



Smithsonian  
*Archives of American Art*

Oral history interview with James  
Stovall Morris, 1964 May 14

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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with James Stovall Morris on May 14, 1964. The interview took place in Santa Fe, 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.

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. The original transcript was edited. In 2022 the Archives retranscribed the original audio and attempted to create a verbatim transcript.

## Interview

SYLVIA LOOMIS: This is an interview with Mr. James S. Morris at his studio, 616B Canyon Road, Santa Fe, New Mexico, on May 14, 1964. The interviewer is Mrs. Sylvia Loomis of the Santa Fe Office of the Archives of American Art, and the particular phase of art to be emphasized is that of the Federal Art Project during the 1930s and '40s. As you were one of the artists involved in these Projects, Mr. Morris, we would like to ask you some questions about them and also about yourself. First, would you tell us where you were born and where you received your art education?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: I was born in Marshall, Missouri, and what little art education I got at Chester Springs, which is the summer school of the Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts. And at the Art Students League in New York.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And who was your instructor there?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: John Sloan.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And where did you meet him?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: In Santa Fe.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And when did you first come to Santa Fe?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: 1928.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: '28. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And then you went back to New York, then, after that?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And studied with Mr. Sloan. Well, when you first came to Santa Fe, what other artists were here?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: There was a group called Cinco Pintores, and Willard Nash, Will Shuster—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Joe Bakos [Josef Bakos].

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: Joe Bakos. And I don't know the others.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: Either it's faded away, or—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. Well—

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: [Inaudible] something else.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well when you went back to New York, how long were you away from New

Mexico?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: When I went back to New York?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, I mean, you said you went back to New York.

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: Yes. Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And then when did you come back to New Mexico again?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: Well, I came back in the summer after the fall when I studied with Sloan.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. Do you remember what year that was?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: I'm bad on dates.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see, yes—

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: I'm sorry.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, that's quite a long time ago. Well, what I'm trying to find out was when you first started work on the Federal Art Project, because I know you were on both the PWAP and the WPA.

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: Well, that's when Charles Barrows and I did the mural at the Spanish-American Normal.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: At El Rito, yes.

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: At El Rito.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And that was on the PWA Project.

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Now, did you—you said you were also on the Florida Art Project. Was that after—

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: That was after.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: After you were at El Rito?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: So, what happened there?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: Well, I went there to meet a friend of mine who had been in France some time, and I went there with the intention of starting an art school with him, which immediately failed. Nobody had any money. I think we had five students that stuck with us.

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

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: And when we saw we weren't going to get any more, we talked to the supervisor of the Project, and she put us to work immediately.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Now, was this the WPA Project?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: No.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: No, this is still the PWAP?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: Still the PWAP.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, I see. So, what did you do on that Project?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: I painted easel paintings.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Easel paintings. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: Rather large.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And do you know what happened to any of that work?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: One, I'm sure, went to the University of Florida at Tallahassee.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, yes.

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: And the other two, I do not know what happened to them.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. How long were you there in Florida on this work?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: I should say about six months.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And then what happened?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: Then, I came back to Santa Fe.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. You said something about Mexico?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: Well, I did go to Mexico and spent six months down there. Saved my money.

[00:05:00]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: And I had a very good time. I met some of the artists, like David Siqueiros.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh yes.

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: And Orozco and—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Rivera?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: Rivera.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. That must have been a wonderful experience, then.

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: Well, that was on a social basis.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: But—and I knew David Siqueiros better than the rest of them.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: Because he was in the same town I was, in Taxco.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, yes. Well, this mural that you did at El Rito, was that in fresco?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: No. No. It was on canvas, and we discovered a recipe to stick a canvas on a wall, and we did that. Just that.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Now, this was before the Florida Project, wasn't it, the El Rito? Well, I wanted to talk a little bit more about that. You said you did that with Charles Barrows?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And what was the subject of the murals? Do you remember?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: The subject was life and activities of native Spanish people here.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Are those murals still there?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: As far as I know, they are.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: They are. And during that period, who was your supervisor?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: Gus Baumann was [inaudible].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. How'd you get along with him?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: Well, I didn't see him after I went out there.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. Well, did you do the murals up there, or did you transport them after they were finished?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: Well, the smaller ones were done here.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: And there was one quite large one that we did out there.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, then, after you got back from Florida and Mexico, then you came back to Santa Fe, and at that time, was the WPA in operation?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: It was, mm-hmm [affirmative]. So how did you get involved in that?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: Well, I had established residence here before.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh yes.

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: That was simply that I was put on it. It was really a relief measure, you know. And on that basis, I was on the WPA. And I was left pretty well alone.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: And I was left pretty well alone.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Was Vernon Hunter your supervisor?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: Vernon Hunter was.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see, yes. And what were your relations with him?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: Well, I'd simply take my canvases down, and whenever I needed materials, like brushes and paint, I went to the office and simply got 'em.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes. Do you remember how often you were supposed to produce a painting?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: No, there was no time—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: There wasn't.

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: —set on it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. And what about your technique? Were you allowed freedom in your technique and in your subject matter?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: Well, they preferred a landscape of New Mexico. But otherwise, you were let free.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And you—go ahead.

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: And I worked on the art index, and that consisted of coloring these old *santos*.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, yes, the Index of American Design.

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: That's right.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, yes. I didn't know you did any of that work. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Do

you remember any other type of work that you did on the Project?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: Well, not on that particular one, but I was on the Writers' Project.

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

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: And I illustrated two books. And I did headings for other books, all in the Spanish colonial style.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see, oh yes. I didn't know about that. Were you also involved in a series of paintings of the old missions of New Mexico?

[00:10:04]

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: No.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: You weren't? Oh, well, I saw one down at the museum, and I sort of associated it with you, but it must have been somebody else who did that. You didn't do any of the missions?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: No.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Just on this Spanish colonial portfolio?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: Right.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, well, we'd already heard about that, but I didn't know that you did any work on it. Do you know where any of these paintings were allocated?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: Well, it was like painting them and throwing them down a well.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, really?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: But afterwards, I heard from people I knew that they'd seen a painting of mine, say, in a school and a welfare building.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Where were these located?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: [Inaudible.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Here in Santa Fe?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: Yes, just west of the state capital.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: But that's here in Santa Fe.

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Were there any other towns that you've ever heard of where your things were located?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: No.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: You don't know of any other? Well, I know they still have several of them down at the museum here in Santa Fe.

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: Oh, yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, what did you do after the Project closed down?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: Oh, I got jobs decorating, you know. Decorating cabinets and kitchens and rooms. Various jobs like that.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, and then you continued to have art exhibitions—

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: To be represented in the various exhibitions in Santa Fe and one-man shows. Well, you have loaned us a list of these exhibitions where you were represented, and

also the one-man shows, so we'll include that as part of this interview. What—when was that article in *Time* magazine about your work, when did that appear?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: That was '51. 1951.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, and you said you thought it was the summer, because I noticed—

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: Yes, it was.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —there was no date on that. Now that also is very interesting to have, along with this other information. What effect would you say that the Projects had on your work as an artist?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: Well, it simply gave me a chance to live and eat [laughs]—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: —and paint.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, so that it was just an opportunity to go continue with your work, but it didn't change the character of it in any way.

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: No. I was able to build a house—

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

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: —[laughs] and get a wife.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: Because I had a steady income then.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes. How long were you on the Project, do you remember?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: From the first conception of it to the very end.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, well, you had a good, long time on it then. And what would you say were the reactions of your fellow artists to the Project?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: That, I don't know, because I built a house with a mountain as a backyard.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, I see, so you didn't have much to do with them.

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: No.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes. Well, was there, you weren't conscious of any criticism, then, of the way the Project was administered or supervised or anything of that sort?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: I never heard any.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: You never did. Well, now, what effect would you say that the Projects had on the art of America?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: Well, it was fantastic. I think it was a great thing.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: Painters who were about to starve were able to paint again. And then did some fantastic work.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Fantastically good, I guess you mean by that.

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, I mean, in addition to the help that it was to the artists, what do you think the impact was on art of America?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: Well, if there are any murals done that period, they're still there.

And I think it had a great impact, almost like a renaissance.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. And do you think it helped to make the public more art-conscious?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: Definitely.

[00:14:58]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Uh-huh [affirmative]. And, well, we've had other artists say that it really created a new market for artists of America. That before, so much of the art that was bought was from Europe, or was very—only the best artists', or the most recognized artists' work was acceptable, and it was not available to the general public, but after these art projects, that people became aware of other artists whose work was good.

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: That's true.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, it was that sort of thing that we're interested in finding out, what the artists feel of the effect of this on the work of artists in America. Well now, if the federal government were to attempt another subsidy of the arts, what form do you think it should take?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: I hadn't thought of that. I don't think a voice has been raised for that.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, I was wondering—

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: If so, I do not know about it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: No, well, I don't know that there has, either, but just on a comparative basis, I know there was some criticism that it was necessary for the artist to be on relief, you see, in order to get a job, and whether it would have to be as drastic as that, or whether the policy of the PWAP, which was where being on relief was not necessary, but only that artists needed work, and the government helped to subsidize it.

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: That's right.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: So that it was—I mean, a comparison between the two policies. Do you have any opinions on that?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: Yes, I do. Those that can't afford to paint should be able to. Some are very good painters, and they have to work at something else until they get enough money to take off and paint. And I wouldn't put it on the basis of relief.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And by what standards do you think an artist should be judged worthy of being subsidized?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: Well, by his paintings. And I don't know about some of the artists. I don't know what they—some are now teaching school. Some have been very successful in New York and on the West Coast.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Do you know of any artists—any particular ones who sort of got their start on the Federal Art Project?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: I think Rothko [Mark Rothko], who was very successful, although he spent 20 years without selling a painting.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Who was this, again?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: Rothko.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Rothko. I don't believe I know him, his work. Do I?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: I don't know.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: How's that spelled?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: R-O-T—



SYLVIA LOOMIS: R-O-P—

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: T.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: T.

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: Rothko.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —C-O [sic]? Is that right?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: That's right.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And what was his first name?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: I don't know his first name.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Where did he paint?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: Where did he paint?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: In New York.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: In New York. Oh, I see. And can you think of any others that you think got a good start on the Federal Art Project?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: Oh, yeah.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Who else?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: Have to look at my scrapbook for a minute.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: All right.

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: He was killed in a car wreck not long ago.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Where did he paint?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: New York.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, he was in New York, too. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. You don't mean Pollock?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: Pollock. Jackson Pollock.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, yes. Yes, well, he's one of the classic examples of somebody that got a good start during those days, and who since has become very famous, of course, for his work.

[00:20:05]

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: Those are the two most outstanding names that I know of.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. Well, are there any other comments that you would like to make about that phase of your life and your work as an artist?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: Well, the only objection I had to it was after you'd done a painting, you didn't know where it was going.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, I see. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, that would be kind of frustrating, wouldn't it?

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: It was annoying, at least. As I said before, it was like painting them and throwing them down a well. You didn't know where they were going.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: That would be my main objection.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: But generally—

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: Otherwise, it was grand.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, we're very grateful to you, Mr. Morris, for these comments on your work as an artist, and particularly the work you did on the Federal Art Projects. Thank you very much.

JAMES STOVALL MORRIS: You're quite welcome ma'am.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]