Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Adelaide Fogg, 1965

Contact Information
Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington. D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Adelaide Fogg in 1965. The interview was conducted by Harlan Phillips for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

HP: Harlan Phillips
AF: Adelaide Fogg

HP: A good way to get started about this is to take me back, if you can, to the late 20s at the turn into the 30s, where were you, and what were you doing, what were the prospects, what were your interests?

AF: Well, I was in Boston.

HP: You were?

AF: I was born there. I had gone to the Art Institute of Chicago, that was during the depression, you know, and it was kind of horrible. But there was a nice feeling there in a sense of meeting other artists and so forth. You know, I'm kind of self-conscious now.

HP: Don't worry about it. You went from Boston to the Chicago Art Institution?

AF: Yes.

HP: Were there other alternatives?

AF: No, no. I always wanted to go there because—well, I went there, now that I think of it, because I read Carl Sandburg's poetry. You know, I was very romantic then. He wrote a lot about Chicago, and it seemed a wonderful place. Then I got interested in the Art Institution. Then I went there for I think it was a year. Then I couldn't continue there, and I went back home to Boston. My father lost his business. I guess this is how it all comes into it, and because my name is Fogg—you know, the Fogg Museum—I had quite a time getting on the Project. To me it was always just a wonderful, wonderful thing that an artist would be wanted, you know, and then that they'd be paid to work.

HP: Yes.

AF: It was just terrible. So I remember it was so hard to get on. I went down and applied and there happened to be—I can't remember his name. He was the head of the Project at the time. He was trained in the Fogg Museum. He said, "Well, you don't need this job." You know you had to prove you needed a job.

[INTERRUPTION]

HP: Well, was this Richard Morrison?

AF: You know, I cannot remember his name. I block out on the name. I don't remember, because I considered that so unfair. Here we were living in the Charles bank Homes, which was a kind of wonderful settlement place, you know. My father was working as—well, doing a job a young man should do, packing leather and all that kind of stuff. I really needed work and, you know, I kind of have to think about this. Oh! So I went to enroll, and the people didn't believe me, so how can I prove it, you know? So at the time—I don't know how it happened—I heard about it that there was an Artists Union there in Boston and I'd always heard of unions with some horror, but I was desperate. So I went there, and these people were very nice and they liked my work, they believed me and of all people, I'll never forget and this was the first time this ever happened to me, I was just standing around with my mouth open watching everything. They took me up to this guy, whose name I can't remember, and it turned out this was some kind of committee that got people on that, you know, that some unfair thing happened to. I remember Mischa Richta at the time stood up and said, "You are." You know I got on the Project, and it was just like being in heaven, or something to get paid all the time, as I said, and get a salary for it and have some kind of dignity and so on. Then what did we get-$20 a week or something? And material?

HP: Something—yes—and material.

AF: Then I got to know other artists there and, you know, once you get into the union then you're supposed to do something in return. Well it was not ever a terribly active thing to me anyway. I remember Jack Levine used to try to run it. He was just horrible at the time. He was a young guy. We'd just die waiting for him to say the next

words, you know, and to get out and so on. Oh god, it brings back old memories. All we ever all wanted to do was just be artists, you know, and that enters into the whole thing.

HP: Were you given a special place in which to work, or could you work at home?

AF: No, you could work at home in your own studio. You had a supervisor that came by to see how you were doing. At first it was kind of awful because I remember at the time the kind of painting I was doing—well, what would you say, I don't know what it was, but anyway, I was serious about it, and it was kind of a dread to have a supervisor come, what is he going to say? Or do? But mostly the emphasis was on technique and egg tempera, I recall working with egg tempera, which is a very tricky kind of thing. I remember I did a mural and the landlord had a kitten, and the kitten lapped up all the egg. I remember that, and I had to do it all over again. But then they would come and they would pick up the paintings, you know, and take them and exhibit them. They had places I don't recall exactly where, but that was kind of wonderful too; that not only you painted, but that people got to see what you painted. Gee, I can't remember too much about it.

HP: Artists are fairly independent, at times even cussed people. They don't particularly like people putting aesthetic thumbs on their eyeballs, you know, but this flavor of sharing with other artists, what effect did it have, as you think back about it, on the so-called independents because unionization is antithetical in a way.

AF: Well, I don't really think that artists will ever be unionized. As I recall, it was a horror because after all you had to go there and everybody—well no one was really—how could one say it, "professional union person." Actually the whole thing I guess was based on—I don't know what, unless just these grievances that came up. Actually I think that psychologically artists are not usually tuned to having this sort of thing, although at the time I think there was a certain amount.

HP: Well, unionization was in the air, wasn't it, that is generally?

AF: I think that was part of the times.

HP: Yes. I think it was part of the times too. As a matter of fact, we never really solved the question as to whether men could organize until 1937.

AF: Yes. Well, what happened too I think was that, as you say, we're stubborn people, and we got called so many names that, you know, well we just wouldn't give up in that sense. But, well maybe it's my attitude now because that hinges on that, in that after all it was Van Gogh's dream, you know, to get all the artists together in one, and it just didn't turn out that way I don't think, because it was too much of a group individuals. Each one has to go his own way, I guess.

HP: Yes. But in terms of content, you know, the showing of WPA art where you see and know what some else is doing and you would discuss and never agree, I'm sure, on things aesthetic, but that kind of opportunity, a place where you could meet and talk, this is something which was not anticipated, but part of the general flavor.

AF: Yes.

HP: So I think perhaps—what it was—there was a sharing content-wise and technique-wise.

AF: Yes, that's true.

HP: And in that sense maybe even idea-wise.

AF: Well, I don't know, we were all so—I mean each one was interested in his own particular way of painting, and each one was influenced by other painters naturally. The mural painters were kind of—I remember Richta did a huge mural we were all very much impressed with. Not I realize it was very much influenced by Orozco. He was very talented. But Levine always was Levine. I mean he always went alone on his own with his terrific knowledge, of course, of technique and color, a very fine colorist. We all were tremendously interested in that. Then along with the Boston project they had this—now I can't remember what they called it. They had a section, a very fine section there in a technical sense on materials and colors, various colors and dry colors and experimentation with those, what is permanent and what isn't permanent, and so forth, and sizing the panels and all this stuff. We did all get together and discuss that, you know, and we did influence each other in that.

HP: Yes. I think it was—well put it this way, with the government as a common employer, doing something that you enjoyed doing, with access to materials, you know, and not part time trying to work two jobs to sustain the thing you wanted to do, there was more opportunity for experimentation in all kind of ways. Take the Index of American Design…

AF: Yes. That was beautiful, very beautiful.

HP: Springing, you know, almost suddenly, requiring minute, careful, precise technique and this was an opportunity to do something which but for that project would have been completely lost certainly in time. But there was this flavor. But the atmosphere was charged particularly on the East Coast with, ideological conflicts of one kind and another. This is the, the flavor of the period—the popular front ideas in the air. It was exciting as can be.

AF: Yes. Then too we were painting. I remember we felt—well, I speak for myself in the sense that I can't remember the content too much. I don't even know where the paintings are, what they did with them, whether they burned them, or kept them, or what they did with them. You know, they had so many things that they broke them up, broke up the sculpture in places, and did all kinds of things. But I know I was experimenting with sand in the paintings, putting sand in with a kind of varnish and some other mixing kind of media. I think at that time I pretty well did all different kinds of things, you know, but also interested in—well, we were bounded together with this depression in the sense that practically everyone was in the same fix and so that it had a feeling of fellowship. But especially there I think that each person kind of just went on his own.

HP: But there was an added zest then. That makes a difference.

AP: Yes.

HP: Because we were all enthusiastic too. I remember now and then someone would say, "Oh, the WPA." You know, I don't think they knew what they were talking about because it was kind of like everyman's dream, you know, in the sense of a king of Utopia. It couldn't last, you know.

AP: No, I remember I had a friend that was looking for a place here in New York years ago. He happened to be Chinese and he was a student, studying at the Art Students League and finding it hard to get a place, you know, people think, "Well, they're different. We don't know them." He went around and around, and he expected to have a hard time. But you know how he had a hard time? He went to this place and the landlady said, "What do you do?" He said, "Oh, I'm an artist, I paint." She said, "Oh, well you just sit around all day and do nothing." She wouldn't rent him a thing. This feeling that art is nothing in that sense. I don't think that feeling exists quite so much today. I think people are a little bit more adhere.

HP: Well, in those day I suspect that we were busy at the great good success, you know, and we overlooked the creative aspect largely in our drive for, oh, investments, you know, the great bubble, and so on. Then everything went smash. So the old leadership even in Boston was discredited largely. We looked beyond the locality. We looked for answers to Washington, D.C. Washington was a land of opportunity for young men with ideas, not the old law firms in a Boston, or the old Wall Street firms in New York. They had been part of the corporate reorganization and billowing which had landed in smash. The WPA was almost like a renewal, refreshment, you know, like a spring rain really. And so far as art is concerned, certainly a modern American artist, young people in the 30s, their opportunity was quite slim partly because the galleries were so few, you know, for showing. It is a fact: I don't know how many people I've talked with had to manage a part time job here, a part-time job there just to do the thing they wanted to do. And you're right, suddenly the Elysian field opened up with the WPA. And for several reasons—that is, the recognition of an artist. Of course, it's rather curious in a way that the government thought that it could help the economy by supporting non-competition fields, the volatile fields, those fields filled with idea and creativity. They couldn't go into building a steel plant. That would compete with vested interests. But young artists suddenly had opportunity to do what they loved most—paint. You had access to materials, and before many artists had to scrimp in order to get the materials with which to paint even if they had a lot of ideas or had to make a statement of a personal nature. Suddenly this was all transformed.

AF: Yes. And before I think we were all set up in the romantic sense from the history of other artists that an artist had to be poor to be able to paint. But I can recall a friend of mine who got on the WPA finally. She was carrying a child, and she fainted in Scully Square because she didn't have anything to eat. The WPA was just like God came down out of heaven and gave her something to go by. I don't know, I don't think we've ever felt that needed since, you, know. So I get sort of—well, what's the word? I don't know. It bothers me a little when artists who were on the WPA put it down, you know, because at the time they were darn glad to get it.

HP: Sure. I'm not sure—I was a kid in those days, but learning how to lack for a little is a very important, and to suddenly have all our gods go smash and have the economy high center gave us the right to rollup our sleeves tinker with the mechanism, see what made it tick, reexamine it, reshape it, and there was a—The way we had grown as a nation, the whole problem transcended state lines, you know.

AF: Yes.

HP: So it required the growth of power and influence of the federal government. But in so doing, the charge has generally been made that everything was centered in Washington. But the WPA in this very process reversed it because it gave discretion to the local areas. For example, projects that grew up were tailor made to fit the artists that were available. You couldn't, you know, compel, or cajole, or coerce an artist into a mold which was

alien to him. You could just give him opportunity, and what he did with the opportunity was his business, but suddenly to have this, you know without the managing of the two extra jobs must have been great. Well, you indicated somewhat earlier that you did a mural. How did this come about? Had you had training in mural painting?

AF: No. it wasn't a huge mural. It was actually on a wall board. It was only four by six feet, but they called it a mural anyway. And, as I said before, I did it all in egg tempera, varnish. At the time I remember now Lavestock was the supervisor, and he had a very fundamental knowledge of this technique so we were all experimenting and it ended up, I think, with a recipe of Jack Levine's, I've forgotten exactly what it was—let's see, you break open the egg. Well, it's the yolk of an egg, I guess, with Denmar varnish. It's a good technique but—well, I mean, you know, you put it down and it picks it right up, you know, quite a thing, you have to use a little brush all that. Gosh, I'm tired just thinking of working like that.

HP: But don't you have to think differently when you're thinking about a mural than you do about an easel painting, or don't you?

AF: Well—I guess you do. But essentially I'm an easel painter so, I think, what I really did was make a big easel painting. I don't think I'm a muralist at all. I'm trying to think who had any regular murals there. Well, you see, you mentioned something about mobility. The Boston project closed or something happened about—yes it closed. I thought, well, I'll go back to Chicago and see if I can get a job out there or something. A strange thing happened. The Chicago project was still going, and they passed a rule. They said that even if you came from another part of the country, you could belong to another project, and by some miracle I got on the Chicago project.

HP: Did you?

AP: So then I'd been on two projects. I was pretty proud of it. That's amazing! How did that ever happen! It's crazy. So I mean that folded up soon. I think I was on that project a year, or something like that, maybe a little bit more. I met a lot of artists there and worked there, and I cannot remember too much about that. I remember a few people, you know, and stuff like that, but I don't remember too much about painting there except that they did keep some of the works there. I mean the Chicago Museum put them all down in the basement, or tried to store a lot of paintings down in the basement instead of, you know, tearing them up or selling them for canvas and stuff. I think that was a shame that that happened. I don't know. It happened here in New York, that they sold the canvases to second-hand dealers. They went down and bought a Kuniyoshi, or this, or that for the canvas. It seemed a shame…because essentially it showed to me, and it shows to me now—not really now, but it showed to me then or-what it meant to me then was that we didn't change very much. Culturally speaking there still was not a feeling in the general public for painting or anything.

HP: In the New York situation, it was a question of available storage space and the pressure of the moment had gone beyond the WPA. We were in preparedness, a wartime thing. They may have been wanting to store bundles for blue jackets for all I know. They required space, and they sold it what they considered to be scrap so much a proud, or whatever it was. But it did vary. Well, wasn't some effort made by the collection point in Boston to share the paintings with public institutions, hospitals and so on?

AF: I really don't know. I don't know. See, all this to me is hearsay. I didn't know too much about it because I went to California. I lived in California for seventeen years. I just kind of heard it around. I mean I'd say, "Do you know what happened to the paintings?" you know, something like that. But it really means to me psychologically I still insist—I mean war or no war. I mean war—what a thing! You know, if we don't have some kind of thing in us that responds to something else besides fighting and war, what else can we be as human beings if we don't have some kind of respect of cultural things? That doesn't just include the visual arts, but in a sense all art forms because once we get into that war thing, you know, nothing else is important. Well then I think—I don't know—sometimes I think we're going to have to become different living organisma, that if this is how we react to things in a sense killing each other—well, we are going to become different. Life itself has got to change. I think one of the things that makes us different is a feeling for other things that are intangible. You really can't put your finger on it. I mean no critic ever knows what's good or bad in a sense of its own time. He's lucky if he does. People that have work considered, "Oh, well, he's just kind of strange. He'll never make it." He turns out to be the one, you know, and the big shots that were going around—they had their day in a sense, but who knows what really in evaluating all the work that was done. People were serious and did work hard. Really the things that were thrown out and the things that were broken up and the things that were just—to me it's very ironical. They could have been the things that in a sense perhaps would even have moneywise economically brought in more money for more bundles, or whatever you want, for more people in that sense. What always interested me too in the sense of all these upheavals that have been going on is that, say in Europe, during all those awful wars and everything, it wasn't money that got people around and got them out of places, but art—paintings, sculptures, all kinds of things like that. That was the only security they had. And here—to me, I think it's a genuine reflection at that time an attitude toward culture and toward art that—"What good is it!" You know, in

that sense. Yet at the same time here's the government supporting it. You can't have everything.

HP: No. It's like balancing mutually-exclusive impulses, yes.

AF: Then when you come and you asked me to speak, you know, to talk about yesterday. Then I think today is a reflection of yesterday. When we were young and we started out we never expected to be the great artists, you know. We expected to wait 20 or 25 or 30 years to be the great artist. We expected to be great. We expected to take a little time. Now I think the opposite is true. This is kind of the year of the young people in a sense in all directions. It's the young person who is taking hold and in a sense in all directions. It's the young person who is taking hold and in a sense becoming very successful when they're young. I think this is going to be awfully hard for them to handle when they get older. It's a kind of wonderful thing that young people have that they lose, you know, and then maybe regain in a more mature way. But I never got out of New York because I feel the whole thing is just one great big—it's just too much to think of combating in a sense, you know.

HP: Stuart Davis when he was teaching, I believe at the New School, was asked by a veteran, in substance, the question, "How long do you think it'll before I have a one-man show on 57th Street?" Davis replied, "Well, have you done any painting?" "Oh, some. But how long will it be? How long will it take?" So Davis said, "Well, about 30 years maybe." And the kid said, "Go on! You're joking!" This is the thing, there's a certain sense of struggle and—what is it? Pursuit of one's own statements, like Davis with a set of blinders on, although he was up to his eras in all kinds of other things, it never affected his work. He just went on and on and on and on, and it was not especially easy for him ever really until along toward the end. But this current easy-come-easy-go doesn't necessarily equate with value, or intrinsic marit. It doesn't. Although—

AF: No. Well, I think that success is very hard for anyone to handle in that it can be in itself its own-what?-it can be self-destructive.

HP: Sure.

AF: But there is such a thing as arriving in your own way, in a kind of mellow kind of thing that has nothing to do with anybody else. It's just a kind of inner struggle, and if you don't have this thing in you, then I don't care what kind of technique or what do you because it really doesn't matter after all what the technique is…

HP: No.

AF: It's really some kind of magic, I guess, that some people have and some people don't. But what bothers me about the young people in this sense is that they put other artists down; and that we never did. Of course, I don't want to be too moral—What do you mean we never did?" You know; I mean there are different schools of painting, you know, that we wouldn't be caught dead—that kind of thing.

HP: No. I don't mind him painting that. It's not my style. That's a different way of saying it than saying he's not very good. But this camaraderie that was alive in the 30s if there was a possibility for a person to sell a painting —

AF: Yes, that's true.

HP: --he took that person around to see his friends too.

AF: His friends to see so and so.

HP: Yes. So that there was this effort to "not hurry for me" but for a general sharing. I think this was part of the whole picture too. I don't know how far it went. I mean people still maintained their individuality, but nonetheless this was certainly a new wrinkle in the art world. If you had somebody was interested in your paintings say, "Well, see, you might like so and so's work, why don't you go around and see him?"

AF: Well, you see I still feel like that. I feel this way: one person might like my work, or might not like my work and might like somebody else's work. I mean it's not going to bother if I say, "Hey, go over and see so and so,"you know. I mean I never felt that competitive in that sense. There are artists today who do that. But the picture of—no, the competitive thing that's going on now could never have gone on then.

HP: No, no.

AF: Because, I mean I think of California even now when I read these reviews. I haven't been back there for about six years. I see a whole group of young people talking as if no other artist existed there until they came along. Which is ridiculous, you know; and a kind of a—well, I suppose in a sense, getting rid of the influence of their artistic parents, and taking over themselves. But it seems to be a reflection of the general attitude of culture of getting there fastest with the newest idea in how to make a painting, or sculpture, or whatever. I still have this feeling that I had when I was young of taking—well, I still like the Japanese painters, you know,

Hokosan and so on, oh, “If I could just live ninety more years, I think I could be a good painter.” I don’t know if I’ll ever be a good painter, but I think I still have a capacity to struggle, and I think that comes with certain knowledge of yourself. I don’t mean maturity in the moral sense, but growth.

HP: No. But certainly it has the ingredient of continuity of effort. I mean when you think back that but for the WPA you might of necessity had to turn to a whole host of other things which are quite alien to what it is you wanted to do. But this—

AF: I might have very well starved, you know.

HP: Sure. But suddenly this appeared and created continuity, experimentation, new ideas, a ferment of ideas. I’m not sure that we have that kind of ferment, or have had that kind of ferment since.

AF: No. I think there has been a kind of phony ferment. These youngsters are terrifically talented.

HP: Of course they are.

AF: And they have much—they’ve had much more of an opportunity and experience too in studying than we ever had. They see more, and they’ve been more places, you know, than we were. They’ve been to Europe. They’ve been all over the place, and they’ve seen more paintings, they’ve seen more reproductions, and they’ve had some good teachers, you know, and they are terrifically talented people, I think, on the whole. I don’t want to put them down. But they have this kind of alienated quality, I think, of trying so hard to be a part of something. They will take the very furniture itself in a sense and make it into sculpture, and I can see how they do it. If you walk out on the street into the world, in a sense you’re confronted with all the materials that they use. I mean this is their world. But it’s an alienated world—they have alienated themselves from their inner—how to express it? --inner feelings. Really. Well, like there was some guy running around here, three of four months ago, and he went into a store and his hands were bleeding and the man in the store said, “Your hands are bleeding.” He said, “The whole world is bleeding.” It turns out he was a poet that runs around—I mean he goes on a binge and runs around and then gets taken to the hospital and so on. But it seems to express anyway to me this need for this kind of self-destructive kind of thing which is interest in a lot of the art in that it doesn’t follow through in a –I don’t know how to express that either—in a total art experience. It becomes partialized, and they are partialized in that they don’t feel a part of anything, but destruction, I guess.

HP: Yes. It may be that the total picture is so beyond the view of a single person now that all one gets is a fragmented piece of the view. Then too, I think in some respects the artist before who had a statement to make and had to make it some hell or high water confronts to encroachment of others in sitting in the driver’s seat. The museum creates a tone, you know.

AF: Oh well, I’ve withdrawn from all that, let’s say, because it’s impossible to cope with as far as I’m concerned. I don’t have the energy, either I spend my energy on my painting, or I’ve got to spend it batting my head against all the, let’s say, fads and peculiar experiments and all kinds of things that are going on. I don’t put them down, but there is a tone where if you don’t do this in a particular way, you’re never going to get in, and to me that’s a kind of unconscious snobbishness. I mean we might as well say, “Well, here, everybody join this club and you’ve all got to say this and do that.” I do feel that in the whole country there are so many artists like myself who really aren’t too well known, and deliberately so, who are really working and that it will be kind of fun later on for everybody to discover these people because they are people who are determined and are, I think, stubborn, just stubborn enough and determined enough to go on in their own way, even to heck with anybody else.

HP: Well, the whole flavor of the art market has changed, and I think in some respects the impulse to creativity is being altered by astute dealers who think in terms of marketing a product as though you were dealing with fungible goods like peas in a pod and act as a kind of limitation in a way on a creative impulse. In short, the flash in the pan becomes limited to the very thing which you were discussing.

AF: The reason I’m smiling—I think of the lining up, which is kind of, in a way, a pleasant revenge. Let’s put it this way, when you felt nobody wants you, that people are lining up like the lineup for a baseball game, you know, or I don’t care who does it, hurray for him, they want to buy your paintings, you know, and you sell them. There’s a certain amount of, you know, good feeling about that. At least somebody made it, you know. But if you think about how and why, then that’s what gets me. I can’t even bother anymore to think about it because it’s a self-destructive thing, you know.

HP: Yes.

AF: It’s like poor Emily Dickinson, you know, that wrote this poem about—she’s something or other—I don’t know, anyway, she really showed how she felt. She really would have liked everybody to have ready her poetry, have been a great poet, but she really didn’t care, that kind of thing. I think the very act of painting, of writing, or whatever is to communicate. I don’t care what you’re communicating. You can communicate a blob or you

can communicate a this or that. The act of painting is communicating. We went through that thing for you, you know, about abstract and non-objective, and so on and so forth.

HP: Did you see any seeds of the abstract non-objective art in the 30s in the WPA time?

AF: Yes, I think there were a few abstract painters, yes. Coming from the Chicago Art Institute, which have one of the finest collections of—I was going to say contemporary-of "modern"painting. The first time I had ever seen a Modigliani. They had the Kandinskys there, you know who only, oh, 6 or 7 years ago became popular. They had a whole room full of his paintings, and I remember I went in there and , "Oh, what's this?" I came from Boston, and my idea of a good painting was a guy with his dog, you know, and here were these Kandinskys. I had a terrific teacher, and she had told us in history of art, you know, "Don't make a judgment right away. See what happens." I thought I'm not going to decide until I feel if this makes me feel something, you know. All of a sudden it was just like music and I went up to it. That was the title of the painting. Ever since then I never have pre-judged anything but try to see how do I feel, what do I think. But we did get a feeling, I think, of fellowship that many of us still have that are older. I don't know about the young people because they don't talk to us old people really. But I feel sorry for them in the sense that they have such a world to contemplate, or they think they do, you know, actually I would like to see what they did about 25 years from now.

HP: Yes. I think the number of "stars" will probably dwindle. Then too, I think the inflated value given some cotemporary things is going to be rearranged also. You hit the word. There's a certain faddism, people lining up, you know, it's like being a member of the proper club. It's all very amusing and all very interesting and I wouldn't deny them access to it, but what this has to do with value and creative values I'm sure I don't know. It may—

AF: It's kind of interesting too because it's all mixed up. Every once in a while I try to—I once bought "business" something or other, you know, to read. I was kind of curious about it, but I don't know anything about numbers, and I got all mixed up but I did get a picture of the art market somehow, that it's being used more as money, you know, in a sense than money. I don't know how it got that way, but then I guess what happened—this was four or five years ago—something happened, I don't know what. The bottom went out of it or something, but then it's all picked up again. It's so ridiculous, the whole ting. But the reason, I say I can't help feeling a little bit amused and triumphant in a sense at least that they like them enough, or somehow or other they recognize—I don't say, like it—that it is important. Even if it's on a phony basis, you know. Maybe after that we can look at the paintings too, I don't know.

HP: That's impossible.

AF: but I do think a lot of them are going—let's put it this way—to be fooled, not really fooled, but are going to wish they had considered it more seriously and, you know, you still feel, well like when I was looking at a painting. The only way a person can make a collection of anything is on this personal basis and then hope that something happens, you know.

HP: Sure. Well, the art for investment is what has commercialized the whole thing.

AF: Yes.

HP: This wasn't true in the 20s for American artists, not at all.

AF: No. That's why the whole thing is slightly ironical because from this small beginning sense and not being wanted, here is all this—and I think a lot of artists may be not even aware of it. They didn't live them. Maybe we didn't get that flavor of a kind of a, "So this is what you want? Well I'm going to give it to you then." I think the whole thing is self destructive really. See, I taught for 17 years in California. I taught children and adults, and of course it was more fun with the children. They give you something, and the adults you have to argue with, you know. But I do know from that that it in watching people's creativity how they do from the child to the adult that these young people are going on their youngness, and they're unconsciously very much influenced by other older artists whom they might be aware of, or might not be aware of. Well, what's this guy's name that puts in all our factories, you know—

HP: Oh yes.

AF: He does a certain amount of useful—it kind of makes me laugh, you know, in that sense, but he is putting everybody on. He is interested in the money, and some day he'll be like to writer who goes to Hollywood, and they put him in an office and he hasn't been since—you know, he couldn't make up his mind, I mean, what really he is.

HP: Yes. You know, you hit something that's quite important for the whole field of art because with these other factors now influencing whether it's the market, the dealer, or the buyer, the investment, whatever it is, it puts a

creative person in a position where he can really suffer a psychic death without ever knowing it. Suddenly there's nothing more to say—

AF: Just be a miserable human being.

HP: Yes.

AF: Just be a miserable human being.

HP: Yes. With really nothing more to say.

AF: I think there is a point in the creative person's life where they can unfortunately—what's the word?-kill themselves off. I guess when they are no longer able to-what's the word?-kill themselves off, I guess, when they are no longer able to respond to their own senses and their own emotions and their own intellect to the thing they experience. It's all based on what might be exciting and new, or this or that. It's all based on technique, I think. The emphasis on technique is again alienation of one's own emotion and feelings and thoughts. We did have that.

HP: You did. Yes.

AF: We did feel.

HP: Your phone is ringing. [Interruption] Well, while you remained in Boston, was there any effort to relate artists to the preparedness program through posters and so on?

AF: There was a definite—what's the word?—

HP: Cutback, in a way, quotas, etcetera?

AF: No. As I recall this is what we were all working for. Some were considered fine artists, and then there would be a poster artist, or this, that and the other. I mean there was a definite class.

HP: I see.

AF: You know, and the fine artists were supposed to be the, group. This was in the artist's own mind, I think. See, because we were all so deadly serious, and full of integrity and everything and romantic, and so a fine artist wouldn't be caught dead doing a poster. I mean it was always a very limited problem, and it was better that he take—you were pretty good if you were on that-what do you call it? You mentioned it: the project where they did all that terrific work—

HP: The Index?

AF: Yes. Which really did some beautiful work. Now I would be prejudiced still against that in a sense. But I happened to have a friend that was on, and I saw all the work they did, but because we categorized everyone in the sense that each one was this or that kind of artist, I think that was mixed up somehow with the economics of the day of how much pay you would get, and I don't think that the artists who were on the Index got as much as-I'm not sure about this so I shouldn't say that, but that's my impression.

HP: Well, I think the theory was that in making a project to fit the people on the relief rolls they found some artists who were not creative artists in a creative sense but who did have technique and could be trained to do rendering and who did rendering like a camera, brilliantly, even better than a camera. Some pieces you couldn't tell the difference, and this was a very special quality.

AF: I should say so. I mean after all if you think of Sheeler anything I mean can be creative. I don't think that it has to be limited to any particular school. I recall this friend I had that was on. She was very creative, but she needed a job, you know, and to her that was kind of a blow, I mean she was always trying to get on the other project. But we were never in the project that I was on, asked to do any particular subject, any kind of subject matter. We were pretty well left to choose our own, and the only thing they really required was that you worked a certain amount of hours. I don't recall anyone having to paint anything over, or paint. I mean perhaps they would say, "Well, that technique isn't this" or, you know maybe that, but they never criticized the subject matter as far as I know.

HP: No. That's a surprising thing I think, and a good thing.

AF: Yes.

HP: Yes. And this may well be that the whole program was without precedent, and it was placed in the hands—

AF: I don't think it can ever be again.

HP: No. But it was placed in the hands of people who had sensitivity for freedom of expression. Yes, I think that's a –

AF: Now I have heard, for example, where there were minor tyrants in charge—forgive the expression; I won't mention names—that some things went on that everybody was horrified at but the minute it was found out it was changed, so the overall policy was this.

HP: Yes. Well, I think where big jobs were concerned, and what I mean is big jobs like murals in a school building, some effort was made, a sales effort, a negotiation effort. They had to educate the Board of Education to accept, you know, a design, and sometimes they had to reshape the design to make it acceptable if they wanted the work. Sponsorship was involved.

AF: Yes. Or they got into a big fight too. I can recall that.

HP: Oh yes.

AF: Or they took them down in some places. Yes, I remember that now. Also now I think of it, I think that's where the technique, the technical thing came out, you know, too, the interest in wall surfaces. Everything had to be made so—this is truly ironical—everything had to be made to be permanent, you know.

HP: Yes.

AF: 500 years, you know. Size your canvas so that, you know-and now they threw a lot of it out. I think that really is a shame.

HP: Did you have much in the way of visits from Washington—Eddie Cahill? Did you bump into him at all?

AF: No. Well, what I did was I moved to Rockport, Massachusetts, which was—well, you know, it's amazing really. They would send a supervisor down there, and I lived on Bearskin Neck. You know, it just out in the ocean there right. For a couple of years I lived there in the winter because it only cost $20 a month, or something in winter; in the summer it was $300. Then I'd move to a little shack by the ocean in the summer. I really loved it there, but there were artists living there too like that, and some artists lived in Gloucester.AF: Sure.

HP: I recall years and years ago—I don't know if Hofmann was on the project or not, but I recall going to Gloucester, and he had a school with this guy named Thurn, I think it was, Thurn, who was on the project—Ernest Thurn—I've forgotten his name, and they had this school together there after the project folded. But it was a very lovely time, and we all knew I guess in our hearts it could never last. But I wouldn't—I hat to say this—I wouldn't ever want to do that again. I think it's part of being young and part of filling a certain need that if it were tried now would turn into some horror. I think people would try to tell you what to do, which I have a horror of. At least one thing I got is that I do what I want, you know, in my painting. The whole setup would be so completely different.

HP: Yes, I think probably its greatest strength was the fact that it had no precedent and that it just simply emerged and sprawled as untidy as the human life with which it dealt and you could shape it only in terms of opportunity. Now that we have that one behind us, people presumably can go back and fathom what transpired and build on it a better organization, a bigger mousetrap, whatever, but what effect it would have on the creative impulse I'm sure I don't know. Oh, then too, you know, art has taken hold in colleges, universities. It's no longer something that's alien. It's part of the stream, I don't know how deep the running is, you know, but it's—

AF: Well, I have that same thing I've always had because I've taught people that have been in universities, forgive me, in California anyway, and they turn out the same kind of painting. Well, I guess every artist has to go through a whole lot of painting before they find themselves, but they tend to turn out the same kind of painting, the same kind of outlook, the same kind of prejudices, the same kind of snobbery in a sense without any curiosity involved. I know I had this school in a gallery in California, and I had this young man exhibiting there who was terrifically talented, a beautiful sense of color. This was just a natural born Matisse, but not a Matisse, you know, I mean a serious person. They had a habit of there of giving people oral exams and things like that, and he was a dyed-in-the-wool individualist and he would say "yes" when he shouldn't and "no", when he shouldn't, and they just did not pass him. Well, he was the only one that was a little bit different, that had a little spark as far as I was concerned. So I felt "heck, what are they doing?" I mean it all adds up to the same thing. What goes to make an artist is what always goes to make an artist and that is something they have in them that is not quite like anyone else.

HP: You're good because you're different. Right.

AF: Not only different. I don't mean in that sense, but because you are able or was able—I don't want to sound like a teacher—because you're able to be what you are, and if it so happens that what you are is artistic in the bargain, then you have a painting. But I don't think, in other words, that painting can be taught, an artist can be taught. Either you are, or you aren't.

HP: Yes, I suspect that if you teach painting, the result 9 cases out of 10 is no more than a carbon copy. But what I meant by different was the uniqueness that you discovered, and this somehow or other sets you apart. It's like your fellow who wouldn't say yes when he should, or at the Art Institute in Chicago it was Theodore Rosack who was out of step, you know, happily. I mean "Hurray!" Well, Jack Levine with two left feet—so what!

AF: He was considered at the time and he was the young genius of the art project in Boston. He was I remember terrifically talented. I haven't seen many of his works now. I don't know what he works on now, but at the same time he was a terribly talented young man and very serious, deadly serious. I think at the time he painted, "The Feast of Pure Reason" and that was sent to New York. It was quite a thing. It really was quite a painting. But definitely he had this knowledge of color that he got from—well, Hyman Bloom studied with the same teacher. They both had the knowledge of color, terrific. What was his name? I can't remember the man's name. A very fine colorist. I don't know his name.

HP: Then they added their own condiments.

AF: Yes. So that we all got kind of interested in that too. I mean this color thing and try colors through that.

HP: Well, was Levine an articulate fellow too?

AF: At the time—I imagine he probably is now, that I think of it. At the time I guess—well, no, he wasn't. It was very difficult for him to express himself verbally. But, you know, I think we all learned. It was difficult for a lot of us to talk. We learned because we had to. Usually artists don't talk very much. They're afraid they'll give everything away in their talk, you know. And then too they're used to working with images and working with their hands, and I think it's much easier then. I still resist trying to explain anything I'm doing. It's still very difficult, although I could if I had to.

HP: But the, you know, it's—the whole creative process, whatever else it may be, has continuity itself that is a response of a feeling at a given moment in time, place and circumstance. They all help shape it. And, heck, that thing can alter with the change of a single variable. That's how delicate it is. It's the people who of their creativity where they can't play with something new or entertain something new, fight with it, struggle with it. Yes.

AF: Yes.

HP: Well, I gather you look upon the WPA period as a kind of renaissance in a way, in terms of opportunity, experimentation and—

AF: I hadn't thought of it, but I suppose that's it.

HP: Yes.

AF: Because certainly I mean—well I was only 20. I didn't know much about it. In a historical sense I knew about what went on before me, but now that I think about it—I haven't thought about it before—yes, I would say.

HP: Yes. Kept skills alive, kept them tooled.

AF: Oh yes.

HP: Sharpened them, made for greater, better, more perceptive, deeper visualization of things, a greater awareness.

AF: Yes, I would say because to give any creative person the opportunity to work without interference is something, you know. In a sense it was a blow to go out in the real world afterwards, you know.

HP: Yes.

AF: And of course it took a long time to think, "Oh, well, gee, I wish I was back on the WPA." But yes, I suppose you would say it was a kind of renaissance.

HP: Yes. And it had a flavor which hasn't been since the marches, banding together, issues.

AF: Yes. That kind of went on everywhere. Well, it was all based on the fact that we didn't have anything and we

needed something, I guess.

HP: Well, it's also ironic I think that these individualistic artists could come up with a collective voice even in political matters like Spain.

AF: Well, it wasn't easy.

HP: Well, even so.

AF: Forgive me for laughing, for I can remember all the fights that went on, you know.

HP: OH, sure. But I mean ultimately they do react.

AF: Somebody was always calling somebody else a so and so, you know.

HP: Yes.

AF: NO, it wasn't easy, and it never lasted long. I mean someone would say, "Well, I've had this! Goodbye! I'm going to paint."

HP: Pick up sticks and more.

AF: Then disappear for the next three months.

HP: But that's the fluidity.

AF: "Where's so and so? He's supposed to be doing this." Well, I mean you just can't participate too much in the world around you because you'd never get your work done.

HP: Right.

AF: That's how I feel.

HP: But you know the requirement of being my brother's keeper in the sense we were all in the same boat and you had to discuss questions of sick leave and sick pay and this benefit and that benefit because you had a common employer, the whole theory being that he wouldn't speak with a single artist.

AF: Excuse me, I've got to—I'll have to shut her [the dog] in the back. The kids throw bricks down off the buildings.

HP: Do they? [Interruption] I want to thank you for letting me come and talk to you.

AF: Well, it's been fun.

HP: This is a lovely room incidentally. I can't get over it.

AF: Yes. That's nice. See, when you were talking about it's nice to paint and not do something else. Well, that's true. It depends on the person. I have always liked antiques and I love to refinish, and if I combine both painting and refinishing I have discovered that it helps my painting rather than if I sit around and paint, I think, but that's the kind of painter I am. I long ago discovered you can't worry a painting to death, you know. But I do. I can't spend years on a painting, but if I refinish, you know do this other work in between, king of juggle it back and forth, I find that it influences my painting, and it's a release from the painting.

HP: All at the same time.

AF: Yes.

HP: Yes. Well, it's marvelous really. I like it.

AF: Thank you.

HP: I really like it.

AF: I'm going to move to Woodstock.

HP: You are?

AF: Yes. I don't want to burden you with my personal life, but I got arthritis in the back two or three years ago. I

hadn't take care of it. I hadn't realized it and a bone solidified in the back or whatever happens to it, so that I cannot get around New York, it's impossible, so I might as well. It's nice here, but you know you can get kind of isolated. I might as well be living not in New York. So we happened to go up to Woodstock and, my God, it's beautiful. I don't know. I can go up there and live just as easily, and we'll be in the country which I love, because the real advantage of New York is being out looking around and, you know, everything.

HP: Yes. Well, it isn't that it's all out side, but there's a lot outside.

AF: Yes. I mean that I lived here when I was young, and heck I used to go and visit all the galleries and I'd wander all around, you know, I mean you could do that more easily then and didn't feel anywhere so hostile in many instances.

HP: Yes.

AF: And we're always afraid to even walk—I had this Whitman outlook, I loved everybody you know, sort of innocent but heavens, you couldn't do it now.

HP: No.

AF: It bothers me so. What was I saying the other day? Everything seems to be taken out—all men's frustrations. Let's put it in generalized terms, all men's frustrations seem to be taken out in a destructive way that didn't exist before so that I guess man's tolerance the point is less and less any what they can take, I guess.

HP: Well, you know, I think in those terms too, but it's also in a sense the intensity of the pressure because our back yard is San Diego, plus the fact that we are confronted with being rather puny creatures on a puny planet increasingly. This has its effect. It's not necessarily pleasant. I don't even presume to know what the answer is.

AF: Yes, I don't know, but maybe because I taught, I also think of things in an educational sense—that people either consciously or unconsciously educate themselves one way or another, that one is educated, say, through poverty or through any kind of prejudice—I don't care what it is—to respond in a particular way, say, with violence, to what happens to them. Then this thing becomes more and more because it catches on, you know, people get it from each other. So then it becomes an accepted way of responding. Say, if you're a Quaker and you're brought up in a particularly different environment where you react in a sense, than other cheek, or whatever, I mean then you would react of course in a different way to the thing that happened to you. But I feel then that in a sense something somewhere is getting out of hand educationally speaking.

HP: It may be that we concentrate also on those who do get out of hand to the exclusion of those who are nice or —

AF: Yes. Well, you know, a funny thing is that places have different flavors like when I lived in New York 20 years ago I came back here from Missouri. I had been staying because of the rest in a little place in Springfield, Missouri, it's like a country town, you know.

HP: Lovely country.

AF: Completely different, you know. And well, the world must have been like that some time, you know, somewhere. And I came here and, believe you me, I said—one day I thought everybody is going to run right out of the house and they're all going to kill each other. I mean just got that feeling, you know, that the boiling point had been reached, you know, and yet there's a certain kind of feeling for humanity that you get from people here. It's just that they're cross about it. I went to the doctor's office and the door slammed. I didn't mean it, "Oh, I'm sorry" and some woman said, "Well, you did it. It's not your fault," you know, it's just the tone. She was being nice but in a kind of cross way. I think that this city life here is kind of so hectic and so demanding I guess that people respond to it in a kind of friendly paranoia.

HP: That's a good way to put it.

AF: You never know when you're going to get it, you know. Oh dear!

HP: Well, Woodstock would be nice.

AF: You know, you walk down the street here and have as many experiences as you want, or too many. The kids threw some bricks off the building, down in the yard, you know. If someone had been sitting there it would have killed them. And I heard a big bang!bang!bang!bang! and I thought-well, somebody is taking a trunk and moving, and I opened the door and these kids had stoned something, the cops were chasing them, they jumped through a window and jumped, you know, so that I mean everything happens here.

HP: Yes.

AF: At the same time I know among these people that they all love each other, you know, and they love most of all their children.

HP: Yes.

AF: They're all nice children and if anybody does anything to a kid they all holler "Now! Now! And better not try it because you'll get it" you know and so on and so on.

HP: Well, we're just about at the end of the—we've run out of ammunition.

AF: Oh, I thought it was off.

HP: Oh no, it's still going.

END OF INTERVIEW

Last updated... March 15, 2005