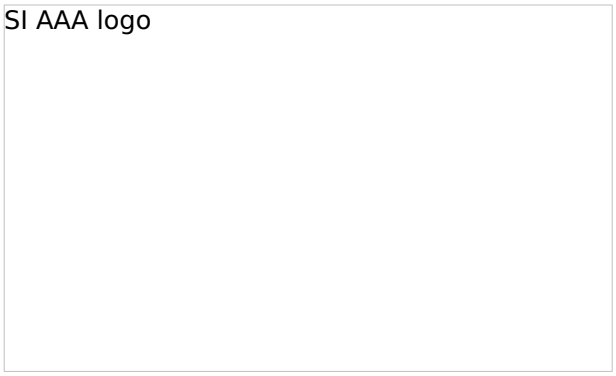

Oral history interview with Leroy W. Flint, 1965 June 4

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Transcript

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Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Leroy Walter Flint on June 4, 196. The interview took place at the Akron Art Institute, 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 some of the interview led to some words being inaudible; however, the original transcript was used to clarify some names and words. These names and words are given an –Ed. attribution. The original transcript was edited. In 2022 the Archives created a more verbatim transcript. Additional information from the original transcript that seemed relevant was also added in brackets and given an –Ed. attribution. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I think by way of a beginning, perhaps it might be wise of you to give some comment of yourself on the '20s.

LEROY FLINT: In the '20s?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: In the '20s.

LEROY FLINT: Well, in the '20s I was—late '20s I was just out of high school.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

LEROY FLINT: I think it was '27 or something of the sort. And I worked several years before going to art school. I can't remember—I guess it was about six years, very nearly. It was 1933 I started in art school on a scholarship. Managed to stay in for four years on scholarship. Otherwise, I wouldn't have been able to stay in. Working in restaurants and—as a short-order cook, and waiting tables, and doing anything under the sun to manage to eat, you see?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

LEROY FLINT: [Inaudible.] After I got out of art school it was '37, around there. And the Art Project had—I don't have any idea how long it had been set up in Cleveland prior to that time. I was aware of it, but I don't remember when I was first aware of it.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEROY FLINT: But it was—at that time it was a considerably a free-wheeling sort of thing. At that time, as I recall it, in order to be eligible for the Art Project one had to demonstrate certain abilities. And it was not a requirement that one had to be on relief at that time. It was not a—it was not a relief agency—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEROY FLINT: —as I recall. And I had had some success in local exhibitions and competitive exhibitions as of—even before I graduated from art school, and was beginning to be collected a bit on a local basis, especially in—for my prints. I had gotten into some print-making and was doing engravings. One of the things that they apparently along about that time were setting up in the—on the Art Project in Cleveland was a print department—a print section. And they asked me if I wasn't working—as I say, I was a short-order cook in a dining-car [laughs] at the time, in order to live and was trying to print and make some prints. And they asked me whether I would like to join this print section of the WPA Project. Fine, it was much more fun than what I was doing.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEROY FLINT: And it seemed to me like a chance to get a lot more work done than I was able to do, even on the basis of being able to afford the materials to work with. So, I can't remember the date that I joined the Project, but I was on it for—it may have been close to two years, 18 months, somewhere around in there, as I recall. One of the things that developed as I continued to work—I had always had a number of interests, primarily in the water. I was raised along the lake and one of the things that I had always wanted to do was to spend some time on the Ohio and/or the Mississippi River.

[00:05:12]

And one of the things that I began to talk about, after I'd been with the Project for, I suppose around a year, [inaudible] might be interesting to go down along the river and do a series of prints. The things that I did myself were sort of semi-caricature, sort of thing. And like so many other artists of that—especially the younger artists of that time, there was an element of social comment in it about, you know, some of the social problems we were all facing at that time.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LEROY FLINT: And I wrangled permission of the Project brass to go down around the Ohio River and make a series of lithographs. And I didn't have any equipment down there, of course, for making the—making the prints. But we—I used transfer paper, and I worked on transfer paper and then mailed the things back to the Cleveland Project. And of course, they had a group of pretty good printers there working as part of the Project, a couple of old-time lithographers who were doing the printing for all the lithographs in that section. So, I sent things back.

That was a very—to me, a very rewarding and exciting part of the thing. Then I got so interested in the river that I decided to go on down. But at the time that I became—at the time I got out of Ohio I was no longer eligible [laughs] to be on the WPA in Ohio. So, at the time I crossed the Ohio border I severed my connection with WPA, and went on down the river. We sort of made a—lived on the land [laughs] almost any way you could. Spent some time as a deckhand on the dredge, and all kinds of things.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LEROY FLINT: And the farmers had a bad time with us. But I spent a year—about a year and a half on the two rivers.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Oh, boy.

LEROY FLINT: Just bumming along, you know, and making a lot of drawings and sketches, a lot of notes. And I had in mind to do a book. Unfortunately, about the time I completed my tour, Tom Benton [ph] published his book [laughs] on the Mississippi [laughs], and that killed it. I sometimes think mine might have been better than his but.

But after that I went over and spent some time in Alabama. And then eventually got back to Cleveland. And this would have been late '39 probably, or [inaudible]. And I was pretty busted. At that time of course it was necessary to be on relief to get on, and it was no problem. [Laughs.] I was a—I was a client at that time. So, I got back on the Art Project, and then did a number of murals, a couple of them in sculpture, and one painted one before the Metropolitan Housing Authority, one sculpture and one painted. And I kept—continued to make some prints, but not as many because the mural thing was a pretty big project. And I was finishing the last of the murals when the war broke. And I was about in the middle of it. And they got me a couple of deferments to keep my out of the army long enough to finish it. But as soon as I finished the mural then the army got me [laughs]. That was about the end of my WPA career.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LEROY FLINT: Of course. And that's roughly my biography—or autobiography as far as the WPA program is concerned.

[00:10:01]

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Was their art in the family? Are you an extension of a family gene in a way?

LEROY FLINT: Well, in the sense my father was a frustrated artist. He had talent and ability but never trained.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEROY FLINT: And it was largely his encouragement and frustration of his own drives that got me into it. But we had—we were not people of means. And so I, as I say, had to work a few years before I got to art school, and may not have gotten there when I did had it not been for a scholarship. I got into a competitive situation. It was when the—right after the Cleveland stadium was built. And they formed a corporation to produce opera in the summertime in the Cleveland stadium.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEROY FLINT: And as part of their promotion, they gave a number of scholarships, I think two in music and one in art. And I got the art one, which got me into art school. And then I managed to stay there on a—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LEROY FLINT: —scholarship of one kind of another, part of the time working scholarship, and part of the time free.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: So, art was something that was receptive in the family? It wasn't an alien thing?

LEROY FLINT: No.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LEROY FLINT: No, it wasn't [inaudible].

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Were there any teachers along the way that kicked open a window in terms of vision and scene and—

LEROY FLINT: A number of them [inaudible].

HARLAN PHILLIPS: [Inaudible.]

LEROY FLINT: Yeah. Well, perhaps one of the most important ones is Paul Travis. He was pretty well known in the Cleveland area. And I suppose if it hadn't been—I think he, probably more than any other single teacher, did more for me personally. I had him in my last years and I was somewhat rebellious against the—sort of the standard operating procedure in the Cleveland school, and developed quite a feud with Henry Keller, who was the grand old man of the Cleveland school at that time. In fact, he kicked me out of all of his classes [laughs]. He wouldn't let me attend them, merely because I argued with him. And it was Paul Travis and Bill Eastman who managed to somehow keep me in school by agreeing to act as very close counselors and to keep me working.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEROY FLINT: And that wasn't too much of a problem because I was—I was—I worked hard in those days. I did an awful lot in addition to regular assignments, and at that time had already had some success, won some awards in regional competitive show—the [May Show –Ed.] up there at the museum. So, I got away with my rebellion, but it was largely through—I think, as a result of these two people. I was very fond of Frank Wilcox. He did a lot for me. He was a great technician and had a wonderful sensitivity to nature, which I found, I was—to which I was very receptive because I was much interested in that myself—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEROY FLINT: —at the time. So, I think these are the three people who had most to do with my formative years in the field of art. I got interested in the printmaking largely through [Carmine Cootney –Ed.], who was [inaudible]—when I took a [inaudible]—it was an extracurricular course they had at that time at a place down called the Print Mart. And Carmine's brother was managing the thing. And there was a little place where they sold—it was a little gallery, so to speak. And they had evening courses for anyone who was interested in print making. And while I was still in art school—the art school had no print department at that time, but I was interested in it, went down and took a—I think just one course with Carmine, which got me started with the medium and the materials. And from then on I worked quite extensively myself [inaudible] in

that direction. It was a—I liked it.

[00:15:10]

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Is there—is there a—I mean, retrospectively, is there a religious theme running through this?

LEROY FLINT: Not in my case. No religious theme. My prints are—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: That in itself is a theme. [Laughs.]

LEROY FLINT: No, my prints had—generally were somewhat satirical, I suppose. I was very—at that time of course most impressed with Goya and Lautrec and men of that ilk because—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: This is wit of a graver kind.

LEROY FLINT: Yes, I suppose. [Harlan Phillips laughs.] Though some of mine, I suppose, could be classed as fun because they're humorous.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LEROY FLINT: But maybe with a needle in it, I suppose.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: The stiletto type.

LEROY FLINT: Yeah.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah. Is this also something that, you know, is a—is an ongoing thing as far as the family was concerned?

LEROY FLINT: No, I don't think so. No, as far as the family was concerned. No. My father was a very conservative sort.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Was he?

LEROY FLINT: Oh, yes. He was a—grew up on a farm, went into the hardware business as a young man working for one of the hardware stores in the town, and remained there. Never—you know, he never got much more than to be just manager of the store.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, did he find that [inaudible] your fun, your humorous cartoon acceptable?

LEROY FLINT: Oh, yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: In other words, he [inaudible] with it too?

LEROY FLINT: Well, he would—he had no problem with—maybe I—maybe I'm wrong here. Because one of his earlier experiences as a—as a young man when he first came to Ashtabula was, he got a part-time job as a cartoonist on the local paper. This would have been back around 1906 or 1907, around—maybe earlier than that, but in that area, in the first—the first ten years. They weren't any good, but he was—he was one of the people on the paper who was given to thinking up rather—do you remember Abe Martin?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Oh, yes.

LEROY FLINT: Well, it was that type of thing.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Oh, yeah.

LEROY FLINT: The other fellow would think up of the gag and my father would do the cartoon.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LEROY FLINT: Well, this was—it was that sort of thing that he had done for a number of years.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, he must have looked upon your own development as a congenial thing, you know?

LEROY FLINT: Oh, yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LEROY FLINT: And he was—dad and mother practically starved themselves to help keep me in school. I was able to work for my meals. Strange that some of the kids you talk to today, you know, are—I used to work six hours a day just for three meals a day, you know?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LEROY FLINT: I thought I was luckier than thunder.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: You bet your life.

LEROY FLINT: And then Dad managed to keep a roof over my head by sending me what he could. But he had some financial reverses, along with everyone else at that time, and it wasn't easy.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: But I think it demonstrates, in a way, that action is a function of interest.

LEROY FLINT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HARLAN PHILLIPS: You projected into it. You just—

LEROY FLINT: Yeah.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: —can't stop.

LEROY FLINT: You know, there's no alternative.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: No.

LEROY FLINT: No alternative. You would keep doing what you can do.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, as you—as you went through school what was—what's the art market like in Cleveland as of this time?

LEROY FLINT: Well—Excuse me.

[Audio break.] [Telephone call. –Ed.]

HARLAN PHILLIPS: [Inaudible.] I had asked you about the—in a sense of what alternatives were available to you? You know, as you go through school where do you point? What's the sense of direction? What was the art market like in Cleveland?

[00:20:08]

LEROY FLINT: Oh. Well, like any other youngster, I suppose, I developed some prejudices when I went to school. I—it was my intention to get into commercial art of one kind or another. This was largely a matter of prompting on the part of my father who thought this was—this was a good business to get into. And it was his own interest. And it was about all I knew. I—the small town where I grew up there wasn't much opportunity to see Art with a capital A. So, I went to art school sort of with the notion that Normal Rockwell was it. And this was about the height of my ambition at that time. That was—so, I had every intention of majoring in commercial art and/or illustration, or something of the sort. And I did. I went through the two basic years, which are standard procedure. And then my junior year I undertook the major in illustration.

But along about that time I happened to see a couple of big shows and I ran into Picasso and Matisse and this was—you know, this was it. And so, I dropped out of the illustration commercial art section. And there was no section that they called fine arts at that time. The only thing that approached it was a portrait major, so I went into the portrait major with Frank Wilcox. But regular portrait painting was too commercial for me too. And so, I was not a very good portrait painter, but it gave me an opportunity to paint and to do a lot of—a lot of learning about what some of the more contemporary things were all about.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEROY FLINT: And at that time, I don't recall being particularly concerned about what I would do

[laughs] or how I would live. I had—from the time I was very young I had always worked, had a job of some sort from the time I started peddling papers at nine or 10 or something like this. So, it—and then my father was the kind of a man who worked with kids, that is we—both my brother and I developed a kind of self-confidence that we could do anything, because we could. We built some houses and we worked on them. And we could [inaudible] you know, when I was—before I was 12, you know, I could do a job of wiring or plumbing [inaudible] sort I had done. And so—and I had, you know, worked in the stores—in the drug stores and all that stuff. I had become a pretty good cook, I worked as a short-order cook. So, it just didn't worry me.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LEROY FLINT: You could always—you would always somehow get along, do something. And so, I don't—I don't—I don't remember being concerned about a living [laughs].

HARLAN PHILLIPS: No. From what you said you were looking for the salt and pepper to put on your steak [inaudible].

LEROY FLINT: That's right.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Because you already had your steak in the meantime, and you knew what it was to meet each day, pay the bills this sort of thing.

LEROY FLINT: Yeah.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: And the self-reliance [inaudible] added aesthetic thing.

LEROY FLINT: This is what I wanted. And it would have—wouldn't have been any problem to me to do anything, or to paint. This would have been—I figured if I want to do this badly enough then I'll do whatever is necessary to enable me to do it, you know.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Right.

[00:25:06]

LEROY FLINT: [Inaudible] very simple. Or at least it seemed simple at the time. And of course, I wasn't—there were a lot of things that I wasn't able to foresee. But it was that kind of—that kind of—that may have been part of the time, too, you know. We didn't have—despite the Depression, we didn't have the fears that so many people seem to have today.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Right.

LEROY FLINT: Especially the young people.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: You knew how to roll your own, because you had to.

LEROY FLINT: Yeah. You know how to roll your own. And it would—it was quite possible to take off down the river with—you bought a—bought a houseboat for $50 and found for, $15 more, an old barge that had an old Whippet engine in it that wasn't running and we fixed that, you know, and got it to run and we'd push the houseboat. And when I came to the Ohio border I—we had—had this friend with me. He wasn't working either, you know. And I had the only income because [laughs] I was working for the WPA. We had $40 or something like this and we took off for the Mississippi. [Laughs.] No problem.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Right.

LEROY FLINT: And we went broke in Vicksburg. And that was sort of touch and go. But it was just a little illegal, I suppose, what we did. [Laughs.]

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Probably. Probably

LEROY FLINT: But I did—had been thinking about a book, you see. And so, as a couple of Northern boys in Vicksburg, Mississippi, in the Depression years, we didn't stand the chance of a snowball, you know.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: No. [Laughs.]

LEROY FLINT: But I had a—just happened to get an idea that—so we'd been all the way down the

Mississippi. We'd been seeing the U.S. engineers, the dredges, and work on the river constantly. And we got together a portfolio of my drawings I'd been working along the river, and went out to the engineer headquarters, which was in Vicksburg, asked to see the colonel. Showed him my drawings, told him I was working on this boat, and I had this—all this stuff on the river, but I didn't know anything about what the engineers were doing, and if I was going to do a book, they ought to be in it. And I needed to get some firsthand stuff. And I said I'd do anything. If he could give me a job, I'll go to work for a while with the engineers, you know, and just [inaudible] the stuff. And he put me to work the next morning. People standing in line that had been waiting for [laughs]—trying to get work.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: [Inaudible.]

LEROY FLINT: But I went to work on a dredge, as a deckhand. It was one of the—this was the kind of thing you did in those days.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah. Tell me this, in terms of content, what you were thinking about?

LEROY FLINT: In terms of content?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Content, yes. You said that you found the more conservative tradition not necessarily uncongenial, but it wasn't your cup of tea.

LEROY FLINT: Well, at that time, again, as it turned out it wasn't my cup of—this wasn't my cup of tea either. At that time, you're young and impressionable and somewhat concerned with the state of the world and things. Satire seemed to be the thing that interested me. And all of my work at that time was in that vein.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEROY FLINT: As long as I was working in prints and graphic arts it worked pretty well because I had, I suppose, you might say kind of a light touch. It was—it was semi-humorous. It wasn't heavy-handed. But I never was able to paint. I was the world's worst painter, I suppose.

[00:30:03]

And again, this is an area where I don't think I had—I wasn't looking very far ahead. It was, This is what you do today, and you do it hard, and you hit it hard and wish, well, tomorrow there'll be something else.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Right.

LEROY FLINT: So, it was not until I got out of the army that I began to paint seriously. And this was largely because I no longer had access to print-making equipment.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, did you do—was there reading that ran parallel with this?

LEROY FLINT: Oh, yes. I was quite interested in that at that time. And I was very much interested in some of the standard literature of the time. Along with a lot of other people, I'm sure, I read Marx and the political philosophy and a lot of that. I read a lot of the so-called debunking history and this sort of thing. It was part of—this also was part of the atmosphere. And —

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Sure, it was.

LEROY FLINT: —I did my share of it. Was active at that time in Cleveland doing the—during that second hitch—second hitch [on the Project –Ed.]. Actually, it began toward the end of my first hitch, before I went down river. They organized a union among the WPA.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

LEROY FLINT: And I was clear up to here in that. Didn't—after I went down river, I didn't pick it up again when I came back. Except as kind of a token [membership –Ed.], I sort of lost my—some of my illusions about unionism. And of course, some of the—some of the people involved in it were—they were a little far out for me.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah. But this too is part of the air.

LEROY FLINT: Oh, yes. This was part of the air.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LEROY FLINT: And I was very much a part of it for a while. But it very quickly ended for me. And I might have—had a number of things not happened, I might have been much more a part of it for a longer period of time.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEROY FLINT: But I came into conflict with a—my own work came into conflict with the political theories. They objected to satire, which, you know, I didn't make the poor suffering common man, you know, the victim necessarily, but he was often—he was—in my things he was sometimes at fault and he was sometimes ridiculous. He wasn't always a hero [inaudible]. And this pretty much soured me to begin with.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah, they could be quite arbitrary. That is, it wasn't free.

LEROY FLINT: No.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah [laughs]. Well, did you—did you have associations at the school with whom you could share these—you know, the kind of anti-conservative or ultra-conservative—

LEROY FLINT: At the school?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LEROY FLINT: Only one really. A young fellow that I roomed with for three of the years that I was there. That was Charlie Shannon. He was considerably young than I. Very bright and a young man with tremendous ability.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEROY FLINT: Real talent. And the two of us, I think, were—we were very close. We went everywhere and did everything together in that period while I was in school. This did not carry over into the WPA days because he went back home, which was down south. But he was very much a part of my experience while I was in school.

[00:35:27]

HARLAN PHILLIPS: So, it wasn't really, in a sense, a loner?

LEROY FLINT: No.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: There was—

LEROY FLINT: I—in fact, we were sort of the nucleus of a few satellites. Not a great number, but a few.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: [Laughs.] I guess—I guess—

LEROY FLINT: [Inaudible.]

HARLAN PHILLIPS: —in the early '30s the impulse was to play it safe for many people.

LEROY FLINT: [Inaudible.]

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Although I suspect in looking back on it only the improbable worked, really.

LEROY FLINT: It really did.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah [laughs].

LEROY FLINT: It really was true.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah. Well, you then spent some time on the WPA. I wonder if you could staff it for me in terms of the—you know, the kind of relationship which you had to existing museums, museum people, the school system, if any?

LEROY FLINT: Well, I'm not sure that this far away from it I'm going to be completely accurate. There may be some flaws in my memory. But as I recall when I first joined the WPA—I think I said earlier that you didn't have to be on relief. You didn't have to be a relief client in order to be eligible You did have to demonstrate some mobility. As I recall they had a committee of people who were knowledgeable in the community and knowledgeable about art. And they were actually a selection committee. They—somehow the administrative powers that be of WPA had set this committee up. They were—they were volunteers.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEROY FLINT: And applicants for WPA had to be approved by this committee to get onto the Art Project. And the committee's approval was based on their knowledge of the person and his or her work, whether they believed that they were capable of performing on a professional level. And it was at that time there was a real serious attempt to keep it a pretty high level professionally.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEROY FLINT: I can't remember all of the people that were on the committee. I remember it was [Mr. Milliken –Ed.], the director of the museum, was one of them. [He was a member of –Ed.] the advisory committee, and I suspect for as long as the WPA was active in Cleveland. Some of the faculty at the school, I'm sure, were part of it. There were a couple of businessmen. I think—I think there was a man named [Knudsen –Ed.], he was in one of the banks up there, [inaudible] very knowledgeable about art. He was a businessman [who was on the committee –Ed.]. I can't remember who else.

And this committee had to approve candidates. And actually, until the law was changed one had to be a relief client to get on. At that point there were quite a few characters dumped by the Art Project because then they were taken because they had listed this as their field. And they may not have been very good. They may very well have been artists, but—you know, commercial artists of one kind of another, layout man or fill-in man on a table, but not necessarily a creative artist.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:39:58]

LEROY FLINT: But if they could show that and the fact that they were on relief, they got—began to be assigned arbitrarily to the to the Art Project. I think the quality of the—and the standards tended to go downhill considerably from then on.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEROY FLINT: On the other hand, they did manage—by keeping some of us on relief, they did manage to keep the—keep a nucleus of pretty good people in that Cleveland Project. So, there was always—there was always work of quality. There was a lot of junk too.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Did you have a supervisor in the print division?

LEROY FLINT: Yes. That was—that was [Carmine Cootney –Ed.]. He was the supervisor at that time.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: He was?

LEROY FLINT: Yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LEROY FLINT: In fact, he set that part of the Project up. He was without question the best print man in the Cleveland area at that time. And so, he was given the assignment of setting up the print section. It may even—I don't know, but it may even have been his idea that a print section would have some value.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LEROY FLINT: I don't—I don't know how many area projects of this time did have print sections. I know they did in Baltimore and New York because I remember seeing prints out of those areas, and Boston. But I don't know how many others there may have been in the country who had

print sections.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I don't know either. I think it varied, you know, depending on how—

LEROY FLINT: Depending a little bit on the people in the area—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Right.

LEROY FLINT: —whether they had the capable people there.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Right. Well, was there much going on in the Index of American Design, which —

LEROY FLINT: Yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: —you were aware of?

LEROY FLINT: Yes. That was—especially the first hitch. My second hitch, I don't—with the Project split up into several different places and as I got to working on these murals I was out on location, and I wasn't much aware of what was going on. But in that first period the whole Project was in a big, abandoned factory building. And they were building models of the city of Cleveland for the Great Lakes Exposition, and everything else. It was all being done in this one building.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEROY FLINT: So, we were very much aware of what was going on in other departments besides your own.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LEROY FLINT: But later on, I wasn't as aware because I wasn't there as much by virtue of what I was doing, wasn't around the Project itself. And so, I—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: As you look back on it, was it predominantly a youth Project?

LEROY FLINT: No, not by any means.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: That's interesting.

LEROY FLINT: At least not in the—I don't think at any time it was just a—just a youth project. I mentioned old Bill Sommer [ph], he was one of the oldest artists in the area. He was in his 70s. And there were—there were a lot of older men. I know all the lithographers, for instance, were older people. The printers.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEROY FLINT: There were a number of the older commercial artists—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEROY FLINT: —were [inaudible]. So, I wouldn't say it was just a youth thing.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I know I—

LEROY FLINT: There were—I would say maybe in that first—remembering all that was going on that was related to the Art Project that that time, youngsters like myself when I first was attached to the Project were definitely a minority. Not over a third of them were younger people at that time. Later I have a notion that there were more younger ones. This may be incorrect too. I can't—

[00:45:27]

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, I just came through Louisville and Cincinnati and their memory shows—or discloses, possibly because of the limited number of artists, that it was pretty much a youth movement. But, you know, this again depends upon the local area.

LEROY FLINT: It depends on just who's there. And in the beginning, of course, it depended a lot on—at least in Cleveland I think, the committee had a lot to do with it, because they [inaudible]

and attempted to maintain some standards—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEROY FLINT: —some professional standards. Which, as things went along, were no longer possible. It became impossible. But at least at that time they attempted to put people on—only people on who were—who had one way or another demonstrated their ability.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah. Well, when you—when you ran out of the jurisdiction, you know, this was on a—oh, most likely on a scholarship in a way because then you sent back material for a while. Did you continue to send back material to—

LEROY FLINT: Not after I got out of jurisdiction.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LEROY FLINT: It was at that time that I conceived the idea of doing a book for myself, so I saved it.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LEROY FLINT: So, I didn't continue to send things back. I don't know that they could legally have done anything with them if I had, you know.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah. Yeah.

LEROY FLINT: But—that is they couldn't have given their printer's time to it, I suppose, as much as I wasn't part of the Project.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LEROY FLINT: And they would have been useless to them just as drawings because they were on this highly ephemeral material which was chalk-coated paper, as made expressly for transferring lithograph drawing to the stone [to draw up later –Ed.].

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, when you—when you returned and after this [wander year –Ed.] down the river, this—what is it, gathering rosebuds of experience as you may [they laugh]—this is the first time the word mural—you mentioned the word mural. How much experience had you had in the mural design? I would think, in a way, it's a little bit different problem.

LEROY FLINT: Much different. And I had no experience that would justify it. The—that was almost the nature of the assignment.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

LEROY FLINT: That is, these mural assignments came out—as you—I'm sure you, recall any agency was tax-supported or partially tax-supported, or a nonprofit could get things from the WPA. They had to make a token—at least a token contribution. And I think it was essentially the materials used. And these mural things came up and you're just—there wasn't anybody [laughs] to do it. There weren't very many who were capable—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:50:02]

LEROY FLINT: —or had training, who could draw well enough to draw that size. So, I think that I got it merely because someone said, Well, gee, we got to have a mural and who can do it? And someone said, Would you like to try it? and I said, Sure. So, this is the way that happened. It was not that I had any particular—had any experience.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I think it's the greatest reason in the world for doing it. [They laugh.]

LEROY FLINT: It was great at the time.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LEROY FLINT: It was—to me it was a very valuable experience.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Did you have to submit sketches?

LEROY FLINT: Yes. Sketches, and in some cases a model. They're not the best murals in the world at this point, but I learned a lot.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Look, you have to leave the starting gate somehow. You just happened to get the opportunity to do a mural.

LEROY FLINT: That's it.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LEROY FLINT: And it was—it was great.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: What did you take for theme?

LEROY FLINT: Well, one of them was—on the outside it was a—it was a sculpture—the three-dimensional one was a relief sculpture.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

LEROY FLINT: Carried in ceramic tile.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Oh, boy.

LEROY FLINT: And that one I worked with the ceramic department to achieve. The—with—this was right overlooking an industrial area—I think right overlooking a valley.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEROY FLINT: And I took the industries—major industries as the theme that you could see from right there. And I used—of course there were people who worked in these industries, worked here. And so, I took these—the men who worked in steel mills, the rolling mills [ph], and the refineries, on the docks, and so on. And it was kind of a [inaudible] you know [inaudible].

The other one was—the painted one—the big one was painted. And that was up in—on the east side of Cleveland. And I took as the theme there nature and industry as work of man, that is nature of work, which produced things, and a central theme of—were just a bunch of typical people[who came down through the trees with a waterfall below –Ed.], just a lot of people ending up in a family, a man and a woman and a child surrounded by sort of industry on one side and nature on the other. Wild [ph].

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Tell me this. In submitting the sketches did you have difficulty getting them accepted? Was—

LEROY FLINT: No.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: No?

LEROY FLINT: No. I don't recall having any difficulty. They were—at least if your—if you—what you're scouting for—I take by your question, any question about the themes. And the only—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: But you know, I don't know, when you get a sponsor, whether it be a school or board of education there's always, seems to me, an art critic involved somewhere [laughs] who has a fixed view as to what art should be, put it that way. And he may take unkindly toward your way of presenting it or the—this has appeared time and time again where effort was made not to put a content corrective thumb on an artist's eyeballs, but nonetheless to somehow, some way appease the aesthetic sensitivity of some—oh, let's say one of Browning's [finite clubs –Ed.], who —

LEROY FLINT: Yeah.

[00:55:08]

HARLAN PHILLIPS: —expressed himself on the subject of art. This is what I meant, whether there was—

LEROY FLINT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HARLAN PHILLIPS: —you know.

LEROY FLINT: Well, I personally didn't seem to run into any of that.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

LEROY FLINT: As I say, there wasn't much bitterness in [my murals, you know –Ed.]. I wasn't very rough [inaudible] time. And I suppose this may be why I got away with it.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: What—was there—was there a man in charge of the mural division or someone?

LEROY FLINT: No. At that time, it was no longer—as I recall, it was no longer broken up into divisions, the way that it had been originally.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

LEROY FLINT: [Inaudible] second hitch. And there was just a director of the Project. And we were not—there was—it was much smaller, too. There weren't as many people involved at that time. And it was not as complex an organization. We didn't have heads of departments so to speak. Except in the technical sense. For instance, in ceramics—when I was doing the ceramic mural. I didn't know from anything about ceramics in the technical [inaudible], so everything I did I had to work with a knowledgeable person who was in charge of the ceramics and the kilns and someone who technically knew. But it wasn't quite in the sense of a supervisor as it had been originally.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Were there many visits in the Cleveland area from Washington?

LEROY FLINT: That I don't—I mean, I don't recall.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Eddie Cahill?

LEROY FLINT: One—I remember meeting Mr. Cahill once, just once. The person we saw most often, of course, was Charlotte Cooper [ph]. But she was state, I think, at least in the beginning. I don't know if she went to Washington eventually or not, but I don't think so.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: State director. Yeah.

LEROY FLINT: No, I wasn't much aware—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Of Washington.

LEROY FLINT: —of Washington at all. They [inaudible]. When the brass came up it didn't get down to me. [They laugh.]

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, I'm not sure that they had brass in the sense that brass is.

LEROY FLINT: No, I mean brass is what I—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LEROY FLINT: —[inaudible].

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LEROY FLINT: [Inaudible.]

HARLAN PHILLIPS: In your own work and thinking, how would you assess the contribution that the WPA made?

LEROY FLINT: Well, I think that looking at it from the vantage point of this distance, let's say my taste has probably gotten a little more sophisticated than it was in those days [laughs]. And I'm —[coughs] I'm apt to be, I suppose, more aware [inaudible], again because of my present research interests—I'm apt to be more critical. And I'm perhaps more aware of the weaknesses in some of the things that were done than I would have been at that time. On the other hand, I think that I can—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: [Inaudible.]

LEROY FLINT: —with a little effort, recall some things of real quality that occurred. And they wouldn't have occurred otherwise. Some of them even in this community. Because this was part of the Cleveland area apparently. I know some of us did work that came down here.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[01:00:17]

LEROY FLINT: A collection of my prints came down here, for instance. [Inaudible] there was—there were a couple of murals in the Board of Education building. Both very good, by very good people. One of them has since been covered up because it was in the boardroom and the board didn't like it. So [laughs]—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: It's been covered up?

LEROY FLINT: So, the—well, they attempted to take it off the wall and they were in the process of ruining in. And someone finally—and before they got too far. They pretty much destroyed one corner on it—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Oh.

LEROY FLINT: —trying to get it off the wall. And then someone—it occurred to someone to call me, and I went over and told them they better leave it there, and if they just couldn't live with it, they'd better cover it up. So, they put a false wall in front of it. So, it is hidden but it's not destroyed [laughs].

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I'll be darned.

LEROY FLINT: It's still there. Well, there were a lot of very fine things done. And there were quite a number of oldsters [inaudible] and Bill Sommer [ph], for instance, was an example, that was able to go on producing and existing in his later years. And he was very productive. That little rascal was a great painter, perhaps the greatest painter this area has ever produced. And if it hadn't been for the WPA I don't know what his later years would have been like. It would have been really rough on old Bill. He was—and boy, they say he was productive with paintings. He just turned them out. And in terms of the prices that his things are bringing these days, they got their money's worth really. And I think that—I like to think that I earned my way. And there were a lot of us that took this very seriously. And we—in the beginning of the thing there weren't—there weren't any hours required. There were none of the standards that they have set—this committee had set up arbitrarily a body of work—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Right.

LEROY FLINT: —that was acceptable as value received. This was in the first hitch. And then that began to change and it lead to a punch of a time clock [inaudible]. And in the beginning those of us who wanted to be artists really turned out the work, you know. The material was there and [inaudible] just—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: [Inaudible.]

LEROY FLINT: Yeah. It was wonderful. But then when they changed the rules this soured things just a little bit because it meant that you had to be on the spot there, you know, always so many hours a week. And that made it a little—a little less pleasant. But still most of the people with whom I was associated with—again, it was a welcomed opportunity to work, to have materials to work with, and you did it because this is what you wanted to do anyway. And the fact that you were getting paid for it—most of us hadn't been used to getting paid for it anyway. This was gravy. You know, this was wonderful.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: [Inaudible.]

LEROY FLINT: [Inaudible.] So there were quite a number of the younger people who I'd run into once in a while that were in faculties and universities and in art schools here and about who've turned into pretty good commercial artists. This kept them alive at the point when—and kept them alive in their field at a time where they could have turned into poor automobile salesmen or, you know, anything under the sun. They could have gotten sidetracked.

[01:05:03]

And I don't know whether it was a combination of the WPA and the war, which then put everybody in demand [laughs], maybe was what did it. But at least by the time the war started [they moved out of WPA into –Ed.] all kinds of things, into the army—a good many of us did. And the army was sort of a [hollow period –Ed.], I suppose, for quite a number of people. It was for me. I didn't do any work at all when I was in the army.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I guess it's—I guess it's after the war that art as an expression begins to explode in all kinds of ways.

LEROY FLINT: Well, I—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Pent up things.

LEROY FLINT: Yeah.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I think in some respect to the '30s people were in a way confined by the atmosphere and by the very process of being part of a collective group, to a kind of social criticism or social realism, and that this may have acted as a kind of a deterrent on creativity for some of them. I don't know. But it—you know, to be part of something larger than they themselves are is, in some ways, antithetical to being the unique individual artist that one would like to be. So, you become part of a movement, you know. And it wasn't until after the war that you began to—in a way to get individual signatures. Although in some cases some people had that carryover right through the WPA—

LEROY FLINT: Yes. There—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: [—although deeper roots before, like Stuart Davis –Ed.].

LEROY FLINT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, these are people who primarily—like old Bill Sommer, for instance, in this area, he had already found his. I mean he was an individual to begin with at the time.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEROY FLINT: We youngsters weren't. We were—we were pretty eclectic on all—I—you know, I'm sure, if we go back and see what we did. You were just sort of becoming aware of what art was all about. And the—there was a lot of eclecticism. A lot of experimentation.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: It was a free lunch counter in that sense.

LEROY FLINT: A lot of experimentation. A lot of—I know in the field of printmaking we developed a lot of unique, unorthodox approaches to the technical problems. These were—this was very much a part of our interest. I myself, and also in—when I got over in painting, technical problems were very much a part of the picture. And this wouldn't have been possible and probably wouldn't have been done if we had all been on our own. But with the group working together you somehow stimulated experimentation. And I developed—at that time got very much interested in some of the older painting processes like the temperas—the egg temperas, in the old manner. And this was pretty common, as I understand. Looking back at it now, in a number of the projects this occurred. It was at that time that a lot of experimental work was done at the Mellon Foundation. There was a project there experimenting with artists' media. And it was moving in the direction of standardizing contents and the statement of the contents. All this occurred back in that time. It was all stimulated by work that was done on the—on the projects. And that's been great. We're still—we're still reaping the benefits of that.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Sure.

LEROY FLINT: There are people like Bob Feller [ph] who's still working as a research chemist now. And the—and the organization of conservationists, which has—since the war, has become an international organization. And this [inaudible]—this was also stimulated by experimentation they made. And we're still using as research material the samples of different materials, the polymers and all these things that were beginning being developed at that time. The samples that were made on the roof of the Mellon Foundation are still being used. They're still, you know, important documentation—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Sure.

[01:10:03]

LEROY FLINT: —these materials. Well, that all begin there. I even—I even invented a medium myself. It was—this one mural was in a game room—a place they played basketball. And—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Let me turn this over.

[END OF TRACK AAA_flint65_8559_m.]

HARLAN PHILLIPS: You were commenting about a game room where they played basketball.

LEROY FLINT: Oh, you know, we had to figure out something to make a mural on that wall that would [laughs] take a beating.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Oh, yeah.

LEROY FLINT: And, well, I did—before going work on that thing, I did a lot of experimentation with the material on which the thing painted, and the ground and the media, to give us the kind of stability we had to have.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEROY FLINT: Wound up at a strange solution, but the mural's still there, and there's not a mark on it. We used—the thing was 13 feet high at its highest. It was an irregular shape, and it was about 13 feet high, and 20 feet long, I think. We used heavy celotex laminated to masonry on the surface, bolted to the wall with expansion bolts, so there was a bit of a cushion there. And I used [in the ground an emulsion based on casein and –Ed.] oil, and developed a medium that was, again, casein and varnish and oil, it harder than blazes. It had been getting hit with basketballs and tennis balls and it would leave a mark in the dust, but there were no scratches on there.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: [Inaudible.] That's interesting.

LEROY FLINT: But this kind of thing—it did go on, and I think it was an important function of the program, at—it did a lot to—I don't think there's any way—evaluating to what extent—well, as we've said, the—there was this eclecticism and a tendency to be interested in social realism and regionalism. This was all part of the philosophy of the time—at that time. But I still don't think there's any way of evaluating to what extent the kind of ferment that took place there was responsible for this burst—outburst of American art, following the war. I think that a lot of the seeds were planted in those WPA years and I question if we would have had anything like it. This thing that we've seen since the war. The dominance of American art over world art.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Sure.

LEROY FLINT: I don't think we'd have seen anything like it yet, had it not been for that. I really don't.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah, you know, a movement such as did occur after the war doesn't spring forward without some antecedent.

LEROY FLINT: That's right.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: And it's the antecedents are in varieties of thinking about how one goes about doing it [buzzing sound] even if the content is in keeping with an acceptable social realism of the day. It's the technique that's developed in terms of how.

LEROY FLINT: Excuse me.

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

HARLAN PHILLIPS: [Inaudible] the how becomes important in the '30s, leaving the what to be determined by the prevailing interests that developed after the war.

LEROY FLINT: Well, I think that it's more than just the how, because I think that the what entered into this a great deal, too. And it was part of this—part of the function of this eclecticism.

A lot of us learned at this time what art could be.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

[00:05:05]

LEROY FLINT: Not just in terms of technical problems, but in terms of content, in terms of why you paint a picture. Some of us got into this as relative youngsters. At that time, we were pretty naive. Part of our experience was thrown into association with older people and thrown—and then, in the challenge of the situation, it was new and unique and [inaudible] as I say, most of us felt pretty seriously. We—there was a lot of motivation to make discoveries, and not just technical discoveries. We'd get together and meet [in our rooms and get talking together –Ed.], [inaudible], who's going right now? And we had little means. We were able to even do a little traveling, you know. Once in a while, a group of us would say, Well, let's go to New York and see what's going. [Laughs.] We'd take the—a weekend, a couple days and go. And I remember it was in that period that the big Picasso *Guernica* came to Boston, with all hist drawings. A bunch of us went down to see it. We wouldn't have been able to. And it was—this was very much a part of ferment.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: There was a quickening of communication, wasn't there?

LEROY FLINT: [Inaudible.] A very, very real one, I think.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Then too, with a group of people who were similarly situated to be in a position to talk about it, that is, idea—

LEROY FLINT: That's right. [Cross talk.]

HARLAN PHILLIPS: [Inaudible] seeds of what later [inaudible]—

LEROY FLINT: In a lot of ways, it was—it functioned for a lot of us in much the same way that graduate school functions. Uh—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: It was a continuous seminar, wasn't it?

LEROY FLINT: Yeah. Yeah, it really was.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I suspect, also, that the stage had enlarged itself. That is to say, the '20s was quite parochial. But here there were so many people in the same boat with whom you could share, at least, an entrance fee, you know?

LEROY FLINT: [Laughs.] That's right.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: And everyone had an oar. Had a sense of being part of something that was—had a direction.

LEROY FLINT: [Inaudible] participation. That's true.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. So that why one was doing whatever one was doing became important.

LEROY FLINT: Yeah.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: And also, philosophical. I find that they get pretty deep into the question of "Why?", or what creative is. insofar as the '30s included this experimentation, and sooner or later they must have discovered that it was a fresh field.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Eternally a fresh field, you know?

LEROY FLINT: Mm-hmm [affirmative.] I think it was—I wouldn't know how to go about documenting this kind of an evaluation of the thing. The only thing I can offer is a very serious conviction that these things are true.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEROY FLINT: We had nothing in this country that compared to the things that developed in Europe among the younger painters in the first quarter of the century. A bunch of guys get together, and they've got a theory and got a movement, like the Expressionists and the Dadaists, and the Surrealists, and these things didn't really happen in this country.

[00:10:01]

We were always—up until that period, we were always relatively observers. We were apart from the world, artistically, culturally, even as well as economically and politically. We kind of [inaudible] from the world, after the first World War particularly. And this kind of—this did something to make a lot of the younger people aware of something they just wouldn't have been aware of; they would have been steeped in regionalism, still, had it not been for that. I know this is true in my own case. And I'm quite certain that at least similar young people [inaudible], I'm not that damn unique. It must have been the same. It must have been the same, all over the country. A lot of young people [inaudible] myself and a few that I, kind of, knew.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Seems like it's a—it is the combination of opportunity and materials, you know, and this continuity of using them, went, in turn, to a deeper hunger for more, and more different ways, thinking about—you indicated experimentation. Running along with it, since there were a lot of evil things in the world, Hitler and Mussolini were first pointed out by the Artists' Congress and the Artists' Union in New York, with resolutions that went—you know. They were sensitive to things that were going on, way beyond the narrow corner of Market and Broadway.

LEROY FLINT: And we were. We were all involved in this sort of thing. We went to—and it was the—in addition to this abrasive quality of ideas and battling among ourselves about one thing or another, you try things out. You weren't working by yourself. If you painted a picture, there was—something happened to it that was quite different than the experience of selling it to a competitive exhibition like the May Show or something of the sort. You were still by yourself and here's the pot and you throw it in, and maybe it stays in and maybe it gets tossed out. But you're producing with other people, and you can't—in a quite different way, you're seeing each other and each other's' work, and you're commenting about it as it takes place, not after the fact, you know. It's an abrasive thing that occurs there. Someone comes along to your work, and [inaudible] [laughs] I think you're doing. This is nuts.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LEROY FLINT: You know, [inaudible] find him trying it, too, and this kind of thing was going on all the time.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEROY FLINT: It was much different. It was—you know in lots of ways, it was closer to—some of its qualities—the experience for a younger artist was what it must have been in the studio of a master in the Renaissance, you know—it was just all this activity going on, [with commissions for this and commissions for that –Ed.] all going on in the same place. You may only have a little part in it, but you were aware of it, and you were aware of what your part contributed to the total thing, and it was that sort of thing.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: It bubbled with excitement.

LEROY FLINT: Yeah.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: And it couldn't help but rub off, somehow.

LEROY FLINT: That's right.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LEROY FLINT: I'm not—like the army, it wouldn't take a lot for the experience, and I'm not sure I would want to do it again [laughs].

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Here, here. It was deadly, deadly. You know, that uncompromising selflessness.

LEROY FLINT: Yeah.

[00:14:058]

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Terrifying in those terms. Although, you're right. It was also an opportunity, again, to sample experience way beyond the narrow borders of one's own town. Because you mix, you know, and it became a real polyglot effort [inaudible]. And you don't know what instinctively enters your being from an experience like that. Suddenly, you are aware of a lot of things that you might catalog—you know, put in your own computer, and it bubbles to the

surface sometime later, as a part of a unique vision that you have. I like to overlook it, although I know it's there.

But I can see the '30s with the, you know, group meetings and organization—a kind of group approach to the production of an idea. That's containing a lot of ingredients, but for the WPA would not have obtained at all, because you would have been painting as an individual. There must be something in this camaraderie, loosely defined in terms of form, shape, idea, content, technique, and the interaction, one from another, or trying this frankly experimental, because you had the opportunity. Going to school almost all during the '30s, planting new seeds, that emerged after the camaraderie, in a sense, is gone. You don't have any sense that it continued after the second World War, do you? That the kind of association which it obtained earlier—

LEROY FLINT: Except—no. No, it doesn't, not in the same way. It apparently has, in a few places. I'm sure that there are a few groups in New York that have achieved something similar, but relatively small groups, isolated and sort of in-grown. But you don't have any broad swinging things, [laughs] anymore, in the sense that this was. You just don't, in this area. Nothing like it. Even faculties that are—work together every day. They don't have that same unified interest in each other that was very, very much a part of our existence at that time.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: [They're just not minding the same store. –Ed.]

LEROY FLINT: No, it's a different—[inaudible] [Cross talk.]

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Although I would think that you're bringing a different kind of luggage now, with you, too. You know, people who pass through the '30s had that as a background. Almost invariably, they look back at it as an exciting period. A period of development, growth, fun.

LEROY FLINT: In a way, I suppose, the—the fact that it was—that these things were set up on a somewhat regional basis, may have made it possible in a way that it's not so possible now. We find—there's a certain validity in some of our interest in social themes. We were in it, you know, in a way. And movement of that kind has a kind of power [that contemporary movements don't –Ed.] seem to have. For instance, the Pop art movement, the Op art movement, which are most current. These people are not involved in these because they, themselves, personally, are together, and have cooked this thing up together. It doesn't work this way. [Inaudible] has occurred. A couple of people, one way or another, get some attention, and then everybody sees it, and then a week after a big—a big splash of a story in *Time* magazine about some artist's one-man show in New York, some student out in San Francisco, California, at a school there, is doing it.

[00:20:12]

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Echo.

LEROY FLINT: Yeah. Not because he was part of the thing, or part of its formation, but merely because it's available to him, and it's available to him as part of his eclecticism much in the same way that when I was in school, I talked about becoming aware of Matisse, and of course that was when became aware of Van Gogh, because the first big Van Gogh show came through Cleveland at that time and [the first big Matisse show came through –Ed.] at that time, and I saw them, and so it was available to me, at least on a superficial level, and I was able to achieve some approximation of its form, and perhaps, with a little luck, some degree of understanding of why it has this form. Movements now are pretty much that same sort of thing. You see a picture in a magazine, and so you do it. It's available to you as a youngster [ph]. With the experience of working with other artists, and all of them in the same boat, economically, physically, socially—it's a different experience.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEROY FLINT: What these others are doing is a kind of reality that an exhibition or a museum or a reproduction in a magazine doesn't have for another person. And they—even when you are in a group like this, a bunch of you see the same exhibition you are able then to chew about it. And there is time to have this as a major concern for a period of time. Then you get into it. You get into it much more deeply. [Inaudible.] You are—it's possible in a formal school situation. [Inaudible] [It works more in a –Ed.] seminar, you can get into a thing in depth in a way that you can't in a formal classroom or lecture situation.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: You know, it may be that the '30s in a way, because of the position that the

government took, gave artistic people a standing in the social order, which but for the recognition of the WPA they might not have had. That is, as being part of the society. So often, I think, artists are—whatever it is, are chewed internally by being outside their social order. They don't find a niche that's comfortable. Well, here area group of you, identifiable as artists, were sustained by an act of government, which permitted you—they probably chose it because they thought it was a safe area—non-competitive with industry, something like that, you know. And suddenly, it's alive with idea, because the very nature of creativity is to soak up experience like litmus paper, and you know, make—chew over it. Digest it.

But maybe the fact of the recognition that artists are other people, people with empty stomachs in the '30s, [inaudible] to give them an opportunity to continue in that which they love to do best. And, incidentally, keep them alive at the same time. But they threw you all together, otherwise [inaudible] your room, some would be in some other room. It would have been totally by chance. You might've said, Well, let me take a trip to New York. You probably couldn't have gotten a group that would have gone on. Maybe. But because you were all thrown into the same boat—you were in fact in the same boat—it may have lent itself to this sharpening of one's vision blades against the blades of someone else [in the same package –Ed.].

[00:25:20]

LEROY FLINT: It's possible. Well, there was a physical, a kind of tangible recognition of art and artists at that time that hasn't quite been achieved since, I suppose, on as broad a level. For instance, it was a matter of course [inaudible]—a school, for instance, wanted a mural, and there didn't seem to be any problem in getting the percentage of appropriation that was necessary to achieve it at that time, and they got murals. Today, even a new school, they have great difficulty getting through their boards any appropriation of money to pay for it. And yet, the fact that these things turned up everywhere, in schools and universities, and art museums, city buildings, and post offices, all over the country—there was a suggestion at that time that it was a valid thing to do, first of all, and apparently it was desirable to have them. The reason that they could handle them was because it was almost for free, you know, so the desire was there.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEROY FLINT: I don't think that they—I don't recall being aware, at the time, that there was any big selling job done in order to sell a mural to school. There may have been some of that, it may have been someone's responsibility, but at least it didn't come to my attention that that was being done. Or, I wasn't necessarily—in the things that I did—I wasn't aware that there was any serious difficulty with trustees or boards of education. The mural was done, and it was designed by an artist, who submitted a sketch, and they approved the sketch, and boom, there was no fuss. Nobody's said, two years later, Well, let's cover that dumb thing up, [laughs] you know?

And when this occurred, in most places, there was the—it has been the result of—most often, it's been the result of the fact that these works were somewhat dated. They're no longer, really, as appropriate as they were when they were done. This drew, of course, [inaudible] social comment type of thing. There wasn't—it's relevant during its own period, and outside of its period, it loses some of its relevancy. Or, in the case of the mural over here, it was just a stupid president who had to sit and look at the damn thing every day. [Laughs.] Every time they had a board meeting, you know, [inaudible] there. He just wanted a change. Anything. It's better than looking at the same thing.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: That's true. You know, the institutions of learning, boards of education, schools, readily lent themselves, wall space and otherwise, to the procurement of this. It may be part the generosity of the human spirit that this work was necessary. Here's an area where some could be done, but it doesn't excuse us here in 1965, where we're allegedly, opulent, where [gee, they don't give a thought to this –Ed.], where the burden is on the superintendent of schools to cut as much as he can in terms of his presentation to make it acceptable at all. The population's just burgeoning in all kinds of directions. You have to build schools, there's no question about that. So they build classrooms, [inaudible] look so much—concentrate so much on the question decoration, if at all.

[00:30:11]

LEROY FLINT: No, they don't give much thought to the quality of place, atmosphere.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Did you have a sense of beyond the artists' group there was a growing appreciation of art on the part of people in general? Was there much in the way of shows of WPA

material, in Cleveland? There was something called the Art Center Movement that came out of this, that had [tours that would sift out –Ed.] samples of work done in other areas, other regions.

LEROY FLINT: This was done in one—not in the beginning, but in doing my second hitch, part of the building in which most of the Project existed was—sort of had a big foyer on the second floor of this building, and this foyer was made into a gallery, an exhibition gallery, where there was a series of programs and exhibitions. Some of them produced by projects in other areas. I guess most of them were. And then, they did a series of shows with the people on the Project—for people on the Project, too, to which the public was invited, this sort of thing. And then, in the Cleveland community, there were a number of little art centers throughout, and the community centers and the community houses began to develop. And this was partly because some of us– this was another one of the things that we did—were made available as teachers. I taught some classes, drawing and painting classes, in those community centers around the community. [Inaudible.]

So, this kind of interest began to develop. I don't think that I would go so far as to say that there was a great movement of popular interest on the part of everybody in Cleveland. But here, again, I'm not at all sure that some of those things that we call a kind of renaissance of art, or at least an awareness of art you keep reading about and hearing about in our own time, may have begun back there, with at least someone getting the seed of the notion that it should be available. You should be able to participate if you wanted to. And so, in any community now it's taken as a matter of course, through the YMCA, and community service centers, they're all giving courses in painting, drawing, crafts, something.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEROY FLINT: And I think this began then, no question.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Sure, the last—I guess the last statistics I saw was in *Fortune* in 1960, which indicated that attendance at museums regarding people interested in looking at art, far exceeded the attendance of our national pastime: the baseball game. Well, yeah. This doesn't—this also has its seeds and roots, I suspect, in the traveling shows throughout the land may very well have at least made a greater awareness than what had existed [inaudible].

LEROY FLINT: Back in those times, in that period, that many of the present museums, museums of all kinds, came into existence. Or began to. In 1927, there were some statistics that there were—recently, I saw something published with the American Association of Museums. In 1927, there were approximately 700 known museums in the country, somewhere around there. Today, there are over 5,000.

[00:35:15]

HARLAN PHILLIPS: [That tells its own story. –Ed.]

LEROY FLINT: These are museums of all types. Historic houses and gardens, and everything. But anything that functions as a museum. It's been phenomenal. Phenomenal. And I don't suppose there's any way to knowing, or documenting accurately, how effective WPA and it's various programs, various projects—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, I was thinking, before the WPA you could live next door to a family whose son happens to be an artist, and never realize it. And suddenly, through the WPA and the kind of publicity that you got in the local press, shows you might have attended, you know, this kind of sharing—"John's son is an artist." You know, question mark [ph]. What is this? Let's go see it. And there isn't any way to document that kind of interest, which projects a person out of his home, to a museum to look at something. [There's a hunger there too, in a way. –Ed.] I don't suppose we're going to answer these questions, but I'm—

LEROY FLINT: Probably not, but then you can at least record some impressions, and you have some—I have—it's been perfectly clear, since we've talked here, I'm sure I have some attitudes —

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Sure.

LEROY FLINT: —about the experience, and what was achieved. And I suppose it's the attitudes of people who make a thing so, really.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Believing it, sometimes makes it so.

LEROY FLINT: Yeah.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LEROY FLINT: Everybody thinks it was effective, it was. Because this is what we're talking about. The very thing we're talking about depends upon the [inaudible].

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah. Right.

LEROY FLINT: This was the product.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, I guess the WPA, in a lot of ways, kicked open windows and let in some fresh air. Just let it tumble in, to work whatever mystery it wanted to work. And if it meant an expanded awareness and an interest in [inaudible] art, so much the better.

LEROY FLINT: I'm not sure [inaudible], in the field of the arts [inaudible] and a lot of the other things in which WPA [inaudible]. I rather suspect, for instance, our—today's assumption that a city has to have a metropolitan park system [inaudible] I think always began back there with the three *C*s [the CCC - Civilian Conservation Corps] in the same period. It's a function of government to provide these things. Where people can't achieve it by themselves.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, that's certainly [inaudible], the function of government. Then the elusive thing is the gradual breaking down of parochialism, is an awareness that somehow, someway Cleveland's Cleveland, Cincinnati is Cincinnati, and in the '20s you could probably draw a knife between them and cut them off. But suddenly there was a sharing.

LEROY FLINT: Yeah, they were both part of WPA in Ohio. [Inaudible.]

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, I'm going to let you get back to work. [Inaudible.] I'm grateful to you for spending the time with me.

LEROY FLINT: It's been fun to sit and try to remember [laughs] things that I haven't thought about in years.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah. You'll get this back to you in manuscript form.

[00:40:00]

I hope when it does come back to you, you won't be too censorious about it, because a lot of it was in the spontaneity. It's designed to be spoken. With all the limitations that that would imply. Probably left to your own devices, you would've sat down to think about it, you would tighten it up—[Cross talk.]—the flavor of what it really purports to be, no more than conversation about it a specific unfolding. [Inaudible.]

LEROY FLINT: I understand what you're after, and the only thing I would be inclined to object to was if I find myself saying something I wouldn't want to stand behind. Otherwise, I would leave it alone.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: [Laughs.] Good. Done. That's—I can understand that.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]