Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Sylvester Jerry, 1965 June 11

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 Sylvester Jerry on June 11, 1965. The interview took place at the Wustum Museum of Fine Arts in Racine, Wisconsin, and was conducted by Harlan B. Phillips for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's New Deal and the Arts project.

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

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: The flight was rough from Omaha. So this thing looks like it's functioning. So we should be all set to see Mr. Jerry. [Audio break.]

As I indicated, a good way to begin is to fence in a kind of background which will identify you as interests unfold, and as chance comes along and throws you in one direction, rather than another. Yeah, we're all set.

SYLVESTER JERRY: Well, I became interested in WPA in about 1935, when I met a Mrs. Holzhauer out of New York. She was coming through on a train to Chicago to see a Mrs. Increase Robinson. She dropped off in Kalamazoo to pay a visit because I had several contacts with her at art association meetings in the past. And so, that particular Sunday, when she did drop in, to see what the gallery was at the Kalamazoo Art Institute, why, after visiting the gallery, we had an informal talk, and at which time she asked me whether I would be interested in working for the WPA. I—it took me some time to think about the actual problem of being connected with the WPA, but in about a week I said I would join the WPA, and—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: What were the considerations that went through your mind?

SYLVESTER JERRY: First of all, I'm a native of Milwaukee, and our background in Milwaukee has been rather—we had—as a youngster, I'd lived under city government, which was socialist by nature. And people there—somehow I was imbued with the idea of this business of government and humanity had some relationship, that government was for the people. And so when this program was suggested, and they were looking for somebody to help allocate this money and get people to work, somehow the idea of art, money, and people joined together. And so, I made up my mind to take the position, and in several weeks, I received a telegram from Mr. Cahill, saying I was appointed to state director of the Michigan WPA Art Program.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: What did you fall heir to?

SYLVESTER JERRY: I—with some—I gave up a position which—with a small art gallery, which had been very good to me, had sent me off to Europe in '31, sent me off to study the Armenian Republic in 1934, which turned out to be a grand tour of Europe, visiting Germany, Russia. And studying the Russian government, incidentally, which was a part of this particular tour, which was given as a grant by one of the people in Kalamazoo.

Well, when I got back—when I started off to Detroit, I didn't know what to expect. I got into Detroit and got to the WPA headquarters. They were somewhat hesitant as to where this Project was, or where the location of the Project was. So, I traveled out, I believe it was Fourth Street—was it Fourth Street? It was north on Woodward Avenue, on a side street. It was in the Colored area of Detroit, and I found an old building. And in this building, some people were puttering around doing posters. They were doing all sorts of strange art projects, but nothing in the nature that I would consider as art.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

SYLVESTER JERRY: Because my background in art was the Layton School of Art, Milwaukee,

and I had spent three years at the Art Students League of New York, studying with people like Boardman Robinson, and Tom Hart Benton, John Carroll. And I spent one year living at Woodstock, New York, painting and as a painter and not as a museum person, I was somewhat struck by the low level of the type of thing that was being done at—when I arrived at this particular Project. It seemed to be a very disorganized mess. People on the payroll primarily for the sake of a check, rather than for the production and the enhancement of public institutions.

[00:05:00]

So, the first problem I had to face was to look over the roster of people available in the Detroit area, and then spread north to the large industrial areas, such as Flint, Lansing, Michigan, Ann Arbor, and then, to the northern belt, Iron Mountain. I found that very sharply there were people available that needed assistance, and many of these people—the key people—arrived on the program as supervisory help. In Detroit, the first person I hired was a Mr. Cashuan [ph]. In the painting field was Gerald Mast. In Iron Mountain it was Aarre Lahti. And all through the program, we had these key people who were producing artists but had no particular market at that time, either in the educational field or in the sales of their particular art forms.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

SYLVESTER JERRY: I found by getting a nucleus of rather brilliant people in the arts—what I would say is probably the finest people available in Det—in Michigan—we were able, with that as a nucleus, to take the relief people from the—pick the people from the relief roles, and by supervision and direction, create works which I felt as time went on we were actually in the production business of giving the public more than we received, in terms of moneys.

The next big job was to find locations for works of art. And so, we contacted institutions that were about to create buildings, or buildings that needed decorative elements. And in all these cases, the people were more—the heads of the institutions were more than interested in our services. One of the big contacts that we had was the Michigan State College, which gave us sculpture works, new buildings were being built very rapidly under the direction of—I believe it was Dr. Hanna [ph]—and that was one of our points where many things were functioning in all areas. They could use our services if it had a quality mark, and we were glad of their cooperation, and we cooperated very gladly with them.

We found that out-state it was somewhat difficult to centralize people in groups. And so, the only major project we had was Iron Mountain, where we found one of the fine creative designers of America, Aarre Lahti, who—Finnish, by background—was able to develop Finnish looms, develop a factory for churning out Venetian blinds, wood products of all kinds, and weaving of all kinds for public institutions. One of the big jobs where we had much collaboration was the Western State Teachers College at Kalamazoo. We created a wall out of—walls out of plaster, carved in-size plaster. The drapery. And towards the late part of the '30s, we were in the furniture design business. And I shouldn't say business, but we were very competitive with design furniture created anywhere in America.

On our program, we had several young people who had the ability to design—contemporary, in those days. And I remember several of the public buildings not only utilized our services in the making of rugs, furnishing, draperies, the actual furniture, and murals, or whatever sculpture was needed to enhance the building. One such a project was the—a center in Kalamazoo, in which we created many things to make a center, I believe, for the Colored people there. This was done back in 1938.

[00:10:00]

And it seemed to me that by combining all the elements of the arts—the crafts, plus the painting and sculpture elements—an ordinary building could be made quite extraordinary looking. And I think the people who enjoyed the use of these buildings felt that something more than just utility had entered into the actual construction of that particular place.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Let me help you out.

SYLVESTER JERRY: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: When you spoke with Mildred Holzhauer—

SYLVESTER JERRY: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —did she give any indication of what the design, conceivably, might be for Michigan?

SYLVESTER JERRY: No.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: She did not.

SYLVESTER JERRY: No, I walked in cold into this program, and after the first few weeks, I wondered how I'd given up a rather comfortable position in Kalamazoo, which, to me, had friendly support in the community, for a program that was quite indefinite at the time, but which would formulate as time went on, and was a question of our imagination. To develop programs around the kind of capacities or experiences that the artists or craftsmen had. So, it was a—it was two functions, really. One was to have ideas to furnish to sponsors, as to enhance their institutions, secondly was—the problem was to find personnel capable to execute this particular type of program.

One of the very fine things we did in Detroit—I think, one of the outstanding things for our program—was that we gave a young painter, David Fredenthal, his first opportunity on the WPA. He arrived on the WPA program a youngster out of—I believe, out of the Cass Technical High School. He needed assistance. He painted his first fresco at the Detroit Naval Armory. And today, of course—as the years disappeared, David Fredenthal emerged as one of the outstanding American painters. I'm amazed at the young people who had their first opportunity on the program and who have flourished, and today, of course, are instructors in many Michigan universities.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: What did Mrs. Holzhauer sketch to you as—you fell heir to something the nature of which, as you put, was indefinite. Where did she indicate the central agency would be of assistance to you? What ways could she help you?

SYLVESTER JERRY: We operated most days—the first years of operations, operations were out of Washington. Holger Cahill was the national director, and I found him a very sympathetic man. Several times he visited Detroit to project things, and I found that without the assistance of the Washington people, we would have been left very much on our own. That is, it would have been purely a relief program, and not a program with art as one of our objectives first, and secondly, of course, the problem of feeding people and having artists carry on under a depressed period.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. But the—in short, when you walked into this office in Detroit, something had just emerged without a sense of direction.

SYLVESTER JERRY: Yeah, I found it was somewhat confusing when I walked into this office in Detroit. And we immediately hired key personnel, as rapidly as we could.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Did she give you this indication that you could look for and staff for supervisory help?

SYLVESTER JERRY: Nobody gave us that. We got that in Detroit, at the relief office.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I see.

SYLVESTER JERRY: I did go to the relief office. We combed the files. Everything that was available, we combed, for anybody or anything that looked like an artist, a sculptor, an automobile striper.

[00:15:05]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

SYLVESTER JERRY: House painter—anything that was called painting. We took everything we could find and placed them on the program, and then, tried to make a place for them within the capacities, or whatever their experiences were that would fit in with our type of program. In some cases, a man possibly did one type of job in industry, and in the field of sculpture, for instance, we had many assistants—men who would build the armatures, men who would do the casting, men who were not artisans—artists, in the strict sense of the word. But where assistance was needed, these men, having had some experience in the

trades, were very helpful in the creation of large sculptures, for instance. Many of these people—while their capacities were not in the art field, we needed their services in order to function.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: In other words, it's like staffing yourself with an internal production unit—

SYLVESTER JERRY: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —for all kinds of skills.

SYLVESTER JERRY: All types of skills were needed. And I know one of the projects that we did—I believe one of the major projects we did in Michigan was the Index of American Design. And the thing that amazed me about the Index of American Design in Michigan: the people who were turning out the very fine plates—which are now part of the Smithsonian collection, I believe, in Washington—were people who were not essentially creative, in the strict sense of the word, but who could reproduce miraculously. In fact, so miraculously that I think the plates produced are far beyond color photography. So, it was a question of adapting skills to certain needs that were needed at that time, to keep the Project functioning.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

SYLVESTER JERRY: The whole theory I worked on as we progressed was that we were not a relief program. I may have had an illusion about the whole thing. I felt that we were spending federal money, and our problem was to produce things that had, first of all, artistic merit, but secondly, were of a utilitarian nature, so that the recipient—the institution—felt that they were receiving something of—a material thing, of—something of a material nature for their institution. I just felt it was—we were running a business, in the end, of turning out art. We had services to offer the public. The problem is, what did the public want, and where were the places available? And if places were available or services were asked for, we would go right out and consult with them, make sketches, and show them, definitely, how they can improve their structure and give it a touch—an artistic touch which was totally lacking in some of those buildings. In plain words, we enhanced simple structures and gave something more than was present at that time.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: When you looked over the state—like, Lansing, where the university was, or Ann Arbor, was it an effort to create an organization in Ann Arbor? Did you find directors for the local organizations, or it was simply the isolation of a job that could be done and people locally who could do it? How was this handled?

SYLVESTER JERRY: Our projects were housed—our projects in Michigan were housed in only two quarters—three quarters. We—our major program was in the Detroit area, where the bulk of the workers were. A small project was in Flint, and the third project was at Iron Mountain, Michigan. Out-state, in many of the areas, the artists would be on the program, but that particular artist would, in many cases, be an easel painter—

[00:20:01]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

SYLVESTER JERRY: —who would be working on his own, turning in so many works over a period of time. But in the Detroit area and the Iron Mountain area, we were primarily concerned with actual works that would be placed as a part of buildings. Many cases, we collaborated with architects who were building the buildings—who were designing the buildings, and who felt that funds were not available to give another touch to the building. So, in many cases, such as Western State Teachers College at Kalamazoo, when a building with about—it was about to be erected—they were vitally interested in what services we could offer.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

SYLVESTER JERRY: And so our men who were designers, such as Mr. Lahti in the furniture and craft area, Mr. Cashuan [ph] in Detroit, in charge of sculpture, Mr. Mast in charge of murals, their services were called—they were called in as consultants, and they would recommend that certain types of things be placed. And it would be up to the institution, at their discretion, to pick and choose that which we had to offer. But in many cases, we

offered a package job. We would offer the arts and the crafts, as a unit, so that the building would be much better looking. But as a final—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But the—yeah. Yeah.

SYLVESTER JERRY: —achievement.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: This whole relationship with architects is a new one, the—isn't it? I mean, they don't generally think in decoration or decorative terms.

SYLVESTER JERRY: I feel—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: That's overdrawn, perhaps.

SYLVESTER JERRY: No, I feel that, in the '30s, the amounts of money that were available for public buildings were limited. And the decorative elements, the arts, were an outside thing, which would—it would have been thought of, but not actually executed at that time because of the lack of funds.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

SYLVESTER JERRY: It was a question of moneys, actually. And I felt that we were a force in the sense that we could add this one element that was lacking, because of the type of people we had available and the fact that these people, by experience which they had gained on this program, were in a position now to execute works as collaborators with architects. I felt it was a very fine training program.

In fact, aside from the amount of work that was turned out—which is still in existence—the artist had his first opportunity to work with an architect, and—on a mass basis, I mean. Of course, it's—there's always been this opportunity for artists to work with architects. But here was a chance for an architect who wanted his building to be something more than just a building. He had a chance to have it enhanced, and these services were available as a gift of the federal government. And so, a building which was just an ordinary structure when it suddenly had a carving on the exterior, wall carvings on the interior, murals on the halls or in the auditoriums, furnishings in rooms, wall draperies, and things that the budgets of those institutions would not have been able to have handled.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I see.

SYLVESTER JERRY: They would not have been able to have handled that.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: In short, you—it's like waving the red flag in front of the bull, in a sense. The intrigue—whet his appetite with this packaged arrangement—

SYLVESTER JERRY: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —which you had organized in Detroit and Iron Mountain—

SYLVESTER JERRY: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —as the two major centers.

SYLVESTER JERRY: We felt that, in selling the work—just to sell one work was somewhat of an insulated phenomenon, because these people would not be aware of our entire program. And when we would consult with the superintendent of schools or the president of college, by making an awareness of our entire program, we could offer a multitude of services. And by using all of our services, we could complete a structure to our satisfaction, and we hoped, to the satisfaction of the community.

[00:25:06]

The plan was, we were trying to do—to make an artwork out of something which would have just been pieces before, and now it was an entity.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Tell me this, were there varying degrees of receptivity to—well, put it this way: I would assume that the whole concept of sponsorship comes in here.

SYLVESTER JERRY: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: That is, the—take the Teachers College—was in a position where some percentage of payment for the materials to be used would be involved.

SYLVESTER JERRY: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: They were aware of this and—

SYLVESTER JERRY: Oh, yes. The payment—the institutions that were the sponsors made their contribution according to the federal regulation—whatever it was in the particular—at that particular time. No, they were aware of the costs involved. And the only thing that they felt was that—in making our presentation, we'd give them a clear-cut picture of what we were about to execute, and of course, the costs involved.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, yeah. How much did this—discretion did this leave them? Put it this way: I'm not aware that a university president of whatever kind is necessarily artistically inclined. His notion of what constitutes interior decoration or decoration of any kind may very well conflict with, you know, a group that is organized and designed to enhance.

SYLVESTER JERRY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: That is, what might please the shop might be not acceptable to a—for example, a sponsor. How much discretion did he have? Or, this was an educational project, too, in this sense, I would suppose.

SYLVESTER JERRY: In most cases, the actual evaluation of our project was turned over to somebody who was familiar with art in the institution. The power of whether or not the project was approved depended upon some individual who had an art background in the institution. And if the individual who approved it, why, the head of the institution would approve the program.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: So that the negotiations, to the extent any existed at all, was between the project and someone who was knowledgeable in the field?

SYLVESTER JERRY: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

SYLVESTER JERRY: The person had a background of the arts, that we dealt with.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But even there, the power of a persuasive presentation is—well, did you run into any—I don't want this to sound like I'm digging for something that was nonexistent, but in other areas, efforts were made for sponsorship and upon occasion, the—a mural, for example, where the artist was granted opportunity to draw preliminary sketches, or even a model of what ultimately might be there—freely, artistic freedom—did not meet the requirements—the artistic requirements or pleasure of the sponsoring agency. And you know, you come against the old difficulty of a sponsor, a patron, and an artist who is simply, you know, free.

SYLVESTER JERRY: No, in presenting a project, we usually made a very close sketch of the thing. In many cases, we practically made a facsimile of the room, or the building upon which a sculpture was to be placed. One of the big projects was the Lansing Waterworks. We did, I think, a figure—my memory is somewhat dim. It could be about 30 feet high, in poured concrete, on the front of the building. And as you entered the building, a fountain was created—a ceramic fountain. And on the walls of—leading to the second floor, a mural painting was placed. Well, in this type of project, a model was created, so that the sponsor had some concept of what we were doing.

[00:30:02]

And then, once the word was given, why, we would go proceed. The Lansing Waterworks was one of our very fine projects, we felt, because we had, up to that time, never executed a work in the poured concrete. And the problem there was to create a figure, which is on the front facade—I think you must go back about a block in space to view this figure, it's so large. The problem we had was to create the lower section and keep in mind that they were

pouring every day. And so sections would be delivered—and try to keep in mind what the—when the, possibly, the head was poured—the section that contained the head—and all the relationships of the figure were kept in mind.

And so, the artist had a real problem of projecting this thing from a very small model to this very huge thing, which finally was erected. And of course, we were so amazed. Each time a section would be poured, it was a plaster cast that we made, reinforced with two by fours on the—in the pouring, of course, the wall—the section would be backed by sandbags and a steel construction to hold the thing from the pressure of the actual wall. And so, we ran into problems—engineering problems that we knew nothing about.

And so, the one thing I found in taking on big, large projects was that we gained a type of experience not available, up to that time, for us, because many of the artists up to that time had been doing small projects—sculptures that you'd probably place in your home, or easel paintings. And suddenly, we are out doing figures of 30, 40 feet in height, monuments 20—well, 15 feet, at least. I think we did a Father Richard for one of the Detroit parks. The sculptor involved, Leonard Jungwirth, up to that time, had executed, possibly, very small sculptures in the field of ceramics. And suddenly here he was carving a huge figure out of black granite. And so, we were projecting things far beyond the—far beyond what the artist had done up to that period. In fact, we were creating an opportunity, or a challenge for the artist. We were giving him a chance to see if he could execute, on a large scale, things that he always had imagined that he was able to do, but never had the opportunity.

I feel the program was a genuine opportunity for people who had capacity and imagination to try their abilities on a large scale. Although we painted large murals at Royal Oak, one of the big projects we painted was a small town called—I believe it's Clare, Michigan—central Michigan, as you travel north from Lansing. The superintendent of schools there was very excited about mural painting. And so we had four huge walls—vertical walls. And much to our amazement, Mr. Gerald Mast painted these at the Detroit Art Institute. We had no place large enough to scale—or, high enough, rather, for the placement of these panels. So, they were executed in Detroit, and they were taken to Clare and mounted with white lead—I believe is what we used as an adhesive in those days—and placed on the walls. And a small community there had a very beautiful set of murals.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Take the mural of the waterworks.

SYLVESTER JERRY: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: What's the criteria, from the office point of view, of choosing an artist for a specific task?

SYLVESTER JERRY: We had people that did certain types of murals, and I believe the project—like the waterworks, the artist that was involved there—his name escapes me now. He's one of the instructors at one of the universities in Michigan. He had never executed a mural up to that time.

[00:35:05]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

SYLVESTER JERRY: And I—as I remember, it dealt with elements of water. And so, looking over his easel paintings, Mr. Mast, who was the supervisor, decided that this man was most capable in the direction that we wanted to paint. And so, he was assigned the project, and the project was executed. The entrance, the water fountain, was done by Claudia Caulder [ph], I believe is the name, and she, up to that time, had been executing very small ceramics. And here was a change to do a fairly large, good-sized ceramic, with water as the theme.

Mr. Cashuan [ph] who executed the exterior of the building—who, actually, is a very small man in size, not small in ideas—but always had ideas of building huge things. Here was the opportunity of a lifetime to execute, probably, the tallest sculpture he has created—that he has ever created. It was an opportunity at—when the man had—men indicated they had certain capacities, the opportunity was afforded them and away they would go. And much to everybody's amazement, the challenge was accepted. In most cases, I would say, the product was very excellent—it was excellent.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, when you spoke earlier that you designed and ran an effective business, it was in the total enhancement of buildings of a public nature.

SYLVESTER JERRY: We were not—we found that just creating easel pictures, the easel pictures just piled up. And marketing easel pictures was a job in itself, trying to get these out and give them away to public institutions. But when you look at the architectural units that were created, I feel that the money was far better invested in that area, because there you could see the whole unit, rather—you could see the walls, you could see the floors. You could see all the things that were executed to enhance the building, and that made an entity. Where just an easel picture could be stuck out in a hall someplace, just another thing they might hide someday or stick in the basement. Where, a large project that, once it was out, it was out, and it was viewed by the general public. I think, in spending federal funds in those days, these large projects gave the taxpayer a better opportunity to see where his money was going.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

SYLVESTER JERRY: And he could view these things, where a little easel painting could be in the hall, or in the school, or in an office someplace of a tech support agency, but not accessible to the general mass of people.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. You know, you raised the interesting wrinkle of the nature of the function was a responsibility for spending the funds—tax funds of citizens, and therefore, they should have some larger participation than in just, as you put it, an ephemeral work like an easel painting.

SYLVESTER JERRY: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Something which was permanent, established, part of a building becomes part of their total awareness now [inaudible]. But it's a way in which—

SYLVESTER JERRY: We also ran into other projects at—as time went on. We also got into the graphic area, and under the direction of Charles Pollock, who is now on the staff at the University of—no, Michigan State University. We turned out some very excellent silk-screen posters.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

SYLVESTER JERRY: I think, actually, Mr. Pollack is a very capable designer in the field of graphics, and this gave him an opportunity to find a way to get his talents out before the public. As the Charles Pollack we had is the brother of the famous Jackson Pollock of the drip school and so forth— painting, and is internationally-known.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

SYLVESTER JERRY: I think the thing that made our Project, really, in Michigan, was the key supervisory personnel. The leadership that they afforded.

[00:40:04]

These men were well-grounded, and they set a pace to be emulated by the other artists and by the younger artists, so that as the program progressed, the quality went up, and up, and up, until the time when I left, I thought we were actually producing things not as a relief agency, but as an office where services were asked for and the products were of such a quality that we were no longer a relief program, but we were a servicing agency of quality work.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm. Well, did the demand reach the point where it exceeded the—did you have work ahead?

SYLVESTER JERRY: Yes. I think what happened, actually, in our case, the—once you execute a good project, other people got excited by it, and one project led to another. And I think the big problem was, in the beginning, when we had nothing to show. I remember going, when I first arrived in Detroit, to popularize the program, we took over the rooms of the Scarab Club, and instead of a WPA show, we put on an exhibition of the works, executed by the artists on the program, to give the general public—or any agency that wanted to look—an

opportunity to see the kind of talent that was on the program. And we invited thousands of people, and we had a mass of people come to the Scarab Club to see this particular showing. It was like an art exhibit of the individual artists so that the clients—who are, in this case, tech support agencies—could see, actually, what the variety of works were available of our staff, actually.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: So, there was this, you know, overall educational program—

SYLVESTER JERRY: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —to—yeah.

SYLVESTER JERRY: I think the first part of our program—the first six months, we had to acquaint not only the state, but the agencies that could use our service that we had this kind of a program available. And it was somewhat a mystery, I think, to many people in the beginning, because they'd heard of a theater program, and they'd heard of a writers' program. They wondered what was coming out. But the arts, I think, was just a kind of a type of spectacular program, because there it was, right before your eye. You could go out and look at the agency, and see the work, and view it, and you would see, actually, where your actual dollars were being spent.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Hm. Well, it makes sense.

SYLVESTER JERRY: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: It makes an enormous amount of sense.

SYLVESTER JERRY: I've always liked—I've always liked the idea that as the program progressed we were not just a relief program, but we were a program where people did things. The program, while it afforded food to the artists, it—the biggest thing it did was to afford him the opportunity to work in his chosen field, and to have places to execute these works, and the opportunity, also, that this particular work or works would be seen by an audience. To me, that's one of the important things, I think, the government did, by giving institutions the art works, so that the entire program could be viewed. And I think, as I look back over the years, I feel that the art program probably gave as much to the general public and the taxpayers as any program that was involved—that evolved during that period.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Now, part of this pattern was draperies, fabrics—

SYLVESTER JERRY: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: design—

SYLVESTER JERRY: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —and weaving.

SYLVESTER JERRY: We wove at Iron Mountain. We had Finnish looms, developed by Aarre Lahti. And in the—in that area, the Upper Peninsula area—pardon me.

[00:45:00]

The Upper Peninsula area was one of the very difficult places to have programs. So, up there, we took a whole corps of Indians, and made a project in the area of crafts. We developed skis, we developed snowshoes. We developed many of the wooden benches that were seen on the highways of the state of Michigan. So, we tried to develop projects of a practical nature, based on the skills of the workers.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, was there any historical background for weaving, fabrics, drapery in Michigan? This—or is this learning a whole new—

SYLVESTER JERRY: We found that Mr. Lahti was probably one of the most exciting young men that we had met on the program. And he had all these ideas of how to develop looms, how to make things, and he had the skill to create the equipment, plus, take untrained people, training them to turn out these products which, I think, were as good in their day as anything on the market.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But in the design of furniture, Michigan has not been backward in the—

SYLVESTER JERRY: No.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —[inaudible] of furniture, by a long shot.

SYLVESTER JERRY: No. We backed into furnishings—uh, we're seated on WPA furniture, incidentally. [They laugh.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: They're marvelous.

SYLVESTER JERRY: This is all WPA, and that's 25 years ago. You can see how it's stood up.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

SYLVESTER JERRY: It's never been repaired, and it's still functioning.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I'll be darned.

SYLVESTER JERRY: We got into the furnishing area because we had a vast group of workers, and we had no way of assimilating those people. They had skills, but they were not creative the arts. And so, in order to create a craft program that would make sense, we had designers create furnishings, on demand, and then we trained these people to churn out the types of furniture that you see here, in this room—similar types.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And this didn't unduly conflict with the [inaudible] [cross talk]—

SYLVESTER JERRY: No. We were not in competition with private industry.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: You weren't?

SYLVESTER JERRY: No. Our whole interest was to create something for an institution that had no resources—no financial resources. Where an institution had sufficient moneys, it was up to them to go out in the market and buy. And ours was merely a supplementary service to agencies that would have had nothing. But having a few dollars, or even, in some cases, having private donors give it to the institution, were they able to have the kind of thing that made their building somewhat more habitable.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Oh, yeah, but was there any pressure brought, at all, by Grand Rapids and the furniture business?

SYLVESTER JERRY: No, no. No.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: That's very interesting, because in other areas—that's plural—there is another area in which a glass blowing factory was established in New Jersey.

SYLVESTER JERRY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Making glass objects, vases and so on, for hospitals and high schools, and so on. Corning Glass in New Jersey was the manufacturer of glass retorts for chemistry and biochemistry, and the more sophisticated thing. Well, they objected to this as a kind of competitive thing, and it was apparently squashed upon that ground. But here's an instance in which an industry with a history and a background did not operate in such fashion as to deny some who couldn't afford their furniture an opportunity to get furniture.

SYLVESTER JERRY: Well, thing that I was interested mainly, in any of the furnishings that we executed, was that the chief opportunity went to the designer.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah [laughs]. Well, combine them.

SYLVESTER JERRY: Then, we combine the skills of the workers—in many case, the nondescript skills of the workers—to function and execute the designs of—in the field of furnishings, which would have been probably a rug or a chair, or something of a craft nature.

[00:50:00]

The big problem I found on WPA was to take skills which were not too well-defined and make them into a team, that when they collaborated together as a team, they would execute

something. They probably had no idea of the design of the thing, which was essentially done by somebody who had great skill. But by all working together as a team, the actual output created something that was quite miraculous when it was executed.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Well, and then the effect on them, of being part of a—

SYLVESTER JERRY: Of a useful—they were doing something that was useful. They could see this, and I think it gave a pride to the people who were part of the program, to know that when they finished whatever the project was that they were working on, when they could see this in a public building, it was a real thrill.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Let me turn this over. I've got some more things I want—

SYLVESTER JERRY: I have repeat—

[END OF TRACK AAA_jerry65_8703_m.]

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yesterday when I flipped this tape over to this side when I was talking with Sylvester Jerry, for some reason or other the blasted thing didn't record. The only addition, which came at the very end, was to the effect that in '38, when the state took over control of the Project from Washington, they were suddenly inundated with a lot of unskilled workers. It was this fact that created the production unit. They had defined means of using them. Accordingly, they went into the production business under the state. Or as compelled by state control, where they suddenly received a lot of people whom ordinarily they would not have accepted.

[END OF TRACK AAA_jerry65_8704_m.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]