Smithsonian
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Oral history interview with Wilbur G. Kurtz, 1965 June 5

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Wilbur G. Kurtz on June 5, 1965. The interview took place in Atlanta, Georgia, and was conducted by Richard Keith Doud 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. 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

RICHARD K. DOUD: This is an interview with Mr. Wilbur Kurtz at his home in Atlanta, Georgia June 5, 1965. The interviewer is Richard K. Doud.

Before you start talking about what actually happened during the '30s, could you give me some idea of your own professional background and how you happened to be in a position to work on this Project?

WILBUR G. KURTZ: Well, I was born in Illinois and, at the age of seven, moved to Indiana with my parents. And after I got out of high school, I went to Chicago to study at the Art Institute. And I found I wasn't interested in doing anything whatsoever except trying to draw pictures and that's why I went up there. And after going to school at the Art Institute, ultimately, I would go to school a while and work a while, and I was in Chicago, altogether, seven years.

I was very much interested in Civil War history as a youngster, and naturally I got to where I—any artistic endeavors I made related to history. And I came south in 1903, just on a visit, to interview various parties down here connected with that episode of the Andrews' Raid. And I made several trips south and finally married the daughter of the man who didn't let the Yankees get away with that locomotive.

RICHARD K. DOUD: [Laughs.] Is that right?

WILBUR G. KURTZ: And she hadn't—didn't have to talk me into living in Atlanta. I liked Atlanta from the minute I saw it. And I came south here, and we married in 1911. I settled here in 1912, and I've been here ever since. And my work has been, largely, certain phases of commercial art because there was more money in that than anything else. I used to do a great deal of architectural perspectives.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative.]

WILBUR G. KURTZ: Drawings and renderings and so forth, for architects and all sorts of commercial art and advertising. And that has been my work ever since I have been in Atlanta.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Well, what were you doing in, oh, about 1933, when the Public Works Arts Project started?

WILBUR G. KURTZ: I was right here in this studio, and that was during the Depression and even the architects were out of business and there was very little to do. And when the Project came along and Mr. J. J. Haverty [ph] became the director of the fifth district of the Art Project, he appointed me to manage the office for him in the way of selecting the various artists, in and around Atlanta only, to work in the Project. And there were agents, here and there, scattered over the five states that attended to that in their own states. So, I had nothing to do with anything outside of Atlanta. And the office of the aforesaid was here in Atlanta, the office of the fifth district, and hired and selected the artist and assigned projects according to the rules that had been drawn up by the Art Project headquarters in Washington.

[00:05:16]

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. How did you select artists? I mean, what was the procedure here?

WILBUR G. KURTZ: Well, they were persons that I happened to know personally, or knew of. And practically all of them wanted to work in the Art Project because we were all in the same boat when it came to living expenses at that particular time. It was a time where the artists all over the country, for that matter, were feeling the pinch of finances and they were very glad to work in the Project. Some of the well-known artists in the United States—in various places in the United States, top-flight artists, worked in the Project. And we had a number of them around Atlanta that would qualify. And they were put to work on projects assigned to them and they—one of the rules was that, according to the disposition of what they did, such as oil painting and sculpture, would go to some tax-supported building—

RICHARD K. DOUD: Yes.

WILBUR G. KURTZ: And—I guess you know all the rules about the Project.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Government property, in a sense.

WILBUR G. KURTZ: That's right.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Well, this was WPA at this time?

WILBUR G. KURTZ: Oh, yeah.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, what were some of the projects that were carried on here in Atlanta?

WILBUR G. KURTZ: Well, there were a certain number of easel paintings and, in rare instances, sculpture. There weren't very many sculptors around here, but I have in mind two of them. Julian Harris was one of them. And the rest of them were paintings either in oil or watercolors. And the work was turned in and disposed of by the director of the fifth district.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Was there anything here being done in Atlanta on what they called the Index of American Design? Do you recall anything about that?

WILBUR G. KURTZ: You don't mean that [inaudible] measured drawing of historic houses, do you?

RICHARD K. DOUD: No, sir, this was a project designed to reproduce, through drawing and painting, objects of historic or antique aesthetic interest relating to America's past. They—

WILBUR G. KURTZ: A number of examples of that sort of thing were made, yes. There were a group of historic houses in this county, up here at Roswell, 20 miles north of Atlanta, of antebellum houses that were built before the Civil War and were designed according to—very much like the houses in south Georgia. In other words, the Greek revival design. There—these houses in Roswell are unique in that respect because that sort of architecture wasn't common at all in this part of Georgia before the Civil War. So, the Roswell residences were imported so to speak. A number of paintings were made up there by some of the artists.

One I have in mind was Bulloch Hall, and that's where Theodore Roosevelt—that's where his mother was born, and where Teddy's father married Martha Bulloch.

[00:10:18]

RICHARD K. DOUD: Oh really?

WILBUR G. KURTZ: The old house is still standing. A painting was made of that one. And then there's another one, old Mimosa Hall, and then another one, Barrington Hall. And examples of what you might call a native architecture in the environs of Atlanta, very little of that done because it wasn't considered important enough to pictorially record.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WILBUR G. KURTZ: There were a variety of subjects, of course, and I don't remember—I couldn't recite the catalogue of them [laughs], I don't remember.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Oh, no, I don't expect you to.

WILBUR G. KURTZ: One of the best of the local projects, as far as having a permanent value which still persists, is working over the cyclorama, the Battle of Atlanta. It was housed in a building out in Grant Park, in the southern part of Atlanta. But nothing but the canvas was there, which it was on a display, constituted the—in placement thereof and the ground within the circular canvas was a flat and unrelated surface. And it was deemed advisable to give that flat and unrelated surface a diorama treatment, so as to carry the picture forward into the foreground. Also, to hang a canopy above so that what the viewers on the platform—what they had in front of them was all picture. And that project resulted in a mounting attendance out there which still persists. And the income is well over $100,000 a year now. So, I hesitatingly say, that as far as any art project in Georgia is concerned, that paid off in a big way. The income is considerably more than that. I don't know the figures now.

And the picture is unique on the American continent because there are only three cycloramas on the North American continent. The one in Atlanta, which represents the battle of July 22nd, the big battle around Atlanta, during Sherman's occupation of this area. Then the one at Gettysburg, which has recently been worked over and brought up to where it's convenient for the viewing public. I never have seen it. I've seen reproductions of it. The third one is just outside of Montreal in Canada at the shrine of Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré. And that—the subject of that is the crucifixion. That is a shrine that [inaudible] Catholic church.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WILBUR G. KURTZ: The—I don't know what the admission charges are at Gettysburg. Belonging to the government, maybe there's no charge at all. As I say, I've never seen the painting, I've never been to Gettysburg.

[00:15:03]

At Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré, they don't charge an admission, but they expect you to buy something at the gift shop. [Richard K. Doud laughs.] I've seen their book with the reproductions of the big picture. And as I before said, I've seen that at Gettysburg. But I know more about this one in Atlanta because I had something to do with it. I did a lot of the repainting on the canvas, which it needed it. You know, those cycloramas were made—the ones I'm talking about, quite a group—were made in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Oh really?

WILBUR G. KURTZ: A chap named Wehner, W-E-H-N-E-R, set up a cyclorama studio in Milwaukee, and went abroad and recruited various artists over there who had had experience in painting Franco-Prussian War cycloramas. Those things were made—particularly in this country, the Milwaukee pictures—as traveling shows.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WILBUR G. KURTZ: They went on the road to various cities and if they didn't have a building to show them in, they would build a temporary structure. So, this Atlanta picture, it was opened—had its premier, so to speak, in Detroit in 1885. Or maybe it was '86. The artists, some of them, had come down here and made a study of the field. So, they weren't just improvising a bunch of soldiers romping around a cow pasture. They studied the field and anybody that's familiar with the details of the Battle of Atlanta can spot the particular points in the picture that you can visit today, knowing that the episode represented there is—fits the ground on which the battle was fought. Careful study was given to that. Well, the picture had had considerable vicissitudes, and in its removal from place to place they'd have to roll it up and ship it to a town and unroll it and set it up, and it's a huge canvas; 400 feet in circumference and 50 feet high.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Good grief.

WILBUR G. KURTZ: It's painted on linen squares—50 feet squares—that were woven in Belgium where they had those big carpet looms. The squares were laced together by sail makers. And it had come—the cyclorama had come to Atlanta for the Cotton States Exposition of 1895. While it wasn't exhibited at the Exposition, it was in Atlanta at the time in a downtown structure. The story of its vicissitudes here in Atlanta are—is a lengthy story, with a great many a curious detail, but it finally was purchased by G. V. Gress, a wealthy

lumber man of Atlanta, who at long last persuaded the city to take it over. And he gave it to 'em. And it was housed in a temporary shack out at Grant Park and stayed there for a number of years in a temporary structure, and then it was moved to the present fireproof structure in 1919. But, as I said before, there was nothing but the canvas there. And it was deemed advisable to give the foreground a treatment, so that the viewer on the platform could see nothing but picture. The canopy over it prevented you from seeing the steel girders that held up the roof and the area treatment in the front matched the terrain and so forth of the canvas, maintaining the same sort of color scheme, so that what one sees now from the viewing platform is all picture.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WILBUR G. KURTZ: Have you seen it?

RICHARD K. DOUD: No, I haven't, sir.

WILBUR G. KURTZ: Well, it's worth going out there to see because, as I say, there's only three of them on the North American continent. Europe doesn't have very many left. You see, these things belong to a day long before the movies.

[00:20:01]

To show big, spectacular views of events and of such subjects as the Grand Canyon and so forth. They had to make big pictures of them, and carry them around the country, and house them and charge admission to look at them, and then go on somewhere else.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Sure.

WILBUR G. KURTZ: This Milwaukee crowd didn't confine itself to cyclorama Civil War pictures. They did one or two crucifixions, and one Christ's entry into Jerusalem, and the last one they did, I think, was the Battle of Manila Bay during the Spanish-American War. If there ever was a cyclorama painted after that, I never heard of it.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Yeah.

WILBUR G. KURTZ: It's what you might call a lost art. And I'd like to emphasize the fact that nobody considers it as an example of the fine arts. It's just one of those commercial things that are—were created at a time when the public would be interested in that sort of thing.

And the last example made abroad, I think, of a cyclorama, was one that followed the First World War. It was—the format of it was a cyclorama, but it wasn't any storytelling picture. It was a group of the high command, the high brass, of all the Allies. And it was exhibited at the Century of Progress in '33 in Chicago. I don't know what's become of it now.

And anyhow, Atlanta's very proud of that picture out there. Although, the way it was acquired was certainly more of an accident. It was just a chain of circumstances that eventuated in the placement of the picture out at the Grant Park where it's—along with the zoo—it's quite a show place. And as I aforesaid, the city derives a handsome income from it. People from all of the world come to Atlanta to go out and see the cyclorama.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Well, can you tell me something about some of the local artists who were working here during the time of the restoration of this painting? Who were the people who were painting and what has happened to them since?

WILBUR G. KURTZ: Well, I did most of the painting on the canvas. And it needed it. It had been torn and badly mended. And some of the instances of that hadn't been carefully painted over at all. Well, that required some of the painting. Then some of it had to be removed when it was moved to the present building because there hadn't been a precise calculation of the circumference of the steel rail from which the picture hangs. It's free hanging.

RICHARD K. DOUD: I see.

WILBUR G. KURTZ: Air space behind it, which you have to have. And the portion of it that was removed, when the two lanes came together, that had to be worked on and so forth. There were a number of instances of that pretty well over the canvas. And I did most of that part of the work., but we had a sculptor who made the figures, plaster figures, which are in

the foreground. They had to be made at a smaller scale; couldn't use anything life-sized. We had real Civil War artillery that we could have put in there, but it looked like Big Bertha on the Western Front, way out of size.

[00:25:06]

So, those figures, for the most part, in the foreground are only two-thirds of the actual size, plaster figures of assaulting federals moving across this area to restore a broken line on the episode of the battle. And the ground had to be treated—colored—close to match that in the painting.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Sure.

WILBUR G. KURTZ: You'll see all that when you go out there and look at it, and you should go and see it. And the artillery is only, afore said, only two-thirds the actual size. And that had to be made out of plaster of paris, reinforced, of course, by steel rods. And the shrubbery was an assembly of plaster of paris leaves on steel wire, so that a bush that looked like it would weigh only 20 pounds really weighed about 150, 200 pounds because it was all permanent material. It was supposed to last forever.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Sure.

WILBUR G. KURTZ: And it gives a very nice effect and the—where the canvas meets the ground it handles for the most part so you can't see where they come together.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, you said that Mr. Haverty [ph] sort of left you in charge of the office here.

WILBUR G. KURTZ: That's right.

RICHARD K. DOUD: What sort of problems did you have? Did you any financial problems here? Or any political problems dealing with local people?

WILBUR G. KURTZ: No, that—everything worked very smoothly in that respect.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WILBUR G. KURTZ: Some of the artists that were employed in the Project weren't very wonderful artists. And they were usually assigned in groups where they could work on mural decorations for, as I recall, two of Atlanta's public schools.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WILBUR G. KURTZ: It's been so long since I've seen that work, I don't remember very much about it. I visited some of the projects while they were working on them, and by and large, the project, as for the ability of these artists, ranged from the top-flight variety to, what you might say, mere amateurs.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Sure. What were your standards for hiring these people?

WILBUR G. KURTZ: Well, they were supposed to be able to draw and paint [Richard K. Doud laughs], as a fashion. And some of them were portrait painters. And you mentioned Julian Harris a while ago; he did some carving on one of the buildings over at Georgia Tech, which is a state-owned school. And one or two of them made some portrait busts of well-known personages connected with the history of Atlanta.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Were there many artists—it's a bad way to put it, but relatively speaking, was there much art activity in and around Atlanta in the 1930's as compared to, say, Milwaukee, or some other comparable-sized city in the North?

WILBUR G. KURTZ: Nothing comparable to that cyclorama studio in Milwaukee, no.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WILBUR G. KURTZ: We had an art school here. The Atlanta Art Association operated an art school. And it's still in operation. And a lot of these artists that worked in the Project had gone to school there.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WILBUR G. KURTZ: And there was a few little organizations of artists in what they called sketch clubs that would meet once a week and go out in the country and sketch and all that sort of thing.

[00:30:10]

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WILBUR G. KURTZ: There was a moderate amount of that kind of activity. But you could find that sort of thing in most any city at that time. And you can still find it; it's still going on.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, did the WPA set up any art schools here? They did in some cities. Did they start anything like that in Atlanta?

WILBUR G. KURTZ: Certainly not in Georgia.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WILBUR G. KURTZ: I know very little about what they did in Florida or Louisiana. See, they had a director for each state. A representative in the Project in each state. For instance, there was an architect in Nashville, Tennessee that managed the Project there. And in Louisiana, there was a head of an art department of one of the universities down there. And in each state, they had somebody to look after the artists of the various states. There were five of them in the fifth district.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Who decided on the projects to be done in Atlanta? Did you decide—assign projects? Or did Mr. Haverty [ph]?

WILBUR G. KURTZ: For the most part.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WILBUR G. KURTZ: Mr. Haverty [ph] was active in the Project and took a great deal of interest in it. In fact, they called all the directors in, and the state representatives in, to a convention in Washington during that period. We went up there and I want along. I had a mission up that way anyway, visiting, and I attended the meetings in Washington. It was all highly interesting. It was interesting to hear the reports from the various states as to what was going on and so forth.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Do you feel that this type of a Project, such as you had under the WPA, helped the artists in Atlanta? Did it help art—

WILBUR G. KURTZ: I think it saved—saved the situation. Things were pretty bad here financially. Ain't no doubt about that. If you were old enough to remember what was going on up east, they had high-salaried architectural draftsmen raking leaves in public parks and things like that. Things were pretty bad. And they weren't any too good here. And all of the artists that were employed in the Project were very glad to participate in it.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Do you think there's a need today for some sort of assistance to artists? Should it be done? Or need it be done?

WILBUR G. KURTZ: There's considerably more interest. I'm speaking now of what I happen to see around me. There's been a mounting interest in art circles here, with the Atlanta Art Association; and the school has been enlarged. They're going forward with a project now that promises to do a great deal in the line of art—in fact all the arts, an interest in all of them. Drama and so forth. The present—their present endeavors are a little bit north of here, the various buildings they now own. Some were acquired by—gifts of fine old houses of their owners. And they're getting ready to spread out in one huge building to house everything.

[00:35:04]

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WILBUR G. KURTZ: So, it's a great stride forward. They have received a considerable

contribution from well-to-do Atlanta people, and they're going forward in a big way. I expect that Art Project had something to do with it, sort of causing more thinking along those lines. And I've been here since 1912, and at that time, there was one little sketch club that would meet once a week on the weekends, go out in the country and sketch. And now, they have a school, and it looks like everybody's trying to get into the act. [Richard K. Doud laughs.]

Atlanta's full of people who have come here through the years, and you know that in viewing the various exhibits they have at the High Museum—that's this art association outfit—and also the arts festival, which is held once a year at Piedmont Park and—which has just closed. And that's an exhibit of paintings; it's quite an elaborate affair. It is held annually, and there seems to be a great interest in it because every night the place is crowded. The parking constituted a considerable problem because of the number of people that attended. It looked like, some nights over there, the whole city had just moved in on the park. There's a tremendous amount of interest in everything there.

The architects exhibited a great deal of their work and, of course, the painters. Then they have concerts, ballets, and so forth, the allied arts. It's one of the—it's the instance where, just by looking, you can see the tremendous interest in that sort of thing, because they sure flock over there, particularly at night, to see the exhibits. There's all kinds of pictures—paintings, drawings, sculptures, and so forth and so on. Well, that's vastly different from what it was when I came here in 1912.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Do you think maybe the WPA had something to do with—

WILBUR G. KURTZ: I think there was—

RICHARD K. DOUD: —building this interest?

WILBUR G. KURTZ: —influence from back there was—has had an effect on that sort of thing. It made the Atlanta people conscious of that sort of thing. And after all, unless that sort of thing is encouraged—that old saying, "Where there is no vision, the people perish."

RICHARD K. DOUD: Yeah. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WILBUR G. KURTZ: And we know that in foreign countries, where the fine arts have been encouraged by governments, that it's not a bad thing at all. The same goes for musicians, and architects, and so forth. There's a vast interest in it, in and around Atlanta, which wasn't here at all when I first came here.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Well, it looks like there's vision in Atlanta, and it looks pretty encouraging for the arts here. But do you know anything about the situation in the rest of the state? Is there anything going on in the rest of Georgia that you know of?

[00:40:07]

WILBUR G. KURTZ: I have no doubt there is, but I'm not at all familiar with it. I don't get around much over the state, or any of the other states in the area of the fifth district. But I couldn't help keep abreast of what was going on here in Atlanta.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Sure. Well, could you just sort of tell me, much for my own personal information, what have you been doing lately? What are you doing now?

WILBUR G. KURTZ: Oh well, I've always worked in a studio.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WILBUR G. KURTZ: And have been doing commercial art. And the last three or four years, I've been painting a series of historical subjects for—on a commission. Subjects relating largely to Atlanta history. Which I have—to which I've given a great deal of attention because I'm the sort of a chap that likes to know what is going on in a town where I happen to live. What was going on before I happened to show up? I want to know something about the past. And a lot of my work has been with an emphasis on picturing Atlanta as it was during the last century.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WILBUR G. KURTZ: Particularly of the antebellum and Civil War period. Atlanta was put on

the map in a big way because of the invasion of Georgia by the federal forces. There were three major battles fought here. The city was under siege and a lot of it was burned. There are lots of picturesque subjects that you don't find in every state. But every state has that sort of thing, of course. But General Sherman put Atlanta on the map in a big way. And Margaret Mitchell came along and wrote a novel which did the same thing.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, I certainly appreciate your remarks. I'm sure they'll add to our research. If you think of anything more that we should say about WPA in this city, I'd be glad to hear it. If not, I won't take up any more of your time.

WILBUR G. KURTZ: Well, I think that covers it pretty well. After all, that was back in '33 and '34. And I think I've given you sort of an outline. That's what we did here, and according to reports I heard from the various representatives of the states of the fifth district, they had just about the same sort of thing, and procedures were identical. And there must have been a lot of art created throughout the country.

RICHARD K. DOUD: There was.

WILBUR G. KURTZ: And I noticed, some years ago, a New York list of artists. Some of them are top-flight artists working in the Project.

RICHARD K. DOUD: Yes. Most of our top-flight artists were associated, in some respect, with this thing. Well, Mr. Kurtz, I want to thank you again.

WILBUR G. KURTZ: Well, you're quite welcome.

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