Smithsonian
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Oral history interview with Clarence Holbrook Carter, 1964 April 13

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Clarence H. Carter on April 13, 1964. The interview was conducted in Milford, New Jersey by Richard K. Doud for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.The Interview focuses primarily on Mr. Carter's time as Director of Northeast Ohio Federal Art Project.

Interview

RICHARD K. DOUD: This is an interview with Clarence H. Carter at his home in Milford, New Jersey, April 13, 1964. The interviewer is Richard K. Doud. I think the best place to start generally is with your background, what you were doing before the depression. I am sure this has all been written up in various publications, but I'd like to hear you tell a little bit about your own background before the 1930's.

CLARENCE H. CARTER: Do you want me to go back to the very early interest that I had in art or start more professionally?

RICHARD K. DOUD: Well, I think you should. I'm not trying to take you back to your earliest recollections, but if your interest in art was a childhood interest, I think it's important.

CLARENCE H. CARTER: Well, it was. Of course, living in a town like Portsmouth there wasn't any art and most people didn't know anything about art in those days. I was primarily interested in art all the way through my life and that was all that I was ever interested in.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Did you have an artistic background as far as your family is concerned?

CLARENCE H. CARTER: In a way. Jesse Stuart, the writer, once said, "You know, Clarence, all of your relatives are artistic." He taught school in Kentucky in the section where my mother's family came from. And he said everything they did had an artistic flair. I had a cousin who was Art Director, or still is Art Director of the Cincinnati Inquirer . My mother had wonderful taste; also my father. They didn't do anything themselves but they were always encouraging, and my father took a great deal of pride in what I always did. He died when I was in high school. I was determined I wanted to go to art school. Mother said, "Well, I'll try to see you through just as much as I can." She said, "Why don't you sign up for two years?" And I said well I wanted to go the four years, I didn't think two years would be sufficient. Previously, I had a great deal of encouragement, the art teacher for the public schools in Portsmouth gave me art lessons on the side from nine till twelve years old. I did a number of things there. And through her interest I entered the county fair. One year I got six first prizes and the sweep stakes for getting the most prizes in art. That gave me encouragement to try wider fields, and the next year I tried the Ohio State Fair and got first prize and sweepstakes. So then through that encouragement and winning several poster awards, and some articles in the paper – one I recall – I was around nine years old – predicted I would be a famous artist some day, which sort of entertained me in a way. And yet I took it seriously too. So that there was never doubt in my mind what I was going to do. Then when I went to art school I found that I was pretty far behind most of the other students because they had training in good high schools, especially the ones that came from the Cleveland high schools and the larger cities, so that I had to work doubly hard to catch up. I remember my first pathetic attempt at design. I was making little rosettes one right after the other making a repeat border which was rather sad. But by the time I got to my junior year things picked up and I was winning awards. In my junior year I was fortunate enough to have several pieces in the annual big show at the Cleveland Museum of Art. And during that time I had liked the work of Antof Cardi. He was a Belgian painter and his work interested me because at that time I was interested in morbid subjects. I think many adolescents go into that phase, and his rather morbid interpretations of religious subjects on everyday Belgian life intrigued me and I did a copy of his Pieta that was in the show. Mr. Milliken, the director of the Cleveland Museum, was away at that time and he came back just as I was finishing the picture. He came to the gallery and it was so exact and so much like the picture that he got terribly upset and wanted to know who gave me permission to make the copy. Somebody had given permission but they failed to state that I shouldn't do it the actual size of the picture, which I had done. So they said I couldn't have the picture, and I was terribly upset. They sent the picture to Belgium to get the doctor's okay that owned the painting, and also Antof Cardi's permission for me to have it. In several months' time the thing came back all stamped up on the back that I could keep the picture. Well, that did one thing that was extremely good for me, although I was very upset at the time, to put all that work into something and maybe lose it, but it drew me to the attention of Dr. Milliken. He became interested in my work. During my senior year I got an award in the May show, and also he was on a jury at the Art School for a special competition that was held. Ralph Coe, who was one of the leaning collectors in the Midwest , bought that painting. Then, through Mr. Milliken's interest I think primarily, a number of patrons of the arts in Cleveland bought the remainder of my paintings at the Cleveland Museum. I had five paintings accepted and they all were

sold, which gave me eight hundred dollars. And, of course, eight hundred dollars in 1927 was a great deal more than eight hundred dollars today. So he arranged for me to go steerage to Europe, and going steerage in an Italian ship isn't the easiest thing in the world. Two days out I was able to change over to second class and the rest of the trip was very pleasant. So I first landed in Naples. I went to Anticoli-Corrado from Rome, was there a while but it was so primitive that I didn't seem to be able to get a hold of the thing. And Maurice Sterne was painting in Anticoli and that was the reason they thought it would be nice for me to go there. So Maurice Sterne and his wife suggested that I go to Capri for a while, which I did, after being in Anticoli for a month. I was always rebelling against instruction. I liked to strike out on my own. They wanted me to join Hans Hofmann's class, summer class in Capri and I wasn't too keen about that. I wanted to be on my own and express what I was seeing and feeling. But Mr. Hofmann was very helpful in finding a place for me to stay at a reasonable price, and he was so good they felt that I should respond more to his overtures and join the class. Still I went my own way and it was very stimulating. I like Hofmann. Of course, he wasn't speaking any English at the time. It was all interpreted by several men: Alfred Jensen and Bettachel. They were trying to get me to be more like Hormann in the way I was seeing things, expressing myself. But I went on painting my own way, listening to the criticisms. The very final class, Hofmann spent all the class time talking about the things that I had done, praising them. Then they descended on me, Jensen and Bettachel, and various others in the class – Cameron Booth – asking why I wouldn't go on to Munich, that Hofmann said he could make a very good painter out of me. So then I let loose and said that I felt they were all being too much like Hofmann and weren't being individual enough. So I went on back to Anticoli and stayed there three months, and went back to Sicily. I went to Sicily New Year's Eve. I did a series of paintings there and sent them back to the Museum. I got first prize at the Cleveland Museum of Art in the May show and all of the things that I had in that show sold. So that gave me enough to keep traveling. I went to North Africa and down to Carawan, Tunis, then back to Marseilles, Switzerland and Paris. In the meantime, while I was in Italy, William Milliken and his mother came over for the summer and I was their guest in Florence for two weeks. During that time he took me to all the places that I should see. It was really wonderful because he knew exactly where to go. There wasn't any waste of time seeing things that were unimportant, and this gave me a very great understanding of the Italian masterpieces, which I had had even when I was in the art school. John Singer Sargent was the great master and Frans Hals and Velasquez were the old masters. I liked their work up to a point but I seemed to prefer the sort of magic qualities that the Italian School had. They seemed to go deeper for me. I liked the design element. I didn't feel that Velasquez or Frans Hals had a great deal of design, and certainly not John Singer Sargent. I got pretty tired of all the type of painting seemed to be sort of slick, brisk type of painting. So one day I dashed off a Sargentesque portrait to prove how easy it was to do. Well, the only reaction of my fellow students was, "Well, why don't you paint like that all the time?" So I really didn't gain much by trying to prove my point. But when I got to Italy, of course, I was just in my element. There I was surrounded by all the things that had appealed to me when I was a student, and with the encouragement of Mr. Milliken I got that much more. Then, of course, I have gone back; I had started up at Paris and then went back. I want to say that in the following year I was in Paris; Dr. Milhiken and his mother came to London, they asked me to be their guest in London. So I met them in London, stayed there for ten days. We traveled around London and the same thing happened there, with my being introduced to the very best. At that time I met Harold Parsons, Harold Woodbury Parsons, who was then the foreign representative of the Cleveland, the Metropolitan, and a number of the museums in America. And he started buying things also. And for a number of years after that he'd visit my studio and buy one or two pieces. He gave two pieces to the Kansas City Museum when that collection was developed. Then we went to Belgium and went to Ghent and Bruges and Brussels. Then I left him in Brussels and went back to Paris and stayed in Paris until late in August. And in that length of time I sent a group of things back to the Museum that I had done in Paris. I had a great deal of luck there and won more prizes in Cleveland. So I left at the end of August and on the ship coming back I met Mrs. Carter, who was seasick most of the time. I met her just two days before the boat docked. It was a slow boat, a ten-day boat. And you have a girl on the ship that far! At the final costume ball I wore a costume I had bought in Tunis. I had a little bit of the Rembrandt in me, I was intrigued by rich ornamentation and costumes and I bought a number of things. Any-way, wearing that at the costume ball I got the prize. It was supposed to be the most historical prize, and the captain when he gave me the award said, "The award, Mr. Carter, is the prize for the most hysterical costume." But Mary Griswold was sitting next to me and I asked one of the girls that I knew who she was. She introduced me and in that time we made up for the rest of the trip. In those two days we became real serious, and within a short time we were married and on our own. Mr. Milliken came over for the wedding. Then we went to Cleveland to live, stayed there for a length of time, with a few exceptions. I went to Portsmouth and did a number of paintings there, she would go back to her parents in Elmira. Well then, the depression hit us; we had a baby at that time, and things looked very bleak. We hardly knew just what was going to come next. Then the Works Progress Administration asked some of the artists to do murals and various things in the City of Cleveland. At that time I did two murals for the public auditorium, one called "Bridges" and the other "Education." We worked in the basement of the stadium. Of course, the City didn't want to use any more heat than necessary out of season, so we bundled up in heavy clothes, and it was a very bitter winter. We sat on what little bit of heat there was in the heaters, and painted our large murals. Then some time elapsed and they formed the Federal Art Projects. I still was making sales at the Cleveland Museum, which was fortunate, and helped along a great deal and I was consistently winning prizes. At the time I was there I won thirteen first prizes and a number of second and third prizes, besides many mentions. My position in the community had developed

to the place that my pictures were in demand. With that, I didn't really need the Federal help as much as many of the other artists did. Then the Federal Art Projects were developed and I didn't have any real need to work with them, didn't know too much of what was going on. Carl Braumo was the director, and Carl was a very able Cleveland painter. I was rather surprised when I was approached to become the general superintendent of the Federal Art Projects of Northeastern Ohio. They said they needed me because Mr. Braumo was leaving. Well then I had a session with Carl Braumo and found the reason he was leaving was because the pressure had gotten so great that he just couldn't take it. He said he was just about ready to go out of his mind because the unions were pressuring him that he was not able to keep his promises that he would, I think, make too freely. And I was rather interested. New things appealed to me. I talked it over with William Milliken and he said, "Well, for goodness sake, don't take it." He said, "Braumo is just about out of his mind." He said, "You'd be very foolish to get involved with that." Well evidently I have a very stubborn nature and when somebody advises me not to do something I'm more determined to do it. Well, the next step was that I had gone far enough to give my consent to Carl Braumo that I would consider. The next step was that Mildred Holzhauer, who is now Mildred Holzhauer Baker, came to Cleveland and called me and wanted to know if Mrs. Carter and I could have dinner with her at the Hotel Cleveland. So we went down and had a very pleasant evening and discussed the possibility of my taking the directorship. I said, "Well, I would be interested but could I get rid of the unions, could the unions be dissolved?" And she said no, said Harry Hopkins approved and wanted the unions to exist. Well, it seemed rather strange to me that the government would set up a project and then sponsor the unions to strike against the projects. I thought well, I'll take care of that in time. There was a fellow that was a great agitator. His name was Jacobs. And Carl Braumo told me a number of things that made me feel that he was not doing as much for the good of the project as he could and it was more on the basis of agitating. She agreed that at least they would see that Jacobs was laid off before I would become director. I was told that everything was all right, but I said, "Well, let me see his layoff slip." "Well, that's coming." "Well," I said, "I'm not taking it until I see his layoff slip." Finally they found that I meant business; and two weeks passed before they finally realized they were going to have to lay Jacobs off before I would take over. In the meantime, the project was in turmoil and going down fast. The union would call me up, different members of the union, wanting to know what my policy was going to be, asking some questions, and I would very abruptly say, "Well, I'm not director now." I said, "I'll talk this over when I'm the director, and I prefer not being bothered." So I didn't involve myself in any way with any commitments or anything else. The first day I moved into the project was the day that I was shown the layoff slip for Jacobs. I came in, I had some art magazines with me, and began looking over the project, deciding what I wanted to do, what changes I wanted to make, both in directing the men and also in projects they were going to do, and in the physical change of the whole setup; it seemed sloppy. There was work going on all over the place. There was an area where they were doing silk screen printing when you first came in that seemed like a messy introduction to the whole thing. So my first day in figuring out what I felt should be done, somebody liking to look through the art magazines I had on my desk, they disappeared. So then I thought well, this is where I'm going to have to get tough. I sent out word that nobody was to leave the project until the magazines were left on my desk where they had been picked up. And I went about my business, and before I left the magazines were back on my desk. My first sizing-up of the situation I thought I'd clear up the entrance way. It was a large room. We turned that into a gallery and some of the men on the project worked on that. Some of them were able to use hammers and nails and stretch burlap. Repainting was done. And of course there were some people on the project that shouldn't have been doing any more than house painting anyhow. So I pressed them into use to tidy the place up, to do what painting needed to be done. I re-evaluated all the various departments and appointed heads of certain divisions where I felt the need of direct supervision. I had an office built for myself and a business office next door. I inherited Johnny Sago from Carl Braumo, who was secretary, and he was praised to the skies to me. They said that I couldn't run the project without Johnny Sago. That had been pressed home to the extent that I felt it was either Johnny Sago or the whole thing would sink. But after being there a while I realized that Johnny Sago was causing as much trouble as anybody else because he was always pressuring for this for one person or another, he was taking too much personal interest in individuals. He had his friends; and he also studied the stars. I'd be going to Columbus for a state trip and he'd warn me that I would have to be careful, that I was going to have some accident happen to me. One day I went out and found that they were taking the wooden sculpture that had been fastened above the entrance of the business office. I asked the men what they were doing. They said Johnny Sago said these had to come down because he had read the stars and that I was going to be hit on the head that day; everything that could have fallen on my head was being removed. So I got pretty tired of that. Finally I told the State Director, Charlotte Cooper, that I thought I'd better get somebody to take Johnny's place, although he was a very fine person. He is now a lawyer and he had a national record for typing and short hand and was a very able and capable person. In his place I got a girl by the name of Mary Zampino. Mary was just the opposite of Johnny. She was not intense and she had no interest in any of the people on the project beyond what they could contribute to the project. There weren't any personalities that meant that much to her. So she kept to her knitting and kept out of my hair. The thing that kept rancoring was this union business. For instance, I had a layoff of, I think, around seventeen or twenty-one. My quota had to be changed once in a while, so whenever they changed the quota I had to lay people off. At that time I had to go to Columbus for a meeting. I had told Talman Kabeny who had inherited the head of the union position when Jacobs was let out. He had promised me that there would not be any strikes. So I came back from Columbus and everybody was scurrying around. I asked Edris Eckert what was going on. She said, "Well, Talman

is planning a sitdown strike." So I said, "Well, you go out and tell the people that I have already instructed the timekeeper that anybody who strikes, doesn't work, will not be paid; whoever doesn't work I have already instructed the timekeeper that as soon as that happens the pay stops." I said, "You tell them that the people who are on the project are going to be kept on, they might as well get all the money they can; the ones who are going to be laid off might as well get what little bit that is left of their time to be on the project." And I sent word that Talman Kabeny should come in and see me. Well, Talman came in and he looked very sheepish over the fact that he knew he had promised me that he wouldn't strike. Well, it seemed that pretty much union behavior at that time was that promises didn't really mean too much. It was the glory of the union itself. So I had a little talk with him. And by that time Edris Eckert was able to bring home the fact that the thing was going through regardless of what the union did, and that it only made common sense that they'd better keep working and get as much as they could. To make the thing as fair as possible so that there wouldn't be any criticism from any source, I personally interviewed everybody that I had listed to be laid off. And I laid off only the people that were contributing the least to the project, not worrying about how much they had been involved in the project in the past, or anything else. It was only through my finding that certain people were not as capable as others, and it seemed only fair to me to keep on the best people, people who were really contributing the best. So each individual was called in separately and I went over the entire case with each person. And it was quite an arduous task, because it was quite an emotional thing with some of them. There was only one change that I made. One person I was laying off had a slight deformity. His case was so bad and I realized what a hardship it was going to bring upon his family and so forth, that regardless of the fact that he wasn't up to par with his work, I kept him on. Well, the union had realized that I had done just as much as I humanly could in making a fair choice of who was going to be laid off, so that things weren't too bad. But then the layoff came. And it was not an easy thing for me either, because I knew—I had worked with some of the fellows. But every time I had to lay off I saw to it that it was somebody who was paying more attention to the union than to his work on the project. In that way, I was able gradually to weaken the stand of the union which had just been primarily saying, "Well, now, slow down, Buddy, you're working for Uncle Sam now." And some of these people I had taken on after I got on the project, weren't people I had inherited but people I had appointed during my regime would come to me and say, "Well, Mr. Carter, what am I going to do? So-and-so has come to me and said, 'Well, you're just going to have to slow down here; you're working for the government now.'" So then, of course, I stored that in my mind and when there was a layoff that person was included. You may think a lot of—too much of this is involving the union—but it was a great factor at that time. There was the Worker's Alliance and it was quite left-wing. It was accused of being Communistic. Of course, things were pretty involved at that time. And because I was not Communist in my sympathies, of course I was labeled as Fascist. One day I asked Talman Zebeny what was the difference between Communism and Fascism, because I really couldn't see a great deal of difference. He, of course, didn't answer my question. But he got very mad and flushed in the face and for a moment forgot that I was his boss. He said, "Nobody but a damn fool would use both words in the same sentence.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Was this Worker's Alliance a national union?

CLARENCE H. CARTER: Yes. Yes, that was national. It was set up in Washington. It seemed always to me a very strange thing that it was set up purposely to take care of the people who were hired on the projects.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Is that right! I didn't know that.

CLARENCE H. CARTER: And Mrs. Roosevelt was very much behind the thing also. Then there was a fellow by the name of Russell Flint who was very active in the union, a very good painter. He was not, the same as Talman Kabeny, they were contributing, and I put Talman Kabeny in as manager-director of the Print Division, the Graphic Division. They were able artists, and as long as they were able I could work with them. Russell Flint found that it was a losing cause, the union was, because I forbade them to meet on the project, which they had done in the past. I said, "You're going to have to have your meetings held some place else." There was a national meeting of the Workers Alliance, I think it was either Detroit or Chicago or some place, so that Talman Kabeny and another fellow, I can't think of his name now, were picked by the union to go and represent our project at the conference. It was on a weekend and they both came to me and asked me if I would give them a day on Monday; if they weren't back on Monday if I would give them a day so that they could stay on. I said, "No." I said, "If you're not here to start working on Monday you will not be paid." Well, they went on, knowing what I had said. At the meeting, or while they were in the city where the conference was being held, they met Charlotte Cooper, who was the State Director. They told Charlotte the situation and Charlotte said she would call me up on Monday morning and fix it up that they would be paid. So on Monday morning Charlotte Cooper called me from Columbus and started telling me what she had done. I said, "Well, I'm very sorry, Charlotte, but I have already told them they wouldn't get paid and they're not going to get paid." So we faced that crisis head-on. I was also pretty much pressured by certain Congressmen and certain Senators to take on constituents—the person happened to be of the same religious faith, or political faith, or something, and so it was to their advantage that this person would be taken on. And I would say, "Well, I'm very sorry I can't take this person on. I've reviewed his work, he's been in, I've seen his work, it doesn't pass muster, so I don't feel I can take him on."

RICHARD K. DOUD: This was a real problem?

CLARENCE H. CARTER: That was a problem, yes. And I was very emphatic about it, that the work was the first consideration. And they went as far at times as to say, “Well, if you value your position as director of the project, you’ll take this person on.” Which didn’t bother me at all because I knew where they would be if they carried through with it. Well then one day I was approached that they wanted a grievance committee meeting with me, that they had formed a committee to meet with me. I said, “Who’s on your committee?” And the first person they mentioned was my old friend Jacobs, that I had refused to take the directorship until he was out of the picture. I said, “Well, I’m very sorry but he doesn’t represent the project; I will not meet with the committee as long as he is on the committee.” They said, “Well, he is a member of the union, still a member of the union and the members have willed it so.” They were using pressure terms in those days that the unions had developed, that the will of the membership was law. So I stood fast on that. So as an alternative they put Edris Eckert on the committee. Well, that was all right with me because I knew that Edris’ sympathies were that people who were doing the work were the ones who should be given consideration. She was in full accord with my reasoning. So then we got that settled. They said, “Well, when will we meet?” And I said, ‘Well, I’ll be here half an hour at my lunch time,” realizing that that period of time meant more to them than it did to me because a half hour was about all I devoted to my lunches anyhow. We had one meeting and it turned out that I was telling them what I felt they should do for the good of the project rather than what they were telling me I should do in relation to the union, because they knew they’d seen it come out in the meeting that I had been doing all that I could possibly do, humanly do, for the good of everybody, and the good of the life of the project. In that space of time the whole picture changed. Picketing had stopped. We had an exhibition opening and they were handing out handbills at the entrance-way. I immediately put a stop to that. And the whole atmosphere changed to the extent that Henry Hunt Clark, the Director of the Art School, William Milliken would come down and the patrons of the arts would come down. They started buying pictures from the artists on their own, which was certainly giving the project a greater standing in the community. Then the press became interested. They gave us large spreads in the papers--the Plaindealer and the News and the press all covered us just as they would cover the Museum or any other art function in town, and many reproductions. So that we were able to have a considerable standing in the community. The caliber of the work went up. I didn’t allow anything to go out into the schools or the libraries that I didn’t feel was the very best that they could produce. I became vitally interested in the Index of American Design because I felt that that was something that the United States had never had. We had no particular record of our arts and crafts of the past and it should be recorded. All other nations had had greater pride in their past culture than we had. So I took on a number of people that weren’t creatively gifted but were excellent craftsmen and some of them were able to build into good craftsmen. They had the ability to do it but just hadn’t had the chance to have the training. Joyce Mahalich who was one of the teachers at the Art School was let out of his position as head of the design department when a new director had been brought in. I made him, put him in charge of the Index of Design. We had also a past teacher who was head of the sculpture department, Alexander Blazes. And nobody could accuse me at any time of playing favoritism to anybody, because he had been a teacher at the Art School and a very respected person, one of his large statues is outside the Cleveland Museum of Art now. When he first came in he started hanging his hat and coat in my closet in my office. I said, “I’m sorry, Mr. Blazes, but you’re going to have to put your hat and coat with the rest of the people on the project.” I said, “We have no special interests in this project and you’re going to have to adapt yourself to being one of the members of the project.” Edris Eckert was quite upset when he was taken on because he had been her teacher and she had looked up to this great sculptor. She said, “What are we going to do?” She said, “He would never work with the rest of the students at the art school; he had his own studio and wouldn’t even let us come in to see what he was doing.” I said, “Well, I’m very sorry, Edris, but he’s going to be one of you and if he can’t be, he just can’t be on the project.” Well, it turned out that something was wrong along the line, I don’t know just what it was, but he contributed less than anybody else that had ever been in the sculpture department, because it was a strong division. There were very good men and women in that department. They knew their business and they fired their own glazes and it was a very proficient part of the project, and a department we were very strong in, and our work went all over the United States because of its value. Finally it got to the place I could see no alternative except to lay him off. It was almost pathetic what he had done. I realized then why the Art School had gotten rid of him. And I still to this day don’t know how he had built up such a great reputation in Cleveland; it was tremendous. Well then, the thing went along, kept developing, the people took pride in their work. In another period we had to lay off and one of the boys thought he would challenge me when Mr. Glassgold came over from Washington to look over the project. He was in the Index of American Design working with Constance Rourke. We were going through the print division and this boy said, “Mr. Carter, why did you lay me off?” I shot back, “Because your work is so rotten.” Well, that was unheard of in the early days because you just didn’t tell a man his work was rotten, but there’s no coming back on the straight answer. It bothered him to the extent that several people said that he had threatened to shoot me. There was a period of time that I would take my lunch to the project, both to give me more time to attend to business and also in case I was kept in my office – as had happened on the New York project – so that I would at least have food. The thing went through so that work was improving, our relationship with the City was exceptionally good. Hugo Valgo, who was then Director of Public Buildings and Parks used our work a great deal and was so appreciative of the work we did that he inscribed several handsome books to me, appreciating the things that we had done. I was put on Mayor Burton’s committees, a civic committee, and for planning works of art for the City. So that we built up quite a prestige. Well, Russell Flint was quite bothered because he realized that the union wasn’t actually

contributing anything. So he came to me one day and he said, “Clarence, I’d like to make a sketching trip down the Ohio River in a houseboat; would you approve that?” I said, “Surely.” But I said, “When you cross over the state line, you wire me that you have done so and then you will be severed from the payroll of the project.” Well, that was a very good face-saving for him and he stuck to his promise. As soon as he passed the Indiana line going down the Ohio he wired me and said, “I have now passed the Indiana line.” So automatically he was laid off the project. After a certain length of time he came back as a visitor and he said, “Well, I must say the project was never any thing like this when the union was active.” So the union was non-existent from then on. Well then I was offered a position at Carnegie Tech. They called me up, the head of the art department, and wanted to know if I would be interested in coming down. At that time I didn’t realize that Carnegie Tech had an art department. Their painting department, painting and design section, was not up to what they thought it should be, they wanted me to come in and build it up because, they said, they had followed what I had done in building up the Federal Art Project and would like me to do the same thing for Carnegie Tech, which I did. Well, then it came time to try and find somebody to take my place. There were plenty of applicants but it just didn’t seem that anybody would fill the bill. Mrs. Cooper worked hard on it. It even came to the point where they felt they would have to take on a business director and an art director, dividing my job between two people. Finally they hit upon having Earl Neff . He seemed like a pretty level-headed person and a person who would have the interests of the project at heart. I had a letter from him about two months after I had gotten to Carnegie Tech telling me what a terrible condition the project was back in, that they were tearing the murals off the wall so that they would have space to paint more murals. And he was being harassed by the unions and they were coming in like rats to a sinking ship—

RICHARD K. DOUD: Sounds like old times—

CLARENCE H. CARTER: —and the thing was right back to where it started.

RICHARD K. DOUD: When was this that you went to Carnegie?

CLARENCE H. CARTER: I went to Carnegie Tech in ‘38.

RICHARD K. DOUD: So you were only on the project – what? – about a year and a half?

CLARENCE H. CARTER: About a year and a half.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Well, you mentioned local – I suppose local – politicians asking would you appoint certain people to the project. Was this the only political trouble you had during the ‘30s? Were there any pressures of any kind to do certain types of work or certain projects?

CLARENCE H. CARTER: No. No, we were given free rein. Washington seemed to be happy with what was coming out of our project. Constance Rourke was very pleased with the Index work we were doing. She even came over and discussed the possibility of making a giant portfolio of the things and maybe having it printed on our project because we had a lithographic division. It was set up and there was some mind in Washington that felt that we should eliminate the lithographers entirely because they were not creative artists. But I fought to keep the men on because they were able craftsmen and the lithographic business was folding up and they would be very hard hit because most of them were men that were trained in that field alone and they had devoted all their life to it. And I was finding ways that they could stay on. We had been given a large lithographic press and they started making lithographs or some of the best works of art that were being produced—some of the things that William Summer had done, who was one of the outstanding artists of Cleveland and I think not appreciated nationally the way the man should be; Charles Campbell, who was a very able person, we did some of his things. And we did maps. We did the map for the Tercentenary or something of the State of—I don’t know just what it was. But they were working hard all the time and contributing a great deal. Well, it was because of the work we were doing in that way that they thought maybe it was possible we might even make these giant portfolios of the Index. But the thing didn’t last long enough to go into that.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Well, did you have any social problems: I’m thinking in terms specifically of a discussion I had with a lady who was on the Virginia project, and also a Negro artist in Delaware who I talked with, where there was a certain amount of racial discrimination, not on the project, but in the community where it affect ed the project?

CLARENCE H. CARTER: No. No, Cleveland at that time was very liberal. They may be having their problems now--racial problems--but then there was none. We had some very good colored men on the project; a man by the name of Sallay who did some very nice things for me. And we, of course, had many Hungarians on the project, Cleveland being a very strong Hungarian community, to the point I called it the Hungarian Project. It was an international thing: Sicilians, Italians, Croatians. It was pretty much a cosmopolitan thing. Everybody worked together extremely well. With the union out, they stuck to their business and everybody got along beautifully. There was a German on the project who was my muscle man. He was a big burly fellow. And that was one of the great criticisms the union had because I kept Earl Schuler on, but I needed somebody. For instance, one day I

laid off a Sicilian and I was talking to Fred Rentschler who was head of the lithographic division and my back was to the entrance-way, he was facing the entrance-way, we were discussing some problem. All of a sudden he went completely white, bleached, and his eyes seemed to be frozen on something over my shoulder. So I turned around to see what it was and it was the Sicilian coming after me to stab me in the back. So I just turned around and looked him in the eye. I said, “Well, you were one of the first I was going to take on when I had some additions to the quota, but now you have spoiled your chances.” In going out he sliced the monk’s cloth in the exhibition gallery. I didn’t have that problem following me; but then there was another Sicilian named Jerry, who I trusted very much, who was a very good person on the Index. He carried a stiletto and if I had to go to visit some of the work that was being done at schools and libraries, he would usually drive me. It was either that Jerry would be protecting me with his stiletto, or Earl Schuler with his muscle. Earl was not one of the best artists and that’s where the union was a little bothered that I kept Earl on because of my saying that I would only keep on people who were tops. But I felt that I deserved some consideration as far as my own constitution was concerned.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Basically then the union was your biggest problem?

CLARENCE H. CARTER: It was my biggest problem. The next problem was the change of procedure of operating the project. For instance, one year it was changed six different times, and you can imagine running a business on that basis.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Well, what do you think of the WPA projects as a whole? Looking back, were they the answer?

CLARENCE H. CARTER: I think they were the only answer. I don’t know what the artists would have done. I think it was very fortunate that there was an administration that was aware of the arts. We could have had an administration that had no interest in the arts and the suffering would have been almost tragic because many of the artists that cut their eyeteeth on the project are still some of our top artists today: Stuart Davis, William Zorach, Ben Shahn, so many—Lewis Guglioni, Jack Levine, Rafael Soyer—I mean you could just go on naming people. Some of them did their best work at that period, and they are still known for it. There was an exhibition circulated by the Museum of Modern Art, that was first exhibited at the Museum, on the American Scene between the wars, and they stressed the point that a number of the artists in that exhibition did these works on the Federal art projects.

RICHARD K. DOUD: So if it hadn’t been for that, we might not have had a lot of our present-day painters?

CLARENCE H. CARTER: That’s right. We probably would have been years behind where we are today.

[END OF TAPE 1 – SIDE 1]

[TAPE 1 - SIDE 2]

RICHARD K. DOUD: I want to ask you about some of the projects you had in Ohio. You mentioned the Index of American Design and how well it was accepted, and some of your easel projects and this sort of thing and I was wondering about art classes, if you set up art classes or if you personally organized exhibitions, or how did you handle details like this?

CLARENCE H. CARTER: We didn’t have any art classes at all. We were interested in just the production of art. As far as your second question, I would say it was a second question—

RICHARD K. DOUD: Consider it the second question.

CLARENCE H. CARTER: We were interested in giving the schools things that were more or less educational and things that would fit into the school curricula. For instance, we did the ceramics, and they always, usually dealt with some—most of them were sets, dealing with some story, some well-known thing like Alice in Wonderland, or famous characters from literature like that. We did a Dickens series. We did posters that would be for certain activities that the City was having, they were having fund drives and things like that. We made posters for our own exhibits. I’m sorry I don’t have some of those here. You should have those. They’re over at the College, because I was having a poster problem. But we
did some very handsome posters, silk-screen, we had a very good silk-screen department.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Well now, was part of your job as director deciding the type of project as well as the people who were working on it?

CLARENCE H. CARTER: Yes.

RICHARD K. DOUD: You organized what was to be done and…?

CLARENCE H. CARTER: Everything came through me. If there was any request that was coming from the schools

and the city or from a library, it had to clear through me, and if it seemed like a good logical request I would grant it. If it seemed to be a thing that was not very well thought through and had no reason for being, then of course we just let it be known that we couldn't carry through with their request.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Well now, you painted some murals at the same time you were director of the project. Is that right? You were painting in a Treasury Department competition...?

CLARENCE H. CARTER: That was right.

RICHARD K. DOUD: While you were a WPA director? Was there any conflict of interest or...?

CLARENCE H. CARTER: Well, this is something I failed to bring out before is that I had two stipulations: not having Jacobs on the project was one. I may have stressed that out of proportion to its importance. The second was just as important. That was that I would take the project on if I would have only three days on the project. Of course, there was a great deal of reaction there also, because every director in the United States was giving a full five days to the project. And I was paid on the basis of five days but I was working three days. Every time there was a change in the business procedure that would always come up: How come Clarence Carter in Cleveland is only giving three days? They would warn me to go on five days. The whole thing would go from Columbus on to Washington and then back again with my emphatic, "No, I will not be director any longer if I have to be on the project five days." When I went to Carnegie Tech that was a stipulation. When the head of the department, Wilford Radio came to Cleveland to interview me, I let two things be known: one was that I had to have three free days of my own, that I would only teach three days, that they had to be consecutive days, not broken days; for instance, a half day one day, and half a day another day; but I was the only teacher in the department that that consideration was given to also, because I was very emphatic that I needed consecutive days to create. So in those creative days that I was not directing the project I pretended that I was not even there, and I had nothing to do with the project. I painted my murals in that time.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Who do you think of as the outstanding artists who developed, say, under you during your term as director in Ohio? Who are the people that come to mind?

CLARENCE H. CARTER: Well, I don't think that we can say that anybody was developed under my direction, because the people that were outstanding that came to the project were that before they came on. There were no new names added, like there was on the New York project. Their names did grow and names did develop. But William Summers, for instance, was, I would say, in his seventies or eighties when he was on the project. He was an elderly man then. Bill was a heavy drinker and he would come to the project pretty well loaded, and if he wasn't loaded when he came, he would get loaded before he went back home. So Mrs. Summers said, "Please don't give Bill his pay when he comes in to get it; send it to me, be cause he doesn't get home with very much; he stops at the bar and he is in no condition to come home." So I instructed the paymaster and my secretary to be very cagey about it when Bill came in because he was easily offended. Evelyn Clay was the coordinator of the projects in Cleveland and a very able person and a very delightful person. I called her in one day to help me because Bill Summers was very fond of Evelyn. When I had taken on Mary Zampino she was not aware of this thing; I had not instructed her. Bill came in one day asking for his check. She gave it to him before I realized what had happened, before I had had a chance to instruct her as I had Johnny Sago, not to give him his check. Well, the only thing left for me to do was to try and entertain Bill the rest of the day until he got home, make it so that he couldn't spend any time until it was time to get on his bus to get back to the place where he lived, which I think was called Brandywine, which was a few miles outside or Cleveland. First we went down and looked at a painting of mine that I knew he was very fond of, old Ezra Davenport, a farmer that I had painted when we were first married and living on a farm in New York State outside of Elmira. It was in the Carnegie International and was very much publicized. Bill Summers was very fond of that painting so I said, "Bill, why don't we go down and see Old Ezra today?" Bill sanctioned that. So he stood in front of it and talked about it a while till that ran out. And Evelyn said, "Well, why don't we go over to the Theatre project," because she knew he loved to recite Shakespeare. So we went over to the Theatre project. She gathered some of the people there around and we got Bill to reciting Shakespeare. And he was just having a wonderful time and he was very emphatic with his gesturing. All of a sudden he stopped in the middle of it and turned and looked at both of us and he said, "I know what you two are up to, you're trying to keep me from getting drunk." And he was so direct it took us both off our feet. But we were able to get him down to his bus and get him home with his paycheck. One day he arrived pretty well fixed before he got there. We ate at various places in the area. There were a number of good eating places. One place was in the basement and it was in the winter time and it was rather warm. We weren't conscious that Bill had tied it on very much until we got down there and the heat seemed to have brought it out. So he was determined he was going to stand up. The place was crowded, it was quite large, and he was determined he was going to stand up and tell everybody in the dining room all about me, that he was going to eulogize me. Somehow or other he always seemed to think a great deal of me and my work. And I had an awful time sitting on him and pulling him down because nothing would be more embarrassing then to have Bill stand up and start talking about me. Well then he had forgotten his knife, it was cafeteria-style, and when he went around to get his food I guess he wasn't seeing everything together and he had forgotten his knife. And all of a

sudden he jumped up and started across the room. I wondered what was wrong, well he came back with his knife, and he was very unsteady on his feet, and he was lunging first one way, then the other, and there was more screams and darting in the dining room than I have ever seen. I don know, maybe I've gotten off the track here. What was, what caused this?

RICHARD K. DOUD: Well, the discussion was about the more notable people who worked with you or for you...

CLARENCE H. CARTER: Well, Bill had a—they had a show of his things in the Cleveland Museum of Art. They put out a very handsome catalogue. Bill always wanted to give me some of his work, he felt that I should have it, but I very carefully never accepted anything from anybody on the project. I very much would like to have had some, I couldn't afford to purchase any, but I made that a very tight rule for myself that I accepted nothing from nobody.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Well, what about some of the sculptors? You mentioned before you were doing ceramic things...

CLARENCE H. CARTER: Well, I would say they were good. They were probably kept alive and, for instance, Edris Eckert is one of the leading ceramicists in the country. She lectures almost everywhere on the subject of ceramic-making; writes articles. But Edris was a good person before she was in the project; it was a case of keeping her in trim. The same way with Bill Summers and some of the others. But I would say that there was nobody that actually was made on the project. Some of the fellows that I trained to do Index work were good craftsmen but they were not in the caliber of Bill Summers and some of the other people that were creative, and we actually didn't have too many outstanding people on the project. Wilson Flint was quite good. He won a number of prizes around the Cleveland area but they are not nationally-known people at all. As I say, Bill Summers should be better known than he is, but he isn't even known to that extent.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Well, I have one more question for you. You may not want to answer it, or you may not think it is important. I think you're in a good position to have an opinion on it. Do you think that there is a need for federal aid to the creative individual today? Do you think the government is doing enough, or could do more, or should do more for...?

CLARENCE H. CARTER: As far as I know the government isn't doing anything today and I think it's very healthy that they're not. I think I showed you a letter in which I wrote my opposition to the Magazine of Art a number of years ago when the Pepper Bill was being considered. I remember Charles Burchfield wrote in opposition also in the same issue. My feeling is that it's healthier if you can keep the government out of art. It's a stopgap at its best, because it becomes a political ball then. And whoever is in power can slant the thing towards what ever school of thought he is the most interested in. As soon as you get politics mixed with art I think it's disastrous. Of course, it's nice to be able to feel that the arts are being sponsored, but I feel that today there is enough interest in the arts, enough private collecting, that if a person has the ability he's going to make out all right.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Well, this might lead to something that we have sort of touched on before. Do you think that art schools are doing an adequate job of training an individual who may have the interest and the potential? Do you think he is able to get what he needs to really develop?

CLARENCE H. CARTER: Well there again I think it would depend on the policy of the school. In most cases I feel that it does not. I feel that the artists that are teaching are hired because they are fairly well-known in the certain period that they're painting and they are trying to more or less build up their own individual interpretation of what they feel is best. And, as you know, art is ever changing. During the period of Abstract Expressionism I know a lot of the students were fed that and it was an easy way to teach, because it didn't involve the instructor to any great extent. And he didn't have to slave with them in getting the thing so that it was what you might say, in the past, well-drawn, looked down upon perspective—it was pooh-poohed at; a well-drawn figure was frowned upon. But, as I say, things change. We may get into a period when a well-conceived, well-drawn piece is the prime direction. Well then, if that's the prime direction then the person who has been schooled in another idiom is going to be lost. I don't feel that most schools are training for the future; they aren't—they are training for the moment. And also they are not training for the eventuality that there are all sorts of things that people that they're teaching can go in to, they are not giving them a broad enough foundation.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Well, don't you think that maybe someone might consider that the best artist is not necessarily the best teacher? Do you feel that perhaps there is too much emphasis placed on the well-known artist...?

CLARENCE H. CARTER: The name-artist teaching?

RICHARD K. DOUD: Yes.

CLARENCE H. CARTER: Well, I think that's true. Some artists, I don't think, are just—they aren't capable of teaching. For instance, Charlie Burchfield from all I gather – while I admire his work, and always have very much – he just isn't equipped to teach. The fact of the matter is he freezes up, he's as nervous as he can be before he goes into a class. I've heard that. But then there are top names that are excellent teachers. It's all in the equipment of the person. But I think largely the person who is an intensively creative person himself his main thought is himself and he doesn't want to exert himself to any great extent, go out o his way. While a person who is not a top artist can get wrapped up in what his students are doing and maybe transmit some of his enthusiasm and some of his hopes and wishes of becoming a top-flight artist into some of his students, inject them with something he didn't have himself.

RICHARD K. DOUD: A vicarious situation where he might...?

CLARENCE H. CARTER: Yes.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Well, I think that's a good answer. I think it's been a good discussion. I want to thank you very much for your time and thought.

CLARENCE H. CARTER: Well, it's certainly been a pleasure being with you and having an opportunity to go over this and review some of these things.

RICHARD K. DOUD: The pleasure is mine and I'm sure it's going to be of great benefit. I want to thank you again.

CLARENCE H. CARTER: Well, thank you and I hope it has been of some value.

END OF INTERVIEW

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