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Oral history interview with Clay Spohn, 1964 October 5 and 1965 September 25

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Clay Spohn on October 8, 1964. The interview was conducted at on Grand Street, New York by Harlan Phillips for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

CLAY SPOHN: What was that…?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: We landed in Paris. You were going to Paris. You had enough money to get to Paris, and you didn't care. You had to get there.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I think it's important in a way to get some kind of assessment as to what it was that intrigued you in going to Paris, what was in your understanding as to why you were going there, that pulled you in that direction?

CLAY SPOHN: The thing was, as I mentioned before, that I was interested in the French school of painting.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: You were.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes, and so I was curious about it, and I felt that I had to work fast to get this because I thought well if I miss it now, then I'll be behind. I saw some of Picasso's paintings in New York in 1924, at one of the galleries. I was very much impressed. I think it was Knoedler's. For some reason or other I think it was Knoedler Gallery, I remember it was on Fifth Avenue across from Krsuchaad down the street a little bit. Anyway, that doesn't matter. I remember some of the paintings. I still remember a man with his hand like this, and it wasn't exactly a harlequin costume, but it was almost. It was broken up in different colors, and I'm not sure whether the *Woman in White* was there. It might have been, but it was about that period, and it was very subtle, the coloring of the whole thing I thought was very subtle. And so I was very much impressed.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Then you had that period in Hollywood and Vine, no?

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. Hollywood and—the corner of Cuenga and Highland Boulevard, yes-wait-Highland,yes, where the Highland train came up and stopped. It stopped about that corner of La Cuenga, a little further up on Cuenga, I remember. It was the end of the line.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: But that you left behind to go to Paris?

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. Until I came back years later, well, see, this was about '56, '55 I took a trip to Los Angeles for the first time since then. I was one the Freeway, and I was with some people, and all that was cleared away, all vanished.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: No memory at all.

CLAY SPOHN: The past wiped out…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: That's right, touch stories to the past. Right.

CLAY SPOHN: So when I was in Paris, I stayed almost two years and I made some good friends there. I worked quite hard, but in spells, you know.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well Paris is such an alive place. In a way, it's like no other place you've ever been.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes, but at certain times of the year. Oh, by the way, I said before that that was Gare Lazare, it's Gare Haupt? Gare something or other, it's the main station as you come in from Le Havre. You know I'd forgotten that—I had no reason to think of the name of it for a long time. Well anyway—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Did you find Paris an exhilarating place, or no?

CLAY SPOHN: Well, yes it was. It was almost too much so. There was so much going on at the galleries and shows and exhibitions along with visiting museums all the time various places, then working, you know, you become very stimulated. I was getting very tired, so tired I could hardly walk from being so intense, memorizing

these things I had seen, memorizing the forms the subtle aesthetic qualities, you know. I'd come back at the end of the day just exhausted. I had spent a full day, you know, going through museums and galleries and so on, standing and taking them in, memorizing all this. I remember at that time my way of thinking was not in terms of words so much, but in terms of the visual aspect of things. I thought afterwards that it was sort of bumping one idea against another in order to reason some of these things out, the reasons for things and the effectiveness, that I used to compare two ideas together. That was my way of using logic rather than using words, you see. I found it interesting. It was a wonderful experience, my process of thinking in picturing the thing, of forming an image of it, memorizing it, comparing one thing to another constantly, you know, somebody's else's work to another thing, and so on. I did that the whole time I was there, and for years afterwards. And so I still needed a vocabulary for these things, they were pictures.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Visual…

CLAY SPOHN: Yes, they were visual images rather than using word symbols…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: That is interesting.

CLAY SPOHN: And so then I had to develop words to fit then things data so I could communicate with others. I couldn't tell people what I meant, because I didn't have a word for it, so then I realized the importance of words. Since then I have made a great effort to get the exact word, the word that would mean the thing exactly to myself and to others, too. There I find that teaching has helped a great deal in that because there you have to use the right word, the word that means a certain thing. So I don't think so much in terms of the image as I used to, although I still do. I picture the visual experience, but I also try to find the word that fits it exactly…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: As you can make it…

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. But I had to do it. I didn't have time to form words because I went into Italy, Florence, Rome, and Venice, and I was just trying to saturate myself in as much of this material as I possibly could because I was at that time interested in frescos also, mural decoration. But I became so saturated with all these murals of saints and what not, you know, all the way from Cimabue and Giotto and also the Byzantine, you know, things at Ravenna that I just felt it was almost like a great burden, you know, and I had to leave in a hurry. I thought, oh gee, I'll collapse with all this material that I was trying to remember and so in order that I could remember more even than I had seen , I bought almost two hundred prints, close to two hundred, and they were very wonderful. Eventually I sold them to one of the museums in San Francisco, they were very wonderful. Then having these possessions and so one seeing them except myself, then I got to the point where I wouldn't even look at them so I thought I'd better get rid of them. I remember when I was leaving Paris, the family sent me enough money for my ticket. They were anxious for me to get back to New York and get some kind of a job. They sent me just enough to get to New York on. When I was walking down the Boulevard Despais, I passed a bookstore and I saw a limited edition of Gauguin's N*eu Neu*. It was the French publication, but the facsimile of Gauguin's *Neu Neu* and the reproductions were made in Germany. They were collotypes. It's about the only place you have collotypes prints made, and they were very wonderful because when he had written—of course this was all written by hand by Gauguin, and where he changed the color they did it too, and where he had pasted photographs in they did too, you see these were facsimile collotype prints and looked exactly like the original. Where he painted on the page with watercolor they did the same thing, and where he pasted in woodblock, you know, then they did exactly the way he did it. So it was an exact replica, or facsimile except for the cover, I expect. There were only a hundred copies printed. So I thought, "Well, this is a collector's item, and I can't let this pass." I paid fifteen hundred francs for it, that's about the equivalent of sixty dollars at that time. So then I couldn't take the boat train back, and I was stuck for another month. I had to send another cable for more money. It was sort of slow calling. They were reluctant so finally I got to New York, and I landed here with just taxi fare to a hotel some place, so I was trapped here for three months trying to convince them that I should go back to San Francisco. It was impossible to get a job here at that time in such a short time. Anyway there are some very interesting experiences that I had in Paris. Calder was there at the time I was there, and we used to discuss things. He'd been a student when I was there at the school, the Arts Students League, but it would be almost a story in itself. To tell about some of the things that he did there, some of the things he wrote so I'd just as soon not speak of that—because I've written it anyway…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: You have?

CLAY SPOHN: Yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: You know he's part of whatever, there is of this illusive quality called America…

CLAY SPOHN: Yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: …whatever it is by the way of impulse.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes, and, you see that's one of the things the Archives has on microfilm. I think I've covered all that, but I don't like to start dropping names and that sort of thing. So I'd just as soon not discuss it—but I was a very interesting experience.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: It's only in the sense that what did it all add up to for you? This is not an experience that someone else had. It's something that you also share.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. Well I had a number of interesting experiences, but looking back they're not terribly important.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: How did you feel about Italian painting?

CLAY SPOHN: Well at that time I was extremely interested in the early Renaissance…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Particularly when you see it in its own setting.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. Yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Marvelous!

CLAY SPOHN: I was just bowled over. In a way, all that kept me from doing as much of what I wanted to do after I got home. There was just too much…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Overwhelming.

CLAY SPOHN: Overwhelming, and you see, centuries of such fine painting, including some of the modern, contemporary things, rather, actually is a distraction, and I felt I was distracted for some years after, because the possibilities were so great that I could go in any direction and I felt "Well I can go in this direction. I can go in that direction." And I started experimenting, exploring these possibilities and then these lead on to other possibilities and there was no end to it. So to be able to forget all that—see it's good to know that those things exist, but to have it too close to you, I don't think is a good thing. Because I had some good ideas about painting before I left to go to Paris, and I should have carried those through. I should have completed those before going because it meant a lot later. Just as a tourist and just rushed through, to have gotten a glimpse of it, but not to have remained. Then I became too interested in the French School of painting, at that time and I lost myself for a while. The things I brought back showed that influence. People in San Francisco didn't like it. For one thing, they felt it was too modern, that's what they said, the term they used, and also that it didn't have enough of myself in it. It was too much of the school. Well I had opened myself up completely to become impressed by it and to be influenced by it. I thought well this is an opportunity let's see what is the word, a word meaning that you're influenced, affected…?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well you want to soak it all up.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes, but the word that expresses it they said—responsive. I was very responsive to it, responded very quickly, very easily to it. So I allowed myself to, rather than defending myself against it.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well did you have a sense that that to which you were responding was unreal in terms of your own experience?

CLAY SPOHN: Well, it was so stimulating and so exciting that I wanted to be stimulated by it…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well is this what you meant when you said that you lost yourself for a while by going over the deep end in the sense of being receptive…?

CLAY SPOHN: I absorbed so much that I lost the real personal quality, and it took years to try to get it back.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Isn't that strange!

CLAY SPOHN: Well I think it's happened to a lot of people, and some people never get back. I think too much of that kind of influence can be bad.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: But, you know, if you're interested in art and you're there, you can see the history of art from Years X to Year X all unfold, you know…

CLAY SPOHN: Then, you see, the trouble is then you start using art, the principles of art impersonally. You word from knowledge and intellectually, you're apt to, and you lose the personal touch which developed slowly from the formative years, well from the time you were four, five, or six, you know. But even there you were influenced by something. But I was influenced by nature more than anything at the beginning. And then there were time

when I was influenced by things I'd see by illustrations, you know, and so on. But that didn't last very long. The first real influence I remember was when I was about eighteen or nineteen and saw some reproductions of Cezanne, Van Gogh and a few of those people the simplicity of my becoming interested in the French School. So a certain amount of it was good, but to be too overwhelmed with it was too much. The whole thing now, is and for a good many years has been trying to find more and more of myself and less and less of the things that I like in others, in the word of others, but find what I like in my own. So I remember in writing notes and things I used to say in my notes that it is better to study yourself, study your own work rather than the works of others, to be influenced by your own work rather than its work of others. Your own work, the basis for it should be from the observations of life rather than just art alone, visual images of painting or sculpture alone, but from life—the broad, general principles, the big design of life and so that work I'm trying to do now.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, when you got back to New York, were there some experiences in France which have continuity apart from, you know, your feeling of being inundated and invaded by this vast historical…?

CLAY SPOHN: White I was there, I became almost (can't read word) to get it all memorized, to remember it and then keep apart from my own work, but of course it kept creeping in. maybe it was a good influence. To some extent it was . I suspect sometimes it crept in a little bit too much. By the time the '30s came along, the Depression and WPA, why I just got away from it as much as possible. It was an opportunity to throw it all over, because when I first came back and I showed some of these things to people they—in San Francisco you see, they felt it was too much for them. They couldn't take it. That was very discouraging because without a certain amount of favorable response, why you get rather depressed. I remembered I had quite a few good things—things I liked, and I don't know what happened to them. We moved a lot during that time. The family moved, and then I moved to different studios and during the process of moving, why things would either become lost, or I'd lend them to somebody to store and then usually when I'd try to find them, they wouldn't know where they were. Another thing, sometimes I'd need canvas, and I'd take something that was unfinished, or that wasn't received too well by different persons, you know, I thought, "Well I know this now and therefore I don't need it any more." I'd paint over it. That was important today. Fortunately, there are a few that I didn't paint on but a lot of people have them. I know where some of them are, some I don't know. But, as I say, lots of these things were painted over. Some were a little bit far out. I could accept them today but at that time I thought they were a little extreme. During the Depression I didn't have the means to buy much canvases. I kept working on these old canvases. That was too bad because then you lose records. I should have had photos made had I been sensible about it.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: When were you in Paris? '27?

CLAY SPOHN: '26 and '27.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: '26 and '27.

CLAY SPOHN: January '26 to '27 in the fall of '27 I came back to New York, spend about three months trying to find a job and trying to get back to San Francisco. Finally the family sent me train fare. Well this *Neu Neu* set me back a bit I mean in my plans and all. I gave it to the Museum of Art in San Francisco. They still have it, but I don't know whether they really consider it's mine or theirs. It doesn't make too much difference. A thing of that kind belongs to a museum. I don't-I couldn't be looking at it all the time. I'm glad I did it because there were only a hundred copies, and I don't think they had a second edition. Well, I feel there are many little things that perhaps I could speak of, but just before the crash, let's see, in '29, I had a studio down town in San Francisco on Montgomery Street next door to Ralph Stack pole, who is a sculptor. He was well known on the West Coast. He was responsible for getting Diego Rivera to come to the school there, he and a man named Gerstal, who was a patron of the arts. I think Gerstral had something to do with the Stock Exchange. I've forgotten in what capacity, but anyway, they got Rivera to come to San Francisco and he painted the mural for the School, for the exhibition hall of the San Francisco School of Commerce, and then also for the Stock Exchange he did some murals there. Then Walt Kuhn was there, so just those three and maybe one or two others that liked my work. Walt Kuhn came out for a visit, and Stackpole introduced me to him and brought him over to my studio, and he seemed very much interested in me and, you know, gave me a lot of encouragement. But outside of those few persons and a few other artists, why there wasn't at that time much interest in what was happening in the art world outside of San Francisco, which was pretty much behind the times.

Now remember I was—well, I needed to make a living somehow, and a friend of mine I went to college with, the University of California, was quite successful, and he used to come down once or twice a week to sit for a portrait, but sometimes he'd sit for five or ten minutes and get restless and then we'd go to lunch. He always wanted to take me to lunch and we'd go to lunch some place nearly everyday. He sat so seldom, you know, he'd just come and we'd have lunch. Some days he wouldn't even sit. I remember he came down the day of the crash, and he said that he was losing everything he had. He said it was all paper anyway. He said one thing was it wasn't his wife's money. It was only his own. He was very funny about it, told me how much he was losing an hour, and I think in a couple of days he was wiped out, he was pretty much of an optimist, a happy—a very

happy sort of fellow and in a few years he was back on his feet again with more paper money, stocks and things.

Well anyway, the family's business was affected by it. My father died in '31, and my mother died in '32. My brother carried on said the business and tried to pay back the debts the business was in, so I went down to help out for about three years, and then my brother went into backruptcy, which he should have done in the first place. There wasn't much hope of his pulling out of the debt that he was in. he was forced into bankruptcy finally, and then I was able to—as a matter of fact I wanted to go on the Art Project-I've forgotten what it was called off that time-

HARLAN PHILLIPS: PWAP? Public Works of Art Project?

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. So I got on that rather late, I think it was just a few months before it was converted into WPA. Then when that was formed about '35 or '36 well then I went on the Project Bill Forest, mural project, and they needed mural painters. That's almost the same easel project. He encouraged me to go on the mural project. Well then they wanted work that would be understandable by the general public and acceptable and readable, so I went back to realism, became quite (can't read word) and before that I was sometimes abstract and sometimes semi-abstract. I was more of an expressionist before that. Then I became really literal , became almost illustrative. I worked on definite themes, historical themes. One was an Indian legend that had supposedly taken place in Almaden near Los Gatos. This mural was for the Los Gatos High School. It was later removed because the High School didn't want it after what happened. They didn't think it was interpreted correctly from some paint of new. I was taking it from one account, and they wanted it to be the account that the Catholics had made of it. This was from the Indians, the account I used, you see, so they felt that it should have been the one that the Catholics had chosen. Well according to the Indians, a spirit appeared to one of the chiefs and told him to shoot an arrow into a certain rock—you see, near Almaden was a quick silver mine that the Spanish found—shall I tell this?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

CLAY SPOHN: The Spanish saw these Indians near Los Gatos, near what is now Almaden painted red, you know, and they followed them and found out where they got this cinnabar pigment to paint themselves with, some of the Indians were getting sick, you know, and dying and so on. So according to the Indians, an Indian spirit appeared to him and told him to shoot an arrow into a rock, which he did. The rock split open and water poured out, the Indian bathed in it and got well. Well the Catholics claimed that this was St. Theresa you know, they made their own legend. Well that's all right, except that I made the Indian spirit nude, and they didn't like it. They thought he should have been clothed. Well it would have spoiled the design, I don't know, it was—the thing was finished by then. I couldn't repaint it. It was egg tempera twenty-three feet long and to repaint it would have—well, to go over the egg tempera would have spoiled it. It took me something like two years to paint it. It meant a lot of research. I was working on other murals at the time. But the thing was it was installed and then egg tempera is a rather delicate, fragile medium and one of the students threw an orange at somebody. It missed and it hit the mural and splashed and then somebody- one of the janitors, tried to clean it up or somebody tried to clean it up, and I suppose they used soap and water to clean it, and it took off half the part of the painting, because it was still quite fresh. Of course, egg tempera over a period of years becomes quite tough, but this was just a few months after. So they notified the department, you know, the Art Project, offices, so I was asked to go down and put something on it-varnish-so I put Dammor varnish on it. I didn't know what else to use at that time which wouldn't have much gloss, and Davo is about the only thing.. I did that, and it spoiled the texture of it. It had a very subtle , soft, eggshell texture, which was very beautiful, and when I had to put this on, it just spoiled the texture of it. It and when I had to put this on, it just spoiled the effect. This was, let's see, when was that? This was installed, I guess, in the late 30s. I was working on other murals too, so that was a rather tragic thing in the way that it happened, because it was discouraging.

I was working on a series of murals for the walls of the officer's quarters at the Presidio and they had been approved, the thing was ready to go, that was going to be egg tempera too on the walls. So it was just about—well most all the sketches were finished and then World War II came along and terminated that, you know.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Surely. Well how extensive was the Project in San Francisco?

CLAY SPOHN: Well it included Contra Costa County. I did a design for a copper hood for a fireplace. I never did see it installed, but it was for the Contra Costa Community Center. It was quite large, I mean about four by eight feet, or four by seven feet, something like that. And also another copper repousse which was about three feet by four and a half feet, it was for the Carmel Volunteer Fire Department "Firearem, Save My Child!" Let's see, and of course there were projects all over the place, murals. Ruben Kadish worked on murals until he accepted the job of supervisor. Then he stopped making murals. He painted a fresco for the college—I think it was San Francisco State Teachers College. Herman Volz painted, rather he designed the very large mosaics—they're called mosaic, but they're the large sections of stone some I guess are two or three feet, and that was for one of the colleges. He was over on the easel project before that for a few years and then this was given to him. Well,

there were mosaics murals installed quite an interesting mosaic for I guess the State Teachers College. Well I guess you got all that information from Neininger, didn't you?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

CLAY SPOHN: Because he was much more familiar with all these things. He got around much more, being a supervisor, I decided to say on with the murals. There isn't much to say about WPA days, except that I feel that it helped the artists a great deal, carried them through that period.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: What's the process involved in obtaining wall space? Is this a burden that you as a mural painter had to assume?

CLAY SPOHN: No. that was taken care of by the heads of the various departments. Bill Gaskin, Joe Allen—see Joe Allen was in charge—well let's see, Joe was in charge of all of California. Its been so long. First, I think he was just in charge of San Francisco, Northern California. You must know the—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I wish I did.

CLAY SPOHN: Oh, you don't? I thought you got this from Neininger.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well I'm sure I did, you know…

CLAY SPOHN: It'll come to me. Well Joseph Allen had been with Vitry Atkinson Tory. I remember when I was—well this was ten, twelve years before that, but one time I went to Vitry Atkinson Tory which dealt in—oh, they had antiques, furniture and they had paintings and they had a small exhibition room and prints. I know when I was an art student I went in there one time, and Joseph Allen was a partner or something, or he was in charge of that department. He told me one time, he said, later that he had become a partner in the firm, but then they went out of business. I guess it was around the time of the depression. He was put in charge of Northern California, the San Francisco Bay area. He was the Director. Then directly under him was William Gaskin, whom I had known back in 1922, because I worked in advertising one summer before going to art school in New York. I believe I mentioned that, outdoor Advertisers, and I tried my hand at it one summer, and Bill Gaskin was working there at that time, so I had known him since then. Joseph Dansh was the one…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Dansh!! Of course!

CLAY SPOHN: Dansh was the one who was in charge of all Northern California. He finally was in charge of all of California, I think. Oh, Neininger told me that when he heard these things were forming he was the one that approached the government people for this job. He sent them a wire as soon as he found out about it. They gave him the job. Well he was quite capable, because I remember about 1928, or '29 well it was before the crash, he had a little gallery on Maiden Lane. I've forgotten the name of it, and he was just entering into this sort of thing. It was more or less of a new experience for him, and I remember going in there with a friend of mine, another artist, and some of the things he was showing were thins from Mexico. Well they were all right, but I think we made some comment or something, I don't know, because his things—well I don't know I've forgotten, but this man I was with made some. Yes yes, there was sculpture. I've forgotten who was—I guess maybe Dufano was in charge of sculpture, I don't know. I don't know if he had time to be (can't read word) by that. Maybe that was taken care of by Gaskin and Joe Allen. I'm not sure. Oh, and then there was Sargent Johnson who was a good sculpture. Do you know his work?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: No, I don't.

CLAY SPOHN: Very interesting things. He made a large leaf, I guess it was, in concrete leaf cast. I think it was cast-yes, because he was working in modeling clay you know. It was quite large. I think it was about six feet high. It was for the end of a football field of a stadium of some high school—I've forgotten the name of it—out in the western part of San Francisco. It was very interesting. It was very good.

I was working on a number of projects, possibilities , you know, one was to build doorways. It would be a carved door, and I designed it. I don't know if it was for the church, or a mission or, maybe it was for a mission, but that's what I had in mind because I designed it in the same fashion as the old missions were designed. I had to do a lot of research, especially when I was working on this project for the officer's club in the Presidio, the design. That just got as far as the designs and the plans before World War II came along. But in research work-I was doing the research for that and drawing the designs for that, and I was working egg tempera, that's why—one reason the egg tempera painting took so long, but of course working in egg tempera with small brushes, you know, why it takes quite a while. I had a few different assistants on that from time to time, but I couldn't let them work on it unless I was there, so I worked for about three years on the research of the thing for the Presidio. That was a historical account which was very wonderful. Can I tell you about it?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

CLAY SPOHN: For the Almaden mural I was trying to find out as much as I could about the Indians of California around 1800. You see San Francisco was established in 1776—isn't that odd?-by the missionaries who came up. The Franciscans-I've forgotten now-oh yes! The Franciscans were the ones who came in and established the missions. So I read the history of the settling of San Francisco and also the (notsure) of the establishing of the Mission Dolores. I became interested in the legends of the California Indians and their religious beliefs and so I read a lot. I used to go to the historical account which took place at the Presidio in 1806. Mission Dolores was established, and I think that was founded about 1876, but San Francisco itself—I think Mission Dolores was established in 1776 and San Francisco itself. The mission at that time is what is now called the Mission District, Mission Dolores of course is still standing, well preserved. At that time it was outside of the city limits. Of course, San Francisco wasn't a city, I mean the village of San Francisco was called Yerba Buena, which after a little herb that grew around there. I've forgotten when it was re-named San Francisco. The Presidio was quite a wave out too at that time. San Francisco was just a few little huts. The mission was two or three miles out southwest of San Francisco, and Presidio was in a more northerly western direction. It was about the same distance two or three miles about three miles. So the commandment of the Presidio was a Spanish Californian. His name was Agrayo. I think he was the first commandant of the Presidio, but he had a daughter who was fifteen years old in 1806, and at that time why the Russian American Fur Trading Company was established in Sitka, Alaska. Count Vasanoff was sent by the Czar Alexander, the Great I think—well it was in 1805 or '06. He went by boat first to open up the trade between Japan and Russia and then while he was there—I think he must have worked for about six months trying to open up trade, and he couldn't get very far with it. So then he went up to Alaska to see how this colony was getting along because communications were so difficult at that time it would take about two years, you know, to make a complete correspondence, complete circuit of correspondence. They didn't know how they were getting along, so he went up there with I don't know whether they had one or two ships, but he found they were dying of scurvy and starving. They needed fresh foods, grain, and so on. Perhaps they weren't getting enough fish or what, I don't know what was wrong. But they had Aleutian Indians working for them as hunters and also they had Aleutians. I don't know if they had Heidi Indians or not, but they had Eskimos and Aleutians, according to the account. They had to get fresh foodstuffs, so they came down the Coast, and they stopped about he Columbia River. I think they stopped in there to get water and fuel, you know, for cooking purposes on board ship. They came further south, and when they got to San Francisco—well the Spanish—San Francisco was the most northern settlement, I believe, at that time. The commandante had orders from the viceroy of Spain-the Mexican viceroy I guess he was a Mexican-well the orders came from Mexico. Of course it wasn't called Mexico then, it was called—I don't think let's see—gosh my history is so sloppy.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I don't read either.

CLAY SPOHN: It might have been called New Spain. I've forgotten because at that time I think it was called New Spain. Well anyway-well, it might that he didn't think that the particular things he was showing were especially good, or that they would be very important a few years later. Well, he said something about he thought they would last, or he thought that the modern movement was here to stay or something like that, which I think sounds sort of funny but the way he said it—I just remember that. That's about all I remember of that. I shouldn't have put that in.

I remember he had this gallery, and in a way he was a pioneer in San Francisco having a gallery of modern art, contemporary art. They were all small things—mostly prints the thing he had, small watercolors. Then he sort of dropped out of sight. I don't know what happened to him because everybody that tried to make a go of an art gallery in San Francisco in those days would last a few months and then fail, have to close up because days would last a few months and then fail, have to close up because people out there wouldn't buy anything. I don't think they do come to New York, and then they built a theatre to his name after he became famous in the East here-David Warfield was an actor. David Belasco came here. Of course New York was, always has been, the field for theatre and all that, so maybe he left because New York was a larger field, abut they seem to distrust local talent, they have no faith in it.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Fame!

CLAY SPOHN: Well, it comes from pioneer days. During the gold rush days they imported people and if you came from a great distance, well then it was good. That same sort of thing is a holdover. In other words, I always felt that San Franciscans looked to New York, and New York looked to Europe, and so on. But the last decade at least why Paris, Europe has looked a little bit to New York, the world, much more than they ever have.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: In the WPA days were the sponsors responsible for the material?

CLAY SPOHN: Oh—well yes. The Government paid the artists for his time and his work, a and the public building, or whoever was responsible for, or whoever was in charge of the public building, whatever it was, whether it was a public building or if it was a semi-public building, something that belonged to a community—NO, these weren't

public buildings. But I remember they were either endowed such as a high school, or community center, or something of that kind. Because the post offices, that was something else, that was another—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Treasury Department.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes, that was under the Treasury Department. But somebody else was in charge of that. Cahill was in charge of our branch.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Edward Bruce.

CLAY SPOHN: That's right, Bruce was in charge of the other. I remember that now because I tried for one of the competitions.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: There were two of those, that is Cahill headed one, and Bruce headed the other.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. Cahill used to come out once in a while. I met him on several occasions out there and I've met him since of course. He was a very nice fellow. Everybody like him. Well he was very likable in every way, and he was all out for the artists, you know, to see that the artists got a good break, a decent break. Well, yes, the artist was paid by the Government, and the people who received the work. I guess in a way they would be sponsors, wouldn't they—such as a high school, they paid for the materials. The materials didn't amount to very much. Then these things were not the property of the sponsor, but what's the term? There were not loan, but what's like rented for ninety nine years, what is that?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Lease.

CLAY SPOHN: Leased, yes, for ninety nine years. Then the things on the easel project were also leased on the same basis, I think, so none of these things were the property of the establishments that received them, except that you took it for granted that they weren't going to be destroyed or erased after ninety nine years, provided things lasted that long. I know I did a little mosaic. I don't know what ever happened to it; and I did some lithographs and I don't know where they are now. Those records were kept at one time, but I have no idea what ever happened to the records. But I'd like to know where some of the things are. Well, they gave mostly an account if they were traveling around in a show, or being exhibited some place, they sent us a notice, you know.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Did you work under a supervisor?

CLAY SPOHN: Well yes—well Gaskin—no, I supervised my own work. Gaskin was in charge of all the murals, so was Allen, so they left us pretty much alone so we could do what we pleased and so on. If you needed materials, why Neininger would get materials for us, or I'd go to Gaskin, and Gaskin would get them. Of course they had to keep their eye on things to a certain extent so that people wouldn't be printing in anything that might in some way offend the people who…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: San Franciscans.

CLAY SPOHN: Well the sponsors of course one of the prominent fellows working on the project was Beniamino Dufano, the sculptor. I did some work for him. He had a lot of people you know—if you needed help of some kind. I made some drawings of his statue, the huge St. Francis 180 foot high St. Francis that was to go on Twin Peaks. So I made two drawings to be shown the Mayor. I made a few refinements, which he didn't mind because he told me, but I did so it would look nice to the mayor and the Art Commission. The thing is that the actual size—I had to do it because of the difference of size, the fact that it was going to be seen from a great distance, from downtown San Francisco as a rule you know, and also if you got close then, of course it looked different. When you got close to it that's something they didn't realize, so I had to allow for those differences in the drawings. So it looked a bit refined. It's sort of fun to make those things. But everybody assisted one another if there was any need for it, you know. I worked on something with Charles Howard, just at the last after the project was folding up right after Peal Harbor, why some of these things had to, be completed, and Charles Howard was working on a mural for The Officer's Club at the Alameda Naval Air Base. It was on glass. It was being painted in reverse. I was finished with my work, so I assisted him in the completion of this. That was fun because everything was being done in reverse. This was behind the bar…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well Benny Bufano had a lot of ideas, a lot of little whirlpools generating, he was-I don't know…

CLAY SPOHN: Well, I gave him one idea—you mean for his statue?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

CLAY SPOHN: Well, yes. He was going to have a studio in the head of this 180-foot high statue of St. Francis, just jokingly one day why not have it on rollers so it would turn with the sun? I mean St. Francis had his arms up and

he was facing east so as the sun rose St. Francis could be following the sun of course, and then by evening he would be facing west, the sunset. Well I mean I said this in a joking way, but he took me seriously. And Joe Danish was going wild because of the cost, you know, just realize the cost of all this putting a motor in there. But it was a lot of fun. It might have been a good idea, except it would have been a hazard to planes and such things. I think that was the main objection to it. Of course Bufano's style was a little hard for some people to accept.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Was it?

CLAY SPOHN: Well, he did one thing, a statue of Sun Yat Sen for on of the parks in Chinatown. It was a very simple and very fine thing, but it was such an unusual style that people—well it received both good comments, criticism, and also rather sharp criticisms from some quarters.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, you know, what has come down from San Francisco was that some extent he was a Peck's Bad Boy in the sense of perhaps demanding—you know, in that sense.

CLAY SPOHN: Well he was, yes,...

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Or like a monopolist...

CLAY SPOHN: Yes, he was, very demanding. His project was a large project. Let me see, I think he was working on other things too, but the fact that this was such a big project, why had quite a staff working for him so he was his own supervisor. Well, I guess everyone was that had his own little job to do. He was on a supervisory basis in pay.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes, but you know in terms of the overall cost of something, he could be pretty sticky.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. Well he was fantastic in his needs of the department—outlandish at times. At the time there was a lot of comment—I don't know whether to tell stories about him, or not...

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Oh yes, because this is part of the scenery.

CLAY SPOHN: Joe Danysh had a beard at that time, you know, a close cropped beard, and the head of St.Francis Bufano made it look like Joe Danysh, I mean so close you know, it could have been coincidental, but everybody remarked about it. That was sort of amusing. Of course, I guess Joe didn't mind, you know, it was sort of flattering him.

Bufano must have had some sort of a complex. I mean after working on this thing for several years, a few years, why he must have developed a complex about St. Francis. Because one day I happened to run across him. We were on our way to project, I think, one morning. He was coming down one of the hills, and I joined him. We walked down the street and he was telling me about St. Francis, you know, what a fine man he was, and all this. Of course I knew about St. Francis. Anyway, he was explaining things about St. Francis, and he said you know—well Bufano was very small, you know, he was almost a head smaller than myself—so he said, "You know, St. Francis was a little fellow," and he put his hand on the top of his head like this, and he drew it out parallel from his head, and he said he was a little fellow you know indicating that he was just about his own size. I couldn't help but think he must have identified himself with St. Francis, you know, after working all those years he couldn't help it. That's all right, but I mean those are just amusing little things that people were aware of, and there used to be little anecdotes of that kind.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well he used to keep the pot boiling for sure, didn't he?

CLAY SPOHN: Oh yes, yes, he was a very hard worker-worked night and day. All the time, yes. It would indicate then that there was an easel project, a mural project, a sculpture division you know have been called Mexico, but they didn't call themselves Mexicans. Of course, the revolution hadn't taken place at that time. I think it was 1822, the first revolution from Spain. So the Commandante at Presidio was given orders not to allow foreigners into San Francisco Bay. But San Francisco being so isolated, of course they would have liked to have invited foreigners there because they were so isolated and they were very lonely for some news of the outside world. That was the way it was put in the history books, you know. Now let me see, I believe there was a French—yes, it was a French boat that came in and I've forgotten by whom it was written, but there was an artist aboard, and he made drawings and an account of the state of affairs in San Francisco harbor at that time. Then I believe an English ship might have come there before Count Vasanoff's boat came, see. Well anyway Vasanoff—that was in 1806, and I think they fired a few shots, purposely made certain that they wouldn't be too accurate, but they had to make some sort of pretense that they had to warn people not to anchor in the Bay. But the Russians anchored anyway and asked to be allowed to come ashore. So finally the Spanish said, "Well if you don't stay too long, maybe overnight or something."

The Commandante was in Monteray, oh, I don't know, see Monteray was-what was Monterey at that time? One of the headquarters in California. He wasn't here, they said that they couldn't let them stay, that they'd have to have approval of the Commandante Agraye, so they'd have to send word down. They sent word, and explained, you know, that foreigners weren't allowed and they weren't supposed to be there. They were all considered enemies of the Spanish colony. They were afraid that they would lose their colonies, you know. So they said, "It'll take several days for us to find out, to have a horseman go down there and get word," you know, and all that. They started celebrating. Vasanoff was a widower. He was forty-two. So there were several days of celebrating and entertaining the men from the Russian boat and during that period why he, of course, met the daughter of Commandante Agrayo and fell in love with her. So by the time Agrayo got up there why he told them they should be leaving but that—oh, Vasanoff explained—I'm stuttering, stammering so over this it's been so long want to go outside a minute.
(Interruption)
Am I too talkative?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: No, you're all right.

CLAY SPOHN: Well, there's something rather wonderful about California history. There are so many wonderful things about California history that I was fascinated with this because I used to hear stories from my grandmother about the early days out there. Everything that had to do with California and the Indians. Well, she lived in Nevada for a while, back in the '70s I guess somewhere around there. She came from Pennsylvania. Her father went out there first across the plains and she came. But she used to tell me stories about the Indians so anything about the Indians was very wonderful. I became very fascinated with this. This all took place inside at Presidio and where the officer's club stood was where the old fort was, you see, on the exact spot. They made the fort by staking tree trunks, you know, into the ground and trying them, and then the houses were built of a combination of adobe and timber. There was an earthquake in 1806, which almost destroyed the place, which was just a hundred years before 1906, when they had the earthquake and fire later, you know. But now the Vasanoff thing—you see, this is quite interesting because if he hadn't come down, the sea otter probably wouldn't have been wiped out, because the census of the show of hundreds of thousands of sea otter. He could take a canoe and the Indians-well he brought the Indians down later—or this Russian Fur Trading Company came down later and they established Fort Ross, you know, which is up near what is now called the Russian River. They only stayed a few years, but they wiped out all the sea otter until they were for many years extinct. They thought they were extinct. I saw a small herd of about seventy five in the later 30s or, wait a minute, it might have been '45. It was around '45 or '46 I have forgotten, yes around there some place. I happened to go down there one time, and they were pointed out to me. I could see them down there eating abalone, you know. Then they disappeared, and I don't know where they are now. There are very few sea otter left, but one time there were hundreds of thousands of these.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: All over the Bay.

CLAY SPOHN: All over the Bay and out in the ocean. But the Indians that they brought down from Alaska and the hunters, you know and the Russians from the fur company used to go out in small boats and bang them over the head, you know, and at that time it was supposed to be the finest fur known, maybe still is. But they would take them to China, I understand, to be treated, but even at that time I think they were worth about the equivalent of, as I recall reading the historical account was about three hundred dollars a pelt at that time, which would make it much more valuable today. I don't know just how valuable, but they had to be taken to China to be treated and so on for some reason or other and then they went all over Europe.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, did this form the subject of the mural?

CLAY SPOHN: The mural was the romance between Conception, who was the daughter of the Commandante, Conception Agrayo and Vasanoff. Well, it's very romantic, almost too romantic, and the historians wrote it up in such a sentimental manner, you know, that you couldn't help read about it and you'd go to pieces. It'd break you up. Brett Hart wrote about it. And there's a wonderful book which gives the account of the whole thing, or at least the latter part of it, the part that took place years later, and I think his name was Davis. It was in some of the California libraries. I've forgotten the name of the book, the exact title, but he claims that it was the finest romance in American history, and he claims that it was a much the best romantic tale because for one thing it wasn't an unrequited love affair. These stories turn out fine one way or another. I mean it's a happy ending. But this was very sad, very dramatic, which gave it more potency, of course, as any drama. The thing that happened was that finally the parents of Conception agreed that Vasanoff should go back to Russia to get the consent of the Czar, I think it was Alexander, because he was the son of Catherine the Great, wasn't that Alexander? I think that's right. but he was to go back to get the consent of the Czar and then go to Rome to get the consent of the Pope because he was a Greek Catholic, then stop off in Spain—wait, was he supposed to stop off in Spain to get the consent of somebody in Spain? I don't know. It would be about a three years trip, you see, and she was to wait for him all this time, which she did. The thing is Vasanoff never came back. he was so anxious to get all these things taken care of that he crossed Siberia in winter rather than going by ship around, which would have

taken much longer. He thought this would be the quickest way, so he went across Siberia in winter, and he fell off his horse and injured himself. I think it was in a blizzard and he got pneumonia or something like that and died. He was buried in Siberia. By the time the news got back to Europe or wherever back to California-it didn't come back to California. No one came back to give the news. So years passed by and in the meantime Agrayo became the first Spanish governor of California, I believe. They moved to Santa Barbara, and he was the first Spanish governor. I've forgotten under what regime that was, whether it was Mexico, or what, anyway he was in Santa Barbara and his family went with him. Conception was there. He had several daughters. She knew that something had happened, something tragic must have happened, she couldn't get word from anybody. She joined a lay order, which was a sort of charitable order, I've forgotten the name-"Women in Blue", "Ladies in Blue" something like that. It was a church order. It was almost like becoming a nun not quite. I mean in other words she hadn't committed herself. So in 1838, a Scotsman by the name of Spence went out there and married a sister of Conception's. I happened to know the descendants of this Spence family later a short time—shall I tell you about that?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

CLAY SPOHN: It did help in my getting some factual material for this mural. A friend of mine I went up to school with—well Ralph Wood was his name—his brother married Annette Spence, I remember when I used to go to their ranch down at Hollister when I was in high school I used to work on a ranch in the summertime. One summer we went to Monterey and Howard, Ralph' s older brother, was wooing this girl by the name of Spence. She was a descendant. She was a great, great grand nice of Concepcion, because her ancestor Spence, I've forgotten his first name, in 1838, went out there and married a sister of Concepcion. So later on when I was working on this I talked to Irene about a lot of things in the past. She told me about—I had to find out something about costumes, you see, and she had some cousins also who were Spanish. Irene who was very blond, didn't look Spanish, but the other cousins did. I guess the Scot was pretty potent because she was very blond—odd you know. Well her features were a little bit Spanish of a certain type, you know. But she had some children and I knew the family very well—I mean the Wood family. She still had a bit of property left around Monterey, from the old Spanish grants, but all those were eaten up by the Yankees when they went out there, you know, around the gold rush period. The Spanish families most of them lost their land after. But anyway Concepcion Agrayo about that period 1830's '20s and '30s, let me see, according to the account, I think it was twenty, I forget whether it was twenty or thirty years later that an English ship came by, a man by the name of Captain Richards, or Richardson stopped at Santa Barbara, and they were entertained by the Agrayo family. At dinner she asked for news—imagine twenty or thirty years later—asked if he had any news. She either asked—one account was that he had heard of the romance and heard of her, and he offered it to her. He went up to what is now Vancouver. I guess Vancouver was called Vancouver Island by that time. But he was on his way up the Coast, and so he suggested that he would make a point to visit Vasanoff's tomb in Siberia. He happened to be up around there some place and went inland and saw this tomb and verified the fact that Vasanoff was dead. Of course they laid it on, whoever was telling this story. Oh, Brett Hart's poem is a tearjerker, you know. It would just tear you to pieces. But I think that was the main account, and I think it was Brett Hart's House, you know and then finally in the 1870's, 1873-maybe this was in the '50s that he stopped by there, about thirty-six years later. Well anyway, I understand that Concepcion then later—well she said that she knew that something had occurred. So the Carmelite-what do you call a nunnery? Convent! There is such a term "nunnery"

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Shakespeare maybe.

CLAY SPOHN: Oh yes, Shakespeare, Nunnery. But a Carmelite Convent was built in Carmel. There is a Mission in Carmel. It was either in Carmel or Monterey. Monterey and Carmel join one another. So this Carmelite convent was built in either Monterey, or Carmel and she was the first novitiate, Concepcion and then she—Oh, that was it! I remember now. She died in about 1873 according to the historical account. The Spence family, you see, and the Agrayo family had a lot of land around Monterey. When I first met Inez Spence, why she was living in Monterey. She had one of those old adobe houses, a very beautiful old adobe house. Monterey was a very beautiful town, the old adobe buildings were wonderful. They retained some .

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Special character (unsure of words).

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. But I it was very difficult to get material which described the costuming. That was the most difficult thing. I couldn't find anything. I know that it's around some place, but I had a terrible time just trade. There wasn't any money or anything. The Spanish were very hospitable, and that same quality exists today, or at least it did a few years ago. I know in the late 40s it existed because when the Yankee went out there he picked it up from the Spanish. I had occasion to—well one of the artists from the East came out to teach at the California School of Fine Arts one summer, and it happened to be a very pleasant year, and he said, "How long can you paint in such a place, it's like Utopia, the climate. Everybody out here does so much for you, you know.

All of a sudden it occurred to me that it was left from Spanish days, and it is you know. The farther west you go, you find it more hospitable. Well I think since the war, industry going out there might have changed things quite

a bit, but I remember as a youngster I noticed the difference making several trips back and forth with my parents east, from Chicago west everybody was so very friendly, but from Chicago east everybody was cold and tightened up. But of course that's a western trait anyway whether it's California or not. But the fact is that the Spanish being isolated were very friendly. So this romance, this romantic tale regarding Concepcion and Vasanoff opened up an opportunity for me to dig into some strange facts of California history which I wouldn't have gotten ordinarily.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

CLAY SPOHN: but I found out some thing about the Indians which were interesting. So I started designing. I was making plans for mural decoration regarding the California Indians about their after life, the after world, the creation myth and so on. They were quite fascinating. Had the Project gone on I would have worked in some of these Indian legends, I guess. So I had to ask questions and get descriptions. Well Inez said that she remembered when she was a little girl her grandmother told her that when they'd have fiestas in Monterey and Carmel that—of course the Spanish were very fond of—and had many fiestas—they would paint the horses and rouge their noses. You know, suppose you had a white horse or a gray horse, they'd put rouge on the nose and paint them and put feathers on them, bright colored feathers and decorate them. Of course its saddles were wonderful, the costumes were quite interesting too. It was Spanish style and elaborate. They didn't have money before the Yankee came, and they never locked their houses. They had hundreds of herds of horses and cattle just miles of cattle and the trade finally when the Yankee Clippers went around there you know—as a youngster I read Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast* and in regards to the hide and tallow industry, you know, at San Diego and Los Angeles-let's see, what's the port of Los Angeles now? It's Santigo, yes but I mean it dealt with Los Angeles. I guess that was right after the war, the California Uprising, you know. California was a republic for a while, and they had a small war with the California Spanish. The Spanish became Californians and joined the republic, and Vallejo was a big name. The town of Vallejo was named after him, a large ranch owner. I think he was one of the first governors of the state of California after it became a sate during the gold rush days. Let me see now I'm trying to think when Dana, I think the Clipper ships went out there around 1820, didn't they? I've forgotten, well that's for somebody else to check didn't they? But the description of all historians at that time was that they had so many horses that a traveler going from Los Angeles up to Monterey he could stop at a ranch any lace and get a new horse.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, part of the Project was the *Index of American Design*…

CLAY SPOHN: Yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: …which might have involved Indians…

CLAY SPOHN: Yes, but that was a recording of artifacts and the crafts that had already been made—such as old weathervanes, Americana…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

CLAY SPOHN: It dealt with the crafts and the arts of pioneer crafts and arts so it was duplicating that material in a very realistic manner.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

CLAY SPOHN: Colored drawings, colored paintings. So this would have gotten into a lot of that too. And I guess maybe—I've forgotten how much of that they got. The Project out there, and I recall, most of it was New England because even if they found material out there, it was from the ships, the New England clipper ships, or things of that kind, you know. I don't think there is much left to record of California things except things from the missions, a few things, objects. But that was a good project. They did wonderful work on it.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

CLAY SPOHN: Because it was so accurate and so factual and …

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. Well what's the total effect? This project got you away from French influence…

CLAY SPOHN: Yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: It got you back into realistic…

CLAY SPOHN: Well yes, it had to be realistic because these factual records, but now I see how all these could be treated in a different way. I see now how fantasy could be applied to all this in order to give it another kind of color, you know, time colors things anyway, just as nature colors a stone, or an old fallen tree trunk, or a piece of iron, you know, it puts a patina on anything that is old enough with moss, or rust or something of that kind which

gives it another kind of attraction, so this thing in the past you can put your own patina on it, you know, I suppose follow the way in creative things in art of any kind. I feel that the best way to do it is the way nature does; that is, you don't duplicate anything the same way twice. I mean you don't duplicate it. Nature never duplicates anything exactly. But to color things as time does gives it another kind of color, and it romanticizes the thing, and I think there's a good reason for the thing to be done that way unless it's to be factual history, just a matter-of-fact record, accurate historical record which doesn't—well, that can have color too, but this other is like adding poetry to history. It's let me see, what else? How can they say this? It how a novel might do or a play…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well it's an imaginative projection…

CLAY SPOHN: Yes, an imaginative projection, yes…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: since the image itself has been removed and the participants have been removed, all you have left in effect is the outline, so you fill it with meaning by color by…

CLAY SPOHN: By my own interpretation which is…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Sure. And it's symbolic…

CLAY SPOHN: Yes, I can see the whole thing being treated that way. One day I'd like to work with some of this material not necessarily the California, but the Plain Indians, for one thing, which is part of Americana, and maybe some of California. I see how California could be done in a very wonderful way too, by painting it semi-abstract, but very colorful, rich, like a pageant. I've had it in mind for years and one of these days I might think of it because I have noticed the last ten or fifteen years occasionally I work with pageantry, and it's sort of a romanticized history, a bit from history some place, a romantic element. So I might, I don't know, but there are so many things, so many possibilities, and then I feel it would be completely American rather than being French themes, French material, you know. I feel that that's pretty well gone, although I haven't completed all the things I intended to do while I was in Paris, I might do that as a separate project. The work is still incomplete, but I have drawings and notes for it, and just do that as a series, just to get it out of my system and say, "Well, now I've done that, and I can go on to this other." I think I might return to this other material and do it in a much more imaginative way than I did before. The other was very literal when I was on the Art Project. But one thing that made it literal was the fact that it was so hard to dig up these facts about the costuming and all that I became determined to make it accurate. I don't know. It's just so hard to get that when I did get something, I wanted to make it literal as I possibly could. So it was a completely different attitude that I had toward representing things, or toward painting than I had when I was in Paris. But, as I say, I think it did serve a good purpose of wiping, getting rid of that, at least putting it in another category so I could view it from a different point of view entirely than I did the murals.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Among the supervisors—what was Joseph Allen? Was he the easel…?

CLAY SPOHN: No. Joseph Allen was in charge of the hole Bay Area project, Northern California, as I understand it. It seems to me that the whole thing broadened out, and then Danysh was in charge of several states, Nevada, California—well, I think maybe by that time Joe Allen was in charge of all California, it seems to me, because they used to make trips to Los Angeles. He and Danysh would both go down there sometimes, or he'd make a trip down there, and I think the Los Angeles Project was under their supervision.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Did you have assistants on your murals?

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. Walton was one. When I was making the cartoon he helped me draw the cartoon from the sketches. Walton, I've forgotten his first name. Then later when I was painting the mural I had one or two. One was Robert McChesney and I made a rather unusual discovery I think at that period. McChesney was full of fun, you know, at times and I thought he was well, he brought some eggs one morning. I don't know who brought the eggs, but anyway I had a bag with eggs to use for making the egg tempera, you know, using the yolks and linseed oil and dama. One day I picked up an egg out of the bag, and he'd been there earlier. He got there before I. We were working in a place called the pickle factory. It used to be a pickle factory. They moved the whole mural project down there. Before that it was out on Petraro Boulevardin south San Francisco, so they moved the project to North Beach to the pickle factory and we had large rooms. So I picked up an egg and cracked it and the yolk was blue, and McCHesney started to laugh. I thought he was playing a joke on me, you know, and I thought he'd gone to Chinatown that he'd gotten one of these fifty year or a hundred year old eggs. This was like a hard jelly. It was blue, I'd never seen anything like it, and he started to run so I picked up the egg and threw it at him, and it hit the mural and ran down, and I was very upset. I went over with a rag to wipe it off and it made the most wonderful glaze, just you know like a varnish, beautiful glaze when I wiped it off, and so then I started experimenting with oil color, oil tub color applying it for glaze, and I found that if you take a yolk of an egg—of course I mean a fresh egg, this one was must have been several years old, and I don't know what caused it to have a blue yolk but the yolk was a sort of a jelly. It was just—it was a coincidence of some kind or

other—I found that if you take tube color—see, instead of mixing the oil with the dry pigment, the egg yolk and all together, why not take the tube color and mix egg yolk with it and then thin that out with water. If you use enough, the right amount, you can do that maybe just a few drops of dama—not too much, and you can make these water washes with oil color, because yolk acts as an emulsifier, but it has to be very thin, you see, but you get the most subtle glaze. So I did, used a big brush and made glaze after glaze after glaze. That worked quite well. That came about through this freak…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Accident…

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. So McChesney is now a painter…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes, he is…

CLAY SPOHN: He's married to Mary Fuller, the one that wrote that article God in America article.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well did you also do some easel work on your own during this time, or no?

CLAY SPOHN: No

HARLAN PHILLIPS: You kept away form it, you say?

CLAY SPOHN: Yes, I did two or three lithographs, let's see, I've forgotten now. I remember one lithograph I did was the story of Ariadne and Theseus and the Minotaur. And then it seemed to me I did one or two others. In fact, at the pickle factory some were working on the floor below they were working on mosaics and I made a mosaic panel, a portable panel, which I rather liked because it wasn't so static. I mean it had movement. I don't know what happened to it. It was probably allocated to some place or other.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. Well most of the mural work was arranged for through the office itself.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. The artists themselves didn't have to contact these people at all. That was all done through the administration…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes, but when you had a size wall…

CLAY SPOHN: A certain size wall?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes, you had a certain size wall which was available and I assume the administration would get in touch with an artist such as yourself and then it would become what kind of a sketch you would make as a suggestion that would fit that wall. As you put it, you went into historical things from the point of view of the county and the area…

CLAY SPOHN: Yes, the particular area. For instance, the story of Vasanoff and Concepcion Agraya took place right at the Presidio and therefore it was something…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Sure, it was relevant to the time and the place.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes, that's right.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: This is a wholly different and new approach than you had before, isn't it?

CLAY SPOHN: You mean where-than I had before?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: In terms of generating an idea…

CLAY SPOHN: Oh yes! In terms of a special experience of trying to get along with this…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

CLAY SPOHN: Agraya Boulevard because they've anglicized the pronunciation of it and call it Agradio, Agrumo, but it's Agrayo Boulevard, and it extends directly south from the Presidio just almost on the line with the City proper. So the story was about the different phases. It was all about the different steps of this romance, the whole thing. I'm glad I didn't do it. I was being too literal and tried to be too accurate, and it would have a notion that it was about eighteen walls, or something like that…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: That's considerable…

CLAY SPOHN: Well you know eight, or nine feet high—but if it could have been handled in a very free manner, it would have been quite a lot of fun, but after a while I began to realize how tedious that kind of work is.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, you know, was research and it was hard to come by and this, in turn, made what you did come by all the more valuable to you. In that sense, it was having discovered it. Besides it was relevant to Northern California history, which itself was illusive, because you had such difficulty finding it. So it would have been a way of sharing your research efforts in a much broader way. Well, you know, looking back on the period of the WPA there's income that's steady which is a kind of unique thing for many artists in the modern field, you know, they had a tough time in the 20s and 30s…

CLAY SPOHN: Yes, well there wasn't much you could do. The artist wasn't trained at anything else-except a few-but I mean so many of them weren't. no other skill. There wasn't any place for them. There wasn't anything else they could do.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Right.

CLAY SPOHN: Of course, the Presidio that was government property. I was saying before that most of these were all in semi-public places, but then the Presidio, of course, that was government.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes but, you know, I think what transpired in California may be reflected elsewhere in the country, that as the 30s deepened to the late 30s, the scene and the feeling shifts in the country away from self concern, unemployment fo one kind or another, to preparedness to meet the new monster on the scene, Hitler, etcetera, and the German, Italian, Ethiopia, the Spanish Civil War, all these things were also going on while we were, let's say, more self-concerned because there was unemployment and while we were trying to, what is it, deal with the depression and our economic system, we never really came out ultimately to settle that sort of thing. It may well be that the reason you were working in the officer's club was because the Project in California had seen the handwriting on the wall in the sense that Congress would not make available funds for an employment project field, you know. This was the way for the Project to continue and make its contribution to military installations, like Presidio, or you mentioned the Naval aviation…

CLAY SPOHN: Club, yes that—officer's club. John Howard had that, you see, that was his project. I think he came on the project late…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: So it would tend to indicate that there was away from schools two installations of a military character in the late 30s. I think in various areas of the country under WPA there was an attempt on the part of the local people who, after all, had to tailor-make local projects to fit local talent, and they had vast discretion in this way depending upon how imagination they were, they might conceivably maintain the Project by making it more relevant to military things and so on as distinct from easel painting, or watercolors, or such things. It became a content thing. It may have been, I don't offer this as a black and white affair, it was a shift in…

CLAY SPOHN: I remember at that time they said that they had to have so many people on the mural project to take care of the easel painters that the important thing was to have as many mural painters as possible. I think one time I asked them if I could go on the easel project, and they explained this to me that I would be better to say on the mural project. I think they were going toward public buildings, government buildings, government installations, to improve them or put murals in them, and post offices and that sort of thing, although that was on that other project.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: The other with Bruce…

CLAY SPOHN: Yes, but I think-it seems to me in going over this thing there was a plan to have this become some sort of permanent thing for the government, just working on government things entirely, I believe, as I recall. It was just about to developed when war broke out. So there's no telling how far it would have gone if it hadn't been for the way.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. But at least there was this-what?-six year period…

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. At first it was sort of experimental. I know that. But even so there were some good things done, but it was experimental, you know. They had to search around a bit. And I remember there was a bit of complaining too because some people said well it was a waste of public money. But I don't think it was.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I don't either, but I know the public press generally had that attitude and it wouldn't surprise me for San Franciscan press to have the same attitude because I think…

CLAY SPOHN: Well some were for it and some were against it.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: But I think you did indicate there was little sale of paintings on the part of San Francisco local talent because they weren't supported. Here they could get them obvious reason why they should not be supported; namely it was a waste of public funds even though the net effect is to—gee, you know, decorate or add to public buildings.

CLAY SPOHN: Well you know in ’57, I made a quick trip to San Francisco. Some friends of mine going out there invited me to go, so we went through Carmel and I wanted to see this thing I did in copper for the volunteer fire department. Well, it had sort of gotten dark then. I wanted to keep it bright, you know, in the copper because it looked better when it was bright, but it had a patina over it, but anyway it was there and one of the men in charge showed it to us, and he said they liked it, so years later, you see this was ’57, to have them still like it, well I thought that was very good thing. I mean I felt good about that. So there was something that was practical. It was of metal. It was over the mantel of the fireplace and the them of it was “Save my Child” you know. It was done in sort of early American style which was amusing and decorative too. So some of the things had a purpose, and I suppose some time will be considered part of Americans.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. How did you find the attitude of artists toward the WPA, generally?

CLAY SPOHN: Well they were very grateful, I know that. Very grateful for this because otherwise they wouldn’t have been painting at all. If you take, for instance, skilled talent, you know it might have taken years for artists to get back on their feet again after, say, after the war, or after the depression was over. Of course the development of cultural things in the community or in the country is a necessary part of the community uphold of the quality, wouldn’t you say so?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Sure. But this is the first instance. I mean the whole experience is without precedent. Artists for the first time were looked upon not as merely citizens who were unemployed, therefore if there was a job, they didn’t (can’t understand rest of sentence).

CLAY SPOHN: In a lot of different papers there were photographs of works, you know, that were being done on the project at that time, so the press reported it, and the critics on those newspapers gave us all good write-ups and whenever a work was finished and installed, why they reproduced it and so on…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: It was an occasion….

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. So I think it was a good thing, and I think most of them realized it had value. At least today they must by this time realize it. I don’t know what more to say about it. The artists were hard workers. They worked at it. I know that. They didn’t keep regular hours. I know they’d work night and day…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: But they allowed to do something they enjoyed doing…

CLAY SPOHN: Yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: They were paid for it to boot by the government when they could anticipate relatively little in the way of income…

CLAY SPOHN: But they worked, oh, especially in the fresco, you know, when you’re working in wet plaster you can’t just stop when eight hours are over, or when of the day comes, you have to keep going sometimes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, I think instinct for workmanship was exhibited, don’t you?

CLAY SPOHN: Yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: And that the—while an artists might not have been doing that which left to his own devices he might want to do, the fact that you were doing a mural in a school required some different content perhaps than you yourself, you know, might want.

CLAY SPOHN: Oh yes, I did that in an entirely different way than my personal painting because I felt that I was doing if for the community, you know, and I felt sort of responsible, highly responsible as a matter of fact, for doing a good job because it was something you were sharing with others and it was for others. Actually it was more for others than it was for yourself. If I had been painting for myself, I would have painted in an entirely different way. I was painting in such a manner that it could be understood. Of course Allen and most of those in charge wanted things that would be acceptable and understood by the public and some of the mural painters were a little bit more expressionists maybe in the way they treated their work. I don’t know how I happed to be so literal. I guess I was quite literal…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: In other words it was a different world. The times called for responsibility to what a community…

CLAY SPOHN: Well, this is a story-telling themes and it had to be…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I think Danysh and Allen were quite wise in the sense of thinking of it in addition as a public relations thing. It you were using public funds. Best the public be at least pleased.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. That's what I thought too. I thought I was using public funds and go ahead and give them (something) and do it as best as I possibly could. I remember both Danysh and Allen explaining about painting you know. They said that they felt that this sort of thing was helpful to the Project to do it in a way that would be acceptable and understood.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Sure.

CLAY SPOHN: (can't read sentence)

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Sure. And the community had a stake in what you were doing.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. So. Well everybody had their own particular style. I can't think of any other aspect.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well it must have been a pleasurable experience…

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. It was. Everybody worked together, and you felt like a group, you know. You were contributing something to society as a whole. I was always thinking about friends, you know, who were in the people you know business. I was in business but I wasn't trained in business, but they would look down on the artists. They regarded me too as something of a freak.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: What strikes me peculiar in retrospect is that the government did not compete with any vested interests whatsoever. You see the work was done on public buildings. The work was done by artists who are individualists, there wasn't any vested interest that was astonished.

CLAY SPOHN: You see, I designed them.. they had to have a copper (don't understand). I was working on other things too. This was a large full-sized cartoon. Then he copied exactly from the cartoon. He was a copper smith working in this old historical shop that had been there for years. He was a crafts man . he was well trained in mural work. He came over to this country and he was an expert craftsman. He worked in metal and fine hard work. Somebody got hurt I remember, the depression came they had to let this man go.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: (can't read)

CLAY SPOHN: So I'm sure there were many cases where, you see, WPA did give work to many of these experts and craftsman who otherwise would have just been out of luck.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: And as you pointed out, the skills would have grown less skillful…

CLAY SPOHN: Yes, in time they would have drifted away, would have became what—street diggers, or something else, you know, gardeners or something, and they would never have gotten back to their craft. This way there was work for the craftsman in metal. But I'm sure if they had continued would have developed something very fine for public buildings, which would have been historical monuments of one kind or another. So let's see, I don't know what else…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I guess that's about it because we're running out of tape.

[END OF SESSION 1]

[SESSION 2
September 25,1965 FLAND STREET, NYC]

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Take me back to San Francisco, a marvelous place, a most exhilarating city, but take me back to the 20's, the late 20's. What are you doing?

CLAY SPOHN: Well, I arrived about the first part of '28 from Paris. I arrived here in New York City in the fall of '27 and stayed here for a while. My parents were trying to force me into getting a job and being serious about taking care of myself. I wanted to paint and so I tried it for three months here in New York City, and I couldn't find a job any place and I tried to get some murals from architects and couldn't locate anything so after a period of three months I finally convinced them that they should send me enough money for my train fare back to San Francisco, which they finally did and so after I once get out there, I started painting again.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, had you taken art in school?

CLAY SPOHN: Oh yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: You had? All along?

CLAY SPOHN: Well, I had been interested in painting ever since I was a youngster. I thought I can't make a go of

this in a financial way so I tried to think of other things and I tried to be practical and I tried to go along with advice from my parents, and so when I went to the University of California I majored in economics. I found myself being attracted to various courses which seemed more enjoyable than the practical things so instead of taking a certain course in political science, or ecnomics why in one case I switched to courses in agriculture. One was entomology, which I found very interesting. As a youngster I was interested in bugs, in insects, you know, and things that moved, and color and that had a great influence on my painting. I see today the interest I was thinking the other day. I was wondering why I was interested in color. Well in looking back I remember that my interest was in the color of insects, bugs. That attracted me more than the shape or form. So I found myself constantly looking back for a source of my color combinations, back to what period when I was four, five, or six years old. I think that was one reason I took these courses in Entomology, just a few, but then I was also taking courses in art and art appreciation and drawing and English. I liked English courses, the Romantic side of literature I didn't care much about composition or the syntax, or whatever, the mechanical things, you know, and as a matter of fact, at that time anything that seemed rigid, cold, mechanical I tried to avoid. Though I did enjoy Logic and one or two courses in philosophy, I didn't take them too seriously in an academic sense, but rather for the experience. I just enjoyed the new experience.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: It was a lunch counter from which you could sample.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes, well I wanted to sample life. I wanted to experience life, I didn't want to make plans for the future. I wanted to live it at the moment. And anticipate the future, but not make rigid plans for it. So somebody advised me to take an architectural course in mechanical drawing. I tried it for a week or two, and I couldn't stand it. That was just too rigid. Now I find myself being quite interested in certain geometric problems, and I enjoy my geometry now just playing with it. I treat it in a very flexible way, more as an art than too much of a science. Of course it is a science. It has its limitations. But so I dropped that course and took the art courses that had more freedom, and one course in illustration and other courses in fine arts, some sculpture.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Was this idea of art a receptive one in the family not in terms of people, but in terms of the impulses in the family?

CLAY SPOHN: Receptive by my family?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. Or do you represent a kind of mutation that appeared in the family?

CLAY SPOHN: Oh, no, no. My mother painted before she was married…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: It did have grounding?

CLAY SPOHN: She won prizes at eighteen. She did some beautiful paintings still lifes, yes. They looked like early Picasso, looking back, in the old tradition, too, when he was a youngster, I have seen some of his flower paintings, still lifes and so on. My mother's things were a little bit spontaneous, freedom, and soon very skillful, but then she had to give it up. She was married and had a family.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: But it was congenial as idea.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. Both my mother and father liked the idea as long as I treated it as a hobby, but not as a vocation.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, he was thinking of groceries. Sure.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: And that's understandable. You came through the school, the University of California?

CLAY SPOHN: I didn't finish. I left because my interest in the fine arts developed, kept getting stronger, and so the Dean of the Economic Department told me one day, "You know, you won't be able to graduate in your major."
I said, "I know it."
He said, "Well, do you care very much?"
I said, "Well no, what can I do?"
He said, "Well, you can qualify in fine arts."
Well I had made up my mind anyway, you know, and so I went to art school, the California School of Fine Arts. At that time it was called the Mark Hopkins Institute, where the hotel is now. It meant a great deal to me.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Did it?

CLAY SPOHN: Oh yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: When you say ‘it meant a great deal’, is this in terms of the climate, the atmosphere, teachers, or what?

CLAY SPOHN: Well, I felt great compassion and sympathy for the students, and I don’t know whether to say this, or not but I might as well. In a way I feel a little ashamed of it, you know, but there were so many of them so poor and they were making such a sacrifice to follow this and I felt the students were great, you know, and I had to get in. I felt that it was were I wanted to be because I thought I was a wonderful to donate a life regardless of whether it includes the danger or poverty or whatever, and I had a feeling, “It might be difficult, but I’m going to do it anyway.”

My father was very successful at that time, but I felt rather ashamed of being in the situation, an easy situation, when there were others who were in a desperate situation, who even so were following the arts. Well, there was a great attraction to it for me. It’s hard to explain why, what meaning painting has for you. It would take me some time to look into it…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes, but, you know, you had the sense of being alive in a different way than you were at the University of California.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. Well…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: That is, you could both absorb and contribute, you know, this mutual business.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. If I had a few minutes, I could probably dig down and find out just what was behind this. Of course, I was always drawing in school and then when I was at the University of California I was working on the school paper, you know, the *Chicago Magazine*, and I found myself working till three o’clock in the morning, you know, on drawing and things and as a consequence I was neglecting my studies, some of them.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: To me it illustrates that acting is a function of interest, and if you have interest, you just go.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes, well I couldn’t keep away from it.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: That’s right. It wasn’t something you thought about.

CLAY SPOHN: No, it wasn’t calculated.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: It just happened…

CLAY SPOHN:Yes

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. I know. Well, how about the…?

CLAY SPOHN: So then I came East, you see, and went to the Art Students League for two years.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: You did?

CLAY SPOHN: That was 1922 to ’24. While I was at the League my parents kept writing letters, “get a job”, you know, “You have to support yourself some time. You might as well go out and get a job.”

Finally one day I started out early I guess about six in the morning and I went to a leading magazine first to see if I could get a job as an illustrator. I took a course from Morgan, Henry Morgan, and I was a great admirer of Henry Raleigh’s work at that time. Was it Henry Raleigh? You recall his work? He illustrated the *Fu Manchu* stories I remember and very fanciful. Well, you see this dealt with imagination, and I like to work with imagination. The courses I liked best in school were history, literature, anything that had to do with dreaming, or the unreal world, and so Henry Raleigh’s illustrations appealed to me for that same reason. I thought, “Well if I’m going to make a compromise, if I have to make a living”—and the family, of course, were impressing me with this notion that I should do this, and so I took some courses in illustration as well as in painting, and fine arts. Wallace Morgan, that’s his name—Wallace. He gave me a great deal of encouragement, so one day I started out. I was still a student in school. I was taking drawing Boardman (unsure of that word) Robinson and then painting, too. The first instructor I had was Pene Du Bois.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: How did you like him?

CLAY SPOHN: Oh, he was a wonderful fellow. I liked him immensely, and Henry Miller for a little while. I wanted to find out, I wanted to get all their ideas, you know, their approaches, and George Luks, and I learned a great deal just from their personality—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, you know, Miller and Luks…

CLAY SPOHN: Yes, and they were wonderful experiences, but, you know, DuBois was a great friend of the students, and he would confide in the students, stories about other painters he had met and speak of experiences he had had and that means a great deal besides just telling you things about painting technique and so on.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well it's the subtleties of breathing after all…

CLAY SPOHN: The subtleties of what?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Breathing, just breathing, absorbing things…

CLAY SPOHN: Oh yes, being alive, being aware.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Like Luks.

CLAY SPOHN: Of responding to things, yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: A fellow who could get pleasure out of an ash can.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. Well, but Luks had a certain drive, you know.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Oh, yes.

CLAY SPOHN: And a spirit and a vitality, but Du Bois told a story about Alfred Ryder, at the time he went down to visit Alfred P. Ryder—I don't know whether I should tell you about that.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Please do.

CLAY SPOHN: Well, DuBois had been a student of Chase—let's see, was it William Chase?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Chase is a name I know, but that's all right.

CLAY SPOHN: I suppose he was an academician. I suppose he was from the Academy School. The Art Students League broke away from the academy and organized—I don't know the history, but DuBois told us something about it, and so when DuBois was a student he said one time how immaculate Chase was, that he would be preparing to go out for the evening, and he was in white tie and tails and had his white gloves on and just before he left the studio he had an idea and so instead of taking his gloves off, or changing, DuBois he would paint a still life or something before he left. He wouldn't take his gloves off, and he wouldn't have a spot of paint. Well, of course, he was a good painter for that style and for that school of painting. DuBois said other times he would go down to the corner and borrow a fish from the fish market, take it and paint it and bring it back before noon while it was still fresh so it wouldn't spoil, and have a painting finished. Of course, a lot of his things were fish.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

CLAY SPOHN: Well it gives a little bit of the personality, the character of Chase, William Chase, I guess that was it. Then DuBois told another story about Ryder. He said that he wanted to meet Ryder and I think it was Chase that arranged for Dubois to go down and see Ryder. I think he gave him a letter of introduction to him. So I think Ryder was living on 23rd Street at that time, somewhere around the vicinity. DuBois said that he went down and knocked on the door—Ryder was quite elderly at that time, this was in the teens some time, and I don't remember just when-but Ryder was quite old at that time, I think it was a few years before Ryder died, but DuBois said that Ryder was losing his memory. He said that while he was there Ryder asked him several times what his name was, and who sent him. He asked him over and over again in a very few minutes. DuBois said that it was about six inches deep with clutter, and he said there was a trail worn through all this between Ryder's cot and his easel. Then he said—to indicate how serious Ryder was in producing the best he could in his work—that he would see a painting. Then he would remember that there was something he wanted to do to it, so he'd go and borrow it. He'd borrow it, take it back and it would be months before these people would get the painting again. He'd put it aside and forget about it. He said in some cases people didn't get their paintings back until after he died. He kept borrowing them back to improve them.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: To re-work them.

CLAY SPOHN: And re-work them and so on, which was quite a laudable thing, but DuBois attributed it to the fact that perhaps his lapse of memory had something to do with it. He'd forget what he was going to do with it and then he'd run and bring it back and work on it.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Another way to look at it is that for him the creative process extended over years.

CLAY SPOHN: It was a continuous sort of thing.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: No end to it. That's right, it wasn't complete.

CLAY SPOHN: No. It wasn't. Well nothing is. It's a continuation, that's all.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Right.

CLAY SPOHN: The only absolute is continuation. I was just writing the other day something about that. I could show it to you, a statement about the difference between absolute and relative. It seems to me that absolute and relative are very much the same thing. They can be—oh, what's the word?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Equated?

CLAY SPOHN: They can be exchanged. And the reason I brought that up, well the reason I was writing a note the other day was a long time ago I had read the Edinborough lectures. Well, I was very much impressed by Troward's lecture on what he had to say about the absolute and the relative I notice so often—well, people, the artist I think especially are looking for answers, solutions, some kind of absolute. Well, the situation change.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: It alters.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. That's what I meant, that it can alter because it's impossible for me to conceive of an absolute being a static form. There's no such thing as an absolute way of painting, or an absolute formula except perhaps—I don't think even in that—we could use absolute formula. Well, I'm not sure.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: You know writing footnotes on Einstein equals mc2 has led us in mathematic to all kinds of things.

CLAY SPOHN: But then later on they might find another formula where this formula would become just a fragment of some larger formula.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Till we break through that formula and discover a whole new galaxy and we will.

CLAY SPOHN: New principles. You can't destroy things. Those formulas will always exist only in relation to something else, and so the new relationships constantly are new relationships. I find that what had meaning for me as a set of principles in the fine arts, or life, all things, the way they affect me, I find that those things change. The thing that I was more or less intolerant of one time I find myself accepting now but the reasons are different, the circumstances are different.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Sure.

CLAY SPOHN: And so I don't see how a person can remain fixed in his ideas forever. I feel that a person has to be flexible, and I think the artist is perhaps one of the most flexible.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I think this is probably so because he anticipates so much that's in the air which most people don't recognize until it's right in front of them, you know for the artists it's an anticipation.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes, well the thing that's fascinating is the unknown, until you know a thing you don't need…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: It's ended, it's dead by definition almost…

CLAY SPOHN: Well, it's not dead because—here's something that interests me. I feel that the past, present, and future all together in a sense they're one thing. They're part of the same chain, so the past is never dead, but there is another link in the chain of things, that the chain is a sort of moving thing, or else you move along with it.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: When I used the phrase 'dead', it was a bad choice of words. What I meant was that if this interest suddenly splits, it's also part of the new interest.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes, but this is something that amuses me, that is the notion that time doesn't change, we do. If a thing had happened at a certain time, it's still there. It still exists, but we've moved, so that what we call time in relation to ourselves we've changed, but we're under the illusion that time changes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

CLAY SPOHN: You only have time if you have things. Time actually is the distance between things. If you haven't things you can't have time.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Right. Well, did all this unfold at the school? I mean, you know, the philosophical questions that you can get involved in?

CLAY SPOHN: Well these things around at the Art Student League, some of these things, but then…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, when you juxtapose a Miller who was sort of Renaissance—well, maybe that's unfair to him, and the other person that you had, George Luks, who was a man of the streets, you know—

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. Well, he was proud of the fact that at one time he had been a rowdy. He said that he used to box and fight. I remember one time that he said to the students, "Why don't you fellows fight more with each other? You're a bunch of sissies! When I was your age, I was always fighting." His knuckles always looked as though they had been broken several times, you know. But he was quite rugged, and he was admired by everybody but some people regarded him as ignorant. There's one incident that I could tell you about, I don't know whether I should or not, but years later—you see this was when I was coming back from Paris. I thought I'd look at the League and see what it was like. I dropped in, and Luks was having a class and Miller was having a class and I was just visiting, so I went in Luks class and he was painting on one of the student's canvases and it was a portrait. The student had a head he was having trouble with, and Luks was painting on it, and he said, "I'll show you how to paint an ear." The student was fussing with it, you know, and Luks liked a strong, bold approach and so taking the student's brush he went one, two, three strokes, he said, "See, that's an ear." Well, it was the foundation of the form, you know. It was just sort of blocking it out. And he left him, and he said, "Now that's the way to paint an ear." So I left the room and I went around to some of the other classrooms, Miller's class to see what they were doing and then a few hours later when the classes were over I was walking out and I passed Luks and Miller on the street talking and Luks was telling him about this incident, you know, that he had showed this student how to paint an ear. He said, "I told him he could paint an ear in three strokes, and the damn fool believed me." Well, he was playful, you know. I don't know what that indicates, but Luks could paint an ear in three strokes, or maybe a head in five. Well, anybody can if you want to say, "This is what I mean. At this particular time this is enough for a head." It doesn't have to be complete. How complete is a thing? Is a painting? It's the artistic statement, a personal statement of some kind. Sometimes a person can do very little and express a great deal and so in some cases a person can say more with a few words, or a few strokes of a brush than he can by working ten years on it.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Right.

CLAY SPOHN: Six months on a head, as they did in the Renaissance, some of them did in the Renaissance, but of course, all these things—well, the way I look at it most of the contemporary painters haven't much use for the painters of the Renaissance today, but I'm still fascinated by some of these portraits, or other painting where they put in a great deal of effort, you know, and concern in completing a thing, or carrying it to the ultimate, what they considered the ultimate at that time. On the other hand, I wouldn't want to do it myself, but had I lived during the Renaissance I would have probably. But the one person that I admire very greatly, of course, is Rembrandt because he seems to have all the attributes of—he and Goya in his later years—both the Renaissance and what we are doing today because Rembrandt at his best had that freedom and simplicity. He could do things with a very few lines and very little rendition, but still he could put in a spirit that gives life. That self-portrait at the Frick is a very good example of that because—well, when I go there I don't know if it's on exhibit at this moment. They change things around a bit, but whenever I have gone there to look at that portrait and also Ryder the last time I was there, there was a Van Dyck on the opposite wall, and I couldn't help but by impressed how cold the Van Dyck was in comparison to the warmth and depth of feeling that Rembrandt had in the portrait. By contrast the Van Dyck seemed very hard and static, sterile, whereas Rembrandt is still alive. You know, some paintings will always be alive, and others were dead to begin with. I can understand why many of the artists today don't care for the Renaissance painters because there's too much perfection, actually, and as Picasso said, or others have said,--well, no they didn't say this. Well, let me say it. Perfection, as far as I'm concerned, is finality, and finality is death. What Picasso said was, and he was speaking of certain contemporary works he had seen, abstractions that he thought were cold, and he said that they were, that it was clinical art, which is a beautiful term because he meant it was sterile. It's the sort of thing you find in a surgeon's or in an operating room where everything is sterilized and pure—too pure. No warmth. No emotion.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. Well, perfect is what I mean by pure, but too perfect is too finished—oh, and the life has gone out of it.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Unreal.

CLAY SPOHN: But there are exceptions. Some things might look pure, but they are not, well, from my point of view. I'm not trying to speak for everybody, but an example of that would be Mondrian because I find Mondrian's paintings very much alive, but it's in a different direction. I know a lot of my friends don't like Mondrian, but I have to because he went in the other direction. As Einstein said that a straight line eventually is a curve if you go far enough, and if that's true, why then they'll meet in a curve, but so the warmth compulsive painting going

in this direction and Mondrian going that direction I think they'll meet. Of course you can say that Mondrian was looking for certain purity, or perfection, but it's a different kind. I think his work is still moving, is still alive, you know. I became aware of that when I one day several years ago I went to the Museum of Modern Art. I was looking through the permanent collection, and I found it very disturbing. I know what it was that disturbed me. It was a (unsure of word) I fine that very annoying. It takes away from the painting. It's all right. I enjoy it. Sometimes I enjoy it, but it's…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Distracting.

CLAY SPOHN: It's distracting and there's too much of it. And so as I was leaving to go down the stairway, there was a Mondrian outside, and it gave me a great sense of peace and relaxation because it is very peaceful. This particular one is a very peaceful and restful thing and I felt a little-there's great simplicity and lack of agitation and whereas that last, or was it near the last thing of his, it had a title of *Boogie Woogie*. I find that a little bit jazzed up, a little bit annoying for me. So I can't stand still in my likes or dislikes. Sometimes I find that I get a great deal of satisfaction out of the Abstract Expressionism. It can be a very dynamic sort of thing, but I wouldn't want to live with it forever. I've done some myself, and it's a release, but it's a balance for the other. They all have their place, of course, but my greatest interest is in the more relaxed things, I think, the quieter thing because I think it can be more monumental, and it seems to have more eternal quality to it, whereas the impulsive, spontaneous thing can be very exciting and also can have an eternal quality, but it seems to me that it's only one phase of the eternal thing and if you look at the eternal thing in a broader sense, in a larger time sense, why I think the over-all quality of it is one of quietness because it's a sustained thing, sustained emotion and it's a sustained rhythm. That's why I find a great fascination in drums, anything drums, you know, African drums, or also Body Dodd's drum record that Rudi Bleah made some years ago was wonderful because to me the drum is a sustained rhythm and it's boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, it's wonderful. It's heart beat of course. It can be the heartbeat of a person, or of a race, or of a tribe, or nation, or a world, or a cosmic thing…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: It has its symbolic thing.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes, it's very symbolic and so when I see a painting that has a quality of that kind, a sort of sustained rhythm, why that's great. It's magnificent. So that holds my interest more than these various trends, but trends are necessary because that's the thing that makes the rhythm. It is this up and down, back and forth and change…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Sure. It depends upon the shifting context.

CLAY SPOHN: Shifting…?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Context in which you find yourself.

CLAY SPOHN:Yes, Yes. And shifting change of rhythm, even in the drum you find the shifting beat sometimes. Drums can be wonderful.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Did the teachers at the Art Student League relate what you were doing to the air? I often wonder when, you know, you go to the school—like Henry Mille, who is philosophically minded, well-read, broadly read…

CLAY SPOHN: Yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: And yet he concentrated on a kind of Renaissance technique in a way.

CLAY SPOHN: In a way it was. Let's see, I didn't associate his work with Renaissance…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: You didn't?

CLAY SPOHN: Especially at that time. I'll have to think about it some time, to look back to find out just what I thought about it. But he was very sensitive, highly intelligent and his sense was very poetic, very lyrical. I remember him saying to a student, a young lady in the class was painting a still life, and there was a pitcher, a teapot that was a school prop, and it had a spout on it. He was telling this student about its personality and how it sat so quietly and then he said, "And look how it holds its head." Well, that was a wonderful relationship of ideas there, you know. Well that's the thing I am interested in, the association of meanings and association of ideas is important. Excuse me.
[Interruption for phone call]

HARLAN PHILLIPS: So the Art Students League then was a real fruitful period for you?

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. It was quite a wonderful period. Let's see, yes, it was at the Art Students League that I sort of saw the light, you know. I remember doing Central Park and—well it was the relationship of the instructors and—

well it was New York. I feel that New York is the most stimulating place. I mean it's challenging, but you have to have something that irritates you a little bit, you know, or it doesn't have to irritate you, but something that does not allow you to just sit down and meditate the day. In San Francisco when I was teaching at the California School of Fine Arts, Rothko was invited to come out for the summer by the director of the school, the summer of '46 and so he said, "How in the can you stay in such a lovely place. It like utopia. How can you paint in this lovely weather? How can you get anything done?" well, it's true, you know. It's just too easy to let things pass by. But in New York you have to keep moving. You have to keep moving. There are so many things to do.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: It comes at you like a thirty-foot wave everyday.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. Well actually it represents the whole world, because there are people here from everywhere…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

CLAY SPOHN: So you have all these various influences, but anyway, I remember one day going out to sketch. Occasionally we'd go out, you know, just for a change to get away from classes and sketch in the Park. I remember one day I went to the Park, and I was very excited about—well the appearance of things. It was fall because—well, it was winter I guess because there weren't any leaves on the trees, but the formation of the trees, the structure of the trees, you know, you could see the skeleton of the tree at the same time, and I began to get sight at the rhythm of the movement of the branches, I started working very quickly, and it worked itself. It was as though the pencil was doing it, you know, the fact that I was so impressed with the thing I was working at. I wasn't concerned with how I was drawing and how it looked. Finally when I looked down at the paper, why I could see this sort of spirity of movement coming through the whole thing, you know, a feeling of life rather than the superficial appearance of it. Then I realized, "My gosh, that's it." You know, and I felt well that's the first time I've really seen the light and from then on I felt well I can just work in freedom and with ease without being to concerned with the results, you know all this superficial effect as long as I go the spirit of the thing into it, you know, and made the drawing as alive as the tree or as the subject matter, whatever. But then I lost that at times you know. I got sidetracked and got too involved in trying to perfect things and I got interested in perfection and so on, so the life went out of it, so I had to revise it.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: That's the human story.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes, yes, you have ups and downs.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Sure. You mention Paris. Did you go from the Art Students League to Paris?

CLAY SPOHN: No. I was speaking of 1524 and I kept getting letters from home that I had better find a job and all that, so I thought, "Well, I'd better cooperate." I saw an ad in the newspaper, and it said they wanted a young man, an art director for a new magazine that was developing. I forget whether they said they wanted an art student or not, but I went down and interviewed them and the man wanted me to take the job. It was just beginning, and I had some experience in magazine-college papers, and I should have taken it. I've always regretted the fact that I didn't because the experience would have been excellent, you know. I sides-stepped it because I thought that I would be trapped in something commercial and I've always kicked myself ever since. I could have stayed with it. I could have dropped out any time. I could have stayed with it a year or two and had some fun with it. It was a chance to…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes? To see what its limits were.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. Find out. Very foolishly I didn't, so I gave it up. A few weeks later I went out to look for an illustration job, so I started out with *Cosmopolitan Magazine* and who is this artist, who is very well known—well, it doesn't matter. He was sitting there waiting, too. I didn't feel so bad, you know. They kept me waiting so long. They took him in first, but I don't know. If you get these people in the commercial field, it's unfortunate, but you can't help it.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: It's the pace, you know.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. He was well known, you know—everybody knew him. They know about commercial artist, but they don't know about the fine artists, more today than they used to, but at one time they only knew the commercial artists in the commercial field, but so the art editor of *Cosmopolitan* saw my things and he sent me to another magazine and I went there and I went all day long and finally I landed, let's see, at the *New York American Newspaper*, I guess that's it, something like that. I guess at that time I was working for the Journal. I think the building is still standing down there. They're about ready to tear it down, but so I think this was just a Sunday paper. The editor was Ray Gleason, very kind, he sent me over to the *New York World*, the *New York Evening World*, you know, so I went over there and the art editor's name was Marcus, I don't know his first name. I showed him a couple of my things, some cartoon things that I had, and I remember the illustrator Frue-do you remember his name?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

CLAY SPOHN: He had a very distinctive style and was quite clever. Of course, he did things for the drama. He had the same kind of job that Al Hirsh has. Al Hirsh is over in Paris now. I painted his portrait one time. Unfortunately I needed the canvas one time and I painted over it. It wasn't very good. It wasn't a good likeness. Well anyway, Frue made line drawings, you know, for the drama, actors and he was there, and I remember I was quite unpleased with him so this man Marquis said they didn't have anything at that time but he said to keep in touch. He said, "You might try the American."
I said, "I was just over there."
He said, "Oh, wait a minute."
I was just going to the door, and he said, "Wait a minute. Here's something that we have. The man that was doing it isn't dependable."—or something like that, "We're planning on someone else." At the time, these were four or five people working on it. He said, "Maybe you can try your hand at it."
I said, "Fine."

At that time it was called Metropolitan Movies, it had to do with the humor and pathos of everyday life. I made little thumbnail sketches, as he advised me to, and brought them in once a week and he'd pick out what he wanted. It paid quite well, I did that for a while. My things weren't very good. Then finally they gave it to one person. Then I had a chance to work on a diorama for a real estate company. I got it through an architect, or somebody told me about it. I made that, and it was advertising. It was for the purpose of getting publicity for this real estate company. A new tract of land was opening up on Long Island. It was called Marlborough Farm. Now it's been absorbed into some other name, but they had it in the window at the corner of 22nd—well, it was on Fifth Avenue, just around the corner from 22nd Street, and the building is still there. It was there for years because when I came back from Paris it was still there. It was full of dust and dirt. But I made a little golf course and built little people out of matches playing golf. I guess they were three quarters of an inch high. I had them putting, and swinging, driving—you know, and I had trees. It was quite realistic, and there was a road running directly from the front part of this set. The diorama was the flat plane, a horizontal plane, and then at the back of a backdrop to make the distance, you know, the sky and the trees in the background and so on. It had little houses, one in front—you see, it hadn't been developed yet so the real estate people wanted me to take the houses as they thought they would appear, and so I got another student from the League who was a sculptor—I've forgotten his name—to cast these houses for me, but I made them in perspective so as they went back, they kept receding, you see, so that it would be in keeping with the visual effect that one would have in looking at the whole scene. It went back. These houses got smaller, and then on the road I bought little toy automobiles and kept getting them smaller so as they went back they would be little tiny automobiles until we came to the back curtain then I'd paint them so they'd blend right into the thing. It worked. In the back there was a railroad train, a trestle, like a little train. Actually it wasn't. it was stationary. It was a toy train, but everything was in proper relationship from the standpoint of perspective, things receded properly in size. Well, it took a lot of time, but they put too much pressure on me. They wanted it in ten days. I took three weeks. They were crabbing, you know, but it paid pretty well, and so I was glad it was over. Then I began to become interested in mural painting. Well, I was interested in mural painting the whole time I was at the League. I kept thinking about it, and Dubois said, "Well, why don't you go to Fontainebleau where there's an American school there for mural painters?" Well I thought, gosh, I went to the Architectural Society or school. It used to be under the League. I don't know whether it is now. Do you know?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I don't either.

CLAY SPOHN: Is it called the Architectural Society? Architectural League? I went there because they had part of the building. I wanted to find out who the prominent mural painters were, and I said that I wanted somebody that wasn't too old-fashioned, you know, that was modern. They suggested Ezra Winter, so I went up to see Winter and had some photographs of this diorama out there. When I first spoke to him, he said he didn't have any openings. He had several people working for him, and he had a wonderful studio at the top of Grand Central Station building. You took an elevator up on side and then there was a catwalk between panes of glass away up the it was sort of opaque, but you could see people down there in the main part of Grand Central Station. Then his studio opened up on part of the roof. It had a wonderful high ceiling about, perhaps—well, it had a feeling of thirty-five feet, but you see vertical dimensions are deceptive so actually I would guess it was close to twenty feet deep. It was a large room. Winter said he didn't have an opening, and I showed the photographs, and he said, "Well, would you be willing to just do, oh, just rough work around the place?"

I said, "I'll do anything. I'll work for nothing." He sort of hemmed and hawed and I said, "Well…"
He said, "Why did you come here?" I said, "I wanted to find something about mural paintings but whether there were any openings."

He said, "I'll try you for a week. Would you be willing to work without pay for a week?"
I said, "Sure." I cleaned out bird cages. He had a lot of canary birds, a few, one or two cages, anyway birds, and so they had me do some (not sure of word) work on some drawings and things. Then I guess he saw I was

serious, and so he gave me something that was a little bit more responsible and this was working on the design for a stained glass window for Strauss's new Bank in Chicago, a twenty-three foot stained glass window, but this was for the design. Then finally, a few days later, he came back and asked me how much salary I wanted. He said, "Do you want twenty-five dollars, or thirty?"
I said, "I'd be glad to get the job." I was ashamed to ask for the most. I said, "I'll be satisfied with twenty-five." Well, I should have said thirty, you know being a student. He gave me twenty-five a week, and so I worked on this. Sometimes we'd go down to the place—I've forgotten where it was—where we'd get the glass, you know, stained glass factory, it was very interesting to go down and meet and then I worked on the designing of murals for I don't know whether it was for Yale on—I don't thing it ever went through—but he was teaching at Yale at that time, and that helped, you know.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

CLAY SPOHN: Then he started working on the scenes for the New Chamber of Commerce in Washington, D.C. He was working on it here, you know, so I worked with him on that, making the lettering in Roman style lettering to go on the beams, you know, and they were about eight or ten inches high, and he had a section, sample section, that he hoisted up to the ceiling to get the feeling of it, and that's why the value of having such a high ceiling to the studio.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Sure.

CLAY SPOHN: He had about six, or seven other people working for him, young fellows, you know, some were architectural students, most of them, I guess, and some were students from Yale, his favorite students. Well, we all worked together and one fellow was named Bronson. He was very jolly, full of them—I don't know whatever happened to him. He had a chance to go with Beebe on this trip to the Gallogas Islands. I don't know if he went or not. This was in the summer of '24, and I stayed through the fall till I got ill, and then I went back to San Francisco. But while I was working there and we were working on this lettering for the ceiling, why the son of Zack White, who was an architect, came in. Winters had him come over to advise us about the lettering, you know. He was a specialist. He knew about these things, and I remember later somebody saying that Winters had to pay him fifteen dollars an hour for his services. We were quite impressed by that, you know. These young fellows—just beginning, you know—we were impressed by all these things.

Let's see—well, I stayed though the summer. It was a miserable summer. It rained a lot, and it was overcast. The heat was just unbearable, and you see, while I was at the League I—well, just before I came to the League I was having some trouble with my stomach. I had indigestion a lot, and so the doctor said, "You have an acid stomach," or something of that kind, "Don't eat salads, or any cooked foods, eat soft things." Well, I didn't pay much attention. I thought, "Ill have to find out through experimenting just what agrees with me, or how I can get the most out of the type of diet that would be best for me." Unfortunately I got interested in vegetarianism. I thought I'd try it, so I started cutting out meat, and I was eating just vegetables mostly and milk, but it would have been all right perhaps had I been eating fresh green things, or cooked greens things, but I was eating in cafeterias and restaurants so it was canned foods, you know, and I kept getting weaker and weaker for a period of two years, and it made me very nervous because I wasn't getting enough nourishment to nourish my nerves, I guess. They were starved, and I was always on edge. I remember I had to exercise about every half hour. Before I went to Ezra Winters, when I was working at home on these newspapers illustrations, I had to go out and run around about three blocks, you know, to become calm enough to go back to work. I'd work for another twenty minutes, and then I'd do pushups, you know, then I'd go out and walk five miles or—I was always on the run, you know. I remember I used to get up about five in the morning and take ice cold showers in the middle of winter and walk about five miles before breakfast, then eat all these prepared cereals. There isn't any nourishment in them, not much. Then I'd eat vegetables and salads and whatnot, and I was always walking or running. I remember early one morning I was walking up Fifth Avenue in New York you know at a very fast pace, and there were two business men on their way to Wall Street. They were walking on their way to Wall Street, I guess, or walking to business, I don't know, but I heard one of them say to the other as I whizzed by, he said to his friend, "There's a young man who's going to get somewhere!" I was going to 5th Street or into the Park or somewhere. Years later, especially during the depression, I thought, "How I fooled those fellows!"—you know. I thought it was a great joke. But I had to do it because this diet affected my constitution and my whole nervous system. I was just too stubborn, you know, to give it up. I thought, "I'll give it a full try, a fair trial." And I tried it for two yeas and I just wore myself down to—well, it wasn't exactly skin and bones, but my stomach became more impaired, my digestion was more impaired, and I got very tired very easily. So in the fall of '24, I was so exhausted that I finally had to tell Mr. Ezra Winter that I was going to leave. I said that I wanted to go back home and work on mural directions. I gave that as an excuse . I didn't tell him I was feeling ill, but actually it was just from exhaustion, so I went back I was still experimenting with diets. The last stroke of this whole business of not eating meat was—I tried it once or twice my vegetables, but whenever I ate meat I went to sleep. It just seemed to knock me out. It was too much for me. I'd go to sleep so I just stayed away from it.

Finally after I went back to San Francisco my parents saw me and asked me about things. I told them about this

crazy diet and so I thought maybe—I red it somewhere—I was reading books on this thing and I read that if you feel tired, you should fast, you know. They said, “Its alright to take a little orange juice in water,” so I fasted for five days. I kept getting weaker and weaker. We were living in an apartment, so I finally got so weak I couldn’t walk from the living room to my bedroom without being exhausted. My mother finally said, “Well I’m going to call the doctor.” I said, “o.k.” So when he saw me—it was the same doctor that I’d gone to before—he said, “What have you been doing with yourself?” I told him about this diet and he said, “Do you think you know more than your doctors do?” I said, “No, but I was having trouble with my digestion and so I tried vegetarianism for a while.” He said, “Well what you have to do is to just stuff yourself with meat, mostly meat, protein, a high protein diet. Lay off vegetables.” I did, and my stomach picked up. Then I had so much energy. You see when I went to the League, I stopped smoking because that went along with this heart business, and I didn’t drink. We did in college, you know, of course, Saturday night was a big whoop it up sort of thing, you know. That was one reason I wanted to get away from San Francisco, I wanted to get away from all that. I was just sick of that kind of indulgence. I stopped drinking and stopped smoking, so then I went on this diet—excuse me, my hay fever.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Is acting up?

CLAY SPOHN: Would you have more coffee?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: When I went on the diet that the doctor prescribed, I began to get this tremendous amount of energy. Of course, San Francisco being a hilly town, why I found that I couldn’t hold myself back so I’d run up hills and then walk very calmly back. just as soon as I came to a hill, I’d run up it. I felt wonderful. Then I was running for street cars, and running all over the place and I felt this isn’t good. I thought, “Well, I have to do something to hold myself down, so I thought I try smoking again. I tried a package of cigarettes and it made me very dizzy. It took me about two weeks to finish the pack. I had to force myself to work on it. I did, smoking…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: It was your gyroscope.

CLAY SPOHN: Well—whatever it was, yes. It brought me back to earth, you know, and so then I smoked for—well, until last February, all those years.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: How long did you remain in San Francisco then in this period of rehabilitation?

CLAY SPOHN: I did some painting while I was there. One of the best things I have ever painted was this thing that I did, the City Hall, and I lent it to someone, but I still think it’s a good painting. I think it’s the best painting I ever did. It’s very, very simple, and I remember I was interested in making just a very few colors, and very simple, and the forms—I reduced everything to the greatest amount of simplicity but it was free. I did a bit of painting there and then went to Monterey, Carmel, for a month or so. The family were on their way to Los Angeles. I had a little studio in Carmel—and they stopped by and said, “Would you like to take a trip down to Los Angeles ?” I said, “Well, all right, fine.” I left everything there, locked the place up and went down. My father had a partner in a Los Angeles office downtown. I’ve forgotten what it was that made me decide to say. I said, “I think I’ll stay.” Well, I had some money saved up from this work I had done there. I saw a house. It was called the French Village on the corner of Ringo Boulevard and Highland.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: In Los Angeles?

CLAY SPOHN: Across form the Hollywood Bowl.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Right.

CLAY SPOHN: I saw this place, I said, “Gosh, I’d like to live there.”I’ve forgotten what my parents said. Well then my mother said, “How would you handle it?”—you know. I said, “I have some money saved up.” I’d saved up my allowance, too, it was a sort of dirty trick, I guess…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Look, you survived however you can.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. Finally my family said, “Well all right. we’ll send a few things down.” I took this house, one of these houses. There was a group of houses there. I don’t now whether to talk about this or not. I feel sort of embarrassed in a way—well it’s all right.. I think there were two places vacant at that time, and I took one of the houses, but they were built by two brothers by the name of Davis. They owned them. They were architects. One of them was an architect, and so I moved in and I bought—I went to a second-hand dealer and bought a lot of antique furniture, New England furniture, but my mother sent some things down, she sent a bed and—oh, I had a wonderful Japanese tonsu that I had had ever since I was a youngster. The reason I mention this is because I lost all these later. The Swedes, these Swedish friends—well, there was a wonderful Swedish family who lived in the back part of this development. They lived in a place called the tower house. It was a round. It was a tower. The rooms were circular. His name was Eric Stocklasser. He was brought over to the United States by Mark Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks. He bad been in films in Sweden, and apparently he was prominent over there.

He got to Hollywood. He had ulcers and was ill and in the hospital for a month, had to be operated on, so when he got out he missed the opportunity of being in a certain film he was supposed to be in, so finally they gave him a part in *Laugh Clown, Laugh*. I've forgotten who was in it. I saw the stage play here before I left. Lionel Barrymore was in it, and Ian Keith, and I was very much impressed by that stage play. It was very good, "dramatic." It was a sort of Pagliacci thing. Then I saw this film and Stocklasser was the ringmaster in it. It was a minor part, and it was the only film he was in, and he was fed up with Hollywood by the time I got there. He was a giant of a man and his wife, a very attractive wife, told me a lot about Eric later and about Europe. One time he was considered the strongest man in Europe. As a youth he went around—he made his living by these prize ring fights. Somebody would challenge all comers and he'd make a hundred dollars, or something like that, or so much if he'd knock the other fellow out. Well he was knocking all the people out, you know, and he made a pretty good living. But he had been a cartoonist during the Balkan wars. He was sort of a correspondent and made drawings. I don't know—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: The Eastern Question

CLAY SPOHN: A whole series of Balkan wars.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. He had a lot of interesting experiences, and his wife told me about a number of them. Then later just before he came to the United States, or I don't know how long before he shipped out as a sailor. He tried everything you know. He was the kind of person who would do anything to make a living. He was adventurous, and he liked adventure and so on, a very romantic sort of person. Well, he was on a ship that went to South America, and on the way back it had a cargo of coconuts and the ship sank. I don't know how it wrecked. I think it was in a storm, but it was wrecked and I think he was the only—well I forget whether he was the only survivor. There were just a few survivors, but he was floating around in the Atlantic in the Gulf Stream for three days. His wife told me to ask him about it, and I did. He was rather reluctant to talk about himself, although he was an egotist but he didn't like to talk about some of these things. Anyway, he aid that there were two of them, two persons. There was a hatch floating around, and they held on to this hatch. He said there were coconuts all around, so they'd swim around and get a coconut and crack it on the hatch rings, you know, and drink the milk. I've forgotten whether the other person was lost or survived, but anyway after three days, Eric was picked up, but he'd lost quite a bit of weight, I guess inspire of the coconut. There were so many other tales that you don't know how many of these tales were true or not, you know. But he became my best friend. He was rather sophisticated in one way. In another way he was very childish. A very nice fellow and a lot of fun. He had had experiences in Sweden as a house painter and decorator and he did decorations, but he knew the craft and it was the old world training, and it was wonderful. If the artist today could have that kind of background, knowing how to handle paint and glazes and varnishes and just to have knowledge of it—I think he'd be very well off. He contracted to decorate a house, and he hired a crew of painters to paint it. He and I did the decorations. I did some murals for the entrance, and he did murals and decorations inside. Well, that wasn't in the contract, but he did it anyway, see. The woman that owned the house lived next door and it was just being completed. She wanted to know what he was going to do, to decorate the house and he wouldn't tell her. He said, "Just leave it up to me. I'll give you something that will be wonderful, that you'll thank me for. Well, he was doing things that they weren't used to, his designs, decorations were marvelous, wonderful sort of folk art, Swedish folk art, or decorations. I don't mean the sort of folk art, you see around the five and ten cent stores, you know, but wonderful, large, simple forms and colors. It would be hard to describe it in words. I was impressed with the color relationship and the wonderful caramel-like quality he had on wood. The garage doors he did about five coats, one color was green, one blue, red, over this a certain amount of this blue and green comes through and it was wonderful. He was wonderful with glazes. He said that in Sweden that kind of painting had been done there in the last three years, because of the way it had been painted in a number of layers. But he had this wonderful mellow-like quality, and this woman would come and look every once an awhile and shake her head, you know, and click her tongue and be upset and nervous and say, "Well, do you think that is in good taste?"

She didn't have any taste at all. So it didn't make too much difference. But I was making this mural on the outside and that upset her a lot. This was up on Whitney Heights—Whitney Terrace it was called. A lot of people lived around there, and they got up a petition—well, they got people to come over and try to get us to stop painting these things. The neighbors didn't like it. She went around getting people to come and ask us to stop because she said people would come to her and they'd say they didn't like it, they'd say we were making it too modern. Rudolph Valentino lived next door, the house on the other side, a large place, large garden and so on, and we'd see him pass by, you know—this was just before he died—and there were some other film people that lived around there. One of them came over and asked me, he said, "What is this supposed to be?"

I had explained to him that I had three panels in the entrance way. It was Spanish type house, what they called California-Spanish, phone-Spanish, you know, stucco house. I was painting on this plaster wall on the inside. This side was open with three arches, so I had three divisions here so you could see through the arches, one was—let's see, there was literature, drama and poetry. There were three divisions, and then in the section with drama I had a stage with a Hamlet on the stage and smaller figures around the dance, poetry, and, oh, there was one—I

had a sort of medieval-looking philosophers, you know, with a big beard. I did a sort of modern interpretation of medieval illuminated manuscripts, a sort of modernized version of the things, but there was a little bit of Giotto in it. I was having fun.

I discovered a certain technique to give it effect—you see, I liked fresco a lot and at that point I hadn't done any fresco, but I wanted to get the technique of fresco. I used just pure pigment. I don't know how long this would last, but it gave a wonderful effect. It looked like true fresco. I took carbon paper, and I brushed on with turpentine just to get it on there. In order to se it I put some shellac in a spray can and sprayed this on. Well, I don't know what would have happened to it over a period of years. That held it, you know. Then on that I could take a little oil and then I could brush it on with petroleum spirit, kerosene, or something, just so it would lay a thin layer on. It was very liquid. It was almost like painting with water they use in fresco, you know, but I got the same effect. Then it had that just very slight glaze appearance that fresco has, you know, a sort of eggshell glaze. It's quite effective.

Then it was finished, and Stocklass was still working on his decorations inside. Well, I was supposed to get—I think he was getting $2,000 for the whole job and I was supposed to get $600, I forget if it was $600 or $900. maybe he was getting more than that. I've forgotten what he was getting, but he had to pay his crew. Well anyway he wasn't very practical and it didn't work out too well for him, I guess, and so well he gave me fifty dollars. I think it was fifty or sixty as partial payment, and then he said that he was waiting for the woman to pay him more. Then he would pay me later. In the meantime, I thought, "See, if I can get into the technical end of the film industry, it would be interesting."

I saw that my money was running out, and I needed to make some money sooner or later. I thought I'd see if I couldn't get a job in the film industry in the industrial, technical end of it. I had just finished reading a book that I had taken out of the library at the corner of Vine and Hollywood Boulevard. Am I dwelling too much on the theatre?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Not at all.

CLAY SPOHN: It was a most fascinating book. It was called Rube, R-U-B-E, but it was written by an Italian woman. I've forgotten her name, but it was about the first World War, and it was one of the most dramatic, powerful stories I have ever read. It was so dramatic I thought, that it would make a wonderful film and I thought if I got the chance I'd like to do the sets for it and possibly some of the directing, you know, technical advisor or something, you know, at least make some suggestions. I thought, "I'll go around and see if I can get a job."My father's partner's name was Tom Cook and he had an inn. He knew some people, but I wanted to do it on my own. I thought that if I could do it on my own I would be much happier. More fun, you know.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: A challenge.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes, and you know, you feel sort of surprised if you get a job. I mean it's a chance to use your imagination. I went to the Paramount Studio and asked for the art director. He saw me and said, "What are you going to do?"
I said, "Well, I have some ideas about making sets and I think it's pretty good. It has to do with imagination."
I tried to describe it. He said, "Well, can't you put it on paper?" It would take a long time. I said, "Well, maybe"—
I didn't want to say no—I said, "I suppose so."He said, "Well, can you bring me something by Tuesday?"
I think this was Friday or Saturday—I don't know. In those days we worked, as you know, Saturdays and Sundays, too, especially there.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

CLAY SPOHN: But anyway he wanted it by Tuesday. I said, "Well, all right, I'll try."I went home not worried about it. I knew I couldn't express the idea I had—it was such a short time to explain this technique. So I made some foolish drawing, and he looked at it. "Well," he said, "you might be a genius but I can't understand it."

It wasn't any good. It was a terrible thing, I should have explained that I needed more time, I should have explained it in words. I tried to explain the idea to myself, that the film was an unreal medium sort of a thing, that whatever the thing was that was being presented was not life as it is. I mean it is a representation of life rather than life as it actually is. Well, of course, theatre is and so is a novel. I said that when a person reads a novel, why something occurs in the imagination. The imagery is unreal and it's fanciful and it's full of inaccuracies which true life, real life, so I told him that should be presented that way, you know. The way the mind envisions these things is almost like reading a book—so make it unreal. Why paint to be like realism? Painting is a fanciful thing. Why not keep film as a fanciful tings, too?

In New York I remember there was up on Broadway—was it called the Moscow Art Theatre? I never went there. I intended to. I wanted to, but at that time I was saving my money for something. I don't know what it was. For a trip to Europe—that was it. I guess unconsciously, but I knew I wanted to use it for something. Money was hard

to get, you know, even from the family. I remember seeing the stills out in front, and I thought, “Gosh, this make-up is wonderful because it’s fanciful. It’s making it unreal, emphasizes over emphasizes the real, the natural.”

The sets were extreme, the makeup was extreme. It emphasized the characterization of each particular part, so I thought that this could be a great thing. Also before-some years before that I had seen *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* I’d seen it three times. I couldn’t keep away from it. It was wonderful and that film was in the same realm.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Marvelous!

CLAY SPOHN: I was impressed by this approach to films. I explained to this man about the unreality of the film, about the use of masks. I said that the facial structure should be built up, you know, that the costume should be changed to emphasize the effect of the situation and that sets should look like sets, that they shouldn’t look or be naturalistic. Well, he couldn’t see it.

Then I went to several other places. I went over to Culver City—MGM I guess it was, yes. The man there had a better, broader view of things. He was a very well-known art director. What was his name? Floyd Gibbons. He was well-known at that time. Well, he was quite patient but I don’t know. They stall a lot. They put you off. They say, “Well we’re busy now. Come back.”

Mitch Leisen lived a few doors up from me, and he was assistant director to Cecil B. deMille at that time, and I could have worked on him. I was trying through him to go to see DeMille, you know, too see if I couldn’t get a small job some place where I could work out gradually but I wanted to work right on the set. That was the only way to get it, rather than making drawings. Finally I went to the Art Directors Club and got a list of the different directors. I had a whole list. I was going to go through them and see these fellows. The first one I took was named Al Otto—no, not Al Otto. He’s a friend of a friend of mine in San Francisco. He’s somebody else, but this man’s name was Otto, Jack Otto. Well anyway, he was at Fox, I didn’t know how to do these things, so I just went barging in. one day one morning I just barged up to the entrance of Fox. In those days it was easy to get in, I went to the entrance and they had a telephone operator there and a cop. I’ve forgotten whether the cop approached me first, or whether I talked to the operator. I think I talked to the operator first, and I said that I wanted to see Mr. Otto. She said, “Well, he’s in conference just now. What is it you wanted to see him about?”

I had to think very fast. I knew at that time they were interested in three dimensions and I had to use some sort of a device to get in.. I just wanted to get in to talk to him. All of a sudden it occurred to me, you know, that they were sort of working on that. So I said, “Well tell him that I have something to do with stereoptic effects in motion pictures.”
I felt that was a better term—steroptic effects in motion pictures. She said, “Well just a minute.”
She called in and they said, “Get him in there fast.” Well here they were having a board meeting, and there were about twelve people or so, you know.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, then you were really caught.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes, and I was trapped and I couldn’t get out. Mr. Otto was up at the head of the table, you know, and he asked me what I wanted , and I said, “I have something that I think is very wonderful, that has something to do with steroptic effect of motion pictures.”He said, “Well tell us all about it.”He asked me what my technical training was, and I said, that I was an artist, a painter but I said that I wanted to do it through the treatment of a set. I did have an idea, I did. It occurred to me how to do it and that is, you know where you’re painting an illusion one thing that makes things come forward, especially if you have a corner of a building, the intensities come forward and the opposite, to intensities which would be vagueness would recede, you know, depending upon the conditions, the way you feel. I tried to explain that the intensities come forward especially in the corner where this shadow meets this light.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

CLAY SPOHN: This comes forward because of the greater…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Contrast.

CLAY SPOHN: Contrast, this darkness is a little bit deeper than this here, and the light is lighter than it is there.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

CLAY SPOHN: Too great contrast brings the corner of a room or a building forward and so I told him I wanted to do that. Well, they didn’t know what I was talking about. I knew they didn’t. I used a lot of painter’s terms. I knew they wouldn’t know what I was talking about. You know, I had to impress then quickly, so I had to confuse

them. It was honest. I wasn't being deceptive but I talked, I used terms that I understood and I knew what I was talking about and I felt they would work. He said, "Well could you demonstrate it to us. Bring it back. We're right in the middle of making a film now. If you could bring it back in three months."I said, "Well, I'd like to work right on the set."
He said, "Well you can't do that because we can't hire a person because the bankers want to know. We have to give some evidence of what they're doing and why and the qualifications and so on. If you could make it on the set and bring it back in three months we'll see what you can do."What could I say? All I could say was, "All right."I left, and I should have worked on the set, the thing was my money was running short. I was getting desperate. That's why I wanted a job but I could have gotten a job. Some friends wanted me to make little cartoons and things. At that time they used these little cartoons for the silent films, captions.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Oh yes.

CLAY SPOHN: I met a fellow who was doing that, and he later on became a director. I don't know where he is now, but I had a friend on "Poverty Row," what they call Poverty Row, where you can make small films for $25,000, maybe a one rail film or something, and he knew a lot of the people there and he could have got me a job, a small job, but I should have stayed for a few years until I could get this thing access. Actually it would have been a lot of fun. There are so many opportunities and so many ideas, you know, and you have ideas all over the place. It's a matter of which one to choose, you know, and I thought, "My gosh, if I do this I'll be trapped. I won't be a painter. Maybe I'll get married and have a family, then I'll have all these responsibilities and I'll not get to Paris."—you know. I worried about it for a while and finally I wrote to my parents and I said, "I'd like to go to Paris."I went to see how much it would cost because I knew I could get there if I left immediately. I didn't know how I'd live when I'd be there, or how I'd get back, but I didn't worry about that. I thought well something—you know when you're young, you don't have to think too far ahead. Life is with you. Yes, everything is with you—everything—if you treat it right look at it in the right way. I wrote the family and said I was planning on going to Paris. I don't know if I asked their approval or not. I don't know what I had in mind, but I had to tell them. I said that I wanted to give up the place—well, I had to do something with the furniture especially with the little Oriental rugs, you know, they had given me. One was a little child's prayer rug, you know. I had a few things I liked very much. I should have sent them back home. But Stocklasser had some parties and things. I'd like to go into this because I feel I should tell it. Would it be all right to take a break for a minute?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Oh sure! In fact, it'll give me a chance to flip this over.

[END OF SIDE TWO OF TAPE]

CLAY SPOHN: I think all things have a place and I think there's a timelines for certain things, and I consider it a challenge in a way. I think it's good, it keeps things alive. It keeps you from becoming smug and self-confronted.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, this is what the two students thought with their fixed idea about where you were going…

CLAY SPOHN: Oh yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: They didn't remain fluid at all.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. Well they were already set. See, they were old men…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: They had survived psychic death.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. Well I don't know whether now—well, maybe they've loosened up a bit since then.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Unadventuresome.

CLAY SPOHN: Well I don't know. I have no idea, I'd have to look in that. They were adventurous enough to go to Paris of course, but I don't know within that…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Imagine having an impression of Paris before arriving.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes, and thinking, well (can't read) is a place we should stay away from…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: It's like carrying a bar of soap and a washcloth in your hand all the time because you can conveniently erase things that…

CLAY SPOHN: There might be germs. I can see what they meant. My brother did that, I don't like to give away secrets but that's another story. He was scientific and I wasn't scientific. He always carried defiant germ killers around in his cars if he touched things you know he'd scrub his hands. I hate to tell stories…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: You already have with the two youngsters who didn't want to…

CLAY SPOHN: Yes, well I mean why not? Things should be in the open. In other words, if something annoys you the best thing is to throw it up and (can't read) it the outside (can't read phrase). You know, I remember I used to say that a person should—well, I mean when you're at parties and things you know and you have a couple of drinks and you sort of open up, taking spontaneously just for the fun of it. I used to have some pet things I used to say, I remember—I forget, it'll come to me later.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, you know, when you suppress something it remains.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. Then you have it. You still have it. Of course…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: You don't suppress it in effect. It does remain and it begins to color and corrode. That is, if you do suppress it, you in fact don't suppress it because it can corrode…

CLAY SPOHN: The fact is suppressing is a process of suppression. It's just another way of suppressing…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

CLAY SPOHN: I had an idea there that I wanted to bring out, that I associated with that. I can't think of it now. I almost had it a little while ago but it escaped me. It might come back. I used to have a number of things that I used to say that I believed in—oh, they occurred to me as discoveries, and so I held on to them as ideas, and I'd write them down. Sometimes when I'd have a chance to talk to people I'd bring these up, but I have a number of them and maybe this will come to me.
One was that in experimenting—a while back I talked about this business about all things are good. The reason I would like to talk about this is that I think it has something to do with painting, has to do with living, and painting is a extension of living. It's partly the same thing. So these apply to painting. Sometimes things wouldn't work, you know, when I was painting or being, so I'd try one thing, you know, and often "get it that works." You'd try that with great enthusiasm, and it would work for a while, and then something would happen and it wouldn't work any more. Then I'd try something else. Well, over a period of years these things would go around, the same number of fingers on your hand because I tried a lot of them. Then it occurred to me why not try them all, if one didn't work. So I would. I included all things, all possibilities and have them there as possibilities and I'd use them as one would the color on his palette you know, when you needed them, and it worked. It always worked. When I opened myself up, made myself flexible enough receptive enough to be influenced by these things, or to make use of them, everything worked—always. But when they didn't work, I'd find myself being to selective and dropping down to just one thing, or two things, so opening myself up to accepting the reality of anything. That's why I believe that all things have a place. The romantic is a reality, the romantic attitude is a very definite and valid entity in itself or part of the other entity, but it is one of the realities, one of many realities…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, there isn't much music in a single pipe organ…

CLAY SPOHN: Oh, yes, that's right.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: You have and can pull upon…

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. So I used to like to talk about these things just to remind myself and also to remind others that you know, you talk with your friends and they say, "Well I'm having trouble," or , "It doesn't work," or, "What do you think is the best thing to do?" and all that, and you exchange ideas and so I bring up this notion, well why not think about it? I have to keep reminding myself. Sometimes I forget, I find myself being one-track, then things don't work and I open up again and start thinking. I don't mean I have to faint in all types, buy the things that go to make one painting I have to open myself up to all these possibilities which are apt to have an influence on that painting, and I think that applies to life too. This business of fineness, I think a thing can be very rough, or very very crude and very accidental even, but if it has the quality of fineness because otherwise why would it be called fine arts you know? Why would you assume that you are fine artists, or why accept it if you don't make use of it, or if you don't accept it fully. So I did have something in mind that I was trying to imply an idea I was trying to develop there but lost track of it. Maybe it will come back.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, this is all a props of your feelings about knowing where you wanted to go and having to meet criticism of people who didn't have any idea what it was all about, not that you did, but you just had the sense that this is where you wanted to be.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. I didn't know exactly what the outcome was going to be. It's good if a person can know-well no one knows. It's good if you think you know. It's good to have an objective. I had an objective, but it was vague…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: That's the best kind, because chance can then make its play.

CLAY SPOHN: But the thing was—yes you have to take a chance, but you have to believe in something, you know, it an idea of something.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Sure.

CLAY SPOHN: You have to believe in something. Well—I have always been—I haven't always known exactly what it was, but I could feel the presence of something.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Right.

CLAY SPOHN: It's dangerous for you to believe in nothing. That's when it's dangerous to yourself.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

CLAY SPOHN: SO it was a wonderful experience in a way in Paris. I arrived in January of '26. I've forgotten the exact date, and I stayed until the fall of '27. it was almost two years, a little short of two years. But some wonderful things happened there in a way. I was a little too inexperienced in the ways of life. I would rather have gone later, but I wasn't sure if I would have the chance, or whether I would want to go back. I knew I wanted to go then. I didn't want to miss it, and I wanted to see painting first hand and at that time I was extremely impressed by the French School, the whole French School, and I wanted to see it firsthand. While I was there, I thought to myself if I ever come back, I'm coming back as a tourist, as a sightseer could rather then become involved too much in life and things because it was too much…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Overwhelming.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes, it was overwhelming. I became greedy for life, greedy to—I don't mean to experience all the things. I don't mean that, but I mean greedy to absorb as much of European art as I possibly could. It made such an impression on me, that it crowded out some of my own ideas.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: There just isn't enough time to encompass it all.

CLAY SPOHN: To encircle it all…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I know it.

CLAY SPOHN: I was so serious about painting, about art at that time. Well, I still am but in an entirely different way, but at that time I was so serious about it, I would sacrifice anything to not miss a moment of seeing more, so I went to all the galleries. The shows would change in Paris, you know. I went to all the shows, the current shows, all the museums and all that. Then there was the life too, sitting up all night talking at the Café Select, or the Dome, you know, at a table and talking, getting excited about things, talking about writing or anything and we'd say, "Let's (can't read)" and then dawn would be coming up and then we'd be hungry, but life was full…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Café life is marvelous.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes, but I don't want to see any more of it. I'm just fed up, you know. Well anyway—well, I wouldn't mind passing a café and seeing people sitting there, waving to them passing by, but I don't want to get involved, too much time…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: But it's a marvelous introduction to—you use the word 'greedy' and 'being hungry' and 'absorb', but the café life allowed you to absorb. Yes. Well it was part of it. It's part of the environment, and the environment of anything is just as important as the thing that's standing in the middle of it like sculpture. I always feel—I was thinking the other day, you know, how important it is for sculpture to be in the right place, to be in an environment that it works with…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

CLAY SPOHN: Of course painting doesn't need that so much but sculpture—the fact that it's in the round, you see it from different angles and you also see what's beyond it…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Sure you do.

CLAY SPOHN: So I happened to be going through a courtyard the other day where there was some sculpture, and I thought how important it was. Of course, the Japanese were aware of that, the importance of that so much. That's why they made their gardens the way they did. The Japanese tea garden is a very fine example of this.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: It sure is.

CLAY SPOHN: You know the origin of the Japanese garden I suppose?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: No.

CLAY SPOHN: Well, the way I heard it, maybe I read it, I don't know-is that they were nature lovers, and so they wanted to bring the outside as close to the home and to the daily life as possible and so what they created in the garden was a landscape that might take up any number of miles. They brought it into a little space so they had a little stream, but it would be smaller. They made little fish to fit the size of the stream, you know. They bred the fish so that they were of a particular size of keeping with the size of the stream, or the little mound which is a mountain. So it was a larger landscape brought into a little space, reduced to a little space…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

CLAY SPOHN: It's a nice idea, I think. But I think sculpture needs the proper attire realized. Of course, sculpture can be done for itself but I think most sculptors, not always but some sculptors must think of the setting they would like to see it in.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

CLAY SPOHN: In that sense, it becomes architectural because the true architect often considers the place such as Mumford spoke of in *Sticks and Stones*. That was one of the books that influenced me. I read that while I was a student, *Sticks and Stones*, by Lewis Mumford. Also *The Dance of Life* by Havelock Ellis was one that spoke of the spirit of things, you know . The vitality of the spirit. Then I saw that life had a pattern, that life itself had design and pattern, that you could see it, you know, you could see it and feel it, rhythm. You could make a painting from what you felt rather than from what you saw visually. All the senses are related anyway. What difference does it make whether skin on your chest, or the skin on the back of your hand, or whatever. If you feel things, or sense things, or even imagine them, there's a definite pattern, a rhythm. Everything has a design to it. Even Chaos has a different kind of pattern of some kind. I mean maybe it's not orderly, what we consider orderly, but if we could see it, you know, in great enough perspective, perhaps we would see it did have design. Maybe in relation to something else it would have a very definite design. In a painting sometimes you see informal, or free forms, or informal qualities. Organic qualities in relation to something more orderly, and it becomes an orderly thing. It depends on how its used—maybe Chaos is only a fragment of something that is larger than it is and if you could isolate it in your mind, in your thinking, in your visualization of it, perhaps then you could see that its relationship was an orderly relationship. But anyway, all things do have some kind of design. If you could see that, why, you could paint. You'd have something to paint about. Instead of using literal or literary subject matter, because literary subject matter gets in the way of the real statement, the real subject matter. I think literal subject matter is secondary subject matter.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

CLAY SPOHN: Except in writing, in writing it's—well it depends upon whether it's poetry, poetic prose of prose or it (unsure of word) but is literal subject matter has to do more with writing than it does with painting, but it a painting , that takes away form the real subject matter which is the material your dealing with and how you use paint, colors like words, you know, and like notes in music and the sounds of different instruments and, migosh, there are lots of things you can do with painting. Painting can talk.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Right!

CLAY SPOHN: Do you mind if I bring out one that's unfinished?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Not at all.

CLAY SPOHN: Just a little one. They are just fragments. In other words, the things that I am doing now are leading up to something which these will be a part, a larger idea. These are unfinished fragments right now. This is the development of a vocabulary. I know what I can do, I've been waiting a long time for this. I could have done it a long time ago, but I had other things that I had to do first. So I'm being very patient. Oh! That was one of the things that I realized when I was in New York the first time at the Art Students League. I realized how you must be patient with yourself. I hadn't been. One evidence of it is that I had to rush to Paris at that particular time. I had to rush. I couldn't get there fast enough.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well that's symptomatic of your running up hill and walking down…

CLAY SPOHN: Yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: That kind of exuberance.

CLAY SPOHN: At that time, I used to think the way to paint was to paint the way the birds sing, with exuberance, with an exuberant spirit. Well that has its place, but you don't have to be a bird all the time, you know. Well patience is an important thing, and I'm trying to be patient now. I'm more patient now than I ever was. When you have patience, then you have command of your controls, you skills, your materials. I'm trying to develop this control, control with patience. This happened to be paint that I had left over. So when I have to paint the other things I'm doing, it's an entirely different thing, when I have some paint just put it on and use it and you know experiment with color and see what the possibilities are because it always suggests some possibilities, some new approach. As long as you're searching , you never lack interest. One should always be a seeker. He should be a recorder, a finder, a discoverer—well many, many things that a person should be.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Oh sure!

CLAY SPOHN: Well, don't take these too seriously because, you see, they have meaning for me, but they might not have meaning for you, but I could see what I can do…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: What you're saying in essence is that you stay alive to the extent that you keep things on the fringe growing…

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. Yes, you see these aren't finished. People used to say years ago they used to say, "But you never finished anything." My mother used to say to me, "But you never finished anything." How can you, you know? I mean you don't know the next thing…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Right. When is a statement finished?

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. It's when you're finished…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Isn't that it?

CLAY SPOHN: Or you're finished when it is, either way.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. Tell me this, does one thing that you do lead into another. Is there that kind of continuity?

CLAY SPOHN: Yes, and sometimes the thing is completely different.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: But you mentioned a larger theme, or idea that you had of which this is a fragment…

CLAY SPOHN: Well the larger idea I have—I have a number of ideas. I want to make several—I have several different approaches. I can't help it, but what am I going to do—throw them away? No. I've had gallery people, for instance, say "You have too many styles. You work in too many different directions." But do does Picasso work in too many different directions, you know. They accused them of something.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: This thesis is to cut yourself in half then, be part of a man.

CLAY SPOHN: Hmmm?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Be part of this man, not the whole man…

CLAY SPOHN: That they say is be this much of yourself…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Right.

CLAY SPOHN: or a fragment of yourself.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Be content with a fingernail.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Strange, isn't it?

CLAY SPOHN: Well yes. I have to take a chance, you see. It's very dangerous. Painting is a very dangerous thing because you take a chance, an awful chance, you know. It depends upon how you look at it. I mean, if you're hoping to be successful in the eyes of somebody else, it can be dangerous. It won't be dangerous for you if you're willing to accept yourself as you really are, to find yourself and if you're willing to accept that and take a chance on that , as to where it will lead you, then you don't have to worry about what the critic think, or what your painter friends think , or what your non-painter friends think, or what the gallery people think, or…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Weren't you fortunate initially to have the built-in notion that if you did take something, it

would be a form of self-entrapment and therefore restrictive…

CLAY SPOHN:If I did what?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: That if you did accept a number of jobs that you had in the offing, which you might have done, you felt at the moment that it would be entrapping.

CLAY SPOHN: At the time I did, but I disliked the idea of giving up that much time to something that I didn't have any name for. I felt that I was wasting time, but I wasted time in another way. I wasted my time worrying about not working in a practical sense, you know…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: You can work….

CLAY SPOHN: I worried at times when I didn't have anything coming along. You know, I felt guilty about not accepting that responsibility. I felt "Well here I'm not being sensible because everybody else accepts responsibility and perhaps I'm being too self-indulgent," you know.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: It's like balance. It's like being put in a position of balancing improbable. You may have been better off financially…

CLAY SPOHN: Yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: But you'd have died—part of you.

CLAY SPOHN: I don't know. I should have had the courage, guts enough to take a job. Well, I did occasionally, but I mean I should have. So what, what if I did take a job for a few years, you know, and become interested in the thing, in business or whatever, in a job of some kind, so I would waste a few years, a year or two, and then go back to painting. But at that time, I don't know, I had sold myself on the idea so completely that I had to paint, you know. I was just convinced that I had to paint…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, you know, we talked earlier about the continuity of change. It's quite possible that whatever it is you are would have been an eddy, become an eddy, if you spent two years at a task. It would have shaped you and you would have been perhaps more grotesque than…

CLAY SPOHN: Yes, it might have—well, to break through the difficulties whatever they were. I think a person has to have some difficulties in life in order to---

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

CLAY SPOHN: Enjoy it, or see its true values. There has to be difficulty. It's not that you like difficulty, but it's the overcoming of it. It's not the difficulty itself, but it's the overcoming of it. You have to have something to overcome.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

CLAY SPOHN: So difficulty should be welcomed. Well, I mean when it's there. If you can't get away from it, you may as well accept it. You know when you don't accept a thing, that's when you have trouble. It's the acceptance of things that makes things possible for you, for your growth, you development. Accept it and then find out how to deal with it.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: But never let it rest. Keep the pressure on all the time, because the moment you go steady with a difficulty to the point where you, see it as though you do a woman, but uncritically, that you've gone over the years…

CLAY SPOHN: Yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: That's blindness.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes, well I don't mean…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: No,no,no, you've wrestled with it…

CLAY SPOHN: The thing is I have been blinded at times by my seeming difficulties, especially during the '30s which we'll be getting to eventually, and that was a depression I was in, a mental depression as much as an economic one. Well, of course, the depression of the '30s was—it was obvious I guess that it was a mental depression as well as an economic one.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: It was total.

CLAY SPOHN: It was a total depression, that's right. I did go through periods where I couldn't function. I couldn't paint, and I couldn't get on the track, and I was sort of lost. But even there I might have gained there. But I will get to that sometime. I guess I'm a little stubborn, or I was then a little stubborn. I couldn't talk myself out of getting away from painting for a while, forgetting it for long enough to take care of the essential things. Sometimes I have, and sometimes I haven't. It's easy for me to do it now, if there's something that has to be taken care of, naturally I could do it I can stop painting for a few weeks, but at that time I couldn't, you know. If I couldn't paint, I wouldn't do anything. I would lie down on the couch and think about life and worry about it perhaps and be desperate about things, but I knew I had to go through with it. It was something I had to go through with, I had to weather things the storm…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: The stream was going by and you were in it.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. Or else the stream dries out—I don't know which. I mean nothing was happening. Everything was at a standstill at one point.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I should think that much of the sea that an artist travels is by definition uncharted. It hasn't really happened yet until he's there.

CLAY SPOHN: No, that's right. his particular sea…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Subjectively…

CLAY SPOHN: Hasn't been charted.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Right.

CLAY SPOHN: It's different with each one. No matter how much you read of the life of someone else's experiences, yours can never be the same.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: No.

CLAY SPOHN: It's never a repeat…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. And where the results obtained in a creative way are the consequences of the experience you have. Here just isn't any way to reproduce someone else' s experience. It's unique by definition.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. But to read about it is interesting, I think.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: It's vicarious.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. But on the other hand, if you can be sympathetic with someone else's experiences, if it's a real experience, you can to a certain extent re-experience the thing in another way. You can't experience it in the way the other person has, but you can experience it in an entirely different way. That's what I found about certain kinds of writing; for instance. That's why I prefer biography, or autobiography to any other kind because knowing that this actually happened I am able to put myself in the situation much more than I can in a fictitious story, a novel—unless it's perhaps very great writing. I don't know.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Unless the kind of reading experience also comes with visual images too I would think that it doesn't have much meaning. It has come naturally to, doesn't it for the artist?

CLAY SPOHN: Will you say that again because I …

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Unless in reading, whether it be autobiography, biography, a novel, a short story, unless the image as it comes as a consequence of this vicarious experience comes visually, images…

CLAY SPOHN: Oh yes, oh it has to, yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes, but how many people read in those terms?

CLAY SPOHN: I think everybody does, that's the thing I don't know.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I don't know either. I haven't been another person. But the language you see is a visual one.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: The words you use are visual.

CLAY SPOHN: Well that's what I tried to explain to these people in Hollywood that time was that the film should be the visual image of the person who wrote the story of the film or should be the visual image of the person sitting in the audience, or should be done in such a way that it allows his imagination to expand.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Right.

CLAY SPOHN: It should be a thing that causes expansion and not contraction, or it shouldn't be presented as just a—well, unless it's a documentary—but it shouldn't be presented as just a factual, static, sort of form because good writing does allow the mind to expand. Well some writing allows me to do that, has allowed me to do it. One is a book by Stephen Crane which is, the imagery is so wonderful in that book that that is. I could paint, use that as subject matter almost. Or a person like Delacriox could have done it, or Ryder I think could have—of course, he was influenced by the things he ready, some of the things he read. But the imagery in that was very frankly based on an actual incident, something that Stephen Crane heard about.
Another thing that developed imagery for me was a book that I read when I was at the Art Students League—no, it must have been afterwards. Yes it was afterwards when I was in San Francisco. I've forgotten when this book came out, but it was well known at that time, but no one knows about it today. It's still at the library. It's called *Twenty Years Ago* by O'Sullivan. And it's worth getting. It was written when he was twenty-one, O'Sullivan was from Islands? He spoke medieval Gaelic. But he wrote this for the people, and it's poetic prose. Nothing happens in it. He talks about things that impressed them and things he saw and things he did, but there isn't any basic them other than twenty years ago—that's all. But someone from Dublin got ahold of it and translated it into English, I don't know whether it was 1930 when it was published or before. I've forgotten , but it was a very poetic sort of thing. When I read it, I thought gosh, I ought to paint that, it became so clear. I told a friend about it—I was working for awhile at the New York University Library, just in between painting periods, and one of the fellows working there was interested in poetry and playwriting, and I told him about this and he happened to go to the browsing room. He found it there, it wasn't in the main library section, but it was in the—I've forgotten the name of the room—it's the browsing room. He found it on the shelf there, so I mean he was impressed by it. Oh it's been years since I read it you know, he said "You should read the first line", the first opening of it. He was impressed by the poetic sing, and so I went back and looked at it, and it was very good. I haven't read it since, so I don't know what I would think now, but that was one of the things that impressed me. Some of the other things—well James Stevens, not *Crack of Gold* nothing like it. It's a little too fanciful. But *The Demigods* I thought very fine and *Deirdre*, Len Hutton's *Desire*, the short stories, and some of the Walsh tales, too. Those things have an influence on attitude, I mean. And some Oriental writings, translations from the Sanskrit, you know. One thing that I liked very much was the tales of fables, little animals talking to other little animals and so on. Well that was before Aesop. Someone said that they thought perhaps Aesop got his inspiration from, but I …

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I don't know.

CLAY SPOHN: They weren't translated in Aesop's time, I'm sure. They were much better than Aesop anyway. Have you read them?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

CLAY SPOHN: Well, I know there are different translations, but the one that I read, and which I thought was excellent, was a man by the name of Rider. He was professor of Oriental Languages, Arthur Ryder, his name was Arthur Ryder. He's dead now but he was a friend of a friend of mine who bought a collection of all his translations so I used to buy his books. And he translated *Women's Eyes*. Do you remember those poems written by some prince who gave up his princedom, or whatever it was to live in a cave. Well, I mean he got a dirty deal from his wife. He became disgusted with her, and he went to a cave and wrote about them, beautiful gemlike little things. But all those things, I think, are important, you know, and they're all related. All the arts are related. So one should keep in contact with other things. But I'm getting side tracked from the visual…

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I think we're getting tired.

END OF INTERVIEW

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