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Oral history interview with Raymond
Jonson, 1964 Apr. 23

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Raymond Jonson on April 23, 1964. The interview took place in Albuquerque, New Mexico and was conducted by Sylvia Glidden Loomis 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. Additional information from the original transcript that seemed relevant was added in brackets and given an -Ed. attribution. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

SYLVIA LOOMIS: This is an interview with Mr. Raymond Jonson at the Jonson Gallery on the campus of the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, on April 23, 1964. The interviewer is Mrs. Sylvia Loomis of the Santa Fe office of the Archives of American Art. The building in which the interview takes place was built in 1949 as a resident studio repository and gallery for Mr. Jonson, his work, and his paintings. And I will interrupt the interview at this time to ask Mr. Jonson to explain the broader purpose of the gallery.

RAYMOND JONSON: The statement that you have just made is, of course, entirely too brief because there are so many various facets involved in the setup for the entire project. And there are certain things that we have learned during the last 14 years in which we have occupied this space. The original concept for the establishment occurred in 1947. During a rather sudden, unexpected discussion with the president of the university at that time, Dr. Phillip Wernette, who at present is connected with the University of Michigan. He encouraged me to proceed to the extent of working out a tentative proposal for him, and the board of regents, to see. And this was done. And further encouragement was given to the extent of suggesting that I work out a final plan for their approval. This was done, and it was approved unanimously.

That was enough encouragement for me, so I went to work. The property that we owned in Santa Fe was turned over at the university. Approximately 400 works of mine were given to the university as the nucleus for the permanent collection. A collection of 95 works by other artists was presented to the university as a further inducement. And then the job developed of working out a building plan that would take care of the needs of the works that will be moved into it and the future. The needs at that time were adequately taken care of. But unfortunately, we didn't look far enough ahead, so that it became necessary later on to add to the building—that is, add on to the lower floor so that we acquired some additional storage space. Therefore, at present, there are three storerooms, housing approximately 1500 works made up of four different collections. First, foremost, and most important, necessary is a collection called Jonson Reserve Retrospective collection, which has just recently been—a matter of fact, last year it had been completely revamped, and brought entirely up to date. The original retrospective ended with 1949. Now it ends with 1963. And in this collection there are 432 works, mostly paintings, some drawings, and watercolors and temperas.

In addition to that collection, there is a group of 83 works done in connection with the theater. That is true. The second important collection is the one at present is called Works by Other Artists, which numbers 170-some. The fourth collection is made up of 350—or thereabouts—examples of works done by students in my classes here at the university over a period of some 20 years.

The main thought underlying the project dealt with the present primarily because that was tangible. But it also took into consideration not only the near future but the distant future, not necessarily as far as the physical plant itself is concerned. But the idea and the ideal, which was to at least attempt to set up a situation which would be a demonstration of an artist who had at least a few practical ideas, not only in connection with the work that he was doing but in connection with the work that other artists were doing.

[00:05:12]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: So, that we might say that part of the idea of consistent upon drawing together and retaining in one place, a fairly adequate representation of works, principally Southwest, for preservation.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: During this period of preserving, the intention was to present as many good exhibitions as it would be possible to present in the gallery. The gallery is small. Usually exhibitions made up of from 15 to 25 works, depending, of course, on the sizes. The ultimate hope at the beginning, and still exists, was, and is, that of retaining, to as great an extent as possible, a large enough group of works, preferably representative works of the different phases of the painter himself, namely myself here. Secondly, to show some of the surrounding outside environment that he was connected with, as far as other paintings were concerned, to the extent that he was able to add them to the collection.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: Just three weeks ago, there was hanging in the gallery a group of works that have just recently been added to the collection, added during the last four or five years. And from time to time that kind of an exhibition can take place. There are considerable statements made in some of the documents, pertaining to myself here, that state, to some extent, the hopes for the near, but particularly the distant future. Whether or not those can be carried out remains to be seen. The reserve collection is supposed to be a cross-section of the various types, or periods, or styles, techniques, ideas, and so forth that I have been blessed with during the last 50-some years.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: Most people, I imagine, would say that, rather than having been blessed, you were cursed

SYLVIA LOOMIS: [Laughs.] Well, not what you've done with it.

[Cross talk.]

RAYMOND JONSON: —[laughs] because of the many, many headaches and the seemingly experimental failures, as well as successes, I hope, that—why go to all the bother?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: But if it were possible—and someday it probably will be—to make the deluxe selection of, say, 200 at present—if I live another 25 years, we'll make it 400—works.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: In order to show this series of steppingstones from the beginning up to the present. Now it happens that, in connection with the present retrospective exhibition, it wasn't necessary to borrow a single work. I could think of no works that were not here that should be in that exhibition because of its importance in the whole story.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: So, all that was necessary was to load up a truck with 69 works and transport them over to the gallery on the other side of the campus.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

RAYMOND JONSON: It would be very simple to have an exhibition in any major city—any city in the United States—by simply loading the whole exhibition right into a van because the cardboards are already between the works in the storerooms, and that has been done because we transported 78 works to Santa Fe eight years ago.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

RAYMOND JONSON: And no damage, and it all worked beautifully.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Fine.

RAYMOND JONSON: Now the—one of the items that is brought up in one of the statements or letters in one of the records here is that, when I had painted my last painting, that the gallery then might well be turned into its name. And that's the reason I asked to have it called the Jonson Gallery, because I didn't know but what a couple of years later I would be dead.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:10:00]

RAYMOND JONSON: Well, I wasn't dead a couple of years later, so the name—and the name remains. It really isn't at present the Jonson Gallery. It's all the university gallery. But the thing I'd had in mind is that when the time comes, here might be an excellent opportunity to study the history of one New Mexico painter, complete—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

RAYMOND JONSON: —with practically all of his work represented in the building, all of his correspondents, all of his records, everything will be right here.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, yes.

RAYMOND JONSON: And anyone who is interested in the research to that extent will have it available to them.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, I actually thought that was what it was now. And I didn't realize until I talked with you the other day that other artists also exhibited there. I thought it—

RAYMOND JONSON: That's right.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —was exclusively for your work, and the history of your work from the time you started. Well, now the—this retrospective show that you have now over in the fine arts gallery, that—was that a complete—the complete retrospective portion of the collection here or was that only a part of it?

RAYMOND JONSON: There are 28 works in that exhibition that are not in the reserved retrospective.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: There are 69 works altogether.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: So, that—

RAYMOND JONSON: I think it's 28.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh [inaudible].

RAYMOND JONSON: 27 or 28 works. So, the major portion of that exhibition is made up of works already in the reserve collection.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, I was going to go on with that, in my little introduction to our discussion this afternoon, to tell about this large retrospective exhibition, which occupies an entire floor of the new fine arts gallery at the university and that a summary of your outstanding career as an artist appears in the 32-page catalog of the exhibition. And that is so complete that it is not necessary for me to question you about your art education and background because this is given in the catalog. But to proceed with the particular aspect of your work that now concerns us, which is your participation in the Federal Art Projects in the 1930s. Now I remember reading that you came to Santa Fe in 1924. Were there many artists in Santa Fe at that time?

RAYMOND JONSON: There were quite a number. We spent the summer of 1922 in Santa Fe, through the insistence of a poet friend, principally because he felt that neither Chicago nor

Peterborough, New Hampshire where we had met, was quite the proper war field for me.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: Or battlefield. And he finally went so far as to say that he would at least assist in paying the rather high cost of such a safari, to the extent of advancing enough for the railroad tickets, to begin with, and the purchase of a few small works during the summer we were there. By the time we had reached the near end of that summer, we decided that John Curtis Underwood was right. Santa Fe for us.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: So, we went back to Chicago and went to work in the hopes of raising enough funds to move onto Santa Fe and build a studio and—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

RAYMOND JONSON: —living quarters with it, which we did. At the time, the—a group of five painters called the *Cinco Pintores* [*Los Cinco Pintores*] were in full bloom.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, is that right? That early?

RAYMOND JONSON: That is correct.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: And that, of course, was quite stimulating because their ideas and their personalities were an entirely different pipe—type to the situation as existed in Chicago.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

RAYMOND JONSON: My friends there—not that they were any less interesting personalities or less interesting painters, they were not. Some of them were absolutely tops, and some of them and myself and more or less won a small percentage of the battle that we fought with the authorities.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Who were the five—

RAYMOND JONSON: The *Cinco Pintores* consisted of—see if I can remember them: Will Shuster, who's still holding forth in Santa Fe; Jozef Bakos—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, yes.

RAYMOND JONSON: —who's still holding forth; Willard Nash, who has been dead many years and worked on the project with me that we will discuss a little bit later.

[00:15:06]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

RAYMOND JONSON: Mruk, Walter Mruk, I believe was a member of the *Cinco Pintores*. And Fremont Ellis, who's still holding forth.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

RAYMOND JONSON: Now Mruk and Nash have departed to the golden fields. The rest of us—the rest of them, are still holding forth as far as I know.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Wasn't John Sloan connected—

RAYMOND JONSON: No, John Sloan had never had anything to do with—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, he didn't?

RAYMOND JONSON: —the *Cinco Pintores*.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

RAYMOND JONSON: He did have a great deal to do with Will Shuster because they were very good friends.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: And with Bakos also.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, what was the first of the Federal Art Projects that you were involved in, Mr. Jonson?

RAYMOND JONSON: The PWAP, the Public Works of Art Project. And I suppose we were all called in. And my first intention was—and it was tentative, and then later, I backed it up—that I not participate. And I felt that it wasn't necessary for me to participate, and perhaps there were others that should have that opportunity. I don't mean that I was living in affluence; I was not. But at that exact moment, you might say, I was called in in connection with taking over class at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

RAYMOND JONSON: So, I had a job—a teaching job—at least for a year.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

RAYMOND JONSON: And as a matter of fact, I took the class—a drawing class of Mr. Kenneth Adams who was going to spend the year in Taos.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, yes.

RAYMOND JONSON: So, that's how I happened to be at the university in New Mexico.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, then, when did you become involved? I mean, you were at some point, weren't you?

RAYMOND JONSON: Yes, very much so. Mr. Nussbaum [ph], who was at the time the director, said that he felt that I should change my mind because it just happens that the university has asked that I put on the Project Mr. Willard Nash and you to do some decorations for the library.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

RAYMOND JONSON: [Inaudible] wonderful opportunity again.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, of course.

RAYMOND JONSON: So, now I said, All right, you may interview me, and I'll accept a position on the Project. [They laugh.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, what type of murals were these? It was a fresco or—

RAYMOND JONSON: These, fortunately, were not frescoes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: The building hasn't been torn down yet, but it will be. They were done on stretched canvas, frame, and hung.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. How many were there?

RAYMOND JONSON: Six each.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: We divided the library into two wings, the west wing and the east wing. The east wings were Willard Nash's, and the west wing was mine. And we thought of doing a long, narrow—or wide, narrow panel to go immediately over the charging counter—I've forgotten what the width is, but something like 30 feet, I believe, or more. But we then—we changed our minds, evidently, because it was never done.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: Willard Nash's were at the same size as mine, so they balanced throughout.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: What were the subjects?

RAYMOND JONSON: I had no subject, to begin with. Whether Nash did or not, I don't know. But it just happened that I had an opportunity going to Chicago for the fair, Century of Progress Fair, which was one of the grandest things that had happened since we came to Santa Fe, unless you might want to include some of the work we had been done.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: Upon seeing the Hall of Science and being quite deeply moved by the many, many things therein, I thought here is my subject: science.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: So, I had already made arrangements that I would not be required to have any evidence of work for the time being. Therefore, I had made no studies, no sketches, and carried on no discussion in connection with the work that would be done—or hopefully be done. So, upon returning back to Santa Fe, after having spent a wonderful session there, I went to work. Therefore, the group based on sciences. The subjects I chose—because they seem to fit in with the scheme—were mathematics, biology, astronomy, engineering, physics, and chemistry.

[00:20:00]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: Willard Nash chose to do athletics. The painting of his that was the same size and balanced my mathematics was called—I called it *Students Going to Class*. This smaller work—this was quite small, 35 by 45—the others were quite large—hung down low, and the others hung up high. The small work was an introduction to the group in each case, just as mathematics was the introduction to my group of sciences, and the students were what Nash's introduction to the athletics. He used football huddle, tennis, swimming, and so forth.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, were these abstract?

RAYMOND JONSON: Mine?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yours.

RAYMOND JONSON: Quite abstract. Not greatly abstract. I think, perhaps almost everybody would be able to guess what they were if they had the list of titles [laughs]—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

[Cross talk.]

RAYMOND JONSON: —in front of them. Not necessarily—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: A few clues, huh?

RAYMOND JONSON: —the titles attached to the particular work.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. Yes. Well, how far had you advanced in your abstractions at that point?

RAYMOND JONSON: Not very far. Because this was in 1933.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

RAYMOND JONSON: '34.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: The works, I believe, were all dated '34, if I remember right.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, then you were—you weren't supervised in this. You just—

RAYMOND JONSON: No.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —were allowed to do exactly what you wanted.

RAYMOND JONSON: Do you want me to go on and—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes. Yes, I would.

RAYMOND JONSON: Then after I realized that I had a fairly good chance of getting something done in connection with it, I suggested to Mr. Baumann [ph], who was field supervisor, that he leave me alone and give me a chance to think this thing through. Because this was to be the first attempt at doing a group of works, which were to go into a certain place for a certain purpose. Everything else that I had done previous to this time was entirely—you might say consisted of aesthetics alone, nothing utilitarian involved.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: So, that was acceptable. So, my good friend, Gus, he would come in, sit down, and I would hide, of course, what I was doing. And we would have a little discussion, and I would learn what some of the other poor strugglers were doing. And altogether it was most enjoyable. One day he came in, I said, Gus, it's planned. I can show you the whole layout. I had made these studies in color—in watercolor—so that I would have something to go by and something to show.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

RAYMOND JONSON: Someplace around the line, I thought, well—it was due to the fact that they were planning an exhibition up at the laboratory, which would be sent to Washington, D.C. of works done on this Project. And this group of works was so bad that some of us felt that we perhaps might well try to pep it up a little bit as far as quality was concerned.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: So, someplace along the line—I think it was Davis Myers [ph] comes into the scene. It seems to me that he was a field supervisor for a while, maybe at first, I believe. Anyhow, he was on the Project somewhere or another. And I've forgotten now, unfortunately, who the people were that we approached for the work. These were painters who were doing large works to go into some building. And therefore, we had no small—there were no small works of ours that were available for this group to be sent—to be added to this group to go to Washington, D.C.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: So, some of us then donated the work.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And that was—

RAYMOND JONSON: Including myself.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

RAYMOND JONSON: And that work today hangs here at the university.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh. Well, now, these weren't the sketches that you were doing—

RAYMOND JONSON: No, no. No. No. No.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —this was another piece of work.

RAYMOND JONSON: Another piece of work.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

RAYMOND JONSON: At this time, I may not even have started one of the finished works at this stage, quite possibly. Because the thing dragged out quite a bit with [inaudible]. I had a little trouble in getting started, but after I finally got it all set, that worked fine. But the large—I remember quite definitely, the large painting—the astronomy—I spent a full month on it. And not working three or four hours a day, long hours, way into the night sometimes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, yes.

RAYMOND JONSON: So, as I say, it dragged on. Not that it dragged on to the end of the WPAP, but it did take considerable time.

[00:25:01]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

RAYMOND JONSON: Mr. Nash—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: —had nothing but trouble.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

RAYMOND JONSON: And it looked as if he would never finish. And that was also a headache because these had to be installed at the same time. We couldn't put up half of it; it wouldn't look right.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: No.

RAYMOND JONSON: And ethically, it wouldn't be right. So, that dragged things on a little bit. And then we finally were completely finished and realized they had to be framed.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

RAYMOND JONSON: And 10 quite large paintings and two medium-sized paintings means a lot of framing.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I should think so.

RAYMOND JONSON: So, that comes along later because I think you're going to bring up the relief project—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

RAYMOND JONSON: —later. Are you?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes. Yes, I am.

RAYMOND JONSON: All right, well, the relief project took care of our framing.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, I see. Well, that was nice that it—

RAYMOND JONSON: Now did I—have I finished—

[Cross talk.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, there was one—

RAYMOND JONSON: Was my answer adequate for this question?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, except that I wanted to know whether or not anyone ever had to approve those sketches of yours?

RAYMOND JONSON: Only Mr. Baumann [ph] himself.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

RAYMOND JONSON: And he looked at them, and he looked at them. He said, I don't see

anything wrong, so they must be all right. Okay, go ahead.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, and you didn't have to—

RAYMOND JONSON: Then I said, Well, now I would like also to finish these without any supervision. He said, That's all right, no reason why you shouldn't. Said, I've seen the sketches. I don't have to see them, I know what you can do, and so forth, and so on. All of which was very pleasant because I knew what could happen to me. Because in those days, I had a tendency, I am quite sure, to be a little bit—maybe more than a little—temperamental.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

RAYMOND JONSON: And the slightest little thing could completely upset me, and it would be just like me to just throw the whole thing overboard, see.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

RAYMOND JONSON: Because if somebody wanted something changed, and I knew that would ruin the work, what would I do?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, and they didn't have to be approved—

RAYMOND JONSON: [Inaudible.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —by the university—

RAYMOND JONSON: Nope. Nope.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —or the library board or anything like—

RAYMOND JONSON: That's correct.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Fine, mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: An ideal situation from beginning to end. Not a single interruption, not a single quarrel, not a single disapproval, no questions asked. Perfect.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes. Well, maybe we could continue from this point on into the WPA days because I assume that's when these things were framed.

RAYMOND JONSON: That's right, '36.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And so, they weren't hung then until '36, is that true?

RAYMOND JONSON: 1936, that's right. Yeah.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And then what happened to them? Are they still there?

RAYMOND JONSON: The—they are, as stated, on canvas so they could be removed, taken off the walls. And they were all removed in 1940, when Vernon Hunter, who had charge of the Project—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

RAYMOND JONSON: —staged a rather comprehensive exhibition in the building—the whole building, which at that time had been turned over to the art department.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: So, some of—the two smaller works had to be removed when the art department acquired the library.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

RAYMOND JONSON: The—because they hung too long, much too low. And the danger of them getting splashed with paint and damaged in one way or another. But the others remain hanging because they were well up, and out of reach.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. And are—

RAYMOND JONSON: And the—our exhibition was in connection with the Butler centennial celebrations.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, yes. Yes.

RAYMOND JONSON: The walls that were built in—a few walls were built in—have remained to the present. And the space that resulted at the entrance was originally our gallery, the art gallery in the university. And I had charge—I was curator of exhibitions there for 10-12 years. And that's where we have had the exhibitions with these paintings of ours seen over the top of the wall because the walls were only about seven or eight feet high, and the room is 16.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. And are they still there?

RAYMOND JONSON: The panels have all been removed, with the possible exception of the football huddle by Nash, which was hanging—still hanging in its original place the last time I was in the building, which isn't too long ago. But what I should say, the last time I went around where I could see that it was still hanging.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And where—

RAYMOND JONSON: The others had been taken down a few times to decorate.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: So, anyhow, you could see how advantageous it is to be able to remove the work from the wall.

[00:30:01]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

RAYMOND JONSON: But even so, one of mine had been somewhat damaged. I think whoever was handling it, they dropped it and dropped it on somebody's head.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, dear.

RAYMOND JONSON: Because the cracks are circular. It looks exactly like the shape of a cranium.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see [laughs].

RAYMOND JONSON: So, anyhow, from time to time, they've comes down. All of mine are down, and they are all in the Jonson Gallery.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, good.

RAYMOND JONSON: And at present, there are two of them hanging. The Physics is hanging in the main entrance over the stairwell. And the Astronomy—the largest one—is hanging in what I call the museum, a room off of the living room in which is housed miscellaneous works, some of them somewhat historical, and furniture, rugs, pieces of sculpture, some Indian pots, et cetera.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see, mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: Nash's are banging around someplace over, probably still in the fine arts building. At one time, I tried to rescue them. I moved them and placed a sign on them to not disturb them. But that didn't last very long. I finally gave up. At one time, there was a project to hang some of them over in the new gym. And we went over and had a conference with the man in charge and allocated spaces for some of these paintings. But nothing ever came of it. I was not able to get a definite word one way or another and finally it just passed out of the picture.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

RAYMOND JONSON: Anyhow, all of the works are either Jonson Gallery or over in the fine

arts building at the university.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, that certainly accounts for those. Well, now were you involved later in any other of the Federal Art Projects?

RAYMOND JONSON: Yes, the relief project.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: Now, this sounds as if all of my grand shenanigans have gone astray, because it sounds as if I was on the relief project because I needed some relief.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: [Laughs.] Yeah.

RAYMOND JONSON: But I needed relief in other matters, not in this way. [Laughs.] Vernon Hunter was a very good friend of mine. I probably have known Vernon longer than anybody else in Santa Fe. Not in New Mexico, because he was born in New Mexico.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: Course I had met him in Chicago before we came out to New Mexico.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

RAYMOND JONSON: Before we came to Santa Fe. So, it was possible for us to be perfectly frank and honest with each other. We were good friends, we understood each other to a considerable extent. One day he came up and called on me. He said, They would like something done at Portales—Eastern New Mexico Junior College, I believe it was called at the time. And he said, I can put on a certain number of non-relief artists to do special jobs. I said, Well, what have you gotten in mind? He said, Well, on the landing in the main stairway in the main building, there are two very fine walls facing each other. And if you would like to undertake, and do something for them, I will put you on the Project payroll.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: I go, Vernon, well, you know just as well as I do, see [laughs], that if I say yes, these are going to be done without you seeing what I'm doing or anybody else, including the president of the college. [Laughs.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Certainly were independent.

RAYMOND JONSON: So—I was naturally independent.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: So, he said, Well, I came prepared to agree to such a proposal. He said, I don't—he said, I trust you. I said, You jolly well better trust me. I said, Also—I think I'm correct, but I think I remember this correctly—I said, Also, if these are a flop, then I don't want them to go to Portales. He said, Well, let's wait till that comes, and then we'll figure out some solution to that [laughs]. I said, All right.

Now again, I'm confronted with a problem of getting started—problem getting started, to orientate myself to the whole situation. I said, The first thing we have to do is I've got to see the place. He said, Sure, we'll drive down and see it. So, down we went. And experienced a slight—what was it called—the Dust Bowl. The dust bowl hit Portales while we were in one of the buildings looking out over the grounds. We saw this black mass, this black sooty-looking [ph]—it looked like clouds, which it wasn't—dust coming from, I suppose, the panhandle.

[00:35:03]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: Well, I—that was miserable. And I decided on the spot that I would not include my experience in Portales in these panels. So, in lieu of the fact that I had nothing to show Mr. Hunter, I said that, Wouldn't you like to work with—you can have a work if you want something. I'd feel better about it if I felt that I was giving something for—for the checks that are arriving. He said, Sure. He said, Let's have some—let's have a drawing, a

watercolor, or something. So, I gave him a watercolor—a drawing.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: Which, when the Project was disbanded, was sent to the Santa Barbara Museum of Art. So, they have it—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Do you remember the name of that?

RAYMOND JONSON: *Monument to Sound*.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, that's the one that I have a copy of, and I've sent it on to Detroit.

RAYMOND JONSON: Oh, it is?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

RAYMOND JONSON: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I found a copy—a duplicate copy at the fine arts gallery in Santa Fe.

RAYMOND JONSON: Oh, yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And then it was done and had some notation that this was a WPA—

RAYMOND JONSON: Oh, yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —work of art.

RAYMOND JONSON: That's right.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: You see, so I got that.

RAYMOND JONSON: Sure. Well, that was funny. Now here was the work, you see, that the met no requirements. It wasn't done for any special purpose, and it sort of carried me over psychologically.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

RAYMOND JONSON: So, I took just as much time as I wanted to. And again, I made two fairly complete, not entirely adequate, studies in color. Again watercolor. These two measured 60 high by 90 wide.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: But you never—you say you did not follow through on this Portales project?

RAYMOND JONSON: Oh, yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, you did follow through?

RAYMOND JONSON: Yeah. Yeah. It was 60 by 90.

[Cross talk.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, I thought—I see.

RAYMOND JONSON: They were carried through. Oh, yes. Yes, indeed. And in due time, they were all completed. So, I called in Vernon and said, Here they are, for better, for worse. I said, I approve of them. Now, what's your decision? I said, You can have them. He looked at them, he said, well—he said, If Mr. Golden feels the same way I do about them, there's no problem in the world at all. Mr. Golden being the president at that time.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

RAYMOND JONSON: I think it was Golden. I had the box made. And on Sunday—they were to be shipped on Monday—on Sunday, the president comes to my back door. I said, Well, you've got here just in time, because tomorrow this time they probably would have been in the box.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: So, I said come on in. I said, I'm holding my breath [laughs]. I said, I have to warn you, two people have okayed them. [Laughs.] Mr. Hunter, the painter. [Laughs.] Now, you have a perfect right to say exactly how you feel about it. If you don't want them, say so, and no hard feelings. He looked at them, and he said, Well, he said, It's unanimous, I agree.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, how nice. [They laugh.]

RAYMOND JONSON: Realize, of course, this is—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: It doesn't surprise me.

RAYMOND JONSON: —somewhat paraphrased, of course, I don't remember the exact wording, but that's what it amounted to.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

RAYMOND JONSON: I said, Well, that's fine. I didn't make the box for nothing. I can use the box to pack it tomorrow, and in due time, Vernon Hunter and myself will be down there for the unveiling ceremonies. And we had unveiling, we had sheets over them at the [inaudible], and they were unveiled.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

RAYMOND JONSON: And it was quite a doings.

Now, you realize that this again was another demonstration. Now, I had given you three. First, the Project here, which has proved to be most successful as far as the perpetrator himself is concerned and is given a great deal of pleasure to a large number of New Mexico painters whose works look very well in the gallery. The other is the WPAP—the PWAP works of art project, where it was proven that it is possible to do that sort of thing under ideal conditions. Third, under all adverse conditions—I mean, there must have been thousands and thousands of the artists and non-artists who also were on the Project simply because they had to have relief, and they could do some simple little things to fulfill the requirements of being on relief, just suffering all kinds of agony going through. And again, I was able to demonstrate that it is possible to carry it. I was—I received checks, so I—this wasn't being done for nothing, don't you see? So, I was really working on the same setup as the person who was practically starving to death and trying to paint a picture at the same time that would be acceptable.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: So, I speak very highly on my own part.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, then—

RAYMOND JONSON: In my experiences with both of them.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, would you say that this opportunity to work at this time benefited your own work [inaudible]—

[00:40:06]

[Cross talk.]

RAYMOND JONSON: Anything that I have ever done that has come along in connection with painting has been a benefit. And certainly, the experiences in connection with both of the projects were the most—most enjoyable. Because not only was it possible to do something under entirely different conditions—and conditions that I had assumed I would not be able to meet—was a real satisfaction.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. Yes. Well, were you—did it happen to be allowed any innovations in this, in your work?

RAYMOND JONSON: I coulda—I coulda done—

[Cross talk.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: You coulda—

RAYMOND JONSON: —anything. Whatever I felt was necessary for this particular case, this particular problem, I'm sure it would have been acceptable. And I think probably—perhaps mostly due to the fact that they are technically well-done.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: Excellent, if not perfect, craftsmanship. And that will sometimes carry the load.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, did—

[Cross talk.]

RAYMOND JONSON: [Inaudible.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —it give you—did it give you an opportunity to do something that you might not have done otherwise?

RAYMOND JONSON: That's right.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: I certainly would not.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. What medium was this?

RAYMOND JONSON: They were all done in oil.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: All in oils, mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: That is right.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Had you started your airbrush work at that time?

RAYMOND JONSON: No.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: You hadn't.

RAYMOND JONSON: No, I had not.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And just sort of incidentally, I wonder if you can tell just a little about this medium that you use so much recently. Polymer, is that the way it's pronounced?

RAYMOND JONSON: Yes. Of course, as everyone knows now, we have a deluge of plastics.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: And as has happened, of course, on through the history of art, at least to some extent, certain things have resulted because of certain things happening more or less outside of the art itself. It'd be interesting to know who painted the painting with a first real honest-to-God brush.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: Colors, for instance—color has pigment—color pigment has been developed very extensively during the last 100 years. We have colors that the old masters did not have. And we have many of them. Someone might ask, well, are they as permanent as the colors that the old masters used? Well, I say they should be more so—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

RAYMOND JONSON: —because they are of today. And there's been a tremendous investigation, I mean, even to the extent of the government stepping in and trying to do

something about guaranteeing that we are receiving the quality of material that they are advertised to be. And I think that's a good thing.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, I do too. It'd be a shame to—

RAYMOND JONSON: Now the polymers—at present there are many. And there have been a few articles recently in the *The Art News*. One by Mallery [ph] on the pitfalls and dangers of certain plastics. And an article in last month's, I think, *Art News*. The article, I think, it's signed with a penname, because I think I know who wrote it, on the polymers that we are discussing at this moment. They are polymers which are non-toxic. And they run the gamut from straight water base to emulsions. There has just been put on the market the most recent one by Grumbacher, which I think is an emulsion. There are additions being added, the most recent one with the Liquitex brand, which is made by the Permanent Pigments company in Cincinnati. The gel is supposed to fit—serve a certain purpose. And there are so many different items that are advantageous that we do not have in oil—the equivalent of in oil, that it opens up, to some extent, a wider view—a panorama of possibilities with paint. Now, most of these dry very rapidly. So, some of us are advertising the fact that we can practically guarantee our works will not crack and fall off on the ground on which they are superimposed.

[00:45:03]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, yes. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Do you have any preference in the polymer you use?

RAYMOND JONSON: Well, I used—well, I've tried only two.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

RAYMOND JONSON: The one that's called Magna, which is some sort of emulsion, because you can use both water and volatile thinners such as mineral spirits or turpentine.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: What is that word again?

RAYMOND JONSON: Magna.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Magna.

RAYMOND JONSON: Magna, M-A-G-N-A.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

RAYMOND JONSON: Made by Bocour in New York.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: A very small company. One-man [inaudible], I think. The—one of the most interesting items, from a technical point of view, is that for the first time it is possible to, in a practical and permanent way, attach paint to the surface—prepared pieces of paint to the surface instead of painting it on the surface. And I have been doing that to some extent. Another is that the—I think all of the plastics will hold the aggregates to a much greater degree of permanency—that is of staying put, of being held in position than oil will.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: We don't know what will happen while the—during the 50 to 100 years that it takes oil to completely oxidize. What happens to what is in it? Sawdust, sand, beads, coffee, sugar, I guess—almost anything. Painters have to use almost anything in these experiments.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: I am proposing the possibility that an aggregate that is very similar to the binder of the polymer paint would be very good, namely plexiglass.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, yes.

RAYMOND JONSON: Now, all of these aggregates are completely sealed, impervious to everything except fire, I think. Fire can ruin. Flame. How much heat—just straight heat it would take to cause damage, I do not know. But I have gone pretty far with it, and nothing has happened. I even heated the paint first, put it on hot.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh?

RAYMOND JONSON: Which sounds all wrong. And it worked all right.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

RAYMOND JONSON: It took a long time to work through all the idiosyncrasies of the medium.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: And strange things can happen with it. The most interesting thing in connection with that is that practically everything that happens looks good. And that is very unusual.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, it must be very satisfying to you as an artist—

RAYMOND JONSON: Absolutely.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —to have this happen.

RAYMOND JONSON: Absolutely. Nine times out of 10. At least nine times out of 10.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes. Well, I wish we had time to go on more with that. But—

RAYMOND JONSON: Well, let's go on.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —I want to get back again to the projects. And I wonder if you'd tell us something about your feelings as far as your fellow artists were concerned and their reactions to the Project. I mean—

RAYMOND JONSON: Well, I have two because we had two Projects.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: And the reactions were quite different out here.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: They work differently, the purpose was different, and the environment that was established was different in each case. The PWAP, which of course was non-relief, was most pleasant, I think, for most of the painters who participated in it.

I mentioned the fact that Willard Nash had difficulty. Part of his difficulty was psychological. It didn't have anything to do with the Project. As a matter of fact, he was somewhat of a problem, even at that time. And his death was due partly to these unfortunate psychological conditions, plus drink. And I think drink—whiskey—because I saw him do it working on the Project, not helping any. And I think that none of the other painters came in direct contact with it except Gus Baumann and myself, because we were doing the job together—Nash and I were doing the job together.

[00:49:58]

The—I don't remember discussing with any of the other painters just what they were doing.

I saw what some of them were doing because of the assembly of the works at the laboratory.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, yes.

RAYMOND JONSON: Previous to shipping them to Washington. So, I think I'm probably at least 50 percent correct in saying that the PWAP was successful as far as the artists themselves in Santa Fe were concerned. On the other— on the PWAP relief project, the situation was quite different.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], that was the WPA.

RAYMOND JONSON: It completely degenerated.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh. Well, that's very interesting.

RAYMOND JONSON: It was most unfortunate. And some of the evidence is here on the campus over in the—I suppose, the new storeroom in connection with the gallery, because at the close of the Project, the works on hand had to be disposed of and they had to go, if I remember correctly, to public institutions.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

RAYMOND JONSON: That is, they—Hunter could not say to a friend, Here, wouldn't you like one of these works to hang on your wall and whatnot. They had to go, as I say, to public institutions. The Project here—and whether or not the same thing happened in the other places, I do not know—but here, some of it turned out to be on—in the form of orders given to the office, to Mr. Hunter, for a certain type of painting. And the backs of some of these works indicate the cost of the painting and its price. So, Mr. So-and-so at such-and-such an institution could order three paintings of adobe buildings with red peppers hanging on it. The cost would be [\$]250 each, we'll say. Not from him, but that's from the office. Probably a little more than that, they were very reasonable. Maybe the materials would cost that. I've seen actual figures on the backs of some of these. The result is that the whole thing turned into a whole batch of potboilers.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

RAYMOND JONSON: And most of the painters in Santa Fe were not potboiler painters. Also, at one time, they were 80-some on this Project, and they were scattered over the state. And some poor gal, you know, living down in Tucumcari, or some such place, who was practically starving to death, had been painting China, we'll say, or crocheting some kind of a design. Well, she could use her hands. So, she was put to work to do something in connection with it. Which probably was much better than having the artist do a potboiler to fit some particular office or hallway in some building.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: That's the reason I say that my impression was that it deteriorated into a total mess. And one of the biggest messes was the last office in Santa Fe, which was way down at the end of the plaza, below the plaza, on San Francisco Street, had been an apartment evidently. And one very large room—very large, it must have been at least, say, 15 to 16 feet wide by 40 or 50 feet long, which was stacked solid with these abominations: equipment, silk-screen materials, and I don't know what all. Paints, mediums, and everything because I think most of it went through his office.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes. Well—

RAYMOND JONSON: I think the materials went through his office.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, I think so.

RAYMOND JONSON: And back around behind was the bathroom, and the paintings were also stored in the bathroom. And one day I was in, and Vernon says, Have you ever seen a painting of—enjoyed by a cockroach? I said Nope, but I've heard of it. So he brought out some paintings from the bathroom. And they were completely irrigated by passages—canals all across the face of it where the cockroaches had eaten their way.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh dear, mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: So, I cannot to speak too highly for the relief project.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, what would you say was the effect of the Projects as a whole on the art of America?

RAYMOND JONSON: A temporary degeneration. [Laughs.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh. Well, not as a whole, I don't believe you would think that, do you? As a

whole—

[Cross talk.]

RAYMOND JONSON: Temporary, yeah.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, don't you think—

RAYMOND JONSON: Not the first one, no. The relief project.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, I say the Projects as a whole.

RAYMOND JONSON: All right, well, let's say the first one is 25 percent and the relief, 75. Although, I think the difference was greater than that, probably 10 to 90.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, do you think that it made the public more art conscious?

RAYMOND JONSON: No, I do not.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: You don't? Mm-hmm [affirmative]. That didn't help.

RAYMOND JONSON: In the first place, I think there was very little actual art involved.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

[00:55:00]

RAYMOND JONSON: It didn't look like art. See these works? They looked—well, they looked just like our women's clubs' groups of paintings.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes. Well, some of the murals that were done—I mean, now, for instance, the one that Bisttram did down somewhere south—

RAYMOND JONSON: Down in Texas someplace.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Peter Hurd did some, Olive Rush did some. And there were good reports from those.

RAYMOND JONSON: These were all the PWAP.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: That's right.

RAYMOND JONSON: Yeah, PWAP, and remember, I have no criticism there.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. It's just—

RAYMOND JONSON: That was a fine thing all the way through.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —the WPA.

RAYMOND JONSON: Oh, yes. It was the relief project—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: —that was so discouraging.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Now would you say that—mm-hmm [affirmative]—that this was the fault of the sponsors, the people that wanted these paintings?

RAYMOND JONSON: Partly.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: Partly due to the fact that it was possible for them. Now I don't mean that all the work that was done here was done under those conditions.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: I think I said that it degenerated into that. I don't think it started out

that way at all.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, do you think then at the beginning of the WPA—

RAYMOND JONSON: I think at the beginning—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —it was good?

RAYMOND JONSON: Yeah, the relief—at the beginning, I think that it probably functioned fairly well. But as it increased in size, it got worse and worse.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

RAYMOND JONSON: After all, there not 80 artists in New Mexico—there not 80 artists in New Mexico at that time.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, probably.

RAYMOND JONSON: 85 or whatever it was.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Still aren't, I don't think. Do you?

RAYMOND JONSON: Well, it's quite possible that there are.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

RAYMOND JONSON: I won't make a list now because it'd take too long. [They laugh.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

RAYMOND JONSON: It's quite possible that there are—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: So, there are an awful lot of so-called artists, that's for sure.

[Cross talk.]

RAYMOND JONSON: And I [inaudible]—and I will include the artists on the other side of the fence from me in that list. You had mentioned Peter Hurd.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: I would consider him as one of the New Mexico artists.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

RAYMOND JONSON: Certainly.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, now, if the federal government were to attempt another subsidy of the arts in America, what form do you think it should take?

RAYMOND JONSON: The acquisition of works that are already done.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

RAYMOND JONSON: You see, I feel that it's slightly—not exactly degrading, but to some painters, it is degrading to paint to order.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: Our—what sort of period that we're starting to see with—in America, of course—starting with 1900 or 1910 on through up to the present, there has been very definitely a certain strata which insists upon an absolute honesty and integrity, right straight through the totality of the individual's work. And if he takes the attitude that he establishes himself as the recorder of things that can be imagined, things that can be interpreted, and so forth, that it has to be done in—under conditions, you see, that involves only those things that flow naturally between the subject, the material, and the doer.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: As soon as somebody else comes in, cuts diagonally across that, or at right angles to it, or full blast against it—because there are degrees and some of the degrees are very subtle—can be very, very discouraging and harmful, I think, to a considerable number of artists during these 50 years.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: Because we have not had the attitude that we are painting for the public or for the state or for the church. We are painting, period. If the public and the church, so forth, will participate, fine and good. But then what is the artist going to do if they don't continue working?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: I don't know whether I make that clear or not. It's an ideal condition. But I know that it exists because I have so many friends who have the same point of view.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. [Raymond Jonson laugh.] Well, it's pretty good evidence of the correctness of your statement. But I'm thinking about the artists, for instance, during this period that wanted to go on painting but simply was not able to sell his paintings. And so, he would have been forced to go into some other kind of work, just in order to keep himself and his family alive. And this gave him an opportunity to continue with it. And perhaps he didn't do anything very startling during that period or it might have been potboilers.

But at least he kept his hand in—

RAYMOND JONSON: Yeah.

[01:00:03]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —so that when the Depression was over, then he was able to go on. I think that, to my mind—

RAYMOND JONSON: Oh, sure.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —this had saved a lot of artists that might otherwise have been lost during that period.

RAYMOND JONSON: But only for that period.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, unless—well, let's say, if they had been real artists, they would have gone back to it as soon as they could.

RAYMOND JONSON: Sure.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: But sometimes a person gets diverted, and then they get into a rut, and they keep on—

RAYMOND JONSON: Well, we're really confronted with two problems here.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: You said the real artists.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

RAYMOND JONSON: All right, that's one problem. But he's not the big problem. He'll make it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. [They laugh.]

RAYMOND JONSON: It's the other group that's the problem, the large group, you see, here, that's the real problem.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: The ones who think they want to be artists but aren't quite sure.

RAYMOND JONSON: Yeah, they're not really dedicated.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah, I see.

RAYMOND JONSON: They won't see this thing through under any and all adverse conditions.

[Cross talk.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: But don't you think there were a good many dedicated artists—

RAYMOND JONSON: Oh, yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —that were helped during this period?

RAYMOND JONSON: Absolutely. Sure.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: That were really—

RAYMOND JONSON: Now, don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying that the government made a mistake in helping them. Not at all. I sometimes wonder if the government wouldn't have been wiser to purchase some of the works they'd already done.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, it wouldn't be—

RAYMOND JONSON: It doesn't necessarily follow, but I mean, that's simply an idea, an idea that I had, and I do have it, to a considerable extent [inaudible]—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, if the artist had gone on painting in the hope that the government was going to buy it because he needed the money, wouldn't it be the same thing?

RAYMOND JONSON: No. Well, it could, yeah.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RAYMOND JONSON: Some painters would probably fall into that rut or that—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, you were so much more independent than anybody else I've talked to, that—

RAYMOND JONSON: In connection with it?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, yes.

RAYMOND JONSON: Well, that's [inaudible]. That's interesting.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I know. Well, even Bisttram, you know, he told about his problem when he wanted—he was asked to do this mural down in—somewhere in Texas—Ranger, Texas, that's what it was. And they—and he was trying to experiment in more abstract form at that time, but they would have nothing except the most literal. And he had a very difficult time finally getting something that he felt he could do as an artist of integrity. And at the same time satisfied the sponsor who was paying for it. Or I mean, the government was paying for it, but the sponsor had to approve it.

RAYMOND JONSON: Sure, yeah.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And the fact that you were able to do—and you were much more advanced than he. And you were able to do it just without submitting any sketches and just saying, you know, I'm going to do what I want to do, and you can take it or leave it.

RAYMOND JONSON: That's correct. You can put me down as voting in favor of the projects, in other words.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. [Raymond Jonson laughs.]

[Cross talk.]

RAYMOND JONSON: [Inaudible.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: [Inaudible] but I do know also that there was a great deal of interference in some instances.

RAYMOND JONSON: Oh, yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: In some instances that felt—that the artists felt inhibited, and he felt that he was sort of a machine that was just supposed to grind out paintings and—whether he felt like it or not, or whether it was inspired or not, but he had to do it in order to get the paycheck.

RAYMOND JONSON: I'd be interesting to know how much dictation there was when the Sistine Chapel was being done.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: [Laughs.] Yes. Well, that is certainly the level on which—

RAYMOND JONSON: And that was an age in which the artist worked for the Medici.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yes, and so much of the work during the ages of the great masters was done under the sponsorship of the church or—

[Cross talk.]

RAYMOND JONSON: Commissions.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —commissions.

RAYMOND JONSON: Sure.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: But they still were allowed complete freedom in a way that—

RAYMOND JONSON: They must have been. They must have been.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: That's right, or they couldn't—

RAYMOND JONSON: At least to a fairly high percentage.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, I think we may have about five more minutes on this. Are there any additional—

RAYMOND JONSON: Do you have another question?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, just to ask if there are any additional comments that you would like to make?

RAYMOND JONSON: It would be interesting, perhaps if it's possible, to have in connection with the Archives, the report of one of the victims, we'll say, that had a bit of trouble. You mentioned Bisttram.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

RAYMOND JONSON: It might be interesting to include, with the typed art document, a photograph of this painting, of this decoration, this mural that caused him so much anguish.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

RAYMOND JONSON: And it might be interesting, in my case, to have photographs of all eight works—the six that were—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

RAYMOND JONSON: —done on the PWAP under ideal conditions—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

RAYMOND JONSON: —and the two done for Portales college that was also done under ideal conditions.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, we'd like to very much.

RAYMOND JONSON: Which would be a very nice item in connection with the document.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, well, this would just point it up, so we know exactly what we're talking about, and if these such photographs are available, we would be delighted to have them.

[01:05:02]

RAYMOND JONSON: I doubt whether Bisttram has a photograph, however the work must be there so it would be possible to get it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, now, we do have one of that Ranger, Texas. We do have a photograph of that mural.

RAYMOND JONSON: You do?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

RAYMOND JONSON: [Inaudible]—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And also, photos of his other works—[cross talk]—so the types of things that he would do when he was free, and the type of thing he had to do under these circumstances.

RAYMOND JONSON: Sure. That's right.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: But if we could also have prints of the work that you did, we would be absolutely delighted.

RAYMOND JONSON: We'll see what can be done.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: All right, fine. Well, are there—

RAYMOND JONSON: The—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Is there anything else?

RAYMOND JONSON: Well, maybe—we started with the Jonson Gallery, University of New Mexico, maybe we should end with it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: All right.

RAYMOND JONSON: And let me say just one thing, and that is that we started out with an ideal, and we've attempted to stick to that ideal. And I cannot recall any part of the ideal that has been disproved as far as its virtue is concerned. The one item that was not mentioned, if I remember correctly, is that I wanted to—also, this is personal in turn— I wanted to demonstrate that it is possible for a painter to set up an exterior environment in contrast to his interior environment, which can function as a demonstration of the ideal arrangements for work, play, and general living. [The Jonson Gallery has proved this can be done. -Ed.]

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]