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Oral history interview with William C. Palmer,
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Transcript

Interview

JT: Joseph Trovato

WP:: William C. Palmer

JT: Since 1941, Mr. Palmer has directed the School of Art at Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, Utica, New York. It would be more accurate, as a matter of fact, to say that he actually developed the School of Art there, which all these years has had a tremendous influence in raising the artistic life of the community itself and its environs. It seems as though I've known you all my life, and I could go on telling of your valued contribution as an artist and teacher, but we wish to have you tell us of your experiences in the 1930s. We might begin by your giving us, if you will, an outline of your background. Where were you born, educated, etc.?

WP:: I was born in Des Moines, Iowa, in 1906, and attended public schools there. After graduation from Theodore Roosevelt High School, I went to New York when I was eighteen to enter the Art Students League. I began my studies with Boardman Robinson, who was my first teacher. I learned a great deal from him. I also studied with Allen Tucker and Henry Schnackenberg the first year. Then I studied for some time with Kenneth Hayes Miller, who was my great teacher. Actually, I began my mural studies at the Art Students League in Kenneth's class. I was also a student of Thomas Benton, who took over from Boardman Robinson around 1927. He was a very powerful teacher and designer of great lyrical movement. His influence is very evident in his pupil that is so well known today - Jackson Pollock.

JT: By virtue of the movement, of the design?

WP:: Not only the design but the authority of the statement, great individuality, because Benton was a great individualist. He gave us all a great feeling of the importance of the individual.

JT: Going back to yourself, would you name Benton as one of your strongest influences or would you name other of your teachers?

WP:: Well, he also at the time was involved in painting murals. As a matter of fact, I helped install his first exhibition of his murals in the Ferargil Gallery in 1926. He had an exhibition there.

JT: I see.

WP:: It was due to his interest that I was able to go to Europe in 1927 to study at the Ecole de Beaux-Arts de Fontainebleau, where I studied fresco painting with Monsieur Baudoin who was an assistant to Purvis de Chavannes. He was eighty-some years old at the time, and that's actually where I continued my work in mural painting, designing and also learning the fresco technique.

JT: I see. When did you first show at the Midtown Gallery? I think that's where you've shown practically all your life. Am I right?

WP:: Yes.

JT: And can you remember by any chance what you exhibited when you first became connected with the gallery?

WP:: I well remember because the first review I ever received for my easel painting was the one that I showed in the first exhibition of the Midtown Gallery when it opened in 1932, and I'm very happy to say that I'm still with Midtown. The first thing that I exhibited was called 103 in the Shade, which was one of my Iowa landscapes. I might go back a bit because -how did I become an easel painter and at the same time a mural painter? When I returned from Europe, I was successful in having some mural commissions at that time in 1928. There was a great deal of interest in painted rooms, and I painted several rooms for apartments: dining rooms, entrance halls, and so forth, and had developed quite a considerable number of clients. Unfortunately, the depression of 1929 struck, and that wiped out all of my commissions that I was working on, and I found myself in a rather embarrassing position. I then went to Canada in 1930 to stay with my sister, and it was there that I began to paint Iowa landscapes from sketches which I had created over the years when I returned to Iowa each summer to visit my family. When I returned to New York in 1932, I brought my paintings with me and showed them to Midtown and Mr. Alan Gruskin asked me if I would like to exhibit, which I did.

JT: You've been showing there, well, I wouldn't say every year, but very regularly, haven't you?

WP: Oh, I have exhibited most every other year or every three years. The only time I've missed I guess was during the war when I spent time with the United States Infantry in Texas from 1943 to 1945.

JT: I see. Well, now tell us when did you first become associated with the Federal Art Project?

WP: In 1932, Mrs. Force, I believe, organized a project of some kind, and artists were asked to produce work for the project. We were interviewed by Mrs. Force and members of her staff at the Whitney Museum and were asked to create anything that we wished. I had been a mural designer. I had painted murals, and I was interested in designing murals and she said, "Go ahead and design some murals." So I worked in my studio on 220 West 16th Street and developed a mural design which I called Function of a Hospital. There was no place in mind for this long panel, and I developed the design and submitted it as a piece of finished work. Also I painted easel paintings. As a matter of fact, one of the paintings which I did of Manhattan from the Jersey Meadows was exhibited in the Corcoran show for the project, and it was selected by President Roosevelt for inclusion in the White House office collection. It was while I was in Des Moines in 1934 at the funeral of my mother that I received a telegram saying that a place had been found for my mural, Function of a Hospital. I returned to New York and then continued working on the project, which was completed and installed.

JT: Would you tell us what federal project, or under what federal project your first mural for the Queens General Hospital was done?

WP: As far as I remember the mural was designed under TERA (Temporary Emergency Relief Administration), and in a letter that I received from Lloyd Rollins, he told me it was going to be supported by the Public Works of Art Project.

JT: I see.

WP: And it was - he says here, "Projects are to be carried out on the following basis: the supervising artist to be paid a rate of \$24.00 per week and the government to pay the cost of all the material used in the work."

JT: What were some of the other government murals that you - or rather, what were some of the other government art projects for which you did work? This, the Queens General Hospital, was your first. Now, what were the others?

WP: As I understand it, this mural in the Queens General elevator lobby was one of only two murals that were completed under the TERA project in New York City. It was after this in 1935 that I was then asked to be a supervisor of a mural project under WPA for Queens General Hospital's incoming and outgoing patients' room. This was the mural that was entitled The Development of Medicine.* In 1935, I also won one of the Federal Art Project's national competitions for the Post Office Department Building in Washington, D.C. It was completed in 1937. I was also awarded another mural commission for the Arlington, Massachusetts, Post Office in 1938. The last mural that I painted for the Federal Art Project was the mural for Monticello, Iowa, Post Office in 1939.

JT: This was also a competitive mural, was it not?

WP: It was the result of a competition. Arlington, Massachusetts, was not a competition. It was the result of work that I'd done before, the St. Louis Post Office national competition.

JT: You have mentioned having painted four murals. Now how long a period of time did this cover, the doing of four murals that I imagine were of major scope?

WP: It was five murals.

JT: Five murals?

WP: Yes.

JT: I see.

WP: From 1935 to 1940. The first Queens General Hospital mural was designed and painted in 1935-36. I won the competition for the Post Office Department Building in 1935 and completed it in 1936-37 and painted the Arlington, Massachusetts, mural in 1937-38, and the Monticello, Iowa, Post Office in 1939-40.

JT: Now, this work, did it occupy all of your time, by any chance? Did you do other things?

WP: I did a great many other things. I was instructor at the Art Students League in New York from 1936 to 1941, when I came to Utica. I was also Secretary and then Vice-President of the National Society of Mural

Painters. I was involved with the Fine Arts Federation of the City of New York and also Director of the Beaux-Arts Institute Mural Department, and at the same time, I had two one-man shows at the Midtown Gallery and continued my easel painting.

JT: Now, you are surely a disciplined person. I think I can understand now why you are able to run a school of art, maintain a high standard in your own personal painting and exhibit regularly and, on top of that, to maintain a beautiful garden here in Clinton.

WP: Well, I left out one thing which I think is rather interesting. Especially today, because I was very involved with the Collaborative Council of the World's Fair of 1939 and also was very involved through the National Society of Mural Painters with the Federal Art Projects. We worked very hard in trying to organize a more permanent set-up for a permanent art project during these years.

JT: I see. You were appointed supervisor of the Mural Department of the City of New York, WPA-Federal Art Project late in 1939. This must have been quite a responsibility. Now, what were your responsibilities, and who were some of the artists who worked under you at that time?

WP: I was asked by Mrs. Audrey McMahan if I would become the Supervisor of the Mural Projects when Burgoyne Diller, who had been supervisor, was given another position on the project. I said that I would be very happy to if I was allowed to continue with my other works, such as teaching at the League, and so forth. This was a most interesting job because all of the murals that were being painted under the project were under my supervision. Burgoyne Diller had been supervisor for some time, and the department was well organized. There was a very large mural studio on one of the piers of the Hudson River where a great many projects were being painted. I was responsible to see that the jobs were completed, that the works were submitted to the Municipal Art Commission for approval. I was the liaison in contact with all of the various patrons, such as principals of schools and superintendents of hospitals, to see that the work was installed properly and that the jobs were completed satisfactorily. At the moment, I cannot recall how many hundreds were involved in this project, which was on a very large scale. Gorky, Arshile Gorky was on the project and worked on designing murals. Edward Laning was developing his series for the New York Public Library.

JT: Who were some of the other people that you remember, Bill?

WP: There was Anton Refregier, Balcomb Greene, and Philip Guston and Ilya Bolotowsky, James Brooks, and many others whom I can't recall.

JT: Actually, you could name practically all the artists who are somebody today. Isn't that about what it amounts to?

WP: I think that's quite true. Most everyone was involved in the project in one way or another, and certainly, I think, we will all admit that it was the one thing which gave us the opportunity to continue with our own work and our own development, and it seems to me that this great project was the reason that today we have such a feeling for the need of art and why there is so much interest in the arts. I certainly feel that it was because of the Project's work in education and exhibitions that I came to Utica with this background, and the philosophy of the need of art in the community formed the basis upon which I organized and founded the School of Art at the Institute.

JT: Thank you very much for giving us this fine record of your recollections which are most valuable. This interview took place in Mr. Palmer's studio in Clinton, New York, June 12, 1964. *William Palmer - August 24, 1964 Reference to Queens General Hospital "Development of Medicine" murals. There is one published statement which refers to my mural in Queens General Hospital, Controlled Medicine called Preventive Medicine, that is untrue. It was stated in a recent book on the WPA - that the panel Controlled Medicine was in effect a plea for and propaganda for socialized medicine. This statement is without any basis of fact, and the author never contacted me for my analysis panel. To put the record straight - the mural Development of Medicine was painted to show the ignorance, superstition and fear of "uncontrolled medicine" - the great historical contributions and discoveries which lead up to the scientific and enlightened medicine and hospital care of the 30s, as shown in Controlled Medicine. The theme of this panel shows the equipment, etc., used by the hospital in prevention of disease and the treatment of the patient. Socialized medicine was not in my vocabulary in 1936, and certainly in doing my research for the work it was never considered or mentioned by any hospital authority. The real purpose of the murals at Queens was to serve two main purposes - one, to give the waiting patients in the "in-coming and out-going patients rooms" something to look at and to inform them of the history and background of treatment - and two, Dr. Kogel, the Superintendent of Queens used the panels in this lectures to student nurses on the history of medicine. W. C. P.