Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with William Friedman, 1965 June 16

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

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with William Friedman on June 16, 1965. The interview took place in Sausalito, California, and was conducted by Mary Fuller McChesney for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's New Deal and the Arts project.

The original transcript was edited. In 2022 the Archives created a more verbatim transcript. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: This is Mary McChesney, interviewing William Friedman, spelled F-R-I-E-D-M-A-N, who lives at 452 Sausalito Boulevard in Sausalito, California. The date is June 16, 1965. I'd like to ask you first, Mr. Friedman, where were we born?

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: I was born in New York City.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: What year was that?

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: 1909.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: And where did you receive your art training?

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: If, at the time, that training were received and had been referred to as art training, it would've seemed to be a strange term. The first of it was in New York. And actually, it was in architecture. You should know that I am not a painter or a sculptor. I am a designer. And it was my first training; it actually was by working for architects and going to New York University in the School of Architecture at night for many years. And then, there was some schooling during the Depression days at City College New York, and also at one of the ateliers, as they were called, affiliated with the Beaux-Art Institute of Design in New York, atelier Whitman-Goodman. And so, it was a combination of formal schooling and working with architects and designers.

[Audio break.]

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: You've just been describing your art education in New York City. Was that the end of it?

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: Well, actually, after I had been working with architects and with museums and after the first part of my WPA or Federal Art Project experience, I found myself out in Minnesota and enrolled in the Institute of Technology there and took courses in engineering and further courses in architecture at the University of Minnesota.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Was this after you had been on the WPA?

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: Yes, it was after, and for a period before also. It's all mixed up. I came out to Minnesota in the summer of '40 and went to school. And then it was that fall that I became affiliated with the Iowa Art Program of the Federal Art Project.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: But you'd had some previous experience with the government-sponsored projects in New York City?

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: In New York City.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: What was that—

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: That was a very exciting project. Back in the latter part of 1935, there was established, under the Federal Art Project in New York City, a school at that time known as the Design Laboratory. An experimental school with all sorts of exciting people teaching. There were a number of people who had been students at the Bauhaus in Germany who

taught there. One of them was my former wife, Hilde Reiss who was an architect. And a person, Lila Ulrich. Both these people are out in California now, Lila's down in Southern California. Then, Irene Pereira and Ted Roszak, Chaim Gross, were some of the people who were teaching in this same school under the auspices of the Federal Art Project. Although, its prime educational aim was the training of designers, naturally in any well-balanced curriculum painting, drawing, sculpture were very important parts of the total study in preparation for design. That's the same principles that we still use in teaching design today. I mean, at the state college, for instance. So, we have basic courses for all students, regardless of whether they intend to be painters, sculptors, designers, architects.

[00:05:25]

This, in a sense, stems from certain educational principles and philosophy that were developed in Europe, principally in Germany, and then carried over here into some of the schools in the United States. And it is something that I believe in deeply, I—in discussing this with many of my painter and sculptor friends, they are in agreement that, to put it negatively, a little experience or training in architecture wouldn't do a painter a sculptor any harm [laughs]. But to put it more positively, there are a number of painters and sculptors who, in a sense, cross the line of what one might call, in a very narrow sense painting. If you take a person like Noguchi, he is nominally a sculptor, but he finds himself involved in landscape and certain architectural problems as well. And this would be true of some painters, too.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: And this was the idea of the Design Laboratory, to coordinate architecture and the fine arts?

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: Yes.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Or the different artists?

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: It was one—it was one of the aims of the school.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Who was it who originally set up the Design Laboratory?

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: Well, this was under the administration of Audrey McMahon, who at that time was the director for the New York City projects. And then working directly under her was a woman by the name of Frances Pollak, who was a New Yorker but who spent a lot of time up in the Provincetown area, Cape Cod area, and who had many painters and sculptors and designer craftsmen as friends. And it was she who, actually, from an administrative, and philosophical point of view, conceived of the idea of the Design Laboratory and then assembled this staff. Administratively, in New York, under her, directly responsible in many respects is a wonderful fellow who died a few years ago. His name was Alex Stavenitz who was an architect and lithographer. And this to me is an interesting combination, which every once in a while, you find. I mentioned earlier atelier Whitman-Goodman. Actually, both Whitman and Goodman were architects, but spent a lot of their time in early years in Paris. And both Whitman and Goodman were very good painters, as well as practicing architects. The Goodman is Percy Goodman, who still to this day—he was a former teacher of mine at New York University. And since that time, for many years, has taught at Columbia University. His brother, Paul Goodman.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: The writer?

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: Yeah, the writer. And as I say, he was a good painter, more than a Sunday painter, and terrific draftsman. He illustrated many books during that period.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: You were going there to the Design Institute as a—Design Laboratory rather, as a student?

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: No, I was on the staff as a teacher.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Oh, you're on the staff?

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: But you were also on WPA?

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: Yes. This was—this school, you see, was set up by the Federal Art

Project, WPA. And as I say, this staff was assembled consisting of architects, designers, painters, sculptors, craftsmen.

[00:10:25]

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Who were the students? Where they WPA artists or just anybody?

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: No, no. The students were from the general public. The impoverished public [laughs] at that time. This was an evening school, you see, and students were working, or trying to work, and earn a living. Many of them have had some previous training. Some of them were graduates of the various colleges or studied at places like the Art Students League or the Brooklyn Museum School. Others had gone to college. One of my best students, at the time, had been an English major, graduate of New York University. And today is one of the good designers in the country.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Did you have to go on relief to get onto this WPA project yourself?

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: Yes.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Do you remember what you were paid?

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: As I recall it, the top at that time was about $90 a month. I probably started lower than that. I had been on a project before that on WPA, that was up at the New York Botanical Gardens in the Bronx. And for a while, I was working for a plant geneticist, Dr. Stout. And that was a very exciting period, actually.

And then, when this Design Laboratory was organized, I went over onto that and began teaching. Under the auspices of WPA, the school was in existence until about 1937, about a three-year period—end of '37. And then because it was threatened with—because of some sort of administrative, financial difficulties, all these things came up from time to time, the school was then taken over under the sponsorship of a trade union at the time. It was the FAECT, the Federation of Architects, Engineers, Chemists, and Technicians. And this trade union organization sponsored the school until it closed down, at the end of 1939 or early 1940.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: How many students did you have at the school?

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: I would say, there are usually an average of 150 or 200 students in attendance.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Were they charged tuition or was it a free school?

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: Well, under the WPA, it was free school. All they paid for were materials. . When it was taken over by FAECT, not having the tremendous resources of the government, it had to charge a nominal tuition, a very modest tuition fee to help pay expenses and pay the meager salaries of the staff. I don't think that when the FAECT took it over, there was much of an increase on the $90 a month [laughs].

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: What courses were you teaching there yourself?

[00:14:56]

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: I was teaching design courses. Mostly, product design at the time, design of objects, and some basic design courses, non-specialized courses, which is the sort of thing that—when I am engaged in teaching now or since then, the sort of thing that I still enjoy teaching basic design courses more. There as much philosophical in the content as they are, to use quotes, "practical."

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Did you stay there with the Design Laboratory until the union took over?

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: Oh, yes. Practically, everyone who was on the original staff continued because this became over and beyond its connection with WPA. It became a very important school, educationally. And there was a feeling of tremendous involvement on the part of both students and staff. And practically, everyone stayed with the school when it was taken

over by the union, and stayed with it up until the time it closed.

I had a visit only a few days ago, some very old friends of mine who were associated with the school were here last Saturday. They're on visit out in the West Coast. And we were, as it were, reminiscing about old times. And only about three weeks ago, there was held a kind of reunion, a fantastic party, in which most of these people showed up. Ted Roszak and Irene Pereira were there, and a number of the others. I'm sorry, I couldn't have been there.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: This party was in New York?

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: Yes, it's in New York. And, you know, I have to go to New York next week [laughs].

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: You just missed it then. [They laugh.] Was there any kind of connection between the Design Laboratory and the other WPA projects in New York City?

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: Well, no direct connection, but there was a kind of—and this was a wonderful thing about those days—a kind of fraternal connection. No administrative or educational connection, but, you know, this was the time of Federal Theater and Federal Music projects and various mural projects, and the Index of American Design, and everyone knew each other. We were all in the same boat. And every once in a while, you know, I will meet someone who had been on one or another of the projects, art projects or other projects, in New York. And we will meet somewhere in this country or somewhere in some other country and always, the talk reverts to what was happening during that period.

I would say that, for many people—and I know this to be true for myself, but for many people, this was a time when they got out of their cubicles. I, for instance, who had been trained in architecture and worked in architecture and design, during that period found myself mingling as it were and fraternizing and becoming aware of the problems in painting, sculpture, and theater and dance and music, and so on. And this happened for many of the painters and sculptors, too, who used to isolate themselves in their studios and think of themselves only as painters who were concerned primarily with easel painting.

[00:20:09]

And this was a period, for instance, when painters found that you not only painted, as it were, on an easel, but you could paint big walls and do murals. And there's this tremendous awakening of interesting and—well, first of all, with the social implications, social and political implications, of what they were doing. But in the broader sense, this was a kind of renaissance in which some painters, for instance, found themselves very close to the theater projects and were engaging in design for theater. And some painters found themselves involved with buildings and doing murals for buildings and had to become concerned with some of the architectural problems, without an understanding in which they couldn't do a good mural. You have to worry about certain architectural problems.

This was the period when many American painters, as it were, discovered the Mexican muralists. Before that, they were hardly aware of them. And I know this to be true out in Iowa. On many of the projects in the Midwest, this was of a later period, you know, in 1940, '41. Painters, again, to get commissioners to do murals in public buildings in the Midwest. They began, you know, hearing about and studying the works of Orozco and Rivera, and so on. It is a great vital period.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Did the sort of European or Bauhaus direction of the Design Laboratory have any influence on the murals that were done in New York City?

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: No, I wouldn't say that very directly they did. Of course, aside from Design Laboratory, you know, American painters were certainly familiar through normal sources of information, and from having been in Europe, they were familiar with Klee and Kandinsky and some of the Bauhaus mural-oriented painters, like Schlemmer. They were certainly familiar with the works of these people. Just what influence as muralists there was, it would be very difficult to gauge. And I know that Stuart Davis, for instance, did any number of murals. And to try to analyze all of the influences going into Stuart Davis's work would be beyond me, anyway. Maybe, someone else [laughs] could do this.

But then, you know, many painters became involved in the Index of American Design. And in this project, where they had to go to the actual sources of the folk arts in America, and they

did very accurate drawings of these objects. This was a period in which many young American painters, not only in New York, but certainly in the Midwest and the Rocky Mountain areas of this country and even out here in the West, many American artists became involved in the folk arts in the United States and became familiar with them. We had a big project going in Iowa in the Index of American Design.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Have you seen the WPA murals that were done here in the West Coast around San Francisco?

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: Yes, you know, Refregier did the murals down post office. What others have I seen?

[00:25:11]

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Coit Tower?

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: Coit Tower, yes.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: I was wondering how they compare with the ones done in New York, as far as influence is concerned or—

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: I would say that—this is just, you know, one man's view—I would say that Mexican mural paintings had a tremendous influence, not necessarily from an aesthetic point of view, although, I think that, in many instances, there are these influences. But I think the spirit of them has been influenced by what took place in Mexico, because I think that what is expressed by the Mexican muralist was a sort of thing that American artists were trying to give expression to here. And you have a social ferment. You have a concern on the part of the painters with what's going on in the world and what brought about certain conditions economically, politically, and socially. And a good deal of the spirit and the drive, it seems to me, was derived and given impetus through the comparable thing that was taking place, or did take place, in Mexico during its social revolution.

Now, I know of instances, for instance, in Iowa—what was his name? Harry—the names elude me now. But one mural painter in Mexico actually had worked for a while as an assistant to Rivera under other circumstances, and was very much imbued with and affected, I think, aesthetically in his configurations, certainly. His palette, his technique, all of these were influenced, I think, by the Mexican muralists.

Now, if you take a person like Refregier out here, to try to say the same thing about him, might not be as easy. But I suspect—and probably Refregier would say the same thing—that a good deal of the drive and the spirit was inspired by what had taken place in Mexico, rather than, let us say—rather than what had taken place in some of the early murals that one might find in Italy.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Since this Design Laboratory was under the WPA, organized by the WPA, I was wondering if you ever did any practical work for the government to just design buildings or anything like that.

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: Not during that period. While the Design Laboratory was in existence, any architectural work that might have been done for the government was not done under the Federal Art Projects, so that we didn't have those involvements. The Design Laboratory was an educational institution.

Now, under the projects later during the '40s, throughout the country, and the one that I was affiliated with in Iowa, we indirectly became involved with certain design and architectural problems. For instance, in the state of Iowa, there had been established five community art centers throughout the state.

[00:30:07]

And one of the things that I was in charge of was the design, or actually redesign, of certain existing facilities, so that they could be used as community art centers. There was one in Mason City. There was one in Sioux City. And some of these, since then, have become permanent community art centers. Long after the Federal Art Projects ceased to operate, these things were taken over by the communities. The Sioux City Art Center, which is still in existence today, and a very good local arts center, got its start during those days. There was

an art center in Des Moines, Iowa. There was one in Mason City. This was one that I designed in an old store building and its basement. And these were centers where they had galleries for exhibit, painting, they conducted classes.

So, there was that involvement architecturally. And then, also in Iowa, we have a statewide craft project. One of the things we did was to design and produce furniture and posters and certain kinds of equipment for public institutions. We couldn't do anything for private institutions. But for schools and for hospitals and other libraries and public institutions, we designed and produced furniture, equipment, as I say, posters, booklets, all sorts of communication.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: How did it happen that you went out to Iowa?

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: By 1940, at the time the union was no longer able to keep the school going, I began to get a little fed up with New York and decided to go to the Midwest. Actually, I went out to the Midwest to go back to school. And I went to the University of Minnesota that summer. And while there, I visited Dan Defenbacher whom I had known through the old WPA days. I visited him because he was director of the Walker Art Center which had been a Federal Art Project project, and which was now a private institution. We renewed our acquaintance.

And then I met, for the first time, Clem Haupers, who had been the regional director—who was, not—who was at that time the regional director of the Federal Art Projects for a five or six state region. He was in St. Paul, but he administered Federal Art projects through Iowa, Dakotas, and so on. And he asked me at that time, whether I would go down to Iowa. This was no longer on a relief basis, however. Although, the art projects, still, through the state administrations, had many people working on them who were on relief. They needed certain supervisory and administrative personnel, specialists in certain areas that they wanted to draw upon. And so, I went down there on that basis as a supervisor, non-relief. This was the time, as you may recall, a period. 1940, a couple of years when everybody behind the scenes knew that we were going to war, and all of the defense industries were beginning to gear up. It was called defense at that time.

[00:35:17]

And economically, even the picture in the United States was improving, on the upgrade. As a matter of fact, the WPA art projects went out of existence, as I recall, at 1943, at the latest. They began—while I was with the Iowa project in '40 and '41, they began tapering off. People were going off relief into various industries. And there was a gradual diminution of projects in the—as I say, I think, by '43 all were terminated.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: The Iowa art center was in Des Moines?

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: Well, the Iowa—the statewide Project was in Des Moines. And there was an addition, of course, a city project, the art—Des Moines Art Center was—now, the chain of command went from the state to the city. And my concern, actually, was with the statewide activities of the Iowa state Project that took me to all the smaller cities where we established these community art centers, and were doing work for public institutions.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: The Des Moines Art Center there was already in existence when you went there in 1940? You didn't set it up—

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: No. I didn't set it up.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: —from scratch?

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: No.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Do you remember how long it had been there?

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: A couple of years, as I recall it. When I came to Iowa, there already were in existence about three art centers in the state. Then after I came, two or three more were set up. Phil Curtis, who was a painter, who lives down outside of Phoenix, in Scottsdale—Phil Curtis also came there. Between the two of us, we set up a lot of these things.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: How would you go about the actual process of setting up an art

center in a new community? Would you approach the community, or would they approach you?

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: Well, it was a combination of the two. From one's knowledge of the state, where there had been some previous interest or activity or where you suspected there were potentials, you got together with some people in the community and a committee was organized. And then, the community itself had to provide the facilities. And then the state, through its resources and the subsidy it got from the federal government, paid for personnel and other expenses. But it had to be something that in which, not only interest but some financial backing came from the community itself.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Would these be art association groups that you approached or the city government?

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: Well, sometimes there might have been in existence, an art club or an art association. If not—if there's seemed to be sufficient interest, then an art association was set up in the community, through the usual sources. One dealt with municipal government officials. But one also dealt with the art-interested people in the community.

[00:40:00]

Mason City, Iowa, for instance, is a fascinating community. Because in Mason City, there are many houses and what used to be—now is only maybe a third-rate—hotel designed by Frank Lloyd Wright.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Oh, really?

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: So, there was some interest in the community. There was a very interesting store and restaurant in Mason City. It's a very small town. It happens to be the town that Meredith Willson comes from. And it's also the town where a good friend of mine, who is a cousin of Meredith Willson, Phil Barber, was associated with the Federal Theater Project in New York. So, this town of Mason City had a store and restaurant with very good craftwork from all over the world. It's a fantastic place. And you could get international food in this place. This little town, I don't know, with 10,000 people but rather sophisticated in many respects.

As is, in my opinion, and without offending dyed in the wool Californians, I must say that I still have a great affection for and nostalgia for the Midwest. I've spent a good part of my life there. I've taught in the Midwest and have a high regard for what goes on in Iowa, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Indiana, where I taught. The art departments at these universities were very good art departments. You know, many, many people who had been on the projects in New York City are teaching in the Midwest, have been for 20 years. Fellows like Jim Lechay and—who else? I think any number of painters from Woodstock and New York City are teaching in Midwestern universities. Mauricio Lasanski at the Iowa City. This is a bad day for the memory system, all sorts of names are eluding me.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: How would you go about staffing an art center, say, Mason City when you first began? Were there local artists that you employed for the staff?

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: In those days, the locality was statewide. If there was a painter who had to go on relief living in Keokuk, Iowa, he would welcome being assigned to Mason City. So that painters from any part of the state gladly accepted an assignment and the opportunity to teach and hang exhibits in any other community. So, this was no problem if there were not people immediately available in the community.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Did you bring any artists up from the East Coast like New York to come and teach in the art centers?

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: No, because the art centers were—as the entire WPA setup, were state administered for the benefit of the needy in that state. So that, except for supervisory personnel, you didn't have imports as it were. Now, a number of people went from New York. Although, I didn't go directly from New York, I happened to be in the area. But I know of many other people who went from New York to art centers in Oregon and elsewhere in supervisory capacities. Otherwise, any of the artists who were on relief in the state stayed there.

[00:45:28]

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: How close a working connection did you have with the national Art Center program when you went into a state like Iowa? Did they work very closely with you as far as directions—

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: Yes. You see, Dan Defenbacher, who was the assistant to Holger Cahill, and Dan's prime job was the Community Art Center program throughout the United States. And he traveled around a great deal. And working in conjunction with the regional and state directors, the art centers were set up in the various states. And as far as I know, practically, every state in the Midwest had at least one art center, you have them scattered out through the Nebraska, Dakotas, and some very vital, vital things took place at that time.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Was there any kind of liaison or cooperation between the art centers in the different parts of the Middle West? Did you exchange shows, for example?

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: There was some exchange of shows, yes. As a matter of fact, every once in a while, there would some shows circulated on a national basis. So that where there had been no museum—where, for instance, in Des Moines, Iowa, there was no art museum. What was the Des Moines Community Art Center eventually became what is now the museum in Des Moines, Iowa. It's now under private sponsorship, but its program actually was the forerunner of what is now the program at Des Moines Arts Center community-supported project with private endowment and so on. So that for many communities, and certainly for the smaller communities, like Sioux City and Mason City, these were the first art gallery, art exhibiting programs. And some of them, as I mentioned before, exist to this day as small and very good community art centers with the vital programs of exhibits and classes, instruction, and other activity.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: How are the art centers accepted in these different communities? Did you ever have any problems with community criticism?

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: No. On the whole, not. You must remember that in those days, what one might call social revolution as reflected in social realism painting was part of the vernacular. If someone wanted to express the horrors of the Dust Bowl and the drought and the horrors of people losing their farms and going on relief, why, if he wanted to and could express in painting, this didn't shock anybody.

On the other hand, as in many communities then and many communities today, people found offense in many subjects that an artist feels free to deal with, you know, like the nude body.

[00:50:11]

Although many art centers have life classes, sometimes in some communities this was subjected to a little criticism. But those kinds of problems really didn't exist too much.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Were there mural projects going on at same time in Iowa?

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: Yes, in Des Moines, in the library. There was one. I'm trying to recall what others throughout the state there were, and I can't be very specific about it.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: You mentioned the Index of American Design earlier. [Inaudible.]

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: That was an extensive project all through the Midwest, in Iowa, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Dakotas.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: What sort of things were they recording? Indians or—

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: No. Most of these artifacts were the sort of thing that one still finds and did find in good antique shops, these were early Americana anywhere—of course, for the Midwest, anything that would be local would be, you know, end of the 18th century naturally, early 19th—through the 19th century. But many things found their way out into the Midwest through having been brought there by people from the East. So, that lots of objects were all over the state, and were recorded by the Index. It might be embroidery, might be carving, some ironwork, and so on.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Did they work at all with the Indian artifacts of that area, or were there any around?

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: There really weren't too many.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: You mentioned Keokuk, Iowa, and he was a famous Indian chief [inaudible].

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: Yeah. Interestingly enough, most of the Indian groups in the Midwest—I'm familiar with some Indian groups in Minnesota and Wisconsin—have done things that I consider to have aesthetic merit, or have aesthetic qualities, but which are not generally considered to be art objects. I mean, to this day, certain distinctions are made and, I think regrettably, between those things like sculpture and carving of a sculptural nature, and certain tools and implements which have aesthetic qualities and which may even have some carving or engraving on them. These distinctions don't exist among the people today. So, for instance, in—among certain Indian groups in Minnesota and Wisconsin, they make beautiful canoes. This would not be considered an artwork, although, I do. And in many exhibits which I have done, I have included canoes and boats and all sorts of paraphernalia in the exhibitions that would also include, say, paintings on hide or carving. You see, we take it—well, you take a thing like this, you know. This happens to be an ancient Indian thing, you know, is this art or isn't it? Or you take something like this—well, any of these, these are religious objects, you see. Are they art or are they not? Is this—this is Eskimo. Is that a work of art or not? It may be made as a toy or was a plaything.

[00:55:19]

So, these distinctions become a little formalized and artificial so that many things are taken a little out of context, like the figureheads on a sailing ship are lifted off a sailing ship and put in the museum and exhibited as sculpture. Well, sure they're sculpture, but they had other purposes, and other meanings as well in relation to the ship themselves. They were things of good omen, or you did it— a master of a vessel would have figure commission in honor of his wife or his girlfriend or what.

And I still do a lot of work in folk cultures. Course I was the director of the Folk Art Museum in New Mexico for a number of years and did a lot of work in Yucatan. I'm going back there to be attending this work.

But here, we're beginning to get on some rather controversial ground as to what the problems of the artists today are in civilized, so-called civilized society, and what some of the problems of craftsmen—they don't call themselves artists actually, what craftsmen in the folk culture see as their problems. But let's not get onto that. [Mary Fuller McChesney laughs.] I have enough arguments about this [laughs].

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: With your position as state director of the art centers in Iowa was your last—

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: No, no. I wasn't the state director of the art centers. I was on a statewide project in charge of the design program. There was a state director.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Oh.

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: I was only in charge of the design program. And as such, I had to do with all of the design and production that I mentioned earlier; furniture, equipment, communications. And also, in the setting up, physically and naturally working on the physical program one has to participate and become involved in the operational program. But I was essentially a designer, which again, would involve us in discussion of what is a designer, you see. The fact of the matter is that professionally, today, I would in much—as much involved in programming and research and writing and editing as I am in what one might call the technological or mechanical aspects of design. You know, how can you just be concerned with designing an exhibit when you have to become involved in selecting materials for it, research, as well as the total organization for the exhibit.

So, and this was true of many people, you know, painters on the Project became involved in programming and supervision and administration, as well as being painters. And this was also true for designers and architects. And this was a good thing, I feel.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Did you have your own staff working with you?

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: Yes.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: How many people would you have?

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: Oh, at one time, in Iowa, I had as many as 25 or 30 people working under me directly, and maybe another 100 indirectly.

[01:00:18]

You know, you begin to split certain responsibilities which is a good thing too.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: How long were you there in Iowa?

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: Just for a year.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: And was that the end of your contact with WPA?

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: Yes.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Then you went on to the Walker Art Center?

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: No. Actually, into other things. I became involved in Japanese relocation, building the airfields. These were all government projects, but not WPA projects. I, for instance, worked as a civilian with the U.S. Army engineers. I work in the design supervisory capacity for the War Relocation Authority which had to do with relocation centers for Japanese Americans, so.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: So, it was sometime later then, after the war, that you went to Walker?

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: Actually, I went to Walker in 1944, just before the end of the war.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: It had become, of course, by that time, a private institution?

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: Yes.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Do you think it would be a good idea for the government in the United States to sponsor the arts again?

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: Very definitely. I have a very deep conviction about government's interest in and responsibility for what might broadly be put under education and culture in our country. I've always been rather mystified by the fact that in most other countries, at the cabinet level—as in France, for instance, Malraux is the Minister of Culture or whatever you want to call it. And we have no one at the cabinet level with such responsibilities. We have a health education welfare person, and whatever takes place in education, the arts, and so on is under that office. I think that the arts, in the broadest sense, not just painting and sculpture, but theater, dance, all of the arts should have someone at cabinet level. And there should be the appropriate subsidies and backing on the part of the federal government and the state governments and the city governments for these activities. Now, to a degree this has been done and more is being done but not enough—

[END OF TRACK AAA_friedm8569_m.]

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: We were just talking about the possibility of the government sponsoring the arts in the United States again, and you were saying that you thought it was very definitely a good idea. I was going to ask you if you think there's a need for it now.

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: Well, I think more than ever. Here again, it’s very difficult to discuss a question like this without getting into some of the broader political implications. Every time I pay taxes—although I have not yet gone to the lengths that Joan Baez has gone to—I feel very much like earmarking my tax money for some good thing rather than for a super bomber or some destructive purpose. And to me, it does not make sense that the culture organizations in the United States, which have such a difficult time, should be having this difficult time in the face of an expenditure of $7 million for [phone rings]—

[Audio break.]

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: If the government did consider such a new program in the United States, would you have any suggestions for methods of improving it? Did you have any criticisms of the way the previous government-sponsored program in the arts was run?

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: Well, now when you refer to the previous program, the WPA programs?

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: No. One couldn't possibly criticize a program which came into existence at that period in our history and whose prime purpose was that of relief. That a program whose purpose was relief could have become so good is one of the great things that has happened in the United States. But if one could imagine a program that is instituted initially for its intrinsic value, its intrinsic cultural, creative value, organized for this purpose with a decent budget, not a plush budget, just a decent working budget, I think this would be a tremendous thing. That one could learn from the experiences of the Federal Art Projects there is no doubt. What form such projects would take, I think, would have to be studied. Frankly, I haven't—myself, I haven't given too much thought about the specifics. You know, whether it would take the form of subsidizing programs of exhibits, whether it would take the form of subsidizing programs in the performing arts, whether it would take the form of subsidizing work—creative work activity among artists, subsidizing specifically education—educational projects in the arts. I don't know. All of these things need more support. And the fact of the matter is, anyone who has been associated, as I have been, with education, with projects—I still do projects for the government and for educational and public institutions as a designer.

[00:05:12]

For anyone who's had this kind of association, there's a deeply felt need for additional support. There just isn't enough money being put into any form of activity such as I mentioned. There are many painters, for instance, who have to get jobs as teachers. And they're not really too interested in teaching. Or they may be teaching something that they're not interested in. God help the painter and sculptor, and I know many of them, who find themselves in situations where they're not—they may teach—out of three courses, they may teach one course in drawing or painting and have to teach courses in design and craftwork and art history and so on, for which they're really not equipped, and for which, temperamentally and emotionally, they couldn't be less interested. And yet they do it. And there's a loss on all sides.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Do you think it's true that in the period since the war the artists have gone more into teaching as a way of supporting themselves?

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: Well, it would seem to be evident as one looks at one's own friends, or as one travels around the country and visits colleges and universities, it would seem to be so. And many, many artists are terrific teachers. And they, after a while, are able to organize their lives. They can teach two days a week, or the equivalent of it, and spend the rest of the time painting, doing sculpture, whatever the case may be.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: I've heard it proposed that this is a new form of government sponsorship of the arts, but you seem to have criticisms of it, as far as the artists themselves are concerned.

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: Well, I would agree that this is a kind of sponsorship, primarily through the states rather than the federal government. Only in a very indirect way to the degree that the federal government does give money to the states for support some aspects of education in the states. To this degree, there is federal support. But this is primarily in the non-humanistic areas. It's primarily only in sciences and technology and relatively little in the arts, or in any of the other creative fields except creative sciences. So there is that kind of state, and at times municipal government, support of the arts.

No, I'm not critical of this. What I think I am saying is that there isn't enough of it. I think what I'm also saying is that it is my deeply felt opinion that the federal government, the national government, has a responsibility in this direction. What took place the other day at the White House is a gesture, some expression of interest, but a pretty weak gesture in terms of actual support where the support is needed.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: You're referring to the Festival of the Arts?

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: Yes. I—What I did say earlier is that because many painters and sculptors find that this is one way of achieving some financial security, they go into teaching and teach certain subjects for which they are not really equipped, and for which they have no real interest, or in which they have no interest or sense of involvement.

[00:10:33]

And this is doing a disservice to the artist and certainly to the student. So where the painter or sculptor or designer is doing what he is able to do, and what he's equipped to do, and where's really interested, this is wonderful. But, at some universities, they will have artists—in-residence where there are only nominal responsibilities in teaching, but the person's only an artist-in-residence to work and produce and—at the University of Wisconsin, Aaron Bohrod is a very good example of a person who's an artist-in-residence, does some teaching, not very much. He goes around the state quite a bit. At Indiana University, where I taught for a number of years, Robert Laurent, a sculptor, was an artist-in-residence. He did some teaching, but he also did sculpture commissions. So he received a stipend as the artist-in-residence. And if he did a commission—a sculpture for the university, he was paid for it on top of that.

And this is one of the things that could be done in the university or art school atmosphere that would be a very healthy thing. Be a very healthy thing for every campus in the United States to have artists-in-residence and writers-in-residence, real working people, to use the vernacular, working stiffs [they laugh], who, by what they do, become a source of inspiration, if you want to call it that, for students.

In terms of educational philosophy, any number of people are agreed that this would be a very healthy thing. That the intellectualizing and the verbalizing that one is engaged in as a student, no matter what your interests are, would become much richer, much more meaningful if, let's say, a student in science or sociology or history or literature could be in contact with creative writers, poets, painters, designers, architects, and so on.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Do you think it might be a good idea for the government to renew the program of allocating a certain amount of money in all federal building projects to arts to embellish the building?

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: Yes. This is done to a certain extent but not enough. But here again, I think we would get into something bordering on the controversial, not that I would—not that I want to avoid controversy. I would even quibble with you in your use of the term embellish [laughs].

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: That was the term used during that period, right? [Laughs.]

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: Yeah. I sort of wince when I hear the term. What I believe in, and what I think has been most successful, is something that you may call a renaissance idea in which, at the very inception, the painter, the sculptor, the person who's going to do the mosaics, becomes a collaborator with the architect, at the very inception. Not the idea, as too often happens, where the architect designs a building, and then at some later date, the painter is called in to embellish, decorate, to cover a wall.

[00:15:38]

And some of the most successful things that have been done in the United States in this respect, interestingly enough, have been done in ecclesiastical buildings. I mentioned Percy Goodman before. He designs a lot of synagogues. And he has brought in many good painters and sculptors [inaudible] and—who else can I think of quickly off the top of my head? At the very beginning, while the thing is in the discussion stages, to program and they begin to collaboratively and jointly work on the idea so that these become integral part and not just a decoration, part of the total thing. And this is great. And where this is done, interestingly enough, more money is appropriated for the painting and sculpture and mosaics and the broad array of what have you.

So, yes, I think that in those instances—now this has happened in governmental embassy buildings around the world where good architects like Saarinen and Warnecke, to mention a few, have brought in painters and sculptors at the inception of the project. And there's been

a reasonably good appropriation of money for this purpose. This is not done enough in governmental buildings in Washington, certainly. In certain state buildings scattered throughout the nation this will happen once in a while. But again, in my opinion, not enough. In San Francisco, itself, it becomes embarrassing and ridiculous, embarrassingly ridiculous, at the small amount of money. We have art commissions, very small sums of money appropriated for this purpose.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: And very little collaboration between the artist and the architects, although occasionally there's some.

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: Occasionally you find it. Very often, it becomes, in a sense, a philosophical concept on the part of the architect who then, as it were, sells a bill of goods to the client. Victor Gruen, who was an architect in Los Angeles with offices in other parts of the country—does a lot of big shopping centers—has convinced his clients, who are usually real estate people and investors, that sculpture is very good in such a situation. And in a shopping center that he did outside of Detroit and one outside of Minneapolis, to mention a few, many sculptors have been given commissions to do sculpture in these centers.

[00:19:54]

In short, what we seem to be always returning to—this is something that I discuss with many of my painter and sculptor friends—is a sort of social context in which painting and sculpture and other visual arts, could take place. This doesn't mean that I am advocating that every painter and every sculptor drop his studio work to do public projects. This isn't what I'm saying. I believe that many painters and many sculptors are not temperamentally constituted to do anything other than easel painting, prints, or studio sculpture which might go on exhibit.

On the other hand, there are painters and sculptors who, within the impulses—within the framework of their creative urge, find a tremendous excitement and challenge in doing a piece of sculpture or a painting in some broad social context, whether it's for a public building, or for a church, synagogue. But this is a matter for the painter or sculptor to decide for himself.

Now, what I think I am saying is that there are many more painters and sculptors who would like to do, and who would feel challenged and stimulated and ultimately fulfilled, who'd like to do this kind of work. There are many more who'd like to do this work than there is work to be done, there's work to be subsidized. This is only one facet of the total problem, it seems to me. Now, there are other facets of the problem. As to what the responsibility—and I know that this is a controversial issue in our society, in our competitive society—the problem is what responsibility does the community at large have toward its creative individuals? Now, there are conservative and reactionary people who would say each individual must take care of himself and particularly these artists, why should they be getting a dole, you know, as opposed to anyone else?

Well, this is a narrow point of view. I think that there are many broader questions involved that ultimately any mature nation has to face, as to what its responsibility toward, other than material values, is. There are some who will say we have no responsibility. I happen not to agree with such people. What responsibility do we have toward the theoretical physicist or the mathematician, you know, to the Einstein, as it were? What responsibility do we have to any creative individual? And I'm not talking only about creative individuals in the arts.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: What sort of an effect do you think being on the government-sponsored part of the arts had your own career, or did it have any?

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: Well, I think that my early experiences with Design Laboratory certainly had an influence on what has happened to me.

[00:25:10]

On the one hand, it might be argued that anyone living during that period, no matter what he did, would be influenced. When I worked on communications problems at the Bronx Botanical Gardens and became involved in problems of genetics and Mendelian theory, I'm sure that this has had some effect and influence on me. But the Design Laboratory and, as I mentioned earlier, the contacts with and the fraternal feelings that were generated between and among individuals in all of the creative fields has had, I'm sure, some influence on my

ultimate attitudes and philosophy, aptitude, as I've applied with collaborative projects in certain relationships that I enjoy in my own work in which architecture and landscape, the total environment, with all of its implications, working together, scientists, architects, painters, sculptors.

This experience in Design Laboratory—I think that what we did in Iowa also was an extension of the same philosophic attitude. And it has expressed itself in whatever involvements I've had since then with museums, and with educational institutions, with teaching. I think it has resulted in a kind of philosophy in the kind of work I do. You know, you can conjecture about these things. I'm sure there are many other influences, including prenatal ones. [They laugh.]

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: It was an influential period, you think, as far as your career was concerned?

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: Well, yes, among other things, coincided with, you know, the period in which one begins to be in the world and experience it and develop personal and social relationships. During the period in which one begins to develop a mature [inaudible]. These are formative periods in one's life [inaudible]. When I first came in contact with the project in 1935, I was in my mid-20s.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Rather good luck in a way.

WILLIAM FRIEDMAN: Yes. I think that all of this—and I've discussed this with many people since then. Chet La More, who is a painter and printmaker, and very active in the affairs of the projects in New York, now teaches at Ann Arbor in Michigan. I was at a conference a number of years ago, bumped into him there. We renewed acquaintance, and we were discussing that period and what it meant, the significance of growing up in such a period. And anyone with whom I discuss this with these days agrees that, in many respects, we were lucky.

[00:30:15]

Just as, you know, students who are studying or going out in the world today, are lucky today that they're growing up in this period where the focus has somewhat shifted. Yes. I think that anyone who grew up and worked or tried to work during the depression years, years of crisis, is lucky. I don't begrudge any moment of it. It was hard.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: I think we just about covered [inaudible]. Thank you very much for giving us the time for the interview.

[END OF TRACK AAA_friedm65_8570_m.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]