs. Force. And then she had these charming little—run by Mrs. Force entirely—impromptu once a year meetings when the artists were brought in and could guzzle on strong cocktails and as much—as many hors d'oeuvres as they could stuff themselves with. But I always felt it was the most civilizing influence in American art, because here are these harried, jealous, poverty stricken—many of them—young artists that have been just showing their teeth at each other, you know, all year, could get together, and over six or eight cocktails, couldn't help but ending up with their arms around each other's necks. Now that sort of thing couldn't happen today at the Whitney.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Because now you feel that anybody that exhibits at the Whitney is big money. You know, he's an [speaks French]. So, in certain things— time changes, but there is that enormous difference, of course, between the Whitney and—that the Whitney is loyal to American art.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: I think in my mind both museums, conscious or not, are doing—are carrying out an idea which is more dangerous to art all over the world than any one thing. And that is identifying technical innovation with art excellence. And I think every museum in America is guilty of and as far as I can see—I haven't been in Paris for 10 years—pretty much all over the world. And I think it's the most dangerous thing in the art picture today. And you know what I mean.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: That is anything that is a technical innovation is synonymous—they don't say it, but the effect is that—excellence in art. I remember how a paragraph—did I mention this to you, in Berenson's Italian artist [history of art in the Italian Renaissance -Ed.]?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No.

GEORGE BIDDLE: How important—it was something like this, he mentioned some artist—I couldn't give you his name, I've forgotten it—not very well known in the Baroque period, and Berenson says about him, If it is true that so-and-so for the first time established a characterization in portraiture, and if it is true that he effected his generation as much as any other artist, why is his name not comparable to that of Giotto or Masaccio? The reason is simple, it is that technical innovation has nothing to do with art excellence—with a high excellence—with excellence in art. And then he goes on to say something, The latter has only to do with—and then comes his definition of what art excellence is.

[01:00:08]

Fine drawing, space, a sense of form, color. Now that is a thing, I think which—for which, personally I think, [Alfred] Barr is more responsible, probably, than any man in the world on account of his enormous prestige. And secondly the Modern Museum more responsible than any museum on account of its prestige. But I think, on the whole, that inability to distinguish between an innovation and excellence is the most devastating thing in the art world today.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Hm. I would agree.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And I will say this again—I will make myself perfect clear by saying, technical innovation may have an enormous importance and enormous influence, but importance and influence have nothing to do with excellence.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Laughs.] Right.

GEORGE BIDDLE: And that is something which no critic in—I don't think, I'll have to think over [inaudible], I can't remember—but by and large there's not a newspaper critic in America that ever seems—that doesn't seem completely blind to that distinction—that monumental distinction.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Um, why—

GEORGE BIDDLE: That's my quarrel with the Modern Museum of Art. Because they've done splendid things of course.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure, but on balance—

GEORGE BIDDLE: On balance, history will tell. On balance, I would say it's the most dangerous thing in the art picture today.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. It's— that is the confusion—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Of course, I think this must be remembered about the Modern Museum. Modern art—Kandinsky—and Kandinsky is quite as modern as de Kooning or Hofmann. I mean, really, I can pick a Kandinsky and say to anybody this is the late de Kooning or something, an early Hofmann, anybody would believe you, if you were careful in the selection. But I think this is always forgotten, that Kandinsky did pure abstraction, I think in 1909, I'm not sure. 1910 I'm not sure. And that the intellectual world knew all there was to know about abstract art by 1912. I have seen the great Cubists and the great Futurist exhibitions in Paris in 1912. The winter of 1912-13.

Pennsylvania Academy gave—the Armory show exhibited all through America in 1913. The Pennsylvania Academy—which I thought was about as conservative as any museum academy in America—the Pennsylvania Academy gave an exhibition of modern art in 1921. And that's completely modern; Marin the whole—purely [inaudible].

Now—so when the Modern Museum comes along and gives its opening exhibition of—what was it—Cezanne and who else? You know, those three—well anyway, they're three founders—in 1929 I think it was—it wasn't so terribly up to date. It was putting on the map stuff that had been known in 1890.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Right.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Now having said that, one of course has to go ahead and say they have enormous ability. They've done beautiful brochures for the first time in America. They put on a show like nobody at all. Certain that they're—if you call it, their side issues, like a collection of films, and their photographs, and architectural data—oh, I suppose it's more magnificent than anything of the sort that's ever been done in America. So, they definitely have an achievement.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And their library facility.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, they are. It's a bundle of tricks.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. But nonetheless it does represent this danger. What happens to regionalism, given the speed of communication? The—

[01:05:05]

GEORGE BIDDLE: Today?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Well, I've always felt this: regionalism, if you come down to tacks, was a

group. That means Benton, Grant Wood, Steuart Curry. Now if you say what is regionalism, with very few exceptions most Western art, and a lot of the best Chinese and Japanese art, has always been regional.

Well, I mean, take Claude Monet, Renoir, all the best Impressionists, they rarely moved—they didn't have automobiles and Frenchmen hate travel. They were all regional. I mean the—I know the villages where Monet worked just by looking at some of his canvases, because I lived for a year and a half—or I went twice for six months to Giverny. There's very little art in the world that isn't regional.

Michelangelo wasn't. Certainly many of the Venetian painters were. The great groups of what you call symbol art were not regional—regional in the same sense. I mean gothic art. Most primitive art was not regional, it's a symbol. But if you take all American art, until Stieglitz came on the map, was always regional, it couldn't be anything else. There may have been a few—I suppose there were exceptions, of course.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I was thinking of the effect of the Modern Museum given current ease of communication, holding up the banner of—like the figure in modern painting, and having all—with communication being what it is—having all areas of the country devoting their skills—presumably their creative skills—not to doing something creative, but to fulfilling a requirement of meeting some standard which has been announced by a museum. This is what I meant.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, I think that—I'm afraid I would have to say that's a danger of our civilization. That perhaps the—where was it that I recently read—I can't remember, but it mentioned the fact that television and radio have probably improved the grammar, you know, of our commentators, but you don't get local dialect anymore. [Harlan B. Phillips laughs.] Now as long as you have Abstract Expressionism, you can't—they'll all be doing the same thing, won't they?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

GEORGE BIDDLE: So I don't think the fact that the Modern Museum saying, "Let's do nudes," makes—in the world we live in—makes much difference.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Except theirs is the trumpet. Theirs is the trumpet, that is the call to the race.

GEORGE BIDDLE: Yes, but if you put the—I mean, the same kind of Abstract Expressionism as almost the same month will appear in Japan, New Delhi, Paris, New York.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Oh sure. I was just thinking perhaps a numerical thing where 54 objects were selected on the figure in America painting out of some 2,000 which were submitted. And the fact that 2,000 were submitted would seem to suggest that, whatever else creativity may have meant throughout the length and breadth of the land, it meant less than trying to compete with a particular—

GEORGE BIDDLE: Be yourself.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. For this particular—

GEORGE BIDDLE: No, I'll say—but I have to sadly repeat that artists are trying to do the same thing even if the Museum of Modern Art weren't pushing them. Sadly. Not all, but—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, yeah. Well, I think we've come, probably, to the end, so we can see what it sounds like and reads like. [Laughs.] Besides I better think about getting back to—

[END OF TRACK AAA\_biddle63\_9261\_m.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

