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Oral history interview with Ray Strong, 1993  
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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Ray Strong on September 14, 1993. The interview took place in Santa Barbara, CA, and was conducted by Paul Karlstrom for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

## Interview

Tape 1, side A [30-minute tape sides]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. An interview with painter Ray Strong in his studio in Santa Barbara, California. The date is September 14, 1994, and the interviewer for the Archives is Paul Karlstrom. Ray we met a little less than a year ago, and I came down to visit you here in Santa Barbara. You have a long history of involvement with California art, particularly landscape painting. You're known best, I believe, as a landscape painter, and this is something that is an interest and a focus that you seem to have maintained pretty consistently throughout your career. You were in a position back in the thirties for a period of time-I don't know the exact years-in an interesting position to interact with some of the key people, especially in San Francisco and the Bay Area, who were dedicated to the Western landscape. Not exclusively that but there was a real. . . . Maynard Dixon being one of them, James Swinnerton, other artists of this interest, of this stylistic and subject-matter focus. And so this is pretty much how you seem to find yourself or find your own direction. What I would like to talk about today-and we're going to have a chance to talk about your career in a broader respect-but to focus at first, and it's sort of like bringing in something that came along a little bit later right into the beginning, but to focus on a single project, which will then I think bring out some of these contacts and some of these observations you have of that time-interesting times in the Bay Area-when for a brief period you were associated with the Bohemian Club and a particular project, which brought into play several interesting things including people that were prominent in the art world in the Bay Area at the time. Also an activity which was very important in the thirties, throughout the country, certainly in the Bay Area, and that was mural painting. That by way of introduction for you, I'd like to then launch into some of your recollections of that time: the circumstances and how you found yourself assisting Frank Van Sloan on this rather wonderful mural which is still extant at the Bohemian Club in San Francisco-the Grove Room mural. So maybe you can, by way of response, sort of fill in a little bit of the background. How did you, Ray Strong, find yourself assisting on that project?

RAY STRONG: Well, yes, the Bohemian breakfast room grove mural was my first assistant job with four other artists. There was Morris Del Mue, Louis Siegrist, there was Ray Burrell. . . . And let's see who was the other one was there? [Gustave Liljestrom-Ed.] How did I happen to get to be asked to assist on the mural? Well, we have to go back a little as to when I first met Frank Van Sloan. When I first came down from Oregon out of high school, when I was nineteen, why, my brother was finishing up his senior year at Stanford. He had shifted from English lit where he went to classes with John Steinbeck, and they were friends. And I lived with him out beyond the Roble Hall across the creek. And I commuted to the California School of Fine Arts. I came down because Portland, Oregon, only had one good landscape painter, and through high school years I'd painted weekends with him rain or shine and we'd put up a tarp if it was raining. We painted in the Columbia Slough all the way to Mount Hood. But I came down primarily to learn to draw. And in 1925 after I'd had a show of paintings of Palo Alto, eucalyptus trees, and the city in the rain, and the circle, and filling stations-all kinds of exciting subjects-and the circus at Redwood City, why Jimmy Swinnerton called me one day and said, "I like your show and how about joining me and going to the desert?" And I said, "Well, when you say desert, where are you going?" And he said, "Well, we'll see Walthe and Arribe and we'll go to the Monument Valley and we'll go through the Painted Desert and end up at the Grand Canyon where there's a Hearst cabin where we can paint until we get snowed out." And I said, "Ye gods! What an opportunity!" And I said, "I'll contact my dad and see. What do you think it will cost?" and he said, "Well, not too much unless you hire a mule to ride on to Monument Valley." Which later I did. And on that trip who was along but Mr. Bergdoff, who was a good draftsman of trees, but Van Sloan and Jimmy says, "Don't listen to him about color. You've got your own color sense, but if you're gonna draw trees, why Bergdoff can help out a lot as to how to root them and make them alive. And Van Sloan kind of tucked me under his wing, and I was painting the moonlight with a, apple box with a candle one night, and I was on the white canvas and he saw me up just above the camp, the place where we were staying, which was. . . . The Wetherill brothers had discovered Keet Seel and Betatakin [ruins-Ed.]. And he said, "Ray," he said, "You know you could get that moonlight involvement a heck of a lot better if you mixed up the blue-violet middle tone and coated the whole canvas and painted in to the night envelopment." And I said, "Well. . . ."-he liked to be called Van-I said, "Well, thank you, Van, that's a great tip." And so the next one I tried, I did coat it with a kind of a [paynes] gray, subtle gray-violet-blue. And he painted along there, and Jimmy was doing his Canyon Kiddies stuff, and we did go to Monument Valley, and they got John [Siefemule; Sief, a mule] under me, and I painted some of the Monument there-a terrific experience. We knew that John Wayne and [John-RAY STRONG] Ford, the movie man, had been out there. And the fellow who ran the kind of hotel in the desert there, we met him. And that was a great experience. Well,

then I came back to San Francisco to the art school.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And at this time you were at the California School of Arts.

RAY STRONG: California School of Fine Arts, and they had left the Mark Hopkins basement, where I first went to art school. We were right down to what was left of the foundations of the Mark Hopkins, but that was slated for a hotel, and then [the school-Ed.] moved to California Street. And the director [Lee Randolph-Ed.] wanted to see my work with Jimmy Swinnerton. And he knew Van Sloan was along, and I found out later that Van Sloan should have been the head of the particular California School of Fine Arts. But he looked at my sketches and he more or less told me in terms of what the art school was trying to do then-they were building on the post-Impressionists-he just said flatly to me, he said, "Well, these are. . . . You're going to be fifteen or twenty years behind the times if you continue to paint these." And I said, "Well, Mr. Randolph," I said, "I'm from Oregon. I came down here to learn to draw. I've been fortunate to get out into the desert country with Jimmy Swinnerton, who owes his life to it, and Van Sloan was there with information and suggestions, and it's better than any art school information I've gotten here. I want to paint the West. I want to paint West of the Rockies and I want to do it with integrity and sincerity, and you're telling me I'm going to be fifteen or twenty years behind the times." It turned out he was right, of course. Because all the advanced guard [sic] in America swung very much that way, but I had my sights set on trying to paint light, form, color, geology-the works-of Western landscape, in the tradition of Thomas Moran particularly, but in the great tradition of Homer, Eakins, the whole Hudson River school. You just name 'em. Up through [George-Ed.] Inness. I knew where I wanted to go and I wasn't getting it. So I talked with Jimmy-he liked to be called Jimmy, because of his earlier doing one of the first of the Katzenjammer period comic strips to amuse the American public-and he said, "Well, why don't you go to the Art Students League?"

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now that may. . . .

RAY STRONG: New York.

PAUL KARLSTROM: In New York, yes.

RAY STRONG: And I was to touch up with him at the Grand Canyon, and when I got to Phoenix, it was too expensive and too time-consuming, so I phoned him and I went on. Well, to come back to the Bohemian Grove murals, early in 1934, Van Sloan called me. I hadn't seen him between. I hadn't seen him at all. And he said, "I've got a job to do the Grove murals, and I need assistance because it's a big high ceiling and it's four walls and we're to paint the environment of the grove and I'm to put [in] the people enjoying the fellowship and what the Bohemian Grove is about." And he said, "Come on down"-and I think it was on a Monday-"and meet the other assistants." And so I met Siegriest, Del Mue, and Ray Burrell and the Swedish painter that was there. His name comes and goes. He painted realistic landscapes of the. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Gustav Liljestrom?

RAY STRONG: Yes. And [it was-Ed.] my first meeting with all the rest of them, although I knew that Del Mue was a relative-an uncle or something-of Maynard Dixon and painted Marin County and had painted some murals for schools over there. And so as we came into the room, the walls were all canvased [sic]. Everything was in one foot to an inch [scale-Ed.] and Van may have shown us some of the detailed, magnificent kind of Frank Brangwyn breakup of the trees, the shadows, the lights and the upper lifting up into the sun of the canopy of the redwood forest. But what he actually gave to us-and he showed us a color sketch in broken color like a Seurat but in broken strokes similar to van Gogh, but in between of everything designed in straight mosaics, even the branches, which are feathery were turned into geometric designs of light/shadow halftone, the trunks the same, the floor of the grove in great big horizontals. Much like Dixon, really: horizontals, and light and shadow, and cadmium oranges and red violets in the shadows. And he gave us each a piece of tracing paper drawn from this color sketch, and it was very graphic. And he said, "Here, Ray, you're younger. You're the youngest. Get on that step ladder and start at the top of the redwood trees." And "Here you, Louis, go to that far wall and do the same thing, and the rest of us who are older, we'll work on top the platforms and off the floor, and as we get the whole thing drawn in in charcoal, if we're pleased with it, we'll fix it, and then we'll take a kind of a warm weathered redwood bark tone and we'll outline everything at least with a quarter-inch brush stroke so everything is moving into an undercolor of the redwood grove but just a brush drawing." So we did. And then one day, he said, "Well, now it's time to go ahead and here's the color sketch. And Ray, you assist me, and I've got muffin tins here," oh, about a dozen of them, one, two, three, twelve-hole muffin tins. And he said, "Ray, I want you to be in charge with me and we'll mix light halftone shadow sunlight up in the branches, sunlight shadows, and an accent value or two on the trunks of the trees, and the sunlight and the shadow in the foreground grove floor, and then every day I want you to put water on those and the first thing in the morning dump the water off and put 'em where the light comes in the window of the grove room and they can dry out. And so you with me will control the orchestration of the color. But the rest of us will just follow the color sketch and fill in the mosaic," which it is.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you. . . .

RAY STRONG: In about four weeks the mural was done. There was only one figure with two little sketched figures on the diving board for the diving pool, and the figure was painted in sunlight out of his head on the end of the diving board. And then he said to the rest of them, he said, "We're all through for the environment and the enclosure of the grove, and I've got to do the figures because I've got to do them related to my own concept, and it's figure drawing and I'm just good at that, and so four of you can go, but I want Ray to stay on because I know he studied with [Frank-Ed.] Dumond, and I've seen his landscapes and I want him to paint the deciduous trees mostly going up into the cumulus clouds behind the diving pool, and I want him to stay on a week." And so I felt very honored, being the youngest painter to. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, right, yeah.

RAY STRONG: So with Dumond's nine to fifteen values, I orchestrated trees looking into them, under them, over the middle, and finally the tops and the cumulus clouds coming over it. And he gave me great freedom. He didn't overpaint what I did. I was working from his sketch, and he had orchestrated the whole thing in color patterns. And that's the Grove.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So that was-including that last week when Van Sloan finished, laid in the diver on the board, you did your trees-five weeks, huh?

RAY STRONG: Yeah. Now the postscript of this is that Ian McKinley, who's related [to me-Ed.], found out that I had been one of the five assistants and the rest were all gone, right. I was invited to come up. . . . An anatomical draftsman who was going to kind of give the [inside, insight] of van Gogh because there was 145 figures. I'd only seen three or four plus one finished one on the diving board. And I was to be given four minutes by this fellow who was the keynote to the personality and the person of Van Sloan.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, that's Vince Perez. He's a member of. . . .

RAY STRONG: And so I was all prepared. I'd stay awake nights for the week or two I had. And this was only an arrangement with this particular person. Ian, I don't think even knew about it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is it Ian McKinley?

RAY STRONG: Ian McKinley. And so I kept sitting on the edge of my chair [wondering] when am I going to get my four minutes to tell him that Van Sloan is the important thing in the spirit of Bohemianism. Sure, the fellowship, the intellectual sharing, all across the board of American letters in biology and geology and State Department people and governors. Sure, all of that was part of the Grove, but what about the art spirit and what did Van Sloan really stand for to me as an Oregonian?

PAUL KARLSTROM: What did he?

RAY STRONG: And I was going to tell him the most important thing-he asked me a question one day.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Van Sloan did?

RAY STRONG: Van Sloan. And the question was, because I'd started an artists cooperative gallery down. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: We're going to want to hear about that.

RAY STRONG: . . . a block or so away for Maynard Dixon's on Commercial Street, and young students were coming in and buying materials, and he wanted to know were they satisfied with what they had come to San Francisco to get of the art spirit craft of painting. And I said, "No, they're very unhappy as I was unhappy." And I said, "You know about my trip to New York because I didn't want to conform and become a secondhand French post-Impressionist painter.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So at this point, you had already gone to the Art Students League to study.

RAY STRONG: I had gone to the Art Students League.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And you were back.

RAY STRONG: I'd been back there four or five years and had a scholarship.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I see.

RAY STRONG: And he said, "Well, you know what you can do about it?" And I said, "Art Students League?" And he said, "Why sure. Let the students determine who was going to teach them. If they want me, fine. If they want you, fine. But I'll start an art students league with you if you get Maynard Dixon." So I spoke to Maynard. He had

a class of ten students under WPA. They were paying for the materials and paying him so much. He says, "Sure, I'll move my ten in." So we started an art student's league. And as we looked up the background of the art student's league idea, we found out that Gutzon Borglum, Virgil Williams, Emil Carson (whom I later met in New York; had a crit from him) and also John Carson, that there had been an Art Students League long before Gutzon.  
. . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: In San Francisco. . . .

RAY STRONG: . . . \_\_\_\_ of the president's looking [out, up] over westward expansion. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mean there was an art students league [earlier-Ed.] in San Francisco?

RAY STRONG: And so we started it. We started it on the third floor of 405 Montgomery Street a couple blocks down from Maynard's studio, a block adjoining where I had the artists' cooperative with my wife. And I monitored Maynard's class. I monitored Van Sloan's class. I also studied under both of them. I went out often with George Post, [who-Ed.] we got to join us. And that was the Art Students League. And so it was a kind of a rebirth of the idea that if you're making images, god! give 'em the real tools to make the images. Don't try to paint in the fashion. Don't try to imitate art and fabricate art on art, which is Maynard Dixon's phrase. Encourage them to look at it with clear eyes, with an intelligent mind, be part of what the Ashcan School. . . . Look at life right around you. Look at the land! Get out, live in it! Sleep in it! Paint it! [laughs] And so we did. Before long we had a mural under Maynard Dixon and Herman Struck and myself. And we painted the farmer labor movement, the populist movement of Mephala, in California terms, in Maiden Lane. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: This was a mural in Maiden Lane?

RAY STRONG: It was a mural in the back windows, which are blacked out because we had an artist's cooperative gallery.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I see.

RAY STRONG: We showed Maynard Dixon's waterfront strike pictures. We started the first rental gallery in California. The people could, without seeing the artists and feeling [sorry], could rent a picture for a month and pay the rent and get a credit if they wanted to keep it, but otherwise that was a [rental, metal, medal] on a good level basis, no personality.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Where was this?

RAY STRONG: It was in the former [Adams-Danish, Adams Danish] Gallery, which was the former cooperative gallery, of which Maynard and Van Sloan were members, a woman who ran it-very famous woman. . . . Later I had us over there in the City of Paris [gallery-Ed.] she carried on. You know her name.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Ryan.

RAY STRONG: Yeah, Ryan. Beatrice Judd Ryan. The full [name-Ed.]. And she lived up to it. Beatrice Judd Ryan was a managerial woman.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So what was the location, though, for the cooperative and for this gallery endeavor and so forth? What was the street?

RAY STRONG: What was the which?

PAUL KARLSTROM: What was the location?

RAY STRONG: The location was on Maiden Lane and 166 Geary, with an elevator. My wife Betty [Strong?-Ed.] contributed her time and ran the Artists' Cooperative Gallery. In a big long hallway coming from the elevator was Imogen Cunningham, Dorothea Lange, Ansel Adams, Roger Sturtevant, and they ran a photo forum. God, we were a live bunch! And in there came Ralph Stackpole's son, Peter Stackpole. The best emerging Life magazine talents in the West. Their blood is strong with Steinbeck, posters in support of the Loyalists of Spain trying to stop World War [II] before it emerged from the bombing of [Mussolini and Hitler]. . . . God, we were alive.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So all of these things, then, were coming together.

RAY STRONG: They were coming together, plus a longshoreman's strike, plus some deaths from the shooting that took place down there, plus the Harry Bridges movement of getting rid of the hiring hall. I did posters for one of their early marches for the women and children of the longshoremen. By 1936, I designed the [floats for- RAY STRONG] the whole darn parade. By that time, I had met a number of the different union leaders, and I'd go

to individual unions. And we had a master plan of there's the sun, that's labor, and that's in the cadmium oranges and the yellows and the gold colors. There's the earth, and the earth is the people who work in the fields, the forerunners of the farmers' union. There's the water, that's the circulation of [the well]. So we designed floats in orange and red earth and blue. And they got big long poles with streamers, and we took some lessons from the Mexicans and the socialist movement in Europe, particularly the Soviet Union, to put color into the parade. And at every four blocks, about, we had a tape rendition of Paul Robeson singing "Ballad of Americans," and commentary by one of the best younger-Mike Quinn-socialist writers for the local left-wing paper. But that didn't bother us at all. He was just a good writer. And so as these men marched up in groups. . . . But at the head of the parade, as I told you earlier this afternoon, the cooperative movement of the students cooperatives at Berkeley to finance their education. . . . The manager of the students' cooperative had at the head of the parade something that I had lettered with a friend, and it said, "Inasmuch as most good things are made by labor, it should follow that all such things should belong to those whose labor has produced them- Abraham Lincoln."

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, now. . . .

RAY STRONG: And that finishes that part of it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, let me. . . . I see our tape is warning us that it's time to change.

Tape 1, side B

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is continuing the Ray Strong interview. This is Tape 1, side B. Now, Ray, you were talking about the mural project. . . .

RAY STRONG: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . that important mural project at the Bohemian Club in San Francisco-the breakfast room, the Grove Room they call it now. And you were telling us about your own involvement as an assistant to Frank Van Sloan, and you told quite a bit about actually how it was done-how you divided your labor and how the different assistants worked and how it was laid in.

RAY STRONG: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But it seems to me there was more to. . . . There's more I would like to know about that project to try to get an idea of how things were done at that time or at least by Van Sloan and his people. And you mentioned that one of the things that you wanted to get across was something about Frank Van Sloan as a man, as an artist. And there were certain qualities that you. . . . The spirit. I think what you said was the "true spirit of Bohemia." And then you went off and talked about his interest in students: Are they getting what they really need out of an art education. And then we talked a little bit about what came of that.

RAY STRONG: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It raised several questions for me, and I hope that we can get to them. One of them, though, is you were talking about the spirit of Bohemia. And earlier when we were chatting, you really described that mural and the way it was realized as a kind of metaphor, in stylistic terms, for the spirit of the Grove.

RAY STRONG: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you remember telling me about that. . . .

RAY STRONG: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . and how everything was conceptualized that way? How was that? What was it about the mural in terms of the light and so forth, the transitions, the trees?

RAY STRONG: Well, the essence of the relationship of the five to us was in [his-Ed.] showing us the line organization of the mural, and passing each of us, was the complete trust he had in each of our backgrounds that we were capable of doing what his mind had put down in line. And the same thing was when it got to the orchestration of the color values, patterns, to bring the Grove to life in its envelopment outside of the control was exercised onto the degree of each relationship of light, halftone shadow, and accents. Again, we were turned loose on the walls in complete trust. It was an [embrace] of artist to artist-not as hired hands; this was on another level. It was a job in which he wanted the spirit of the grove, to which he could put his figures in. [evoked pictorially-Ed.] The amazing thing is after sixty years, I cannot remember, outside of the line drawings or the few figures watching the fellow on the springboard, where were the 140 other figures?

PAUL KARLSTROM: But does that. . . .

RAY STRONG: I just can gather that when we had finished the environment of the volume and area of the grove, the trees, the sunlight, and the limbs, and the ground, that he must have come in there day after day, and maybe week after week, and out of his vocabulary and remembrance of the grove, put the people in. They weren't there when we scaled up. We didn't scale up the people. We did earth, tree trunks, branches, sunlight, shadow, halftones.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, you now upon reflection think that this four-, five-week period was simply laying in, in effect, the environment, and that Van Sloan individually, by himself, then put in all the people.

RAY STRONG: Yeah. The only thing that he put in when we were painting was to put in the posters, many of them which he had designed originally. They were in color. They were in the setting. And then from there, here emerged these finished figures. But to me it's still a mystery. I never went back for breakfast in the room. I never went back to the room until sixty years later. I was busy starting an art student's league. And I was Artist in Residence for all of the National Forest, U.S. Forest Service, west of the Rockies and making a living and keeping the Art Students League going and the Artist's Cooperative and I never went back until sixty years later.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, now, did you. . . . When Van Sloan talked about the project, did he not mention that, of course there would be all these people, these figures, in there? I mean, you must have known that they were going to appear eventually-or maybe not.

RAY STRONG: Van never did invite me to come back. I wasn't that close personally to him. I was an assistant and a friend and a young, fellow painter. There was one exhibit, when I was a [associate/artist-Ed.] member for one year. I didn't know you had to pay dues. And I dropped out when I got a bill for seventy-five dollars for my share of the dues. I hadn't eaten a meal there. I had never been to the Grove when the Grove was in session. And Gustave paid-or Van and Gustave between them-paid my dues for me, just kind of. . . . I said, "Well, I can do that." And they said, "No, we proposed to you and that's what we're supposed to do. If you don't want to stay in, we take care of it." And when I was having supper with Ian with his four sons, across the table he said, "Were you once a Bohemian Grove member?" And I said, "Well, Gustave Liljestrom and Van put my name up because they thought with the annual show I might sell a painting or two, and sure enough, when I did put a painting in, Van looked at [William-Ed.] Ritschel and all these name painters of the Bohemian Grove, and he said, "Ray, your painting is the finest painting in this show." It was a little Oregon sketch of a meadow and a homestead barn and house with some mountains behind it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But that was it. You were. . . .

RAY STRONG: That was it. That was my one year as a Bohemian. But when Ian asked me across the table later, as I thought back why I didn't get to speak, he might have thought. . . . What he did say, he said, "Did you brother ever know about it?" I said, "No. Why should I bother my brother about it." Well, actually my brother [Edward Strong-Ed.] didn't become a member, I think, until he was Chancellor of the University of California. And there was almost thirty years difference in there. I didn't take painting, life, or problems to my brother in the first place. He's on a much higher level of effectiveness in education. But I think because he asked the question and I answered it honestly, that I just dropped out. Well, [according to-Ed.] his recent book by Haggerty, *Fifteen Years in the Making*, Maynard [Dixon-Ed.] dropped out before that in 1930 because he was unhappy as a realist painter, and painting down around the waterfront with all the money boys and the guys that made decisions on the other side of the fence, and he just dropped out but with his own reasons. With me, I just knew instinctively that I was with the working class, laboring [men \_\_\_\_, people], the Ashcan school.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So when you. . . . You were then invited in, I gather, as an associate member, but basically to. . . . The main purpose was so that you could function working on [the mural-Ed.]. . . .

RAY STRONG: Well, I think in Van's idea, he thought that it would be good for the Art Students League for me to be a Bohemian Club member. He thought I might sell a few paintings, which would take care of my monthly bills. He never explained why he promoted me, except that both painters submitted my name. And that's how I became a member. I didn't meet anybody. I didn't come before any committee of admittance. It was just done.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But do you think it was primarily, or largely, in connection with the project? In other words, they needed your abilities and to have you as an associate member of the club was, would be. . . .

RAY STRONG: I thought they were so pleased with what I did with Van on the Grove [mural-Ed.] that I was a potential good member. I think they also thought, "Well gosh, if you get Ray in here, maybe he can do a few posters and we don't have to contribute these infernal number of posters we do." I don't know. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: You were all paid a fee, though. Isn't that right?

RAY STRONG: Well, I had painted one mural at that time for a little parish hall in the Adirondacks and that's the only mural. Although I worked with [Pogarny] and his assistant on some murals when I was in the Art Students

League in the east. But definitely, I felt that wall painting was the primary challenge to paint art for the people—that a wall was a wall, architecture is architecture, and that to fulfill [fill-Ed.] a painting with meaning for people was the real challenge as a painter. Sure, I wanted to paint my landscapes, but I knew that that was catch as catch can and middle class, and people with means would be your income, and I wanted more than that. I still do.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you saw, to a degree, mural art as a public opportunity or statement, and this was part of your attraction to that project. An opportunity to \_\_\_\_ . . . .

RAY STRONG: Well, in Van's idea, I think in Van's mind, having been an Art Students League teacher and interested in young. . . . There's a quote in there of Jimmy Swinnerton, and the greatest challenge to him, he thinks, is not only to be able to do your work and do it well but to pass it on to the next generation. And I'm sure that Van Sloan shared that. I wouldn't be a bit surprised that the financing. . . . Jimmy, when I came up to the sixtieth anniversary I had my wheelchair wheeled through all the past presidents, and we got to Jimmy Swinnerton's and it was '29, '30, '31, he was president and the mural is a couple years later and I don't doubt. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: 1934, I think.

RAY STRONG: I don't doubt that Jimmy must have been a ringleader of both helping to finance, but getting the Grove mural done by Van. Must have been. There must be a connection there but I don't know the actual facts. But since he had invited Van Sloan in '25, [through their-Ed.] association on that trip, there must be a connection between that and the Grove mural. But I don't even know where the finances come from, how much.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What were you paid? Do you remember what your fee was?

RAY STRONG: Well. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Because you were all paid something, right?

RAY STRONG: Well, later on I did a mural as assistant to Maynard Dixon, his final mural of the Grand Canyon for the Sante Fe [Rail Road-Ed.], and that was a hundred dollars a week. I think it was around maybe thirty dollars-twenty-five or thirty dollars. In the Depression, that was a living wage. Later I worked for the National Park Service for \$96.50 [a month-RAY STRONG] doing Mt. Lassen before and after the eruption, and the White Sands National Monument dioramas. And at \$96.50 my wife and myself lived on it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you said thirty something. . . .

RAY STRONG: I think I probably . . . we got twenty-five dollars a week, which was a living wage.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, okay. So this was a work-for-hire type thing.

RAY STRONG: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It wasn't like a contribution to the club because you were a painter.

RAY STRONG: Yeah, but the fellowship moved it up into another level.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, um hmm.

RAY STRONG: It was something that. . . . Obviously he had been up to many Groves [summer encampments-Ed.]. I don't know of any other painter in America, unless they'd gotten Frank Brangwyn, who did the whole British Empire murals who could have taken the Grove and turned it into an aesthetic triumph—which it is.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's very good.

RAY STRONG: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I was asking earlier about the meaning of the mural, the true meaning. And you talked about that before—and I took some notes—how it had to do with the spiritual quality of the redwood grove realized in a mural. And to sort of jog your memory on this, you talked about that the color, line, shapes and so forth pass through a design matrix that realized the spirituality as—and then in your words I think—"a higher form of realism." It wasn't just a portrait or a picture of a place.

RAY STRONG: Well, that would have wrecked the room.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. Well, could you elaborate on that a little bit?



RAY STRONG: I would like to elaborate on it entirely interpreted by myself as a fellow painter. Van himself never said, as he passed a working tracing paper or showed us the breakup, but when I saw his color sketch which was the thing we worked from, my first feeling was, "My god, it's like a cathedral." He's taken the feathery, almost impossible painting problem, of the featheriness of the branches and the feeding of the chlorophyll and he's connected it with Greek pillars of the redwood trunks, and the thing has been moved into the vocabulary of the stained-glass interior of a church. All right, a redwood-grove church. I'm looking back now, but at the time I thought, "Who else in America could take a redwood grove and move it into this vocabulary with the full knowledge of the whole of [John-Ed.] Constable painting out of doors from nature picked up by the Impressionists, moved through Seurat. There's more Seurat plus Van Gogh in that redwood grove mural, but personalized to Van's mental technical wizardry into a mosaic of paint. An incredible job.

[Interruption in taping]

RAY STRONG: I would like to add one more thing to that, which is that my first acquaintance with the mural abilities of Van Sloan was in the entrance, big room, as you come into the Bohemian Club of the King Arthur figures-up high, poorly lit. And I had never seen anything since Giotto, but in terms of the, oh, [John-Ed.] Singer Sargent for one, of his Boston murals. And he transferred some of the dignity of homo sapiens and Bohemian Club members in the way he handled the figures-his 140 figures which I never saw him do outside the diving board figure, to put them in sunlight and shadow and Impressionist enclosure in the mural-but there is a connection and I don't doubt that why he got the Sir Francis Drake room of the [Dons, Doors] with Maynard together was this terrific anatomical, humanistic fusion of painting figurative mural figures. Of which I just bow down in awe. I'm not a figurative painter, but I've seen enough to know when it's at an apex.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Ray, tell me about the. . . . What do you know about the murals in the lounge, the King Arthur series? Were they done before, prior to the Grove Room?

RAY STRONG: Yes, they must have been done early. I don't know what year, but I would suspect shortly after he came to San Francisco because I had seen them [at the old City Club-Ed.]. . . . Oh, when I went to art school I was invited once to go up with \_\_\_\_ Brown [to] the Bohemian. . . . I don't even remember the Bohemian Club members' [names-RAY STRONG]. And in those days, they were very fresh and alive and well lit. But when I saw them at night, there were two old fellows playing dominoes and you could hardly see them, but their presence was still felt.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I think not a lot is known about those murals and their meaning. Did Van Sloan ever. . . . Did he show you those murals when he was showing you around the club before you started your project?

RAY STRONG: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really? And he never said anything about them?

RAY STRONG: Van, with all of his ability, never strutted. [laughs] He was a very self-contained man who knew how good he was. The most important thing he did with me later, after the Grove murals and I monitored his class, was to invite me with two or three of the most talented students to a studio out near Blum's refreshment place. And that was exciting because on the wall he pointed and said, "Well, this is something from my earlier period." And it was cross of gold, envisioned with the cross of gold, because evidently he supported [William Jennings-Ed.] Bryan on the silver run for presidency or whatever he ran for. But the best part, he would sit down and there were little boxes-dozens, several hundred-monotypes: biblical themes, rape scenes, nudes, interiors. All out of his mind. Monotypes. One after another, very much like Goya's.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This was in the studio?

RAY STRONG: And those he would share. He would just sit you down and pass you things and you'd flip them over. Once in a while if you made a comment, he would chuckle a little, but that's the best part of his teaching, was to go to his studio and see the intimate. . . . I don't know what's ever happened to those. There were two sisters that inherited these things. I hope they end up in a museum someplace with permanent public access, but I don't know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you said the. . . . Back to the murals, the King Arthur cycle. The subject matter seems somewhat obscure. It seems like a concoction with all these variety of mythological creatures that are not just part of the King Arthur [legend-Ed.]. . . .

RAY STRONG: Now which one are you speaking about now?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Down in the lounge. Up high.

RAY STRONG: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Those murals. And I was just curious to know what your understanding of the contents of those murals might be.

RAY STRONG: I have no idea. I don't know who financed it, what they told him that they wanted from him. I just know that as you look up to them, they're in a controlled palate with great dignity. The negative spaces between the figures. I think they're gorgeous. But entirely different from painting light and air in a redwood grove.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. Well, do you see any connection between these projects that would say, "It's Van Sloan."

RAY STRONG: Well. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Within the context of the setting-the Bohemian Club.

RAY STRONG: Well, the connection is that obviously the man can draw.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

RAY STRONG: He can compose.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

RAY STRONG: He knows anatomy of trees-trunk and branches-and earth as well as he knows pelvises and heads and bodies and legs and arms and clothes on top of them. They're much better murals than Sargent's up in Boston. More substance under it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, let's see, you. . . .

RAY STRONG: It was worth any three or four years in any art school just to be around him for the three and a half or four years we lasted as an Art Students League. He would always come in with a smock on. Always excuse himself when he arrived and go into the john and come out with a little bottle of soda. He said, "I gotta take a teaspoon of these so I don't get dizzy when I'm teaching. And finally one afternoon I was over doing my ecology murals for the Forest Service. I got home and Betty said, "Van was in and he died. He was here and said he was dizzy and he wanted a place to lie down, so we put him back on Harry Dixon's-Maynard's brother's-copper table, and he stretched out and was gone."

PAUL KARLSTROM: What?

RAY STRONG: Died right in the Art Students League.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Van Sloan?

RAY STRONG: Yeah, Van Sloan.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Amazing.

RAY STRONG: It was good instinct on his part. He didn't have a class that afternoon. He had been either at the Bohemian Club, but he came in and he loved Betty and he says, "I'm dizzy. I'm not well." And disappeared in the bathroom and came out again and said, "Where can I lie down?" and she couldn't put him on the counter for the art materials so they took him in back.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Amazing.

RAY STRONG: Yes, it's amazing.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So Van Sloan actually died in the school that you were. . . .

RAY STRONG: Well, he died in the same, came out of the conversation doing the Grove mural. That's Bohemianism. [laughs] [During spirit.]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, let me ask you a technical question about the murals. How would you describe the process? It's not true fresco. Is that right? It's not buon fresco. Technically, how was the painting done, in the Grove Room?

RAY STRONG: Well, I've already described it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, I know.

RAY STRONG: It began as a mural painter, in fitting line and shapes of straight and curved lines where the rootings of the trees, the growth of the trees, the almost religious Olympic pillars of the trees, and wedding them to the source of the trees, which are the branches in which the sun comes down through into this magic \_\_\_\_.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But the pigment is not in plaster, or is it? Or is it a surface. . . .

RAY STRONG: The medium was half oil and half [turps], which was Maynard's flat drying [medium-Ed.]. The paintings were painted in thin layers, not heavy in pastel. They were built layer on layer. No glazing as I can remember, unless he glazed between painting his figures after they were charcoaled in.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I see.

RAY STRONG: I don't know what he did then, but I wouldn't be a bit surprised he charcoaled them in to see if the line and shapes were working, and then probably fixed it, and then painted it into the atmosphere, maybe glazed it to get a little more tackiness, and then painted the finished strokes in it. I just imagine that that would be consistent with the way the grove itself was painted.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So it was a surface painting. In other words the materials were. . . .

RAY STRONG: And the surface has always held, because he honored the fact that it was a wall painting. And as you look at them, even after sixty years and they've gotten gray. . . . All that fat food and stuff coming in, it adheres to the oil. It would be amazing if there was a good enough technician to clean them. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: They should be, yeah.

RAY STRONG: . . . and see the original vibrancy, because that was a vibrant room. It was stained glass-approaching stained glass-even if flat painted.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, you know, it sounds to me from what you say that for you being involved with the project was practically a religious or spiritual experience.

RAY STRONG: Well, as I understand it from my brother. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Tell us who your. . . .

RAY STRONG: My father-in-law [Harold Chapman Brown, Prof. Phil., Stanford-Ed.] was an ardent Bohemian. And he went up. He liked the music. Ted Shawn came in. All the arts were there. They participated in the Grove plays and. . . . I never got involved in the fellowship-in the intellectual, spiritual, reborn quality that the men must get there-but I do know from Ed's telling me about his particular camp and. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: What camp was that? Do you remember?

RAY STRONG: I don't even remember the name of the camp, but there was a good portrait painter in there and he died of bone cancer. But I do know that Ed [Edward Strong--Ed.], in a way, knowing Ed's background of being an Acorn Club member and the YMCA and going to Spirit Lake up in Mt. St. Helens as a young man and in the select club of the Portland Young Men's Christian Association, it was perfectly natural to him, as Ian said in remarks, that Ed was a great Bohemian. I'm sure he was. I don't think I ever would have been. [laughs]

Tape 2, side A

PAUL KARLSTROM: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is continuing an interview session with painter Ray Strong.

RAY STRONG: This is number two.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Santa Barbara, California, and as Ray so helpfully pointed out, this is Tape two, side A. Paul Karlstrom is the interviewer and the date, we have decided, is September 14, 1993.

RAY STRONG: Fourteenth.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Ray, just to pick up once again for a little while on this project that we've decided to focus on as one example of your involvement-sort of your growth as an artist, and your connection, particularly your experience working with Frank Van Sloan and what that represented for you-but to go back just a moment to that project-the Grove Mural at the Bohemian Club. One of the things that is interesting to me and I think might be to others, aside from the technical aspects of how you proceeded to do this, is the connection with the club itself. And the reason I say this is the Bohemian Club, which of course still exists, is very prominent in San Francisco, and you were up there not too long ago for the anniversary of the murals. But that the club has a long

history going back into the late nineteenth century, and originally it was pretty much set up by artists. It was founded by artists and writers, and over those early years especially the most prominent artists were members of the club. It was an artists' and writers' and intellectual club.

RAY STRONG: Um hmm.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now, your experience. . . . You mentioned your own experience with the club. You were briefly a member, an associate member, I think. And you mentioned, I believe, that Maynard Dixon had decided to drop out after a longer membership.

RAY STRONG: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And I guess what I'm asking is just from your own experience and your observations of Maynard. . . . You know, both of you were artists, ostensibly this would be a community of artists where it would be really desirable for you to have this fellowship. But you didn't get a chance to experience that-if it was really available at all. And what are your observations? You mentioned something about the politics of the time having influence on some of the artists' attitudes towards the club.

RAY STRONG: Um hmm.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Can you, from your own experience, expand on that a little?

RAY STRONG: Oh, that's a very. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: These were the thirties. . . .

RAY STRONG: Well, it's an intriguing and interesting social, sociological area that you're getting into. And San Francisco, with the pre-Waterfront Warehouseman's series of strikes and the crystallization of the resistance for whatever reason of Matson [shipping lines-Ed.] and the shipowners and the people who accrue wealth from that operation. And there was a fracturization, not too detailed thought out by the artists as a group. Except the photographers like Dorothea Lange were recording Ashcan School realities of the police, who were the hirelings, in the eyes of the artists of the people who had wealth. And there was the Salinas strike in that period out of the Grapes of Wrath and the struggle within the factories in the field. And those workers were taking place. And any artist worth his salt or mental equipment and aliveness as a kind of a activated mental cell as a recorder or a interpreter. . . . Choices were to be made. I mean, you couldn't quite remain neutral unless you were not fully alive. And so that. . . . You mentioned Maynard Dixon in 1930, which I just read in Haggerty's book, of just not feeling comfortable any longer with the kind of the symbol of part of the intellectual well-to-do side of the Bohemian Club. And certainly with my first year since I was getting more and more involved with taking students down to the warehouse section of the town with my students and painting the waterfront and doing posters and stuff for the strikers who I sympathized with and what they're trying to do to clean up the shapeup system of hiring. It was all part of that social faction, and I don't. . . . Outside of the fact that a number of us artists formed the Mural Society with Albert Barrows as president, and Edith Hamlin who later married Dixon was secretary, or I was treasurer, I think, at that time. But our group, as a group, were interested in fair selection of walls to the artists, adequate recompense from the Federal programs for the work done-and not in labor-union terms but as a kind of a guild like the Newspaper Guild. These things were going on, and I can understand that Maynard felt a little uncomfortable trying to maintain his club associations when his heart and his mind was with Dorothea's push of the realities of what was happening to people, generally of the kind of strata that he'd always been attracted to in the first place.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, did it ever get so polarized that some of the artists-and you don't need to speak of course for yourself necessarily-but came to the point where the Club and what it represented, which was to a degree wealth and privilege-captains of industry and so forth-was seen as symbolic strictly of management and perhaps even oppression of the workers? Did it ever get that polarized or am I drawing too strong of a conclusion, labor/management type of thing.

RAY STRONG: Well, I imagine the history, as you're [recording it for the Archives-Ed.] of the Bohemian Club that culturally and aesthetically and in fellowship and comradeship of the creative arts-architecture and painting and, including the dance, and certainly theater, and writers-it must be quite a record.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

RAY STRONG: And I imagine that any artist would be proud to be part of the essence of what the club's history was and stands for. What it is today, I don't know. I do know that being invited [by the anatomist-RAY STRONG] and not given four minutes to tell the essence of Van Sloan's Art Students League continuation in my own [Santa Barbara-RAY STRONG] county, I can understand after the conversation at the dinner table that I think Ian [MacKinlay-Ed.] didn't want to have a dropout (I wouldn't have ever mentioned it) but I think he just made a

decision then, if there was any decision, to let me speak for four minutes. But I could have given a nice eulogy of the spirit of the true Bohemian as represented by Van. [chuckles] [Interviewer's note: RAY

STRONG is speaking of a show at the Bohemian Club, San Francisco, 16 March 1993, written and performed by members to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the completion of the Grove Room murals by Frank Van Sloan (played by artist Vince Perez). Then-member Herbert Hoover was played by historian Kevin Starr; various notables of the time were played by other club members. Strong attended as a guest of honor. The event was produced by Ian MacKinlay.-PAUL KARLSTROM]

PAUL KARLSTROM: And by his ideas.

RAY STRONG: And now I've got it and so \_\_\_\_\_, fine. [the blank represents an untranscribable sound indicating dismissal-Trans.]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, see, I don't have any compunctions about that.

RAY STRONG: [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: So we're talking for a bigger record and not to. . . .

RAY STRONG: I think now it's going to be in the record, and maybe a condensed version would be nice to toss. . . . Ian has one of those little orange things that Larry [Werks-Ed.] prepared to pass out, and he's the only one that received them. I think he gave him about a half a dozen. And this is one more.

PAUL KARLSTROM: In moving, for a few moments, beyond that important project which we've now spent over an hour talking about, you mentioned the Mural. . . . What was it called? The Mural Cooperative that you. . . .

RAY STRONG: Oh, the Mural Cooperative that we did was a class project, which the students designed with criticism by Maynard Dixon, Maynard and I ran that particular class. And the class project was given to the students: "We'd like to do something to put in Maiden Lane that relates to what makes California work. There's the agricultural industry in the central valley and down in Salinas, and I think anything you do in design that could give the feeling of what takes place in that endeavor with labor would be fine, and it would be kind of symbolically correct if things are to have meaning in the bigger scene, that there has to be a fusion or a getting together of workers who work with industry and movement of goods and services. And the mural is to be a theme of urban and farm labor." And so they made the design. Maynard largely gave the crit of their design to improve it. And we painted it on a bunch of beaver board and mounted it on a frame and we hung it on Maiden Lane windows. I don't know what happened to it eventually. And then the students got interested in this particular mural and we did another version for the Longshoreman Warehousemen's Union and we did it all in sepia, the same composition as of the four seasons, and the choice between moving toward peace to the left or to the right toward implied fascism and more. I don't ever know what happened to that mural. I redesigned it, and the students worked on it. It never became a class project, and we gave it to the Warehousemen's Union and maybe it's down in their hiring hall. I don't know. This [another mural-Ed.] is a byproduct of the PWA, Public Works of Art [i.e., The Choice portable-RAY STRONG]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now, we have to say for the tape what this is, because this is a knockout.

RAY STRONG: That's the photograph by Willard Van Dyke of the mural when it was photographed in the Palace of Fine Arts [San Francisco-Ed.], where it was up on stage [downstairs-RAY STRONG].

PAUL KARLSTROM: And this is yours?

RAY STRONG: It's mine. Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is yours.

RAY STRONG: Maynard came down. I did a mural for the kids in the library.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It was commissioned by the students of Roosevelt Junior High School.

RAY STRONG: Yeah, Roosevelt Junior High School. I did a mural about twenty feet by five feet high from the Skyline Boulevard of California hills and oaks and bays looking across Santa Clara Valley, before the present industry, to Mt. Hamilton. And when I finished it, the principal said, "Well, you did what we wanted, what would you like to do?" And I said, "Well, I'd like to do something called The Choice." And she said, "The Choice, what's that?" And I said, "Well, peace or war?" I said, "I'm concerned about what's happening in Spain [of the, with the] [lors] and Franco backed by the armaments, the Mussolini and the Air Force stuff from Hitler, and I'm afraid there's something very tragic going to happen. I think about it a lot, and I'd like to do something showing people moving toward peace and then some of the consequences of another war or a world war." And she said, "Make a

sketch." And I made a sketch about so. [indicates size-Ed.] And they put it up, and the art teacher said, "You can't put up a bunch of crosses and [skulls-RAY STRONG]."

PAUL KARLSTROM: Skeletons and grim reapers.

RAY STRONG: ". . . and the Grim Reaper for a bunch of junior high school students. Why that's ugly. Absolutely not." And the principal said, "Well, the students are going to put on a paper drive to pay him \$37.50 a week for about a month's work to paint it, and they're paying for it, so let's get a hundred students, let them decide." Ninety seven voted "We love it." And it was to go in a downstairs hall.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What happened to it?

RAY STRONG: Maynard was breaking up in his divorce with Dorothea [Lange-Ed.] and he wanted to go back to his boyhood uncle's farm in Modesto, and so I said, "Do you mind if we stop in San Jose? I want to show you my California mural which is pretty good, but there's another mural downstairs." So he saw the mural up in the library and said, "Yeah, that's California. That's very good. It's got a little of the earthy integrity of [Gattardo-Ed.] [Piazonni]." And then he said, "Let's go down and take a look at the other one." Thirty feet away he saw this and he says, "My God, Ray, you put everything but the kitchen sink in it!" [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did that mean he liked it or not? [Yes, one day later in 1939 he gave me a \$25 bill to print copies for both World Fairs for the U.S. Cooperative League-RAY STRONG]

RAY STRONG: Well, it was his way of saying I'd really had too much on my mind, and it was really crowded. But the interesting thing was three years, four years later, the Socialist mayor of Berkeley was the head of a whole committee of the Women's America University Women and Women's Clubs of the Bay Area, and they had a two-story building on the 1939 Fair [Golden Gate International Exposition, Treasure Island, San Francisco-Ed.] with all of the [cost] of World War I, and they needed something with color and affirmativeness in it, and somebody in San Jose said, "Oh, we've got a mural down here we think you should have." And sure enough they contacted the principal, and she said, "Yeah, it's too important to be down here. You can have it, but Ray Strong has got to do us three big California landscapes, and then he can do what he wants with it." And so it did go to the 1939 Fair with floodlights on it. Originally, if you'll notice in the original, there was a Chinese, American, an Indian, and Black man all painting the, pushing the world in [springtime, Springtime] into a bunch of the abundance of the world. Anyhow, that's it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, so. . . . Now wait a minute. What we see here. . . .

RAY STRONG: What you see here is about a month ago. . . . It had been rolled up for about fifty years, and it was all crackled like this. It was painted with Dutch [stand] oil, and two of my students who've been studying with me for the last twenty years-now they're all artists in their own right-thought I should touch it up. And our idea [was-Ed.] to touch it up and then get a good transparency of to send it to the WPA Smithsonian National Museum of American Art and tell 'em it's historic and was financed by the students out of a byproduct of the WPA, if they'd like to have it, roll it up or show on occasion, why it's theirs for shipping costs.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How did it get on the canvas this way?

RAY STRONG: Well, the canvas originally was stretched on a stretcher, and now I've got to have it backed up and put down on a good solid, new plywood background so it would take out the wrinkles. But it's pretty well touched up except for right there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, this is rather amazing. I mean this is a rather extraordinary work.

RAY STRONG: Well, look, I've got Yankees, German, French, Italian, what's happening in Bosnia, lying propaganda, he's fishing for men. My brother [Winston-RAY STRONG] posed for this. It's a really good torso. This is the only figure that I ever made of him.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's your brother who was [three years younger than me-RAY STRONG].

RAY STRONG: Yeah, my brother posed for that. He posed for these, too. He was about to get married, and I had him put a blanket on and pose for these [three-RAY STRONG].

PAUL KARLSTROM: You don't mean you brother who was later the Chancellor of [University of California, Berkeley-Ed.]?

RAY STRONG: No, this was the younger brother.

PAUL KARLSTROM: The younger brother. [chuckles]

RAY STRONG: He's the agriculturalist. That's Winston, a wonderful guy. Polio victim [at three years of age-RAY STRONG]. He has two canes, walkers. And Betty's mother posed for some of these. Some Stanford students, [some of] those blinded by war. The nurse has now given a million dollars for a poetic grant of fifty thousand a year from Claremont. The Jewish boy's father was a big wholesaler. He was crazy about Matisse. And Winslow Homer. Coastguard man and then some CIO boys, Ernie Neviss for that one. [not sure of punctuation in previous-Trans.] And the figure at the top is supposed to be Stuart Chase, the prophet of cooperation, being the answer to the problems in Mexico. And now, of course, it's the answer to the world, I guess: If we can learn to cooperate and not kill each other, why we might make a lot more sense out of the world. Anyhow it's quite a mural.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now, you said last time we spoke that you gave, not a copy of this, but a reproduction to Upton Sinclair. Is that right? [Yes.-RAY STRONG]

RAY STRONG: I heard that until the day he died, a Stanford student who I'd met when he spoke in [San Francisco-RAY STRONG]. He spoke in the Dreamland Auditorium in San Francisco, and Dorothea Lange was there, and I had the nerve with the black and white of this [mural-RAY STRONG] to get into the elevator [with Sinclair-RAY STRONG]. And I said, "Here's a mural that the students in San Jose financed, and I know you've done a whole series of peace and war"-I forget the title of it, Trilogy or something-and I said, "I'd like you to have it." Well, I heard after he died that it was till the day he died over his desk where he did his writing. That to me was the well. . . . [claps]

PAUL KARLSTROM: That was it.

RAY STRONG: Well, he almost. . . . Well, he didn't become governor [to-RAY STRONG] "End Poverty in California," but Culbert Olson did it on the back force of it. And California now, with the present governor and with the unemployment and with the major problems again associated with agriculture, God, if we don't move [to-Ed.] some degree of Socialism, how long do we have to play out this mess? It doesn't have to be the one they rejected in France. It doesn't have to be the new ruling class of the misuse of the Communist philosophy in Russia. It'll have to move someplace into Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and particularly from cradle-to-grave cooperatives, free medical, Scotland. Burial cooperatives, medical care cooperatives, consumers' cooperatives. I met the international head of the Cooperative Alliance and had him speak in Berkeley one time. We wrote a little song called "Modern Forty-Niners." I'll have to look that little ditty up. We even had him join in the singing. I can't remember the whole verse of it. Well, anyhow here's some stuff [indicates papers and photos-Ed.] that you're welcome to.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, before we take a. . . .

RAY STRONG: These are black and whites. A lot more here, all right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Before we take a look at that, I want to just ask a couple questions by way of wrapping up.

RAY STRONG: This is something you can take with you, which is about dioramas.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, well let's. . . .

RAY STRONG: This is a little article locally.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Wait just a minute. Let me ask you one more question.

RAY STRONG: Well, that's for this, all right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Because we're still on that. It seems to me that certainly judging from this mural and some of your other activities, you always felt that your art had some kind of a connection to your social beliefs and then perhaps political beliefs. Is that a fair appraisal? Do you feel that that has been one of the factors that's sort of steered you in a direction with your art?

RAY STRONG: I think very definitely it's probably. . . . Van Sloan, when I was painting in the desert with him, one day when he saw me with a very fine sketch of the Grand Canyon. . . . Anyway I was a damn fool to try to paint it in the first place, but I was, and he said, "Ray, I think you're going to be one of the great landscape painters of America judging on your dedication and the way in which you go about coming to grips with what you see and putting it down." But when I was in my teenage years and moved out to the farm, and you have ten or fifteen neighbors [at harvest time-RAY STRONG] come in and sit around the table and mother had abundance-boiled potatoes and meat and salads and stuff-and I'd see these guys plowing into it, and even at that age I thought, "My gosh, in one lifetime, how many barrels of apples, flour, and cutting the throat of this animal and the other, all this input of life living on death. What can you do in life to make it have more sense, more meaning, justification for your consuming all this stuff?" And that kind of aesthetic sense carried over the minute I got to

New York. And I was in New York when fellows who lived by the ticker tape. . . . I was delivering pastry in the Wall Street section, and you didn't walk close to the inside of buildings because these guys took [leapt-RAY STRONG] out of windows and came down, ending it all. What they had in paper was gone and they took out [themselves-Ed.]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, you were there during the [Depression-Ed.]. [Yes.-RAY STRONG]

RAY STRONG: I was there, and I talked with unemployed apple sellers. And they were selling apples [on street corners-RAY STRONG]. Many of them were architects. I tried to get a mural job with a friend of mine, the best student at the Art Students League. It would have been a hundred and twenty-five draftsman, three of them plenty of time to sit on the edge of the drafting table and talk to us. The waste. If I wasn't a Socialist-inclined person before, brother. When Roosevelt came along and tried to save the system. . . . I was lively [active-Ed.] then and so were my two brothers. All three [four-RAY STRONG] times. My dad feared Roosevelt was going to make a [Kulak] out of him [and hated FDR-RAY STRONG]. He was a big grower, Dad was, because he had three or four hundred people picking his berries, and he was scared to death of the Industrial Workers of the World. Oh, that's a wonderful book by [Wallace-Ed.] Stegner, called Tom Hill. Stegner was a great writer.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh yeah, he was fantastic.

RAY STRONG: God, he was a landscape writer.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, speaking of landscape, let's end up on that, because it seems to me that there are at least two aspects of your work. One very directly illustrating your concerns and social ideas and politics, if you will.

RAY STRONG: Yeah. This has cost me a hell of a lot of beautiful landscapes. Now, I look at a single landscape. . . . It speaks more for peace and affirmation. Than throwing my entrails clean across this kind of stuff.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, what I was going to say is that the. . . .

RAY STRONG: I got it out of my system. But Maynard was right. If you are a landscape painter, paint something beautiful, affirmative. . . . Maybe it adds up to more.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But do you see a connection between these two expressions that on the surface seem so different?

RAY STRONG: Well, I tried to put it down as it is. But there is a choice.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. What about your landscape. Does that represent the consequences of a choice? Does that somehow fit in with this?

RAY STRONG: Well, this is the best landscape [I made-RAY STRONG] at the age of thirty-one. I came back from the Art Students League. I had this new interpretation of a twelve-tone, black-and-white scale of color planes [from Frank Vincent Dumond-RAY STRONG] and Seurat, but still enveloped in American painting of light like the Luminous Movement [1850-1875-RAY STRONG]. So Betty saved all of these [Oregon paintings-RAY STRONG]; I've got about twenty-four of them. And before Christmas, I intend to offer them back to Oregon if they'll just give me a Ray Strong room for the next generation of Oregon painters to let them have them as a kind of a challenge, they'll get out there and "do it yourself."

PAUL KARLSTROM: So at this stage of your career, late in your career, you identify with the landscape quest, with that whole movement, those artists who found meaning for their art in nature around them.

RAY STRONG: Very definitely.

PAUL KARLSTROM: In a nutshell.

RAY STRONG: In a nutshell. Nature is. . . . The earth abides. Nature's there. Whatever life force created this cycle of seasons and the abundance that flows out it, plus the erosion and the destruction of the Mississippi/Missouri Rivers. But that whole reverence and respect for nature and natural processes that if man can learn to use it intelligently and live with it, as part of it. But I think that's the challenge for my particular generation and generations to come. And I think landscape painting is a good he-man's, he-woman's challenge to be part of it. It isn't that I'm not aware of the internal conceptual return of Picasso. I had an hour talk yesterday with my neighbor, who is a scientist, a botanist, and his remark was, "Well, Picasso sort of destructed or destroyed the image, meaning realism." And I said, "Well, yes and no." I said, "One of the greatest paintings of the [age-RAY STRONG] that I've lived in has been Guernica of Picasso. He's gone down into the vocabulary to the primitive and below it, and managed with shapes and designs to get into the feelings, right down into the innermost human mind and feelings. And I wouldn't mind becoming a little Picasso, but I certainly can recognize what all of



the advance guard has been doing, Mondrian and all of them. And when I teach, I certainly expose my students to the vocabulary; but I still hope that when they get out before a mountain or a hill or a meadow, that they [look, want, love] fully what nature is giving them for an objective, naturalist approach [to landscape painting- RAY STRONG].

END OF INTERVIEW

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