



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Ben Knott,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Ben Knott on July 24, 1964. The interview took place at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY, 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 retranscribed the original audio and attempted to create a verbatim transcript. Additional information from the original transcript has been 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

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I think by way of a beginning to recapture, to the extent possible, the conditions which existed in the early '30s, and what you were doing before this series of possibilities for artistic and creative people were developed—

BEN KNOTT: You mean personally?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Personally, yes.

BEN KNOTT: Well, let's see. I was a freelance interior decorator and designer, and my clients disappeared, that is they were non-existent. I started out quite well with the huge jobs, so when ERB [Emergency Relief Bureau], it was here in New York came along, well, I went down to see them. And they sent me up to a place. I was interviewed and put on the Art Project and did a mural for them with some of their painters. I'd say 18 men, over at the Julia Richman High School.

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

BEN KNOTT: Which is still there. It was a map of the world, and it was so simple [laughs] they didn't know—nothing controversial about it.

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

BEN KNOTT: Then after a while, I worked for Audrey McMahon as an assistant on painting and the like.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: What was the ERB?

BEN KNOTT: The Emergency Relief Bureau, I think.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Emergency Relief Bureau.

BEN KNOTT: It was a New York City thing.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

BEN KNOTT: It was finally swallowed about a year, by the WPA.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: By the WPA. You knew of its existence, then? That is, the ERB.

BEN KNOTT: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. When you see you went up to see them—

BEN KNOTT: Yeah, they had a central office somewhere, and I went down, applied, and they sent me up to 57th and Lexington in a building there where they sent up headquarters for the Art Project and educational project.

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

BEN KNOTT: Audrey McMahon ran the Art Project and Mrs. Pollock.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Frances Pollock.

BEN KNOTT: Frances Pollock, the educational—there were two lines for interviews and I got in line [laughs] for the Art Project, I think that's about the way to put it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative]. Were you interviewed by Mrs. McMahon?

BEN KNOTT: Eventually, yes, and—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Had you known her at all?

BEN KNOTT: No.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: She'd been in the College Art Association.

BEN KNOTT: That's right, yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. And had been, so far as I know, designated—I don't know how she was chosen or picked—well, in the nature of the interview, do you know anything about it?

BEN KNOTT: Yes, there was an artist, Jonas Lie, L-I-E.

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

BEN KNOTT: Who—and they'd said—they gave me a project and—a map project for a high school. I thought it was a fairy tale idea, and came back over the weekend with a sketch, which they quietly tore apart, and justifiably so. Made some suggestions, so I started a new idea, and brought it in and they liked that. They gave me a companion to work with, a Guy Maccoy.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Guy Maccoy.

BEN KNOTT: And he and I got along extremely well. We worked this project up, and I believe we had about 18 men at one time, and they put us in a big loft over on Eighth Avenue and 56th Street.

[00:05:01]

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

BEN KNOTT: And we went and worked and worked and finally got it done. Somewhere along the line, I was brought into the office, not sure exactly what I did, back at 57th Street and Lexington. [The Project was moved here, there, and around town -Ed.], it's offices. Then there was a blow-up in Pennsylvania, and they asked me if I wanted to go over there as the state director.

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

BEN KNOTT: Which I did, and that's where I really got acquainted with the Index. I knew about it here in New York but didn't have much to do with it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: When you came into the office itself, this is after you had done the mural?

BEN KNOTT: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. The mural was done by, you know, and sustained by local interest, that is the local Emergency Relief Bureau?

BEN KNOTT: Was started.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I see. So, when the shift came to the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, FERA, I think it was?

BEN KNOTT: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: An outgrowth out of FERA was the PWAP. Do you remember that?

BEN KNOTT: I remember all the initials, but I don't remember the details.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, the PWAP was a special project sponsored by Mr. Bruce, in part, and it was run by Mrs. Force, of the Whitney Museum.

BEN KNOTT: That's right, I remember that now.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But the continuity with creative people in the city of New York, with Mrs. McMahon.

BEN KNOTT: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Well, when you went into the office was it a kind of liaison between the office and painters or artists or—

BEN KNOTT: Well, I was put into the painting department, and I had—Lucille Barnes [ph] worked with me, and we interviewed people who were painters for jobs, and discussed our work with them.

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

BEN KNOTT: That sort of thing.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Was there much dealing in the central office with the local political agencies, the housing people?

BEN KNOTT: Well, if there was, I didn't have anything to do with it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

BEN KNOTT: I know we sold paintings to schoolteachers and—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I wondered how effective, for example, was the school's interest in the mural that you did, for example?

BEN KNOTT: Well, rather—extra good.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But they had a—was there opportunity for their expression and— you said Jonas Lie, he was President of the Academy of—

[Cross talk.]

BEN KNOTT: [Well, he was a well-known painter. -Ed.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: National Painters [ph]. Yes.

BEN KNOTT: He was well along at that time. I think he's dead now. Academic painting.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

BEN KNOTT: A good man.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. He was sort of a clearinghouse, or the jury, in a way.

BEN KNOTT: Yes, sort of a jury, an advisor.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. How—did you come into personal contact with Mrs. McMahon?

BEN KNOTT: Oh, yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. She's worth a word as a person. Did you have any—she's still very much alive, but as a person, as an administrator, as a woman with ideas—

BEN KNOTT: She was very good.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

BEN KNOTT: Dynamic and direct and positive.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

BEN KNOTT: And nice to work with.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: You know, this is also a time, in which, in certain areas, women come to the fore. Here she was in charge of a relief bureau initially, the New York City aspects of it, apparently a considerable administrator.

BEN KNOTT: I think she was exceptionally good, and—it was a big Project here in New York, and all sorts of things, you know.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Yeah. [Inaudible] variety here.

BEN KNOTT: And there was an Index project here in New York City. I had little or nothing to do with it.

[00:10:00]

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

BEN KNOTT: It was when I went out to Pennsylvania and took over, that I ran into there, particularly with a woman named France Lichten.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Lichten, yes.

BEN KNOTT: She'd written several books and for the *Pennsylvania Journal of Design*.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: What was the difficulty in Pennsylvania? An administrative one? Or—

BEN KNOTT: An administrative one in the Art Project, yes. And that's a long story.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, it illustrates, I think, that New York was the center of people who would go out of New York, and go all the way to Arizona once.

BEN KNOTT: That's right, yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: So that New York was a, then, perhaps the largest colony of artists and creative people, and it was the source of administrative people in other areas. This is just another illustration. I think the administration in Washington ran into considerable difficulty finding people locally sometimes to do this, so—

BEN KNOTT: In Pennsylvania the story is, they had a woman there, she was very good in her way, but she didn't understand what a relief project was.

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

BEN KNOTT: And she'd run a little gallery and she wanted a stable of artists to handle, and that was about it. And she was always in trouble with the local politicians.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: It's hard, too.

BEN KNOTT: And of course, my coming in as an outsider in Pennsylvania, a little bit difficult, but it was interesting. I had a good backing there. So, it worked out very well.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I think the Federal Art Project, if it had developed into the Federal Art Project by this time, was one which bypassed local politicians, it was a direct federal to the local agencies.

BEN KNOTT: Well that happened because one time there was no payroll, and I called up Washington and I said, "I understand there's no payroll, but these boys and girls have to be paid." [By some trick -Ed.], Cahill, I think, did it, and so the Art Project got its payroll, and the others didn't. It was unfair in a way, but—[inaudible] connected to something federal though.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. That is, the quotas that were created for the Art Project could not be manipulated by the local politicians. They saw painters as painting the courthouse

walls, just black or what, you know?

BEN KNOTT: Well, we had the old Johnson House down in South Philadelphia—

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

BEN KNOTT: South Broad Street, as headquarters and studio, it was very good. I went down there one day to start things, and there were about 20 Italian laborers who were waiting to be put to work. They had been assigned to the Art Project, and I was supposed to give them jobs. Little things like that.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, it's the lack of understanding or exercising discretion on the local level, which conflicted with the genuine—or general policy as announced by Washington. Certainly Cahill wasn't interested in painting walls in a painter's sense, you know?

BEN KNOTT: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: He was interested in the creative aspects of it, and I guess it was difficult initially to get this across, in some areas. Saint Louis, for example, presented a terrible problem for some considerable time, simply because of the local political figures, who had one view as to what they should be doing, and the other side had wholly different ones.

BEN KNOTT: [There are things like -Ed.] ditch diggers.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

BEN KNOTT: They thought it was very funny, because they saw all these pretty girls and boys going into work. They used some of the rooms of their house for studio. It was there Miss Lichten was in charge of the Index, and her main interest was Pennsylvania German, which was perfectly alright.

[00:15:06]

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

BEN KNOTT: And we published, in our little screen set up that we had there, a portfolio of plates adapted from, and it was quite successful, and we put it around, and allocated it to the schools. It was very inexpensive to put on, and that was very, I thought, interesting.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: You had the—this is the—well, you knew the Index of Design had a New York organization. The one in Pennsylvania was the first one that you really bumped into because you became, as I understand it, the state administrator?

BEN KNOTT: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: So that you would know what was going on, you know, in the tent in which you worked. Of course, this was one that was already in being, wasn't it? That is, that it already had existed?

BEN KNOTT: Yes, it had.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: How did it go about functioning? When you say "she"—

BEN KNOTT: Miss Lichten.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Miss Lichten. Were there others? How did she—

BEN KNOTT: No, she operated pretty much by herself.

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

BEN KNOTT: And there were some—we had research people, and of course a lot of crumb bum stuff showed up, you know? Just because [inaudible].

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

BEN KNOTT: That sort of thing.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Bound to happen.

BEN KNOTT: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. What was the criteria for selection in Pennsylvania? What were the standards?

BEN KNOTT: Well, we tried to—well, all the way through, we tried to [get a little background information –Ed.], how old was it, where was it made, and how authentic as an American antique was it? Was it something that Uncle Joe had bought from Bavaria, or—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Was it real, yeah.

BEN KNOTT: And of course, a lot of stuff got mixed up in—but they did a pretty good job of documentation.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. These are research people who are also part of it to establish the authenticity—

BEN KNOTT: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —of the piece or the design.

BEN KNOTT: The artist or photographer—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

BEN KNOTT: —did a great deal of that. But we—they had regular people who did just research.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Just research itself.

BEN KNOTT: The checking. Then after Pennsylvania I was sent down to Washington and the national office. But when the WPA folded up, there was a little bit of controversy, which you've probably run into, about what was to become of the Index, and Horace Janes [ph] was then the vice-director here at this museum, and he had been a sponsor and a friend of me in Pennsylvania. I had met him before then, but we got along fine. And they—what to do with this stuff, and I had been working in the national office, in the big auditorium there, with all these files, and they were all a jumble. And I kept saying to myself, Well now these things that were done locally, if they're left locally, they're just going to disappear. Some of them are handsome enough, they'll be taken and framed and hung in some judge's office, sure, but that's not what it was for.

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

BEN KNOTT: And I talked to Jane [ph] about it, and suggested it ought to be compiled and put together. And he worked with Cahill, and I don't know who else. And they were brought up here at the museum, up on the second floor [inaudible] on the south end of the building. Practically all the galleries, they shipped them things from all over the United States. And it was the first time you could ever get a colossal it really it was—a we picture of how big a thing it was.

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

[00:20:05]

BEN KNOTT: And they gave me a small staff, and I started to sort it by category, and break it down by districts and so forth. To make it a national thing, instead of a local thing. And I think we did a pretty good job, we didn't have enough help to do a colossal job, well, it turned out that people didn't realize, and it was decided it shouldn't stay here in New York, it should go into a national—I always thought that New York City was an ideal place because it being a center of designers and research people who couldn't necessarily get down to Washington.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

BEN KNOTT: But they took it away, and they didn't ask me to go with it, so Mr. Taylor [ph] asked me to stay here [laughs], which I'm glad I did, I didn't like Washington.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No, it's an unreal place.

BEN KNOTT: And—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well did you go to Washington expressly to do something with the Index?

BEN KNOTT: No, I was invited down—or told to come down, transferred down to be an assistant to Cahill. I think on the murals. Things of that sort.

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

BEN KNOTT: [Then the thing was so big and you just -Ed.] sort of jumped into all sorts of things.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

BEN KNOTT: I ended up with the Index file. [Laughs.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Only by chance?

BEN KNOTT: Only by chance, and out of interest.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, how long were you in Washington?

BEN KNOTT: I was there about maybe two years at the most.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Did you know Cahill before this?

BEN KNOTT: Oh yes, because I'd been here in New York and Pennsylvania.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. What kind of a fellow was he? I never got a chance to either meet him or talk with him.

BEN KNOTT: He was a very nice man, very intelligent. You could work with him. I really didn't have much to do with him.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Was he fruitful with ideas, or did he leave you be? Turn you loose on something?

BEN KNOTT: He turned you loose on something and then you could talk it over with him.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Yeah.

BEN KNOTT: He was, what I would say, a good government administrator—administrative type.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Well he'd had prior public relations experience with [John Cotton] Dana at the Newark Museum.

BEN KNOTT: That's right, yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Which was a good school in which to go, Dana was. Some of it rubbed off, must have, because he had—apparently, from what I've learned—he had a way with people.

BEN KNOTT: He was a very nice man.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: He wasn't quite so hot formally, in a formal meeting, as he was in an informal meeting where he could talk quietly à deux or with a small group. He was inclined to be convivial with the boys or be one of them, not the kind of a—what—a Persian satrap type administrator, removed from the troops. He was really one of the troops and understood them. And in this sense, probably represented the interests of the creative people far more effectively than someone who was just a good administrator. At the same time, he got—well, you talked about the murals in Washington, there was a sum of money

which was used by the Treasury.

BEN KNOTT: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Which became a quite a bone of contention between the treasury group, Edward Bruce and others, Olin Dows and some others, and the Cahill's group, and the WPA. That is to say, WPA funds were being used by the Treasury Department to pay the costs of assistance to those who won a competition for a mural. And I think the theory was that the WPA funds should be pristine and pure and spent by those—under the control of those who ran the WPA. But Bruce, somehow or other—and I don't know how he did this—had it established so that the WPA funds were used to help the Treasury Department work.

BEN KNOTT: Yeah, that was really a mix up there.

[00:25:14]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

BEN KNOTT: I wasn't involved in any of that.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No. I don't know whether Cahill was a good fighter or not, I guess he was—

BEN KNOTT: I think he was, yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. In short, they knew of his displeasure. Even if the clarification never came really, effectively never came, as to who was running what, where. Did you ever run into a Ruth Reeves I think it was.

BEN KNOTT: Oh yes, I knew her well.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. There are some stories to the effect that she was a source by way of origin for the development of an Index of American Design. I don't know if—she's out in India and it's difficult to reach her. Uh—

BEN KNOTT: I can't help you on that score at all because it was so mixed up.

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

BEN KNOTT: And she was interested, I know, in South American design before she was concerned with the [laughs] American and Indian thing.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. In short, the origins of the whole idea are pretty well shrouded in mystery, aren't they?

BEN KNOTT: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Because of the very nature of the way the Project was organized. It's left to local discretion, right?

BEN KNOTT: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: So that the Pennsylvania woman—

BEN KNOTT: Lichten.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Lichten, would be concerned with those areas in Pennsylvania with which she was familiar.

BEN KNOTT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And this would vary throughout the country. I wondered whether there was any coordination. You've indicated that when you came up here to the Metropolitan, they gave you a room and suddenly design was shipped to you from all over the country?

BEN KNOTT: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: All these selections. So far as you know, was the whole thing shipped

to you?

BEN KNOTT: Yes. It was the whole thing.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: The whole thing.

BEN KNOTT: They were glad to get rid of it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: In the various localities, they were?

BEN KNOTT: Well, in a way, yes, it was a burden with what to do with it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Storage problems.

BEN KNOTT: I think that was one reason. And when I say I think they were glad to get rid of it, they felt that it was something big, too. I didn't talk with many of the people across the country, unfortunately.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well then—

BEN KNOTT: But they were very willing and very eager to send all this stuff to one location.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. And this was picked—and collating this, is this what you did?

BEN KNOTT: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, start prior to that. Was there any coordination from Washington as to what the Index [inaudible]—

[Cross talk.]

BEN KNOTT: Oh, yes, there was a manual with a description of what it was, and how to organize it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative]. But then the organization was still left locally.

BEN KNOTT: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: When you saw it in the Metropolitan, whole, you saw it all, from whatever source, were all the states represented, or no?

BEN KNOTT: No.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Not at all?

BEN KNOTT: I think there were only 45 states.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: That were represented to some extent.

BEN KNOTT: Some states didn't bother with it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative]. What about the quality? Did it vary, too?

BEN KNOTT: It varied considerably, and [inaudible] the WPA did put out some manuals of operation on how to do textiles and so forth.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

BEN KNOTT: And I remember Utah came to us with the most magnificent drawings of textiles where you could count all the stitches, you know, in the weave.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Some people did first rate work.

BEN KNOTT: [Inaudible] those manuals on those, that's what I was hoping Roy [ph] would have this morning. And I had whole sets of them, they were so darn good I gave them away to artists, or—to learn how to paint. And I think I put a file in our library here, and I think shipped the rest of the stuff to Washington, and all the stuff went down there.

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

BEN KNOTT: And Christiansen should have a set of those manuals.

[00:30:00]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. But these were the policy, published by the central—

BEN KNOTT: They weren't policy, they were techniques.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Techniques.

BEN KNOTT: It was very interesting.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Someone told me that a number of new techniques were discovered in trying [to render these things -Ed.].

BEN KNOTT: Yeah. Well those are in these books.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: So that not only did you recapture some of the past in terms of American design, but you developed some new techniques to capture it?

BEN KNOTT: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: So that it was creative all the way around. You put this in order, as I understand it?

BEN KNOTT: Yeah, I put it in order as best I could. By—we'll say textiles—

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

BEN KNOTT: What kind of textile it was, woven, embroidery, and so forth, and then after that was done, I put it by states, I think.

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

BEN KNOTT: And with the research with it, as far as I know Mr. Peterson has followed the same pattern. He may have changed it a little bit.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. And this—I think you indicated earlier, in Pennsylvania you put out and published some of the representations?

BEN KNOTT: That was an adaptation of *Pennsylvania-German Design*, which Miss Lichten organized. We took the design and translated it to a silk-screen flat poster process.

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

BEN KNOTT: And it was an interesting thing, it was more just design plates.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Did you have to get local sponsorship for that publication?

BEN KNOTT: The public schools, they were crazy about it. I think we were able to put it out, so the sponsor pitched in like a dollar and a half, two bucks for a copy. They went like hot cakes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: That's good.

BEN KNOTT: They disappeared like hot cakes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, this is another indication of the discretion which was granted on a local level, that you could do this sort of thing. I know some of the writers' guides, you know, northwest Iowa, or Indian trails of southeast something-or-other, where people had worked both in the writers' group, as well as in the historical records or documents thing, would put something out which the local Chamber of Commerce would support. Which was a way in which to get sponsorship and also get the quality of the work out into the hands of the public.

BEN KNOTT: That was a wonderful project.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Oh man, I'll say. But, you know, it's comparable to the Index, but the

index presented a much more formidable problem, to get, you know, color reproductions with what was done. Photography being what it then was. Were most of these painted reproductions or photographs that you had?

BEN KNOTT: They were painted.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: They were painted.

BEN KNOTT: I heard an amusing story which I've never verified, but we put in exhibitions and circulated them.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

BEN KNOTT: And, you know, there was a textile exhibition, they were all nicely matted and labelled, and the documentation was on the label. And as I said, in Utah some of these things—and in other places too—you just pick the material up off the paper, they were that realistic and—

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

BEN KNOTT: —Dali-ish in their painting. Well, anyway, they had an exhibition out in Boston, and a couple of old ladies indignantly wrote the president, about, it was a shame for these, to cut up these nice old coverlets into little squares. [Laughs.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: They were that good.

BEN KNOTT: They were that good, yeah. Whether that's a true story or not I don't know, but I've always thought it was a good story.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: What surprises me is the unknown, largely, nature of the drawers now, the people who did the painting.

BEN KNOTT: Well, they appear in my life now every once in a while, wanting to know where this sketch is or that plate is, and I refer them to Mr. Christiansen.

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

BEN KNOTT: And, oh, they go into commercial art. The thing that interested me is that most of them wanted to be serious painters—

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

[00:35:08]

BEN KNOTT: And they just weren't capable of being serious painters, and to get them into this field was difficult because it was commercial. Like painting that extra ripe tomato, did stuff like that. But a lot of them got into it, became fascinated, and worked out various techniques, too.

But they appear every once in a while, particularly at the museum, in the past. And ask questions about where their work is. Mr. Christiansen made up exhibitions, which I think are circulated by the Federation now.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes, those are striking, too. They are. Even in retrospect they're striking. Yes. Of course, you—to handle the Index by way of a tying off process, was a tough proposition in itself. Let alone all the paintings and sculptures that were around the country, but the central area for people to send the Index was right here at the Metropolitan?

BEN KNOTT: At the end, yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. So that in closing off the Index as a project involved shipping all the material here to the Metropolitan, until such time as those involved in judgement could see the national character, and the national importance of the collection as a whole. Then it became a problem as to where to lodge it some nat—

BEN KNOTT: In the Library of Congress or—there was a great deal of talk about that.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Oh sure, and I think probably once you could see the out, it became important as to its origins, you know. And origins then began to differ as to who did what, when, and how. But initially, the origin as an idea to sponsor—I mean, to get local people on payrolls for work and so on, this was an ideal project in various areas. And it grew, it just burgeoned. And only after you see it in total, really, did it become important as to who designed what, where, as an idea. And almost of them, it's clouded initially, I know, but thank God we have the work.

BEN KNOTT: Yeah, that's true.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Well, what did this—in personal terms, what did this whole period of working on a government project do to you?

BEN KNOTT: Well, I was very much interested, and particularly as a state director, involving all the phases of the project, and I enjoyed it.

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

BEN KNOTT: What it did to me, I don't know. It brought me here to the museum. [Laughs.]

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

BEN KNOTT: And my retirement.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Did you ever get the tug to go back into the field of interior decoration and design? You did not. That—

BEN KNOTT: [No, I was in the administrative end of the -Ed.] WPA and coming up here to the museum. Which is another story and shouldn't be mixed up in it. Good thing they didn't ask me down to Washington—and I wouldn't have gone—Taylor said you stay here and make a job for yourself. I had developed this display department, which is now a functioning part of the museum [and when you're busy with something like that you don't have time -Ed.]—interior decoration wasn't for me. [Inaudible] little bit crooked looked better. And—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: It was nice to have a time and a period emerge in which you pour into it what it is you had been and be intrigued by the new to such an extent that you really did turn at right angles.

[00:40:03]

BEN KNOTT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: It was good, in a sense, that your clients disappeared. You know?

BEN KNOTT: Definitely.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. So far as the Index is concerned, do you have any judgement on the effect of the WPA itself as an institution or on the development of skills and techniques and the maintenance of some, oh, basis for continuity and creativity? Or don't you?

BEN KNOTT: I don't frankly. It's a big question.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. And as I understood you, the people who were involved in the Index were not necessarily interested in the Index as the Index, they wanted to be real painters?

BEN KNOTT: Yeah, they wanted to be mostly real serious painters.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Right.

BEN KNOTT: Some of them became interested and some of them were finally very much dedicated to it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. So, in a sense, this would have—while, it's creative in the way in much it did compile and collect this enormous documents on the development of American design, it didn't necessarily lend itself to their drive to becoming painters.

BEN KNOTT: I didn't see anything like that, and all or most of them painted.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: They did. Well, it's an exciting period anyway. Is there anything else, before this coffee pot [inaudible].

BEN KNOTT: I can't think of anything, Mr. Phillips.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. I'm grateful to you for these views that you have expressed about the Index, and—

BEN KNOTT: I think it's one of the great projects, ever.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

BEN KNOTT: And I wouldn't want to take the job of continuing it, though.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: It's sprawled in all kinds of directions, hasn't it?

BEN KNOTT: It [inaudible] you could do it, but you'd have to check back on every item, there's so many duplications.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: It'd be terrible.

BEN KNOTT: It'd be a mess.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: To get something authentic. Yeah. Well, let me turn this off, and we can go about our—

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]