



Smithsonian
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Oral history interview with Philip Guston,
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Contact Information

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

Transcript

Interview

JT: Joseph S. Trovato

PG: Philip Guston

JT: It was very good of you to postpone your trip to New York by a couple of hours in order to have us to this interview. Since I do not take shorthand I'll make my questions as brief as possible. Where were you born?

PG: Montreal, Canada, 1913.

JT: How did you start painting?

PG: I began painting when I was about fourteen years old.

FT: Where were you trained?

PG: I am mostly self taught with the exception of a year's scholarship at the Otis Art Institute, Los Angeles.

JT: Our main subject is the "New Deal and the Arts," so let me ask you: When did you go on the project?

PG: I was assistant on a mural project (PWAP) in Los Angeles for about a year where I worked under Lorser Feitelson. I was also on the easel project there.

JT: When did you go to New York?

PG: I went to New York in 1936 where I first worked as an assistant to Reginald Marsh as a non-relief artist since I had to await my residency requirement. This was the mural for the Customs House building in New York City. I didn't actually paint on this mural but Marsh asked me to design some lunettes between his panels. Next I went on the WPA mural division. I worked under Burgoyne Diller who was my supervisor, he was, I think, the supervisor of the New York City mural division.

JT: I think that is correct. What did you do?

PG: The first thing I did was an assignment to do murals for the Penn Station subways. I designed studies for this project but it didn't materialize. This project was headed by Yuchenko. After this I was given a wall in the nurses' building at Kings County Hospital, Brooklyn. I worked on sketches and cartoons for this project for at least a year. These were approved by all concerned and I was about to begin painting on the wall. However, when the head of the hospital saw the sketches, he immediately used his influence to prevent the execution of the mural. He had not been consulted regarding the designs and he expressed disapproval of them. This head of the hospital actually had no background to judge the work and it was unfortunate that his word and judgement carried so much weight to bring the mural to a halt. It was too bad that the supervisor of this project failed to get the approval of the hospital head before I was asked to expend so much effort on my final designs. Incidentally, the designs in color and the cartoons for this mural were exhibited in a show of the murals done under the WPA.

JT: Do you know where the sketches are now?

PG: I don't know. However, some time ago someone told me that one of these sketches was seen in a houseboat on the Seine.

JT: All this must have been frustrating. But when did you finally come to do a mural?

PG: While I was still on the WPA I was submitting designs for the Section of Fine Arts competitions which I did on my own time. Burgoyne Diller gave me a mural to do in the Community Building of the Queensbridge Housing Project on Long Island. I worked on the design and cartoons for about a year. Everything was approved and the walls prepared - casein tempera painted on the wall.

JT: When was this?

PG: About 1938. Holger Cahill asked me through Diller to do the outdoor facade mural of the WPA Building at the World's Fair. I stopped work on the Queens mural and began working on the Fair mural which was finished on schedule in time for the opening of the Fair.

JT: How long did this job take? What was the medium?

PG: It took about four or five months which was due to the very valuable assistants I was given and also the

wonderful cooperation I received in the way of providing materials and scaffolding and so forth. The medium was a new material just developed for outdoor work, chlorinated rubber base paint used directly on the cement wall.

JT: Did you go back then to the Queens mural?

PG: Yes, and I completed it, a forty foot wall, in 1940.

JT: How does the mural look to you today?

PG: Terrible! It has been repainted completely by some commercial artist. I am attempting to either have my name removed or the repainting removed if that is possible. And if this is not possible, I want the whole thing obliterated since in its present state it is not my work. This matter is still pending. With the completion of this mural, I got off the project because I had won some competitions in the Section of Fine Arts - quite a number of murals.

JT: What are they?

PG: The Commerce, Georgia, Post Office; Laconia, New Hampshire Forestry Building. This latter project consisted of two panels - one was designed and executed by my wife, Musa McKim, and the other by myself. My wife, on her own, did several other murals for the Section of Fine Arts. Then in 1940 and 1941 we moved out of New York City and came to Woodstock where we did the Laconia murals and several murals for the Presidents Lines, which were later turned into troop ships. I then went to teach at the University of Iowa where I finished the mural for the Social Security Building in Washington, D.C., in 1942 or 1943, I'm not sure which. With the exception of some visual aid material for the navy flight program in Iowa - navigational maps, etc. - this marks the end of the mural period.

JT: What was your main stylistic influence up to this time?

PG: The Renaissance chiefly - Piero, Mantegna, Uccello - but I was attracted also by the modern idioms - Leger, Picasso - and was close to the abstract painters on the project such as Stuart Davis, Burgoyne Diller, Arshile Gorky, Balcomb Greene, etc. At the time I did the Queens project, there was already a marked change in my work - it was becoming more concerned with cubist concepts of treating space.

JT: How would you evaluate this whole experience of the federal art projects? First, in relation to your own development and second, in relation to the development of American Art?

PG: To answer your first question - most significantly the project was my training ground in the real sense of the word. I feel very strongly about this. We were all poor, or most of us, and to have the time and opportunity to continue working - I was then in my twenties which is the important period - the crucial period for the young painter. This was most important and figures significantly in my own development. Although I feel that my personal image as a painter did not come about until I began my easel painting with personal imagery which was about 1941. The project kept me alive and working - it was my education.

JT: Were the projects a good thing for American art?

PG: I have two thoughts. That practically all of the best painters of my generation developed on the projects such as Pollock, de Kooning, Brooks, Hague (sculptor), B. Greene, and Baziotes. I could go on and on. My second thought is that the reason it was good is that it had a broad base due to the economic situation we were in - the depression - and all kinds of art and styles, plus all degrees of talent were employed. Everybody was given an opportunity to prove himself. The many painters I mentioned above who have come such a long way is proof of this.

JT: Would you favor government sponsorship of art today?

PG: That's all right with me. But it couldn't be the same thing because it would not have the broad base for the young and unknown talent to come up. The Federal Art Project was a wonderful thing for that period.

END OF PHILIP GUSTON INTERVIEW