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Oral history interview with Charles Henry Alston, 1965 September 28

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Transcript

Interview

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH CHARLES ALSTON
DATE: SEPTEMBER 28, 1965
INTERVIEWER: DR. HARLAN PHILLIPS

HP: HARLAN PHILLIPS
CA: CHARLES ALSTON

HP: Probably a rapier way to get at this is to... Well, what were you doing in the 1930s? Where were you? What were the prospects?

CA: Let's see. Is this before the development of the Projects?

HP: Yes.

CA: Well now, let's see. I came out of college in 1929.

HP: Marvelous year!

CA: Wasn't that a fine year to come out of college? You know, you think you can lick the world.

HP: That's right.

CA: You lived a secluded life on the campus; that's your world. Then you come out and the whole thing has fallen down around your ears--you know, you can't get a job. You can't do anything. I came out of college in June of `29 and took a job as an art director at a camp. It was a very advanced camp for its day. The Episcopal Church here in the community--St. Philip's Church--opened this camp in 1928; and it was one of the first co-educational camps, which was a little shocking to some of the more staid members of the community. They had boys and girls, and they had men and women counselors and whatnot. The community could read all kinds of possibilities, potential for difficulties, into that. But it was a very good camp. After that season, I took a job as a director of a boys' club in a slum area in Harlem. It was a very small operation; you couldn't do a wide program. There weren't the physical facilities for separation. You had kids of ages--five to 16, 17--which made it very hard to develop a program. So it was sort of hit or miss, a hectic situation. I wasn't too happy in it. Art-wise, the only good thing that came out of that--and it makes up for everything else that was not good--was that among the kids that I had was a little nine- or ten-year-old called Jacob Lawrence. This kid was not the usual mischievous, hell-raising kid. Incidentally, most of these kids are now either dead or in Sing-Sing or... I always say I'm the world's greatest social worker. You know, I go back and say, "Look, these are the boys I taught." It was a rough neighborhood; these kids didn't really have a chance. They weren't bad kids, you know.

HP: Jake Lawrence was different?

CA: Jake was always a grave little kid. He had this very curious vision that just fascinated me. If I gave him crayons or whatever materials were available, there was always a very personal, strange kind of expression. I don't think at that time he had ever seen African masks or anything like that, but he used to do these fantastic masks and draw them in brilliant colors. I kept him supplied with things and sensed even that early--I hadn't had any teaching experience then--that this was a kid to leave alone. Don't let him start painting like you, don't start cramming him with classical ideas about art or showing him the great. Let him go. Just give him materials. Then I got him into actually making these masks out of papier mache. I wish I could find some of them now. I saw him the other day, and I asked him if he knew where any of them were. He didn't have the slightest idea. We both said we might go to the old 135th Street Library building and sort of dig through the cellar, because these classes started later. When he was doing these masks, we were having classes around the corner in this library building. Jake came out of that setup, and I think I stimulated him into keeping going. As a matter of fact, that started a relationship that lasted almost up until the time he got married. He practically lived in my studio. He was out of a broken home. His mother used to leave him at this place, because she worked all day and there was no father on the scene. So Jake was at this settlement house, this community house. He came from school to the settlement house until his mother came from work. Then he grew up. He didn't stay in school too long; I don't think Jake finished high school. He went to one of the CCC camps, but he never stopped drawing. There was always this very personal vision. By that time, I had a studio and we had these classes. First... I've forgotten. There were so many initials in those days, you know. Before WPA, I think there was PWA and there

was a Federal Arts... I can't, at this point, straighten them out.

HP: Well, one of them was... There was a College Art Association.

CA: The first one was an art workshop; and it was sponsored, I believe, by the Carnegie Foundation. It was located in the 135th Street Library, but I think they used federal funds. We set up this art workshop. I don't know whether that closed down or changed. Maybe it didn't start that way; maybe it later got sponsored by government funds. I'm not sure.

HP: Well, let's see. Quite early there was the College Art Association, which got interested because it confronted a problem with the modern American artists.

CA: I don't remember College Art being involved in this particular operation.

HP: I was just thinking in terms of the impulses that came into the thirties. There was Mrs. Gibson, the Gibson Committee. I think she worked through the College Art Association. There was a thing called the FERA--Federal Emergency Relief Administration. This, I believe, was centered up in the city itself--that is, the Mayor's Committee. I know quite early that... Well, out of the John Reed Club comes the Artists Union; and they were campaigning, marching, picketing the Mayor's office for a municipal art gallery run by artists. This was quite early--' 33, `34. FERA was later altere d--I think nationally--by a presidential resolution-- or w hatever they are called--into the CWA, the Civil Works Administration, which distinguished between FERA, road building, etc., etc. etc. and the artists or more creative people. Unhappily, they wrote into the resolution a minimum wage of twenty-five cents an hour, which received a very interesting application; because sharecroppers in the South began to leave the sharecropping farms to go to the cities so they could get twenty-five cents an hour wage. This raised holy Ned with the Southern senators, and Roosevelt had most of his political power in the Southern senators. So the CWA was a short-lived thing. But under the CWA, there was a thing called the PWAP.

CA: I remember it now. Yes. I had forgotten that last "P." I hadn't heard that in years.

HP: Yes. Mrs. Force, Juliana Force, headed it up here. This was short-lived because...

CA: What did that P.A....? It was Works Progress. ..?

HP: Public Works of Art Project, decoration of public buildings. It lasted, I think, from December of `33 to April of `34 because of this pressure of the Southern senators, you know, this minimum wage thing. So it had to be stopped. To get back to what was in the air, Roosevelt turned to Harold Ickes to set up a PWA, Public Works Administration. And Harold Ickes was a... Well, he tried to design a contract so that the local political figures couldn't put their hands on the public funds. He never came up with a contract which was ironclad, so he never really got off the ground. Pressure was exerted, because in `34 and `35 things were pretty bad. Longshoremen was invading the A&Ps with their wives, taking food off the shelf; and nobody was going to interfere with a longshoremen. Hunger is a funny thing, you know. The farmers in Nebraska and Iowa were having t se forced sales, these mortgage sales; and they were buying up these farms for a buck armed with rifles to protect the owner against the Marshall. Well, something had to be done. Hopkins was pressed into service, because Ickes never came off the griddle with a proper contract. Hopkins was sent to Washington initially as a coordinator of all these things but then pressed into service with the WPA. Get checks to them by Thanksgiving. Feed them. Worry about what they're going to do later. It was this kind of crash program, you know. It's like militiamen. Spring to arms overnight. Get yourself an organization. Get out on the road and let's go. This sort of thing. And it had that kind of zest to it. So this is the way that this thing sort of evolved. But you seem to, of necessity, have gotten involved in a schooling, sociological situation.

CA: Yes. I'm not sure at this point when I did this workshop whether any of these initial agencies were completely in operation. I have a vague feeling that--some time later-- one of these projects got in on the act and contributed some money or something for the running, because we moved out of the library into another building. I don't remember the library having all that money even with the Carnegie Foundation behind it. I think--as I remember it vaguely-- the funds finally began coming from some government agency. I think, as the program developed and they developed some plan about community art centers for teaching and whatnot, that it was gradually taken over by that. Then the Carnegie thing just moved out, and it became either the PWA or WPA program for community cultural development. This may be all wrong, as I say, but vaguely it seems to me that's what happened.

HP: The Carnegie Foundation had long-continuing interest in what you might call depressed areas even within our own society and would float ideas as an effort, not just in New York City; but they've had this kind of continuity of interest. And while their funds were lean; it is, I think, an illustration of how the foundations in those days led the way. Once the thing was set up and established, it got beyond their fund; and the government would step in. So it would seem to be a normal process. What sort of a... It's so easy to say; but when somebody taps you to set up a workshop, what the devil do you do? How do you fence it in? What sort of idea do you have

as of the time to service?

CA: Well, I was lucky that way; because I came in on this thing not as the originator but to follow a man who later went to the art department in Howard University, a man by the name of James LaSeine Wells. He originated the workshop; so when I got there, the patterns were pretty well set. They had children's classes, various age levels. In the evening, they had adult classes. So the pattern was set up, and it was pretty much left to whomever was running the program to decide what was done. I didn't set up the pattern. It was a fairly effective operation in the community. We had good exhibitions, and we had some good people. I mentioned Jake Lawrence simply because he was so outstanding in it, but there were other people. Not many of them followed through in terms of becoming professional artists, but I think it served its purpose. I don't know exactly when that ended; but in the meantime out of just pure necessity, most of us got on to the WPA, some as easel painters, some as teachers, and some--well-- working in the various categories of art that they had. I think there were people doing prints, there were people doing watercolors, there were people doing murals, and there were people who were teaching. Just about the same time, we formed a little organization called the Harlem Artists Guild; and we used to meet and just discuss our own art problems. We were all pretty young.

HP: When you say "we," help me. Who?

CA: Well, they were people like Augusta Savage Gwendolyn Bennett, Aaron Douglas, an instructor by the name of Henry Barnarn who had come here from Minnesota... Jake, by that time, was--I don't know how old Jake was--old enough to be a member. He wasn't a child anymore. Selma Burke, John Glenn, Norman Lewis... I can't think of anybody else.

HP: It's a representative group, too. Yes?

CA: It was. We met and discussed the things that were important to us in those days. Through the organization, we were able to do one or two effective things beyond the local needs. For instance, we discovered that a lot was going on in the WPA that we weren't getting the benefits of, you know. When it got into full swing, I think there was about... I think Augusta Savage was the first person that got a supervisor's job in the WPA. We began bringing some pressure on them for more jobs, more jobs for the Negro artist; because they didn't really know who the Negro artists were. [Telephone interruption)

HP: It indicated that you finally had a pipeline to the organization.

CA: Oh, yes. We made some protests. We got a committee together, and we pointed out that--not necessarily through any intent--there are a lot of people around who qualified and were not being accepted on this. We put pressure on them. We got practically every serious Negro artist in the community, who needed to be on the Project... We got them on, plus we got a few more supervisorships. I think Gwendolyn Bennett became a supervisor. I became a supervisor on a new project that had developed--a mural project. I was curious because I wanted to know something about mural painting. In those days, mural painting was kind of big with the influence of Orozco and Rivera and whatnot. We got this mural project together and began investigating the possibilities of murals on various buildings in the community. I don't know much about the others, but I was directly connected with the project to do murals at Harlem Hospital. There were several buildings--a nurses' home, the lobby of the new women's building, and a board room. We took over the planning of murals for their buildings. It involved, I guess, about 25 artists. I mean the designer of the mural and his assistance. I spent most of my time on the Project with that project. When it was completed, I did a short stint with prints. I did some lithographs and some painting. I'm trying to think now how it ended, how it finally ended up. I have forgotten. When did the Projects fold?

HP: Well, the handwriting was on the wall by about 1939 when Congress cut off the funds for the Theater Project.

CA: At that point, I got a Rosenwald Fellowship and went on a tour of the South that lasted for a couple of years. But that's getting beyond the point you want to talk about.

HP: Yes. Did you go down and register? To the headquarters-- Audrey McMahon...?

CA: I suppose I did. I don't remember.

HP: Harry Knight. Is he a name to you?

CA: Yes, of course. Harry was a good friend of mine. Harry Knight, Lou Bloch, and a chap by the name of Ross, I believe, Louis Ross, Basil Uchenko...

HP: Burgoyne Diller?

CA: And Burgoyne Diller. Yes, yes, yes. But...

HP: The thirties. What sort of opportunities did you really have in the thirties--I mean, but for this kind of process?

CA: Not terribly many. I don't know what the `305 would have been like if you hadn't had the displacement of the Depression, you know. I mean, before that there had been some measure of success on the part of Negro writers and artists; because you had the mid-twenties when you had a sort of Negro renaissance. This was the time of the people like Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes. I suppose Aaron Douglas was the most prominent artist of that era. Aaron did very well. He illustrated a lot of books; he did murals and jackets for anything that related to Negro literature, books about or by Negroes. When I was a kid, the outstanding name I knew was Aaron Douglas. So then came the Depression. It's hard to evaluate what would have happened, but certainly nothing was happening then. That was pretty universal; I mean nothing was happening anywhere. Artists like Gorky and Stuart Davis... I'd stand in line waiting for my check with them just like... It was that way for everybody. I can see Gorky now. My God, he was a very imposing, sort of saturnine-looking chap. He always had a long black coat and a wide black hat and a big mustache. He really looked sinister.

HP: You mentioned the murals at Harlem Hospital involving, in various capacities, 25 people; so that you have almost a collective expression that goes into it. Which is, you know, a departure from...

CA: Well, yes and no. Mostly it was the idea of one person, I think. Let's see, there was a mural by Verdis Hayes in the nurses' home. There was one in the children's ward by a girl by the name of Georgette Seabrooke. The lobby of the new women's pavilion I did. The one in the board room was done by Alberto Crimi. That is a fresco; these others weren't. They were oil on canvas; then they were applied to the wall. But pretty much these were the people who at least had, through their experiences or their background, gotten the commissions to do the murals. Then assistants were assigned to them and not always, let's face it, in terms of how useful they were. I mean, there were all these people on the Projects; and you were assigned them. I can remember very vividly about one particular assistant of mine. When he was coming to work with me that week, I'd get a call from the supervisor, "Now, before you squawk, bear with him for a week; and I'll transfer him to somebody else next week." Most of it you did yourself. As you say, there's no point in saying there wasn't; there was a lot of waste in the Project. I think the good outweighed the waste. I mean, if only a few people were able to continue and later to come to a full realization of their potentials, I think it was worth a try. But those aspects of it, some of them were funny. I suppose you'd have to expect it in a program like that. But it was there, you know. I don't know how much it helped in terms of work habits and disciplines.

HP: Suddenly you had continuity of pay--$21.

CA: Yes. In terms of an artist's dignity, one of the things that was unfortunate about it was the tight relationship of the whole thing to a dole. I mean the business of having to declare that you had absolutely nothing--I mean not on the basis of a person who should be allowed to develop with government subsidy, but the first stipulation being that you are practically destitute.

HP: I don't think Congress ever was particularly happy with the WPA.

CA: Oh, I don't think so either.

HP: They kept it on a tight financial staff le bit all the way through, you know. For example, you had to face continual quota reduction. Remember the quota reductions when they would cut back?

CA: Yes, yes, the pink slips; and you didn't know when they were coming.

HP: And by what criteria do you choose? No guide post, no guidelines; and that's a human thing, you know. And it's tough. And Colonel Somervell didn't make it any happier.

CA: No, he didn't. I vaguely remember that Hopkins was fairly sympathetic.

HP: Yes. The charges of boondoggling he met by suggesting to the newspapermen that "we're interested in feeding people, and artists have stomachs." You know th++at "nuts to you!"

CA: Yes, yes.

HP: Now, I think we got better than we imagined, or at least the press in those days... For example, Jewell was quite sympathetic in the Times, you know. And he was no small peanuts in the critics.

CA: No, he wasn't. He was big in those days.

HP: Yes, yes. Well, about the lobby of the Women's Annex. When you come to think in mural terms, is it

different than easel?

CA: Oh, yes. I think so. First of all, an easel painting is much more of a personal thing. You paint and you do what you feel or what demands expression out of you. Or you start a painting and you may not know what it's going to be; and it becomes, you know, in the development. With a mural painting, I think you have to do a little more formal planning. I know you have to take into consideration the architectural problems, the position, how it's going to be seen, what the light is, what its purpose is. In those days, I don't think we were developed. Particularly in terms of artists, we weren't t world famous. We were not developed enough to, say, just put one of your pictures on a wall. I mean, there were certain either definite or implied conditions that... Perhaps it should do the history of medicine or some vague reference to a theme, which also led to a different kind of a picture. You're thinking the stimulus is from without rather than from within, so you get a much more intellectualized than emotional concept. And then there's the formal organization and how I get all these incidents or people into it and still work it into a work of art. I think a lot of the murals that were done in WPA days sort of reflect that. I don't believe we got too many great murals out of it, but I think a lot was learned. This was the first opportunity that artists had to get a wall. You have to have a wall before you can get a mural. I think the experience was even more important in a lot of cases than the result. We have an awful lot of pseudo- Rivera, pseudo-Orozco kind of murals around. I don't remember too many very strikingly creative things, but there was developed an interest in the mural technique--fresco, tempera, and whatnot. It was a valuable laboratory that just wouldn't have been, you know. I think this was the wonderful thing. Whether those people went on to become professional mural painters or not, it was a painting experience that was so valuable. I think it was irreplaceable in its value.

HP: I think you've hit one of the important things of the WPA, and that's the nature of experimentation. A youngster could come along and never get a wall, but suddenly here's a wall. And what to do with it? It may be an eddy in terms of his total development, but whatever he picks up and carries along with him becomes part of his luggage.

CA: Just to give you an example of how effective this was, I remember even later than that I accepted a commission to do a mural. This was a private commission. I was a member of the Artists Union, and we worked under the impression that the Artists Union was the union that protected the artist. I accepted this commission--I was pretty naive about union affairs and whatnot at the time--and actually started the execution of this mural when one of the building trades unions walked in on me and ordered me off the wall. I said, "Well, what is this?" They said, "Well, you've got to be a member of the building trades union in order to do that mural." I said, "You're crazy. I'm a member of the Artists Union." They laughed at me. This, I think, gave me my first disillusionment about the Artists Union as an effective, practical union. It was more or less a very valuable, let's say, political weapon. I mean, it was an organization to promote the interests of the people on Projects, you know; but then I discovered very quickly that it had no weight outside of the Projec ts. Well, I went to the Union, and I remember Anton Refreg ier. He called me after I was ordered off the wall. There was some embarrassment. He was a member of the union. These were a couple of goons really that ordered me off the wall. If I hadn't come down, I think they would have knocked me down. So he came in with them, and he was very silent and obviously embarrassed. He called me later. He said, "I couldn't talk then." You know artists can't protect their interests, so I suppose it's necessary. We have to have people like that. He said, "But why don't you come to a union meeting? I think it will be fairly easy to get a temporary card." So I appeared at a meeting and found out that this had to be done through an executive meeting. This was a membership meeting, and the executive meeting wasn't going to be held until a time later than my contract said my mural was supposed to be finished. So that didn't help me any. Also, I found out the people I was doing the mural for were pretty tough characters; they were mixed up in rackets and whatnot. I didn't know this when I got the job. So it was a mess. I was scared to death; because, on the one hand, I had the union saying, "Don't get on the walls" and these hoods saying, "Stay on the wall; we'll take care of the union." I finally got myself out of it. I sold them the sketches, and they had some scabs execute the mural-- horribly, incidentally. But I got off my point on that. When I went to this meeting, this was the situation. You could not paint a mural unless you were a member of this union. You could not put a mural on a wall in New York unless you were a member of the union, but you could not be a member of the union unless you had a picture on the wall.

HP: You couldn't qualify.

CA: So what could you do, you see? So, if the Mural Projects didn't do anything but give people a chance to get on walls so they could say, "I've got a mural over there,"... At least that made them eligible for the union. It was impossible otherwise.

HP: What about the question of sponsorship? Did the Harlem Hospital have a voice in the. ..?

CA: They had a voice in approving or disapproving the sketches. On that particular job, there was a big fight on my mural; it got a lot of publicity at the time. But I completed the sketches, and they were okayed by the Art Commission and by the top people in the--whoever was supposed to approve--WPA setup. Then when it got to

the hospital, the superintendent of the hospital disapproved. He disapproved on a basis that we thought we could fight him about. I had a lot of references to Negro history in my mural. One panel, as a matter of fact, was... There were two panels facing each other; one panel was Primitive Medicine and one was Modern Medicine. In Primitive Medicine, I went back to witch `doctor themes and whatnot; and in the Modern panel, I had a complete integration--racial integration--perhaps with some emphasis on the brown and black people in it because that was the character of the community. The superintendent objected to this and said that his wasn't a Negro hospital-- that he wasn't going to have that kind of thing in his hospital, you know. So we decided to fight it. With the quiet help of a few of the more enlightened medical men in the hospital who operated behind the scenes, we made a big thing out of this. I don't think the superintendent expected it to blow up into such a thing. We brought the Commissioner. We brought him, and we finally won out, and the mural went up.

HP: That's one of the things about the mural; it had to be filtered through a series of possible vetoes.

CA: Yes, yes, yes. I still do murals. I don't like to do murals, particularly because of this. Even in private industry, it's the same thing. Usually, if somebody wants a mural on his wall and he's willing to pay the kind of money a mural costs, he wants his story on there. So you don't get... Unless it's a situation like a Chagall or Picasso... We just want the status of having a Picasso, you know. Otherwise, it's a matter of "we want our story and we're willing to pay for it." The only advantage I find in doing them is that it's one of the few ways I know you can get a lump sum. You rationalize all the other aspects, and you say, "Well, at least it gives me a few thousand dollars that I can do with as I please or that can make possible the things that I think are really important."

HP: Well, I know Burgoyne Diller who had... I think Lou Bloch headed up the hospital.

CA: Yes.

HP: Burgoyne Diller had the other-than-hospital public buildings. But this was like schools. They had a tough time selling an idea sometimes where sponsorship could throw a monkey wrench in the whole machinery. They were faced with the prospect of what limitations this imposed upon artistic feeling and I think wisely showing how skillful administrators came out of this in a way. They kept the project alive by sometimes altering the themes and putting, in a sense, censorship thumbs on artistic eyeballs, of necessity, you know. And yet keeping it alive, unlike Hallie Flanagan, who went full steam ahead--destroyed the whole thing, ultimately.

CA: Yes. I was just thinking back now. I was trying to think of a very sig... I don't know about the country in general, but a very significant mural out of those days as compared with... Well, let's put it another way. A very significant mural painter evolving from those days--perhaps because of this kind of limitation... Whereas, with the Painting Projects, there were no holds barred. I mean, you painted; and, obviously, out of that era came some of the most important painters in the country today. There wasn't that same freedom in the Mural Projects. There were these stop signs and "you can't do this and you can't do that," which still exists. Outside of that, I did a mural recently for a school. One of the figures, which was a semi-abstract figure, suggested to one of the people who had to have an opinion--a female nude; and "we can't have that on a school wall," you know. This is the kind of thing you run into.

HP: I can see--where you re required suddenly to explain a person s investing an image with personal connotations, which is intensely subjective.

CA: Yes. But certainly, it was a godsend to the people who later made American art history.

HP: Well, you know, it's a staggering thing. Of course, there wasn't any precedent for this.

CA: Yes, it's funny. Before I forget it, about seven or eight years ago, I participated in a panel broadcast down at NYC, the municipal station. I was sitting there; and I looked behind me; and here was this big mural, this big Stuart Davis. I recognized it immediately. I knew Stuart well, and his work certainly has his signature. There it was, fairly unnoticed and certainly not cared for. There were smudges and there were scratches on it, and initials, and whatnot. I looked at this thing; and I said, "My, God, look at this." So I called the man who was in charge of broadcast. I said, "Hey, do you know what you have here?" He said, "Well, it's a nice mural, isn't it?" I said, "You're damn right it's a nice mural." He said, "You know, it almost got painted over. About a month ago, we were redecorating, repainting, and someone said, "Well, now, don't paint over that." It was on the wall, you know. So I said, "You know you've got a picture there that's probably worth thousands of dollars. That's a Stuart Davis, and I remember when he did it. For God's sake, get that thing out of here. Give it some protection. Put it in a place where it can be seen, but above all give it some protection." I forgot about it until just recently. This item came up where, after all these years, they discovered what they had.

HP: Yes, yes, yes. He described to me painting that mural. It's the mural that went up the elevator.

CA: Stuart did? [Interruption for coffee)

CA: One of the very important things of that period was that artists, for the first time, got some sense of an identity. Things were so bad that you had both artists who had no reputation as well as artists who had already begun to have a reputation involved in the thing. So younger artists had an opportunity to talk to the artists who were prominent. There was a democracy about the whole thing that was very rewarding, very beneficial. As I stated before, just going down to get your pay--which was a thing that didn't have great dignity--you stood on a line and you waited your turn. Some of those days, by golly, in the wintertime were cold. You'd stand out in rain, or snow, or sleet, or cold. And you got to talking; you got to know people. As I say, I got to know Gorky. As you look back on it, these were valuable experiences. I think the fact that it provided a forum... It provided a situation where artists got to know each other. It provided artists with a consciousness of being an artist and having problems. And, of course, out of that your Artists Union and whatnot... I think the Artists Union, by and large, was a good thing. I think it was a thing to perpetuate the Project. It was a politically- oriented organization and, I suppose, would be considered pretty left wing today.

HP: Popular front was in the air.

CA: But, let's face it. These were the people who had some sense of organization. These were the people who were willing to work, and so they did set policy to a great degree. In those days it wasn't a sin to be very left. I mean, there was a time when it was all right to be very left. Some of the painters have found out recently that it wasn't always that way, you know.

HP: The whole question was up for grabs.

CA: You had to be left to be progressive in those days.

HP: Did you have a position in society? What is it?

CA: Yes.

HP: You know, whether you had an industrial orientation or whether you went back to a loner as an individual.

CA: That's right. . . .even if you weren't an active party member--and I would suspect that the great majority of the people involved in the painting were not. Certainly I wasn't. But at the same time, you supported the things that looked like they were going to help the situation of the artists, which meant that you signed petitions or you donated here and there to things that seemed to be beneficial to the artists. This was the kind of thing that has come back to haunt so many of the artists--that they signed these petitions, whether or not they were Communists or anything like that. We need, and this organization is working for it, you know.

HP: Yes. This whole notion of vested interest in society is a new thing for the artist, really. Government recognized his position, created a means whereby he could do the thing he wanted to do most, and this led to a kind of momentum to perpetuate this very relationship. You're right. I think the standing on line, attending meetings is a social thing as distinct from a political thing. You get to know that there are--beyond your borders, your street, your block, your local community--people who are confronting the same kind of bleakness that you have; and this leads to something which was in the air, a kind of camaraderie, which was, I think, one of the staggering contributions.

CA: I think so, very definitely.

HP: But you know, what the devil, Sacco-Vanzetti was in the air, the Scottsboro Boys, right down the line. All these things were hot. And artists have been kind of vanguardish, you know, in intellectual ways, idea ways. And let's face it, my interest was in republican Spain, too, the Johnson Act aside.

CA: Yes. Sure.

HP: And it took those people, who can see the future coming up over the horizon before it arrives, to have a sense about it. And they did. They're the first group that I know of that took a stand which later developed into the big debate between American First and the Committee to Aid America by Aiding the Allies. They put Mussolini and Hitler and the rest of them on `35.

CA: That's right. Yes.

HP: And this is the sensitivity of the artistic people who can pick and choose. But collective approach is unknown in artists.

CA: That's right. This is the closest thing I've ever seen to it.

HP: Yes. But even as a nation, we didn't decide that men had a right to organize and bargain collectively until 1937 in the court cases. So it was all up for grabs in that sense, and having a voice, putting the heat on Audrey

McMahon, who was quite a girl. She had a rough line to walk between Colonel Somervell on the one hand and the Artists Union on the other. It wasn't a very easy picture for her.

CA: It certainly wasn't.

HP: In terms of your own personal statement that antedates the ..... Thinking about being an artist and getting comfortable with a medium and working out something which is uniquely yours, do you look upon the WPA as affecting that?

CA: You mean affecting the direction of your own work?

HP: Blunting it for perhaps a while?

CA: Blunting it?

HP: In the sense that an artist has this set of blinders, but here you had this social view and you were talking with other people and you were absorbing ideas and thinking.

CA: So that it might have sidetracked you into that?

HP: Yes, possibly.

CA: I don't think that possibly was true. In my own case, I don't think it was so very true; because, well as I say, it was early in your career. I think you were exploring various ways of going, and I don't think my own painting had developed to the point of going definitely in a direction and then having to change that direction. I think, at that time, I was curious about mural painting. I think also, in my easel painting, I was conscious of the social scene. Most of my painting up until that point involved the local scene; most of my subject matter was the local scene. I don't think I was consciously aware that I was doing a social job. These were the things that were real, you know. These were the things I saw. I was very much interested at the time in African sculpture and in adapting certain of the technical aspects of that into my work. Practically all of my subject matter was related to the community, not in an aggressive, protest way, but just a statement of "this is it and this is the beauty of it"--you know, the faces, the dance. I did a lot of things on the early days of the Lindy Hop. When it first developed, I did a series of drawings on that. I used to go around with the people who were then the greats in the music world. I mean people like Billie Holiday and...

HP: Chick Webb.

CA: Chick Webb operated the Savoy. I had a standing pass at the Savoy.

HP: The Four Hundred Club. Marvelous.

CA: I used to go there every night; it was routine. Before you went home, you looked in the Savoy. I knew the manager, so it didn't cost me anything. So I knew Ella Fitzgerald when she was a kid. I went with Billie Holiday to her first recording, and I used to sit in Bessie Smith's rumble seat when she was going to record. I've got a sketchbook full of drawings of Bessie recording with Jack Teagarden and Chew Barry. So I knew that era, and this was my subject matter.

HP: Tenor sax man, Chew Barry. I haven't thought of him in a long time.

CA: Oh, a great saxophone player! I was on for a while. I guess this was after the Projects. I don't know. I'm very bad on dates, but I did a series of caricatures of American jazz musicians for an English magazine called The Melody Maker. In the early days of jazz and swing, England was much more receptive than this country, at least respectable America, middle-class America. So a lot of recordings were made for the English market first. I used to do these--a monthly caricature of one American jazz musician. It meant that I had to go around to recording sessions and broadcasts and whatnot. So I got to know them pretty well. I was sitting on Ellington's piano when he finished "Sophisticated Lady."

HP: Wow, man!

CA: Ellington always kids me; because if I did one drawing of him, I must have done a hundred, and every damn one of them looked like Warner Oland. You remember, the first...

HP: Yes. Charlie Chan.

CA: Charlie Chan. Ellington has that kind of a face, you know. I never did get what I considered a really good caricature of Ellington. I got one that was acceptable, but I never got a really good one. But they were exciting days.

HP: You must have had a lot to exchange with Stuart Davis, who was a rabid fan.

CA: Oh, he was a bug. Yes, yes.

HP: Yes, yes. I know when I first met him, I rang the bell. He couldn't hear it because he had Dizzy Gillespie on so loud that he couldn't hear the bell, which didn't hurt me at all because I like Dizzy Gillespie. Well, this is all part of the scene, that is, the lunatic fringe, in the sense of music, which are the growing points, the experimenters. And, I think the WPA was largely the same way, absorbing new impulse, new idea.

CA: It was a sudden thing. I don't think it had a chance to be really planned.

HP: No, no. It just sprawled, you know.

CA: It just sprawled, and so it made a lot of mistakes. But I think it was a good thing. I don't think I'd like to see it repeated.

HP: I doubt very much if it could be.

CA: It couldn't be. No.

HP: No, because the need was so great.

CA: Yes.

HP: If you begin in terms of need, the satisfaction of that need quite apart from what was done, that's all gravy. The human thing was handled to some extent.

CA: When did they end finally?

HP: Well, it varied throughout the country. Here I think there was effort to curtail and cut back in `38, `39.

CA: That late?

HP: Yes. And by `40, it was virtually nonexistent.

CA: Yes. I have difficulty in remembering.

HP: Let me turn this over, because we're going to run off. [BEGIN TAPE 1 SIDE 2]

HP: Well, I've forgotten just where we were.

CA: I was asking you when the Projects finally ended.

HP: 1940.

CA: I didn't realize it was that late, because it must have ended for me much earlier than that. I remember I got this fellowship, this Rosenwald Fellowship, I think in 1938; and my objective was to go into the South and see the South. was born in the South, but I never really saw it as an adult. I had left it when I was quite young. I spent the next two years in various places in the South. So it must have ended for me around 1937.

HP: It's possible, because there were varying... For example in `39, they turned it all over to the states, you know. Because the Federal Project was really run from Washington. For example, did you see much of Eddie Cahill?

CA: Not too much. I haven't thought of that name in years.

HP: Just the right guy, apparently, for the job--one who could bend an elbow and...

CA: Yes. By and large, the people who supervised those Projects were pretty good people. They were close to the artists. think that they--at least the ones I knew... I got very close to people like Lou Bloch. And very human people. Of course, I know they were taken advantage of all over the place.

HP: But that's par for the course; that's the human story. You can almost anticipate that, you know.

CA: Yes.

HP: But to float an idea and make it walk in those terms without precedent, without any guidelines, is good. You said there's a lot of waste. Well, what the devil, our whole society is premised on a full dinner pail and a full

garbage pail; and you can't escape it. You know, we've got to have them both. My sensibilities aren't affronted by the fact that there was waste. It was just opportunity; and, after all, individually it's what you do with it when it comes along.

CA: Well, the fact that the whole project was not an opinionated kind of an imposition of ideas or approaches was quite something. That's quite a while ago. Even now, some of the more avant garde movements have difficulty of acceptance, but there wasn't judgment. I mean, you did what you thought was right. The people like the Gorkys, the Stuart Davises certainly weren't doing work that was immediately acceptable to the respectable Madison Avenue at the time. Except for the few exceptions of those galleries that specialized in the avant garde... But the fact that there were no restrictions, that you could experiment and explore, this was the thing, I think, that is basically behind the later development of an individuality in American art. This was terribly important. I don't think you could have had abstract expressionism or any of the subsequent movements if you hadn't had this thing. I don't know whether all the artists were conscious of it. Some of them certainly weren't even involved, but the groundwork laid by these people made this thing a possibility.

HP: I think it has certain ironic overtones which I enjoy. In the first place, the thirties... FDR is attacked for centralizing everything in Washington. All our eyes had to look there. Well, what the devil, New York state had tried in the late twenties; but there's a limitation on the amount of funds available. Every state had to tuck in, pull in, tighten. Suddenly you looked for... Something had to be done. There was a spirit abroad in the land... .. .were going to put rude hands on our machinery and find out what made it tick. And in doing this, our pocketbooks were thin; but we were ready for it. So that, in something like the creative field, it was floated in Washington; but the discretion is local. And the variety is incredible, you know.

CA: Yes. It's a little surprising that, with so little knowledge of how you develop a project like this, the bigwigs in art--the Academy--weren't called in to take over and set the patterns for this thing. I mean the official art, especially since this was a federal project--knowing what federal art had been in this country up to that time and the people with the big reputations who were doing the official sculpture and the official murals and whatnot. I remember that these people didn't figure at all in the Projects.

HP: No, no.

CA: That was sheer luck, I guess. I don't know.

HP: I think not. You know, the College Art Association became aware of the problem early, but the leading leaders weren't and didn't care. This was, you know, jured and so on. Their people got accepted, and these others were beyond the pale so that there wasn't any continuity.

CA: That's because they didn't want any identification with this thing, too.

HP: Well, after the original... Let's see, the PWAP was set up under Juliana Force. Most of the leaders in the city in various art schools and organizations were quite critical of it, claiming that they should have been, you know... They should have been this, this... But they had no background, no continuity. They didn't give a damn about Stuart Davis as a person or for his art.

CA: Also, if you look at the history of any of the art organizations, like the Artists Union and Artists Equity, you don't find on the roster too many of the comfortable, successful, academic reputations. They just are not involved in it. They just keep clear of it, which was a godsend. I mean, who needs them, you know?

HP: Although they had the aid of Ernest Pachano.

CA: Yes, that's right.

HP: But, he's a different breed of cat.

CA: Yes, yes, yes. He was a strange little man. He was certainly completely of the old school. But, as I remember him, he was very sympathetic and--this may not be true, I didn't have much association with him, but the few times that I did talk to him doing the mural--he was perfectly amenable to your ideas. He didn't lay down the law or anything like that.

HP: You could have had Jonas Lee, but you had a fellow who was open to conviction.

CA: That's right.

HP: Yes. And you know this is a chancy thing at best. When you piece it all together, it is a chancy thing.

CA: Yes, it certainly is.

HP: Because with Jonas Lee... Oh, look at when they had Lou Bloch and Ben Shahn doing the Riker's Island thing. Jonas Lee made some comment that was picked up in the New York Times--quite critical of it. And later it was thrown out for being "psychologically unfit," you know. Well, it was a big storm, but Lee put himself beyond acceptance, don't you see?

CA: Yes.

HP: He reaped what he sowed in that sense, instead of saying, "Well, I may not like it, but it's all right." Davis would say this: "I don't like his stuff, but I'm glad he's doing it," you know.

CA: Yes.

HP: You can draw that distinction. But it's a great period. Did the Harlem Artists Guild have continuity?

CA: Not far beyond that period. I think the actual need...

HP: .. .was satisfied?

CA: Yes. People went to various places. When things started opening up, I know two or three of them went South. One or two got teaching jobs. We stayed together for quite a while, but the immediate need was... Oh, it was out of the real bad depression days. As I say, we got most of the people on to the Projects; and we stayed together for a while. It gradually petered out.

HP: Well, it served its usefulness.

CA: Yes.

HP: You know, it's the banana approach to living: stick to the bunch or you get skinned. That's one thing we all had to learn in the thirties. Well, what about this Artists Union? Were you into that for their marches and their picketing and so on?

CA: I was never very active; I'm not much of a marcher or a picketer. I went to the meetings, and I paid my dues. During the time of the controversy at Harlem Hospital about the acceptance of the mural, I was fairly active in the Union; because we needed the Union support. But I was always a member.

HP: It's an interesting phenomenon in itself, that was. You know how contradictory it may appear. Although a fellow like Davis... His work was unaffected by that, you know. He could be at organization meetings with bales of paper under his arm, and his work is just unaffected by it.

CA: Yes, yes. Well, Davis had his directions pretty well set. I don't know. He had already spent a lot of time in Europe at that time, hadn't he?

HP: Yes. He'd been to Paris for a year and a half, or something like that.

CA: Yes. He was pretty much on his way in his own...

HP: Either that or it's difficult to teach an old dog a new trick. Because he was... But then he did get up to his eyeballs in the various organizations and so on. He complained about meetings and meetings and meetings and meetings and meetings.

CA: He was very active. He was a great letter writer, too. He'd write letters to the Times. Stuart was quite a guy.

HP: He said something to the effect that it took him three days to write a letter. Well, you can believe it; because when you read his letter, by way of a reply, there's no answer. It's just deadly, just deadly. And his choice of words... You read that carefully. For a fellow, who had the kind of, in a sense, rolling stone education he had.. .most of it from bar to bar, McSorley's Saloon, and so on... But you read those letters, and that's a carefully chiseled document.

CA: I was trying to think which ones of the more prominent avant garde artists today have a background of the Art Project? Was de Kooning on the Art Project?

HP: I don't think so.

CA: I don't remember. I'm not sure that he wasn't.

HP: I'm not sure. But Guston was.

CA: Guston was. Motherwell wasn't, I don't think.

HP: I don't think so.

CA: I don't remember. And Pollock was, I believe. I'm pretty sure Jack Pollock was on it.

HP: Yes, yes. Well, if nothing else, it was a period in which skill was allowed to develop. Materials were supplied, and it kept that impulse alive rather than necessity directing it all to some other avenue.

CA: Yes.

HP: Just that little bit of recognition. which enabled a fellow to still go his own way. Like yesterday, I talked to Herman Cherry.

CA: Oh, yes. I know him.

HP: Well, you know, "what do you do?" The same bleak prospects in Los Angeles, no local galleries, no place to show. You're working in the dark, you know.

CA: No. Incidentally, there must have been thousands of paintings and sculpture made in those days; and I know some of them have found permanent places. But where in the devil is the bulk of it?

HP: Now this I don't know. This is a strange...

CA: There must be just loads of canvas in warehouses or somewhere.

HP: Well, I think they gathered a good bit of it together in Washington; and they allocated it from there. They set up the Art Center movement and sent out touring shows which was an educational process.

CA: Yes. That's what I say. I know a lot of it got located, but there still must be a tremendous amount--bad, good, and indifferent--somewhere.

HP: I think there were two locales in a way. There was a big warehouse out in Chicago and, oh, Mildred Baker--Mildred Holtzauer in those days--was put in charge of the allocation out there, like the University of Illinois. And Indiana picked up a lot of this stuff, of these works. In New York... Well, you know, the requirements for space, preparedness, warfare, mobilization. We need space. Let's sweep that out and sell it for junk. Remember the fellow who bought it up for junk? Some little bookshop somewhere was selling these canvases. But, you know, it's just like everything else. The nation was self-concerned for a period of time, and they became internationally-concerned. The other thing seemed to... I do n't know that it ever was solved; but it turned a corner i n any event, and became less important. Became less important. The fascinating way in which, you know, a nation meets these oversimplified things that come. . . without noting that the seeds were in Spain. Well, I gather it's had continuing vitality for you, that is the experience on the Project?

CA: Yes. I don't think I consciously think of it; but any time I'm reminded of it, I remember it as a time of development. And all the time, of course, that you were doing... As I say, I was involved in the Mural Project. I was a sort of a playing manager. I did a mural and supervised a small group for a particular project. But you never stopped your own painting in those days. The advantage was, of course, that you had the materials. It wasn't just materials specifically for the mural. You had paint and you had brushes and you had canvas, you know. You could always have canvas, because you were making sketches and whatnot. You had material. And I don't think anyone, no matter what he was doing... He might have been on the Graphics Project... Well, I remember once I switched from painting to graphics just for the change. The point I'm making is that you had materials. You could experiment. All of the development wasn't out of what was officially done. It was out of the fact that you had a source of materials and you could work. So that your studio went on, and you painted. I painted a lot more. I mean, there was a lot more going on than just the routine execution of a mural.

HP: Well, look at the silk screen process that came out of it.

CA: Of course. It actually happened out of the WPA. Yes. Who was that chap?

HP: Anthony Velonis, wasn't it?

CA: Yes. I've got his first-pamphlet on it here somewhere.

HP: Sure. And Hyman Warsager was doing the color prints. Did you get to work with him?

CA: No, I didn't.

HP: Fritz Eichenberg... Or was that up here?

CA: I didn't know Fritz in those days. Was Fritz on the Project? I didn't know that. I got to know him later. I didn't do any silk screen, but I was interested in it. I talked with Velonis two or three times about it, and I knew the process.

HP: All these things were bubbling over. This is the youngster?

CA: Yes. In those days, I had a studio which was quite large, and it was sort of a meeting place. I would say that 90 percent of the people who hung out in my studio were all on the Projects--probably a bigger percentage than that. Along with the people who were writing--I mean the Ralph Ellisons and the Claude McKays--we `d meet and have just bull sessions, knockdown, drag out. Some of them were pretty rough. But it was sort of a forum. Anywhere I go now, someone is always saying, "Do you remember the great old days at 306?" It was at 306 143rd Street. I don't think any of us realized the value of those things, but there was a tremendous exchange of ideas, largely because we had at least this thing in common.

HP: There used to be a time on the East Side shortly after the turn of the century--for 20 years or so--where you could go into a teahouse and spend the first half of the night tearing society down and hear all kinds of expressions of view and the rest of the night building it back up again. You'd hear anarchists, the works, clear across the line. It's like the safety valve on the main stem. This is the same sort of thing in a way. The social gathering of artists, who had a vested interest in the continuation of their materials and opportunities, would go for a meeting. The meeting would be whatever it was, but out of it... The little groups that would form as you walked away and stood out on the corner and argued... I mean, this is the excitement.

CA: That's right. And that's the thing I don't suppose has been recorded.

HP: Not at all. I mean, this is part of the atmosphere whatever it...

CA: These offshoots probably were the real thing. I know that was true of my setup in 306. Jake Lawrence did practically all of his work... That first important series he sold was done right in the studio there. Practically everything that was done locally was talked over in 306.

HP: But, you know, a youngster coming along... And suddenly he can talk to Walkowitz or...

CA: It's quite a thing.

HP: Sure. And whatever enters your being instinctively from a conversation usually you hear. What is it? What one person says, the other hears. It doesn't make any difference. It's all grist for the mill. And to know these other people. get a chance to meet them...

CA: I learned out of just one of those associations... I don't remember; I think he must have been on the Project--Ben Schmoo, the sculptor.

HP: Yes.

CA: Aaron Ben Schmoo. I learned how to carve stone just out of a friendship that developed between myself and Ben. He'd come up and give us instructions on stone carving. I got interested in it and did a lot of stone carving, still do.

HP: Even in the sale of paintings, a friendùwould have somebody interested in his paintings; and he would insist that you go around...

CA: . . and see somebody else's. Yes.

HP: Yes. That doesn't happen...

CA: Of course, there wasn't too much buying in those days.

HP: No, but even the thought... I mean, the whole notion that in... Marketing has taken over in a way now as distinct from those days, you know, maybe to the betterment, maybe not. I don't know. I mean, I'm two worlds about that. But as least in those days, you were thinking beyond self in a social way.

CA: And, as I said before, the fact that they had materials and could work allowed them to continue the work and, by continuing the work, sometime or other come to the attention of a wider public. I was thinking of the service that Edith Halpert performed in that respect. I've forgotten what year it was, but it was during those years she mounted a show of Negro artists. Now a lot of us in those days were opposed to shows of Negro artists. We were opposed to Harmon Foundation and people who set up the idea that there was such a thing distinctly apart from the whole American scene. I resented, for instance, the label "Negro art." It was American art that happened to be done by Negroes. But at the same time, there was this need of bringing some of these

more talented people to the attention of the wider art public. This was the whole purpose of the show, and she got together most of the people who were doing significant work and had this show. As a resut of it, a lot of them got placed in the major galleries. She took Lawrence herself; and from that point on, Lawrence began getting attention. Out of that show, I sold one picture to the Rockefellers and one to Mrs. Edsel Ford; and it was quite a stimulating thing. She made Madison Avenue conscious of the existence of this group of artists.

HP: She's always had, I think, a continuing interest in aid to artists basically.

CA: Yes. I think this is a dedicated woman.

HP: I mean, she has 101,000 ideas a minute. She's that kind. It's partly sales, and she's a great saleswomen.

CA: Yes, but it's a lot more than that with her.

HP: Much deeper than that. And just the discovery of something new, and she has a fantastically good eye.

CA: Yes, she has. Yes, she has. She's quite a gal.

HP: I liked her very much. Well, gee, I'm grateful to come in and chat with you about this.

CA: Well, I'm sorry I don't remember more. I know there's so much more, so much. Probably after you leave, I'll think of five dozen things that we should have touched on, but it is a long time.

HP: Oh, well, life was full for a change. Full with interest, and action is a function of interest. You had plenty of tools and could grow; that's the best thing about it. And Congress, whatever its limitations, participated in it to the extent that they could.

CA: Yes

[END OF CHARLES ALSTON INTERVIEW]