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Oral history interview with Merlin F. Pollock,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Merlin Pollock on July 30, 1979 and July 30, 1980. The interview took place in Fayetteville, New York, and was conducted by Robert F. Brown for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The Archives of American Art has reviewed the transcript and has made corrections and emendations. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

ROBERT F. BROWN: This is an interview with Merlin Pollock, in Fayetteville, New York. This is July 30, 1979. To begin with, Mr. Pollock, maybe you could talk a bit about your childhood, something perhaps about your family. What were some of your interests as a child and perhaps, think also of those things that might have led to your later career in art.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, I was born in Manitowoc, Wisconsin, January 3, 1905.

ROBERT F. BROWN: With your family. Was this a small town, your family lived in the town.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes, the town was only about 20,000 at that time and my father, well he'd been born in Czechoslovakia and he came to that part of the country when he was a boy. My mother was born in that area, her parents came from Germany, and my father worked in the railroad. I went to school there, went to high school. I was very much interested in the outdoors, I was outdoors all the time. Manitowoc is right on Lake Michigan, and we spent a lot of time on the lakeshore, swimming in the summertime, fishing some, but I was out in the woods a great deal, and I think I always—I have retained a very strong interest in the outdoors ever since that time. I also was very much interested in art. [00:02:01] I drew a lot when I was a boy, I made sketches and things, of birds and animals, a lot of them on birch bark that we would get off of the trees. When I was in fifth or sixth grade, I had brought some of these sketches to school and the teacher was interested in them, and I left them with her for some reason, I didn't know why, and she sent them to the State Fair in Milwaukee and I got a prize out of them, I remember.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yes, yes.

MERLIN POLLOCK: I had a—there was a ribbon and I also went down to the bank to collect some money, I don't remember how much it was, about ten dollars or something like that, but it was a lot to me then.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So your teacher encouraged you in this.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes, yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did your family encourage you in this, were they—

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well they never discouraged me, they were I mean yes, they were interested but never excessively.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did your brothers or sisters also share some of these interests?

MERLIN POLLOCK: No, no. I had two brothers and they were not interested in that at all. They were interested in the outdoors, yes, I went with them camping and things of that sort. I had, in the public school there, up to eighth grade, we had a visiting art teacher would come once a week, and we had one that I thought was very good. I learned things about watercolor from her, that I think I never forgot. In high school, the art program was very, very poor. We had a teacher that had the students do monograms on bottles, and things of that sort, that was the art. We never drew anything, you know creatively, or anything of that sort.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Monograms on a bottle.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yeah, and I mean I went into the class a couple times, to see what they were doing and it just turned me off. [00:04:02]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well this teacher though, in junior high, and watercolors, what was her name?

MERLIN POLLOCK: That wasn't junior high, that was in grade school.

ROBERT F. BROWN: In grade school. What was her name, do you remember?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Oh my goodness, I wouldn't remember it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Do you recall, how did she go about teaching you?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, she had us work very fluidly, very loosely, wet on paper, use the water and make the color flow and that kind of thing, which of course is very important in watercolor. It wasn't a tight kind of method that you might get in a place like that. She taught you to be free and use it with a lot of fluidity and that sort of thing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: I suppose these were things from your imagination?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Partly, and sometimes she'd bring in flowers and things like that and we'd paint the flowers, but we also did things from imagination; what we saw on our way home from school that day or the day before, things that I'd just seen.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you really enjoyed this.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes, yes, I looked forward to that very much.

ROBERT F. BROWN: By the time you got to high school, was this interest continuing, were you painting and sketching?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes. I drew, I drew all the time, yes, but there was no contact with the school in that respect, it was just my own things, the things I did myself. I didn't, as I say, didn't like what they taught or how it was done and actually, the fault of that high school was that Merrill Aluminum was a big company and some of its owners sort of were very strong in the town, and I think a lot of the teaching was directed toward—to the advantage of that company. In other words, we had a very strong commercial program, we had wonderful rooms full of typewriters and things of that sort, but I took a botany course and we didn't even have a microscope or a magnifying glass. [00:06:05]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Really? Hmm.

MERLIN POLLOCK: We had a good chemistry course but we had—physics was just again, nothing, just a room with no equipment, nothing of that sort. But we had bookkeeping and typewriting and things of that sort were very, very strong, so a person with my interests was a little bit out of tune with what the school was doing. I would have liked to have had a good botany course, I would have liked to have had a good zoology course, that sort of thing. We didn't have that at all but we had—and I would have liked to have had an art course where I would have drawn and we talked about drawing and that, but we didn't have that at all.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you were frustrated.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes, frustrated in a way, but I liked literature very much, I did quite well in that. We had a course one year, an elective course in reading you called it, and you read a lot of books and discussed them, which was in addition to what we did in our regular English course.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So there were a few challenges that you wished, to your curiosity and intellectual interests.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But not many.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Not many, no.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you figure that perhaps this industry, Merrill Aluminum, had a hand in these sort of applied practical courses.

MERLIN POLLOCK: I think so. I think they were—well, they were on the school board, these people, and their influence was strongly felt, and it was to their advantage and perhaps to the town's advantage too, to get people who could work in their offices and that sort of thing, and be readily available.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was the town at all divided between those who had and those who didn't, do you recall?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yeah, we had a north and a south side. The north side was where more of the wealthier people lived and the south side was the ordinary people, and then we had what was called Polish Hill, a large Polish section, and in the early days that was kind of out of bounds for anybody that wasn't Polish. [00:08:17] I

mean, I used to be up there quite a bit and I had friends, but you got in a fight with somebody, why it seemed that every door had another Polish kid running out to be on his, on your enemy's side, something of that sort.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you pretty sociable and active?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes, I had a lot of friends I think.

ROBERT F. BROWN: In athletics too?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Not yet, no, I, I never played ball. We played a little football and I was sort of drafted to play on the school team but I only played for a while. I didn't care much about it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Your main interest of physical exercise was in outdoor activities.

MERLIN POLLOCK: That's right, yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you did a lot of that didn't you?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes, very much so.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You would camp, fish, hunt.

MERLIN POLLOCK: That's right. Trap, yeah, and made a lot of money trapping muskrat, mink, skunks and that sort of thing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. What is it you liked about the outdoors even then, what do you suppose it was?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well I don't know, I just liked it. I liked being outdoors and I knew a lot about the birds and the plants and the trees and just had a natural interest. Another highlight in my young life was when I was five years old, Halley's Comet came by and I remember my brother took me out behind our barn to show it to me one night and said the world was coming to an end, and I remember the great tail of that thing shooting across the sky. [00:10:13] I think that, see that will be due in 1986 again, so I'm wondering whether I'll be able to see it a second time.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did that leave a lasting impression on you?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes, definitely, yeah, very definitely, and that was just for a few moments. It was dark and we went out behind the barn and there it was and I could see it, yeah, and it just stayed with me all the time. I know that the uh, cycle of its return is 76 years, approximately 76 years, and so 76 from 1910 is 1986.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Eighty-six. So that was—was astronomy or anything like that ever an interest of yours?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, I took astronomy here at the university, I took a year of it. I took a lot of courses at the university, when I came to Syracuse. I took botany and dendrology, which is the study of trees, tree recognition and identification, and I took forest, zoology, ecology, all of this at the College of Forestry. Then I took courses in English.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you were able to make up here, years later, for what you couldn't get in high school.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, when I went to the Art Institute of Chicago, when I was there at that time, they didn't have a bachelor's degree or a master's degree, it was just coming into being, but if you wanted to participate in that kind of a program you had to go to the University of Chicago and take these extra courses, or some of the other universities. Well, I worked on the elevated there, I didn't have—

ROBERT F. BROWN: You didn't have time. [00:12:05]

MERLIN POLLOCK: —time for that sort of thing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: How did you happen to go to the Art Institute? Was there somebody particularly in your hometown that encouraged you to do this?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, it was the art school that was noted in that area.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did your family, what did they expect you to do when you finished high school?

MERLIN POLLOCK: I don't think they had any particular idea what I should do. My father was a railroad man, he didn't have much of an education. I worked for two years, I worked in the shipyards and I also worked, when they built a large cement plant I did—I worked in the power division, first in the construction of it, installing all

the electrical equipment, the lines that go to the power plant, turbine and all of that, and when it was in operation I worked in that department until I left to go to school.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But it was your—did you begin looking around for art schools during that time?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yeah, I wrote to art schools and wrote to other schools too. I even wrote to the College of Forestry here because I was sort of divided between whether I wanted to go into that—in that direction, in that field, or whether I wanted to go into art. But then another friend of mine, a high school graduate, high school classmate rather, who had gone to the art institute the year before, sort of encouraged me to go with him down to the Chicago Art Institute, which I did, and he got me a job on the elevated right away, he had gotten one. So I was there a couple of days and I was telling people how to get from there on the elevated and I suspected they're still trying to find their way back. I was an L guard at Adams and Wabash, and all through the loop there for, I don't know a couple of years while I was going to school.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [00:14:07] This gave you some—enough money to keep staying in school?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yeah. I was paid, at that time, 55 cents an hour which wasn't bad at that time.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What did your friend say was the attraction of the Chicago Art Institute, of the school?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, it was, I think it was the best school in the middle west at that time. The only other school was the Milwaukee, or Layton School of Art in Milwaukee, and that was much smaller. I don't know.

ROBERT F. BROWN: About what year was it you got—you went to Chicago?

MERLIN POLLOCK: When I went there?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, about what year was that, 1927 or '28?

MERLIN POLLOCK: No, it was much earlier than that. It was '24, '25.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you went there with what was it about a four-year program you were—you had in mind?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes, but I was there, well actually about six years, but five, five and a half of that probably were involved in studying. I had a um, I got a scholarship, what they called the American Scholarship in 1929, which took me all through the East. In other words, I was supposed to visit the various museums. I went up to Canada, to Montreal, and then I came down through Boston and New York and Philadelphia and Washington, Cincinnati. I think I had \$250 and I got back to Chicago with five cents; enough to get on a streetcar and get down to—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well let's go back a bit, to when you got to the school. What was the curriculum, what did you set out to do or what was required at the Art Institute?

MERLIN POLLOCK: The basic first year course is you took drawing, figure drawing and um, color, watercolor, design, basic design, and a course called research, which was drawing in the Field Museum of Natural History. [00:16:14] We'd go over there and draw, find design in a lot of things, it was sort of a design related to natural history. We drew shells and drew Indian artifacts and drew animals and birds and all kinds of things. It was a whole year course.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Could you describe some of the teachers you had in that first year?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, this man that developed that course, his name was John Gilbert Wilkins. I still have a book—he put, he took what he thought were the best drawings of all of the students and he made a big booklet out of it, a portfolio, and if one of your drawings were chosen to be put in this booklet, you were given one of the booklets; otherwise, they sold for \$25, which was quite a bit at that time.

ROBERT F. BROWN: How did he teach, do you recall his approach? Would he go over there with you, to the Field Museum?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes. Well he was always talking about design. In other words, if you were drawing a bird, he tried to see the patterns of the way the feathers would fall, and the various design shapes that these features would take if you were to look at the bird piece by piece, or if you were drawing an animal, the shapes of the horns and the shapes between the prongs and that kind of thing, or the way the hair would flow on the neck or any part of the body. He was pretty good at that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Would he give you a little talk and then leave you alone and then, then come back and see?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes, basically that would be the way he would approach it. [00:18:00]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was he very severe about it or what was—

MERLIN POLLOCK: He was very encouraging. He wasn't severe, he was extremely enthusiastic, I mean that's what you caught from him, this great enthusiasm for what he was doing. He didn't, I think get along too well with the administration. I think he left, maybe he was there one year after I was, and he left then and he became an art teacher out at Skokie, Illinois, I heard of him later, many years later. But he was quite ambitious and I think he wanted to do this book and I don't think some of the people, the dean of the art institute, I don't think he quite approved of that, and there was a cleavage there, but these things happen. Other teachers, I remember Matilda Vanderpoel, her brother was quite famous as an artist, he did a book on anatomy which was quite universally used years after that. She was a meticulous old gal, and old maid.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What did she teach?

MERLIN POLLOCK: About perspective and that kind of drawing, general drawing. She was very precise in perspective, had to be done—if you made a drawing, it would have to be correct in perspective. She would come in with pictures of masters and show you how perspective had been violated. She wouldn't say well you can do it if you're good enough, but she let you know that some of these people didn't follow the rules, but she didn't tell you what she was showing it to you before. She'd show you, she'd tell you that well see, they didn't do it here, they made a mistake here, or something like that, but you sort of read between the lines. [00:20:05] She insisted you do it and she said you should do it, but some of these great men didn't follow the rules.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you were able to conclude that possibly, they had reasons for all this.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes that's right, that's right, it was quite good actually but if you didn't—if you wouldn't get the connection at all you would just think that she was telling you that these people didn't know what they were doing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: A fairly clever teaching method.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes it was very clever.

ROBERT F. BROWN: It separated sheep from goats.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yeah. Then I had another teacher, Allen Philbrick, I mentioned him, he spoke of unity, unity, unity, he harped on unity, and it took me an awful long time to figure out what he meant by unity. In fact years later, it began to really take root. I mean he found—he'd take some old masters and he would show you triangles or he would show you circles, and you had to draw a model and you had to draw it with triangles and circles. Well, you started just doing triangles you know, and you didn't quite feel how these old masters, or the great masters, were, were uh, really putting this into their work in a subtle sort of way, it was there but it wasn't obvious. But as I say, it was years later when it really began to have meaning to me.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Looking back or when you look back then, do you think it was a useful method of teaching?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yeah, I think I could have done better, now that I've had some years of teaching. I think I have used those ideas but I think not quite such an arbitrary way. The triangle stuck in your mind too much, rather than the idea of unification. [00:22:02]

ROBERT F. BROWN: How did this compare with Wilkins asking you to see patterns?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, Wilkins was different. He had you see what was actually there, and there is a lot of design in nature, I mean it's there, whereas Philbrick, he was imposing this upon it, he didn't—you didn't look so much to see what was there, but you were trying to put something there, and there was a difference, but both of them complimented each other I think.

ROBERT F. BROWN: For what reason did he want you to impose these patterns do you think? It was trying to build up, as he said unity.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yeah, well, because I think well, it exists in most paintings, in most great work, there is some kind of unity one way or another, it follows through in any great work of art. He was trying to get you familiar with this thing. I mean you look at Rubens, with some of his circular forms or um—

ROBERT F. BROWN: But no doubt, any of the renaissance masters.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes, sure, you find this sort of thing. I was trying to think of Bruegel, in some of Bruegel's things, where there's all these fat round figures, and it all blows up into a bunch of circulation relationships, I

mean that was the kind of unity that you find in that where El Greco was something else again, these flame-like forms that move upward.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Are you saying that at that time you perhaps were seeing these things on your own, you were somewhat attuned? When you would look at an old master, were you beginning to perceive these relationships, these geometric structures?

MERLIN POLLOCK: I think he was trying to teach it, get you to see this, but as I say, I think it took a long time after that, that I really became aware of what he was trying to say. [00:24:06] I mean, I think he was very cognizant of it himself and he was trying to get his students to feel the same way.

ROBERT F. BROWN: It took you some time.

MERLIN POLLOCK: You had to grow into it, yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: I sense that you particularly liked the courses dealing with design and patterns, as opposed to this sort of study, while you were in school.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well I think I was more quick to relate to them than I was to the others.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Now were you liking the school quite a lot?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Very much so, yeah. Well I had later instructors, I had an instructor John Norton, who was a very—well, modern I guess you would call him at that time, or quite abstract. He did a big mural in the ceiling of the Daily News Building, that leads from the Northwestern Station out onto the street, the walkway from the street, through the Daily News Building, into the Northwestern Station out in Chicago, and did the whole ceiling on newspapers. We did a lot of sketches when he was trying to evolve his, his mural plan, and worked on the same theme, and we sort of helped him along with a lot of this stuff and oh, I worked a little bit with him. I got along very well with him.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And what was he particularly teaching, what was his—was it—

MERLIN POLLOCK: Theoretically, he was teaching figure painting, but not in the sense of figure painting at all, it was all very, very abstract. We had to do a composition every two weeks, to determine where we would stand in the room to paint the model, what our place would be, and we'd bring these sketches in, these compositions in, and they would be all tacked up on the wall and then he would criticize them. [00:26:13] Then the—or before he would criticize them, actually the class was called upon to look at them and vote as to which would get first, which was the second place, the third place, and then after that was done he would criticize them.

ROBERT F. BROWN: According to the vote?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well no, not quite to the vote. The vote was just if you got all of them, the majority of votes, then you could make your first choice as to where you were going to stand with your easel when you were going to paint that model, but the model was always done very abstractly too. But then he would talk about the composition, what its faults were and what its good points were, and it was a good course. That was one of the painting teachers I had.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You would you mean—I'm not quite clear. You would bring to the class, a figural composition?

MERLIN POLLOCK: No. It could be—it had a subject. For instance, it could be newspaper, and then your composition would be what would you do with that kind of a subject. I made one I remember, with just a lot of newspapers twisted and curled in different positions, in different angles and different shapes and different colors, and other people might do something else that the term newspaper brought up in their mind, that could be even illustrated, but there was no realistic work done in that class, he didn't go for realism at all. It was always strong forms, solid forms, if there were figures they were quite—the term solid was very, very much used at that time, I mean a head was a big egg-shaped form or a big solid form, it wasn't a nose and a mouth and all that. [00:28:08] He used to make drawings, he used to talk about the, some of the Egyptian sculptures, the big basic forms, the way the head changed, the flow of form from one part to another, not in a realistic sense, but in the big sense.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Looking back, do you think that was quite a useful way of teaching, to get you away from the particular details?

MERLIN POLLOCK: It was very important yes. Of course, it led to a lot of contemporary art I think, that direction, going strongly then, but I think the other is important too, it's all important, it depends upon what you're going to do.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you had a real spectrum then, from this rather abstract teaching to say in Wilkins's class, where you were looking at particular things in detail.

MERLIN POLLOCK: There was George Oberteuffer that taught painting too, I had him.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oberteuffer?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes. I noticed in your book, there somewhere that—no, this was in one of those bulletins that I gave you. His wife got a big mural commission somewhere, in some southern city there. I've forgotten her first name.

ROBERT F. BROWN: He was another one of your teachers.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What did he teach, painting?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes, he taught painting, but he was entirely different. William Merritt Chase was one of his people I think he studied with and he taught entirely differently, de Gaulle would have been a man that he revered and he talked about.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was his approach, do you remember?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, he talked about value a great deal. He was very sensitive to painting what you saw there. [00:30:00] If it was a dark day you didn't paint, because the values had changed so much that you couldn't carry on what you'd done the day before, where with Norton, that wouldn't have made a bit of difference, you could just turn on the lights and you didn't care what happens there, it's what you did with it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did Oberteuffer encourage you to paint broadly and loosely?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes, and very colorfully, that is not, not—

ROBERT F. BROWN: When did you, at the school, begin painting? You didn't begin right away with painting did you?

MERLIN POLLOCK: No, the first year you didn't begin with painting.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You get perspective and drawing, the study of faces.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yeah, and some watercolor, some watercolor the first year. The second year, you take still art painting I believe. I got kind of off the track there, I took some commercial art and things that I really wasn't interested in, but I took them because I thought I should or I didn't know what I was doing. When I went to the Art Institute, when I went to school, I never heard of Rubens or Rembrandt or anybody else. I was completely green, from the back woods you might say.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you find that in a way maybe that was a good thing?

MERLIN POLLOCK: I don't know.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were some of your classmates pretty sophisticated in those matters?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well I guess so. Certainly, they knew more about it than I did, a lot of them.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well in class, did you get close to some of them?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well yes, one of the persons that I got very close to and still am is Howard Church, who was the head of the Art Department at Michigan State until he—well, he's now retired, in East Lansing. We were very close for all those years.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you still study then, drawing from the cast, from plaster casts? [00:32:03]

MERLIN POLLOCK: Oh yes we had cast drawing that's right, that was another thing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well by your third or fourth year, you were getting more entirely into painting?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes, it was mostly painting and figure drawing, is the two things that I took.

ROBERT F. BROWN: In figure drawing, did they—what did they stress there, do you recall, or maybe you can't

generalize, maybe each teacher was—

MERLIN POLLOCK: I had a teacher, one of the teachers that I studied most with I guess was the name Sterba, S-T-E-R-B-A, Antonin Sterba. He was an old gentleman of the French school, that is he was very dignified and carried a cane, and had a moustache that twisted up on the ends. We worked in charcoal and we worked as much as two weeks on a single figure, and it was an exercise in stupidity, I think in many respects, because you worked so hard to get this charcoal tone just right, and you had to use the right kind of charcoal, we'd buy the charcoal at the school store, and you pick up a stick and drop it on the counter and it had to have the right ring, so that you knew it had the right kind of texture. I think we spent too much time on that aspect of it, rather than just quick sketches and never, never more than a morning on a sketch, but we would spend as much as two weeks on a sketch.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You really didn't enjoy that.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, I don't know, I guess I did it because everybody else did it, but I don't think it was the right thing to do, I mean looking back on it. You had to have every bone right, every joint right, every fingernail right. [00:34:00]

ROBERT F. BROWN: The textures.

MERLIN POLLOCK: And textures and that sort of thing, yes. I think I was very, very bad, now that I look back, I wonder why I ever stayed with it so long, but there wasn't anyone else. There was another man, St. John, that was teaching, he's the man I think, that did the original drawings for *Tarzan*, and he was a good man but somehow or other I didn't get to study with him. Later on John Norton, his drawing was very good, I mean he taught figure drawing too, and his was big and strong and bold, not copying anything.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But your main experience was this very exacting master, Sterba.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yeah, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Do you feel it dampened you for a while, or you were able to make spontaneity in your other work.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes, that's the funny thing, I did draw on my own after that a good deal. I mean, I would go to the evening classes, Edmund Giesbert was another one who taught there and I used to go to his class and just draw, just use the model. I did quite a bit of that, so I broke away from this thing, but it was—I felt that I had wasted time there, that I wish I had broken away sooner.

ROBERT F. BROWN: At this time, to get away a little bit from the curriculum, did you have other outside friends and any other interests or other things you were doing then?

MERLIN POLLOCK: I worked on the elevator the earlier years and later on, I worked at Weiss's Restaurant, which was a Jewish restaurant across from the Marshall Field's Wholesale Warehouse, which was the house that—the building that Richardson had built, that had been torn down, it was torn down afterwards to make a parking lot. [00:36:02] It was a beautiful building, it was in the art history books. I was an expert at cutting hot pies.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Tell about it.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, I worked in the pastry counter in the basement of it, which was a lunch counter place. Weiss had its own bakery there and they would bring down these big trays of pies just out of the oven, berry pies that were steaming hot, and cakes and all kinds of beautiful pastries, and when I first got the job, they gave me a wire form that enabled me to cut five slices, five pieces, out of a pie, and I learned very quickly that you didn't cut pies that way. The waitresses would come and say, "Give me a big piece," you know you got somebody that gives a big tip, "Give me a little piece," they got this old gal down here, she never gives me anything. So I always cut big pieces and little pieces to order, for the various waitresses, so if you ever go to a restaurant and you get a little piece, it's because you haven't tipped enough between this time. That was a wonderful job, I worked for just an hour at noon and I got two meals a day, wonderful meals. That was a Jewish restaurant and they sure knew how to cook, I mean I still tell my wife what things I had there and how they cooked them.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Suggest things you'd like to have now. [Laughs.]

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yeah, how they must have done it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You were learning, getting some other basic education at that time too.

MERLIN POLLOCK: That's right, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were there any other artists or literary friends you were—that you began to develop at that time?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, I knew Ted [Theodore] Roszak very well.

ROBERT F. BROWN: How did you come to know him? [00:38:00]

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well he was then studying there, he was studying with John Norton, and he's the man that taught me about El Greco, the artist who had two big books with pictures, photographs of all of El Greco's works, and Roszak was a very intellectual young man and he was reading Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, and just really going through that thing and was quite an intellectual really. And he had discovered these books and he was very enthusiastic about them and I remember sitting in the library many times and he would page through and show me what was good about these paintings. They were difficult for me to understand at first, I mean they were not realistic or anything else of that sort, and I learned a lot about folk design from Roszak at that time, he was one of them.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was he about your age?

MERLIN POLLOCK: He's just about my age, yeah, but he had been—he studied in the—he's Polish you know and he came from the Polish section of Chicago, and he had been in New York, he studied in New York for a year before that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And then he came to the school, to the Art Institute.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes, he was there for two years. Well, there were many others; Francis Chapin was a very well-known Chicago artist, and another person there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was he someone you knew then, at that time?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yeah, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was he a fellow student?

MERLIN POLLOCK: He was older than I was but he was—yes, he studied with the same, he studied with Oberteuffer too, and I did, we were in the same class together.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was he like?

MERLIN POLLOCK: He was a very tall person, he was very, very dedicated to painting. He was quite prolific, he painted an awful lot and did things again, quite easily. He liked lithography, did a lot of lithographs, and he could go out on a two week vacation, come back with an exhibition, I mean he could knock them out quite, quite good too, his paintings. [00:40:13]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well were you considered quite a fine student out of school?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well yes, I had fellowships, I had scholarships shortly after, when I started to paint, I didn't have to pay any tuition anymore. One of the directors, now what was name, oh I can't remember his name at the moment, saw some of my paintings, and so they gave me tuition scholarships, and then I had this American Scholarship.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Why don't we talk a bit about that then. You had this American Scholarship you got in 1929.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Twenty-nine.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So it was after you had been there about four or five years, at the school.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, I think that was four, four years.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was—was that during the summer, you were to take advantage of this?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was the purpose of it?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well just to enlarge my comprehension of art I suppose. I visited all these museums, as I said, I went up to Montreal and then I went to Boston.

ROBERT F. BROWN: With a sketch book or did you buy reproductions as you went along?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Mostly I just looked at museums.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Of course you had the Chicago artists but these must have even more greatly enlarged your firsthand acquaintance with.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes, surely.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Do you recall any styles or periods that particularly excited you during this trip?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well of course at the Boston museum, I remember now, some paintings by Winslow Homer, one in particular because my grandfather, my mother's father, had a big picture in his living room, of the—Homer's man in a boat coming home at night, a fisherman with her gear on, and I think there was a big fish in the boat. [00:42:16] I saw the painting in the Boston museum there, my grandfather had just a black and white reproduction of it. Yes, I saw a lot of Winslow Homer paintings there and I visited the Gardner, was there a Gardner Museum? I met Mrs. Gardner actually.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Really?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes. Another one of my teachers, Boris Anisfeld, a Russian, he was a very important man in my career also, I forget these people, and he told me—he was a friend of hers and he just told me to go and see her, which I did, and we talked a lot about what they had there, among other things.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was she like do you recall?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, that's difficult. She was very friendly, very outgoing in her way, she seemed very interested in having me come and talked quite well to me. I think on that trip, though, probably the highlight of that trip was I was in Philadelphia and I met a young man who was traveling around the same way that I was, and he told me about the Barnes Foundation, Albert C. Barnes, and I knew that I had heard about it and I knew that it was hard to get into, and so he told me to go to a certain, well I guess you called it factory, where they made [inaudible].

ROBERT F. BROWN: Right. A source of a misfortune, right.

MERLIN POLLOCK: I went there and I was interviewed by a woman and I had to assure her that I was not a newspaper person, that I had no connection with newspapers or anything of that sort, and then she called up Albert C. Barnes. [00:44:13] She told him about me and assured him that I was what I was supposed to be, and so he said come on out, and so she told me how to get there. I know I had to get on a streetcar and I went out, I don't remember whether that was the same day or the next, I suspect it was the next day, I'm sure it was, because I must have gone earlier in the morning. When I finally got to this place and there was a gateway, there was a big black dog, chained and this dog rushed at me and oh, was snarling and growling and all that, but he couldn't get quite too me, but I wasn't afraid of dogs anyway and I walked by and I went to the door and I rang the bell. A man came to the door, he had a shirt on, no tie, and he was in house slippers, just dressed as any person might be around a house, and he opened the door for me and I walked in and he said, "Put your coat over there," so I put my coat over there and I walked in and he disappeared. This was about ten o'clock in the morning, and he had an awful lot of stuff there, just all kinds of things that I had never seen before, and so I went through the gallery, all over it and he had of course, a lot of African sculpture and he had—I'm trying to think of the watercolorist, the American watercolorist.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Sargent?

MERLIN POLLOCK: No, no, but I'll think of it later. Matisse and all the moderns of course. [00:46:00] Well I stayed in there and it got to be noon and I had seen a woman come in and she rushed around and went out again, I mean she was in there just a few moments, it seemed to me all she wanted to do was get in there and say that she'd been there and get out. But I stayed through the noon hour, it was somewhat past noon, and this man came around again and he said, "You haven't had anything to eat," and I said, "No, I was afraid if I went out they wouldn't let me back in again." Well this was Albert C. Barnes himself, you see, he let me in, and so I was right and after that, he invited me to come any time I wanted to, he played music for me, I remember he played the *1812 Overture*, and he explained to me why it wasn't good music.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Why wasn't it?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, because of the introduction of that *French National Anthem* in there and that sort of thing, he didn't seem to think that was consistent, that's about what I remember. Well anyway, he then introduced me, he had some young men that he would sponsor, they would go to Europe, he'd pay their way, he'd tell them where to go, what to see. I visited with them off and on, with some of those people, and actually, I got a list of things that I should see if I ever went to Europe, which I did the next year.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But if you had gone, paid by him, you would have to follow what he told you.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Right, yes, he had a plan.

ROBERT F. BROWN: While you were there, did he ever talk to you about some of the paintings and African things in his collection?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Just once I think and it wasn't too long a time, I remember he talked about things. He always, he sort of felt or believed that everything that you did had a history, had a genealogy. [00:48:08] You could go way back to almost to the primitives and show how that influence had moved up through the ages, until the present time, how it was, because you painted this way because someone, they had done something way back there a hundred years or go or something, or more.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh many more. Did he sort of talk to you a bit and preach this to you?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, we sat there one day and he was just being comfortable, he played music and talked generally but not too emphatically. But I read—he gave me some of his books.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was he—did he seem to be very enthusiastic about his works, his collection?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Oh yes, yes, very much so. Robert Harshe, who had been the dean of the Art Institute, had tried to see the collection, either he had come in and he was told to leave or something of that sort, I can't remember specifically, but Harshe had told me about this and Barnes asked me, "What do these people say about me, what does Harshe say about me?" Of course I was young and I said, "Well they say you're crazy." He said, "That's fine, that's just what I want them to think." Of course then I told Harshe that when I got back to Chicago and he thought it was a big joke too.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you ever get a feeling of why this man Barnes is so apprehensive and kept people at a distance? Was he frightened of something?

MERLIN POLLOCK: I don't know. Well yes, he was criticized. See he—now I can't remember the name of the man that he gave a lot of money to, to go to Europe to buy paintings, the name slips my mind, a well-known name, I can just vaguely think of his paintings. He came back with this collection and all the critics ridiculed him, I mean he was buying these Matisses and well, Cezanne, and all these things, and the critics thought this was all a bunch of junk, and so he was very, very bitter. [00:50:13] They said he'd been hoodwinked by the dealers and that kind of thing, and he was very bitter about this and then he felt that he was not going to cooperate. He knew more about it than they did and he was right and they were wrong, which is true, and so it warped his character but that was the result.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Sure. Most critics then were quite conservative weren't they?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes, very conservative.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Had you seen these modern European things before?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well of course the Art Institute of Chicago has a wonderful museum and I went and I'm familiar with things of that sort, but he had such a collection of the contemporary French and American things that I had never seen. He had beautiful little sketches, little studies of El Greco paintings, I mean little, small complex things that I had never seen anything like that. We have a wonderful—we, back in Chicago, we have these wonderful El Grecos, a great big, *Assumption of the Virgin* is one of the great paintings I think, of the world, but he had these beautiful little paintings and I was intrigued by them.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You went and saw him several times then.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Even on that visit.

MERLIN POLLOCK: The last time I saw him, there was a big exhibition Matisse was having in Paris and he was right there with Matisse, working right with him, putting the exhibition up and very much involved. I just talked to him briefly then.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well you then came back from this American—visiting these various collections. Did you see any other private collections on this visit?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, I don't know whether you'd call them private, the ones in Washington for instance, the —[00:52:05]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Phillips?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Phillips, yes, Phillips and isn't there another one there?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Ferrer.

MERLIN POLLOCK: I guess so, yeah, yeah. I saw everything that I could see, I mean I was very—I used my money wisely. As I told you, I got on a train at Washington to head home and I hadn't had anything to eat, and fortunately, I sat with a young man whose mother packed a basket full of southern fried chicken.

ROBERT F. BROWN: That's very good luck.

MERLIN POLLOCK: I shared some of his chicken and then in Cincinnati, I just had a little money left and it was breakfast time and I went to some bar someplace and I thought I was going to spend just the minimum amount, but I had some pancakes and I know it cost more than I thought it would, and so all I had was five cents when I got to Chicago.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

MERLIN POLLOCK: I tell you, the train stopped at the Illinois Central Station there and I had five cents to get on the streetcar, to get out to where my roommate lived and I was then able to get enough money to get something to eat.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You mentioned another teacher at the institute, Boris Anisfeld.

MERLIN POLLOCK: He came that year, when I returned from this trip out east, that was his first year there and I got him, I got back to Chicago in October, I believe it was, and I remember the dean took me in and introduced me to Boris Anisfeld and I was in his class and I liked him very much as a teacher. He was different than anything I had had. He was very, very much interested in the old masters and he didn't really talk much about contemporary painters, but as I say, we went up into the gallery which—at the Art Institute there, the Chicago Art Institute's collection is exceptional, and we would talk about various paintings. [00:54:13] He would take a group up with him, maybe during the lunch hour or any time of that sort, and talk about individual paintings and what he thought was good about them and what was bad about them, anybody, Bruegel, Rembrandt, Rubens, any of these old masters. He felt, he had a strong feeling for the kind of surface quality and if that sounds superficial, I don't mean it that way, but the color quality that these people got, not necessarily thick paint and some of the ways that Matisse and these people were working, but some of the more refined kind of surfaces that they worked. He used Dammar varnish a great deal in his paintings and he advocated that we all do that, and we all had our—we'd buy the crystals and dissolve them in essence of petroleum, I think it was called, it was sold at the bookstore, and then we would use that as a mixture with our oil paints, and you did a lot of glazing, that's what I mean by surfaces. You glazed one color over another, over another, as the old masters did, and you got some beautiful effects. He was very close to his students and in fact was sort of a father figure, he took people under his wing and some of them even went out to Colorado Springs, that summer place out there? Margaret, speak about it.

MARGARET: Central City?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Central City, yes, he spent his summers at Central City and his students, some of the students would go with him up there, see I went to Europe. [00:56:04] I liked him very much, as I say, he was very close to his students, sort of a father figure.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You learned quite a lot in his painting class.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes, I learned a whole other aspect of painting from him, I mean he approached it in a different way. This glazing method and the kind of quality that you would get that way, and what the old masters had done with something that he was very familiar with and put it across very well.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did he lecture much or demonstrate?

MERLIN POLLOCK: He just talked, he talked to you. He'd come up to your painting and talk to you about what you were doing and how you could do this or how you could do that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you given a good deal of freedom as to the subject you were to paint or could you paint anything?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, we had—most of the classes at that time had a model, I mean you had a model. For instance, I remember we had a big black woman and he was explaining to me how the color of a black person was like a plum, there was this underlying warmth, and then there was this blush sort of a haze, a blush that

came over the surface, and he was talking about how you could get that, which was very good. That's the kind of thing that he was good at.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And that's exactly where glazes could come in.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes that's right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What were his own paintings like then, did you have a chance to look at them?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes. He painted, quite romantic things. There were four horsemen and a lot of Russian things of course, and he had worked as a designer, I think for, or with Diaghilev.

ROBERT F. BROWN: The ballet.

MERLIN POLLOCK: The ballet people, he'd been with them. In fact, I saw a lot of sketches that he had made for these designs. [00:58:00] I don't know whether they were on exhibition or whether they were on exhibition at Goodman Theater, but they were beautiful things. His stuff was quite romantic but big and done in this glazing style.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well that, during that last year you were there, a student at the school, was this the main thing for you that year, working with Anisfeld?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: That was the high point?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes. And then we, we had what they call a graduate atelier, it was a room that was set aside for a few individual students who had achieved a certain amount of proficiency shall we say, and you would work in this room on your own, it's a good big studio, with two or three or four other people, and paint anything that you wanted to paint, I mean this was not a part of a class procedure, and then you could have any of these faculty people come in and criticize it if you wanted to.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yeah, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You were fairly—pretty confident in your work by that time?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well I thought I was, yeah. Sometimes you think you're more than you really are but I thought I was.

ROBERT F. BROWN: When you were on your own there at that graduate atelier, what sort of things were you painting, do you recall?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well yes, I painted some figure compositions, usually that was the sort of thing, figures were some way involved in the landscape.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you painting very representational?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yeah, pretty representational then, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But not simplifying as say a Norton would have done or had to do.

MERLIN POLLOCK: No, no, I wasn't painting the way Norton had painted.

ROBERT F. BROWN: As you look back, do you think you were even then, beginning to develop your own way of work?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yeah. [01:00:00] Well, I think some of the things that were evident in my work right straight through is still art. I always had some feeling for the underlying structure, I think, of a painting, no matter what it was, whether it was realistic or whether it was abstract, the way things fit together what one part, one part influence another part.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Now was it in the spring or so of '30 that—did you compete for this fellowship to Europe?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yeah. We used to have, for at least one year there, every month, we all had to come into a certain room and we were given a subject and we had to make like a mural design. We had to make a pencil sketch of a certain size and a smaller color sketch, and these were somewhat, somehow evaluated and actually,

to enter the competition for the European traveling scholarship, we had to do the same thing and out of those people then, that got the highest marks, you might say, in this competition, those were the people who were permitted to enter the foreign fellowship competition. It was unfair because some people didn't do very well in that, in that kind of stress, I mean it was just a matter of a day, you were sort of locked in a room and you had to do this whole thing and some people just couldn't work under those circumstances.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You had to carry it to a very high degree and finish in one day?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Reasonably so, yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What medium would you work in?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, it was your own choice, but it would be either watercolor, wash or chalk, and pencil, black and white with pencil or black ink, or any black medium, but the little color sketch was again, your own choice. [01:02:07] You sort of knew beforehand, what you wanted to do and you brought those materials with you.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Who judged it?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, I'm not at all sure. I know the dean of the school did and I suspect whoever else he brought into it, I imagine some of the faculty.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was the dean someone you knew a bit at that time?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, I knew him I suppose, as you'd know any dean. Charles Fabens Kelley, he was also the curator of Oriental art at the Chicago Art Institute and I think assistant director.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What did you submit in the competition?

MERLIN POLLOCK: I made so many of those things I can't remember specifically now, which—what the subject was, of that. I'm sure it had something to do with figures and landscape, because I did a lot of that at that time.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well then were you the—was there only one person selected?

MERLIN POLLOCK: No, no, there were—must have been about eight or ten people that were selected to compete, and the man who got it in sculpture, I can't remember his name now, that's strange, and I got, see in painting, and I don't know, I think there were just the two of us. I can't remember anyone else now that year, that was given anything. See they held—sometimes they gave whatever they had and sometimes they held back, they didn't give the full amount out. This was the James Nelson Raymond Fellowship, I think it was \$1,500.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you were pretty intent on going to Europe, you were very—[01:04:01]

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yeah, that was the thing to do, I mean actually you'd been around school for a while, that got in your blood, you figured that was a good thing to do. Actually, I was going to quit school a year before. Money was a problem, I didn't have as much as I needed and somehow or other I was going to quit, and I told one of the girls in the office there, that I was going to do that, and so she told the dean I guess and somehow or other, they put \$500 in the bank, to my account, and so I stayed. That was a nice thing.

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ROBERT F. BROWN: This is disc number two. So then you were perhaps the one to win the fellowship to Europe in painting, and when did you set out? Did you have to touch base with your family again?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well I went home to Manitowoc, but I think I left in August. August sixth, I sailed on the *Leviathan* was the name of the ship, it had been taken from Germany in World War I and made into—it had been a troopship during World War I, and then it was a passenger ship then, it was a great big thing, and I went to Le Havre, I think, in Paris, and I met a friend of mine who had gotten a scholarship, the fellowship the year before, and we traveled around.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Who was that?

MERLIN POLLOCK: His name was Jack Wolfe, Karl Wolfe is his real name but they called him Jack Wolfe. He came from Jackson, Mississippi, and he was there for many years. he was older than I, as a portrait painter, he was a very good portrait painter and he did a lot. I don't know when he—I lost contact with him after some years later.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Had the institute given you a mandate or at least suggestions as to what you should do

when you got to Europe?

MERLIN POLLOCK: It was very free, no. I had, I may have had a suggestion that I go to Fontainebleau or that I study fresco, shall we say.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Really? Do you think some teacher saw that you had an aptitude for it?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well the dean, I think was kind of interested in that, he wanted to bring more of that back to the States. I mean there was not too much known about fresco. There were people I guess that knew about it, but it was quite a mysterious kind of a painting technique, and so I did study fresco with Paul Baudouin, École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, and I also studied, I went to Fontainebleau then, you know the College of Fine Arts at Fontainebleau, France. [00:02:15]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was he there too?

MERLIN POLLOCK: No, one of his students or disciples, Robert La Montagne Saint-Hubert, who was a tall Frenchman, he had lost one eye in World War I and always wore a big black patch over that, on formal occasions at least he did, normally he just had a glass eye. He painted in the same direction as Paul Baudouin, well he used the same technique. His interest was more along the lines of flat patterns like Paul Gauguin, that kind of color quality. But they had developed a strange fresco technique which had imitated the surface qualities that Puvis de Chavannes had got in his oil paintings by taking as much oil out of the paint as possible, so that the paint on the surface of a canvas would look matte. Paul Baudouin had studied with Puvis de Chavannes and he did go to Italy with Puvis de Chavannes, to study the Italian fresco painters. But they developed this way of painting, which was a very dry, porous plaster, it was true fresco, but it was different than the Italian way of doing fresco, and after I became aware of that, when I went to Italy, I made it a point to see how the Italians were doing it and well, I have some insight into both ways. [00:04:04] There are several different ways of doing fresco. I mean the way that we did it in America here, doing the WPA, was in a sense the true accepted Italian way of painting, but there were other ways of doing fresco that were different. Incidentally, Paul Baudouin said that Diego Rivera had studied with him and of course Diego Rivera's way of doing fresco was much more in line with the traditional Italian fresco painters.

ROBERT F. BROWN: How did Baudouin's way differ from the traditional Italian way, could you describe both?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, yes. In Paul, Paul Baudouin's way and Saint-Huber's way, they took sand, rather coarse sand, and they mixed it with the lime beforehand, the lime powder usually was mixed beforehand, although you could use lime paste, but you never let it get wet and you never used a lot of fine material so that when you put it on it looked like it was quite porous, quite soft and porous, so when you put the color on it would sink in a good deal. Whereas the Italian way and the way that Diego Rivera worked, you had two or three coats of preliminary plaster and then on a very top surface, you would skim over an eighth of an inch or less, or sixteenth of an inch, of almost half and half, lime and very fine sand or white marble dust, so that you got a porcelain-like surface on the, on the fresco, and then when you painted with this very porcelain-like surface, it had a lot of reflective quality and you're painting with much lighter in color, and I would say more brilliant. [00:06:06] Whereas in the one that Paul Baudouin had, it was more like painting on a blotter, your paint was sucked into the surface, on this grayish/whitish surface.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you did paint his way while you were studying with him.

MERLIN POLLOCK: While I was studying with him yes, you would have been kicked out if you hadn't.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you were enrolled then, at the Beaux-Arts and then in Fontainebleau you were enrolled in—

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did that take up a good deal of the time you were over there?

MERLIN POLLOCK: I studied—I think I was about three months in the École, that was after, so maybe February until June, and then I went to the Fontainebleau and was out there until the fall, until October I think.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, but you came to prefer the Italian method, is that correct?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: How did you learn about it? You said you then went to Italy during this trip?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes, after I left Fontainebleau, I went to Italy for a while. There was a young man there, his father was a lawyer, he was an American but he had been born and raised in France and spoke French like a

Frenchman, and he had gotten some information on this and he was trying to do that Italian method right there at Fontainebleau and it didn't sit very well with the teacher, with Saint-Hubert and they didn't get along very well. But we talked about it a good deal and I could see what this boy was talking about, trying to do. I've forgotten his name at the moment.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was the schooling much different under these Frenchmen, then it had been in Chicago?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, yes and no. Paul Baudouin, in this studio that we worked, was always there, and he gave you individual attention, but each week, one of the other instructors from Beaux-Arts would come to this studio and give his criticism, and each one was different. [00:08:11] I remember one, he'd push open the door and he'd start criticizing before the door was closed behind him, I mean he was very much of a showman. He'd go around with a lot of noise and a lot of gestures, and this and that, circle the room and out he'd go, whereas others were quiet and came to you individually and were much more personal I would say.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Even more than you'd had in Chicago for the most part.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes, yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: How was your French doing?

MERLIN POLLOCK: How did I speak French?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yes.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, I could understand and get along with these people, as long as I knew what we were talking about. When we were talking about painting, why it was easy. You could even be criticized just by gestures I think sometimes, you didn't need the words, but I got along all right, I spoke a minimum of French and certainly not very well, but it was enough to get along. I just learned it, picked it up, I never studied French unfortunately.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well in the first months you were over there, you went traveling with this friend, Wolfe, didn't you?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yeah, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Where, what did you seek out, because he'd been there already, so did he sort of guide you?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, we teamed up with another, it was two other fellas actually, one from the University of Wisconsin and I can't think of his name now at the moment either, but anyway, we went up through Belgium and Germany, made a circle and visited all the museums there, and there was also a big—the French, the Belgians had a big international exhibition, I think of the work of their colonies and there was a lot of art and things related to art. [00:10:07] In Germany, we went down the Rhine I remember, we went to Cologne and all these places.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you sketching a lot?

MERLIN POLLOCK: I made some sketches and some notes, but really just looking. I remember I was told by the dean at the Chicago Art Institute, he said, "Don't go over there and make a lot of picture postcards." The main point I think, was to move around and to see as much as you can, of the art of that time, of what was available in Europe, instead of sitting down and doing sketches. I did sketches, particularly in Italy, that I enjoyed doing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What do you recall, um, you went to Italy, partly to see fresco. Do you remember some of the places you went to seek that out, you went to see—

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well we went to, of course went to Arezzo.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you go see Giotto.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Giotto, yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Giotto and Francesco.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes, we went through all those hill towns and of course I also went to Venice and saw the great paintings by Tintoretto and those people.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Sure. Were you quite thrilled?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Very much impressed yes, very much impressed by all of it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Italy was perhaps a high point for you?

MERLIN POLLOCK: I suppose so yes, all those hill towns and the art that they contain, these cathedrals, and Rome, I was very much interested in Rome also, and Venice. [00:12:02] So much of that stays with you. Just the other day there was something in the paper, I believe it was in the paper, about some man, young man that is very important in the French wine industry, no Italian wine industry, and he's talking about wines and how Americans are now using wine. He had come from one of the hill towns and I can remember specifically, that place, and the cathedral there and when I was there, I mean it was rather interesting to see someone in this particular day, talking about an industry, and being able to relate in the sense that you knew where he lived and what he was up to. Anyway, that was in Orvieto, that I had—I could remember.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What do you think it was that struck you about those late medieval, renaissance frescoes, what was it that possibly impressed you at the time?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, the way they drew. Signorelli of course had these very specifically drawn figures, by that I mean outlines were very hard and every part was worked out; that would be consistent with some of the drawing teaching that I had way back when I was a student at the Art Institute, and I was able to relate in that way. I sort of could understand their problems, it was interesting of course, Giotto was another person that was so strong in his organization, these big areas, big figures and the sort of not two-dimensionally, but bas relief type of handling his forms, as composed to Masaccio, who started to do them in the round, you felt the atmosphere around them, more space. [00:14:25] To be able to see the evolution of painting, this was in line in the sense, with what Albert C. Barnes was talking about, and one thing led to another and led to another. He always—anything he talked about, he always related back to its sources and tried to—that was his, his thing that he was so—one of his books, I think was pretty much based on that kind of an idea.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Going to these various towns really brought that home.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes, that's right, and actually, some of these places that I went to were places that he recommended that I go to, on this list that he had for his own group of people that he was sending around.

ROBERT F. BROWN: In Venice, you would have seen the use of glazing.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes, yes, that's right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Inaudible.]

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes that's right, very much so.

ROBERT F. BROWN: This was after you studied in France. When did you come and return?

MERLIN POLLOCK: To America?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well that was quite late, let's see I'm trying to remember now, quite late in the fall and well, I came to Chicago and again, went to the institute just to pay my respects, I was through there as a student, and Charles Fabens Kelley sort of got me—arranged for me to do a mural in the lobby, of the son of Potter Palmer. [00:16:14] Potter Palmer was a very big man in Chicago, they were very important in the establishment or the continuation of the Chicago Art Institute. His son was getting married and had a big floor, what today you would call a condominium I suppose, but it was a big part of an apartment building and there was an elevator lobby there and there was a space for a mural, and I did a mural of that, with sort of an Italian lake theme, with mountains and a lake, looking down on a lake, and the mountains up the back, for them.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And did you use the Italian fresco techniques?

MERLIN POLLOCK: No, this was done on canvas and it was pasted on the wall, I mean the traditional—that would have been the venetian technique, they painted on canvas and stuck it up there you know.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did that go over very well with your—with the patrons?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, I believe so, yeah. I don't know whether it's still there or anything, it's on Getty [ph] Street.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did people know about that, was it a fairly well known commission at the time?

MERLIN POLLOCK: There was no publicity that I know of. I just did it and had several conferences with Potter Palmer and some of his relatives actually, and with his son and wife to be. After that, then things got—that was in 1931, and things got pretty quiet in Chicago, I mean it was dying because of the Depression. [00:18:02] That was a time when well, I would—I had worked on the elevated as an L guard too, during my years as a student and I was used to the big crowds on the elevated, and I'd go on the elevated then and why there weren't half as many people traveling, they just had no point in traveling. I remember the buildings at night, they'd all been used to seeing so lighted up and everything just ablaze with light and activity, and here you see a whole building practically black. I had lived with this friend of mine, Howard Church, we had had a studio where, also we lived there, the top floor of Majestic Hotel, which is right down the middle of the Loop, the 17th floor. I was in the Loop a great deal but that was a time when I became short of money and for days, I just had enough money, a dime or two, to buy some bananas, and I lived on a few bananas a day until my money ran out, and then I didn't have anything to eat for five days, and I had a few postage stamps and I was trying to get enough courage to go into a store and see if I could trade that for some bananas, and while I was standing out there looking at the door, looking at the inside of the shop, another young man came along and wondered if I could loan him some money, he hadn't had anything to eat. I said, "You've come to the wrong person, I'm in the same boat." At the corner of Adams and Wabash, right below the elevated there, there was part of a Hershey chocolate bar lying on the sidewalk. I wanted to pick it up but I just didn't have enough courage. [00:20:00] The strange thing about all of that is I could have, I'm sure, gone right down the street there on State Street, right near where I was living, and there must have been soup kitchens, you know the YMCA, but somehow, a lot of those things didn't occur to me. I'd gone back to the Art Institute and I think I talked to three friends that I had—that somehow were there, and I tried to borrow some money from them and none of them had any money to loan me, and I think that sort of stopped me. My relatives say, when I mentioned this years later, well why didn't you write to us, why didn't you tell us? It never occurred to me, and it wasn't so bad, being hungry, I mean all I can remember is that I had quite a headache and that my breath seemed to get bad, I was conscious of that, but I didn't seem to be hungry, really hungry in the sense that one gets hungry now when you haven't had any lunch or any dinner. When my letter came from my mother, it had five dollars in it and I remember I went immediately to one of these restaurants, the town restaurants where there was sort of a cafeteria, and I had a big bowl of beef stew.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well this, the outlook then was bleak.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Bleak, yes. Then I finally gave up and I went back to Manitowoc and I painted my father's house and then I began to—people began to get interested. I think I sold some paintings and then decided, somebody decided we should have a class, and so a class was organized, to teach. First, I taught at the public library, in a room they had there, in the afternoon, and we had lots of different people; teachers, dentists, housewives. It was a very interesting class and then they had a school there called a vocational school. [00:22:03] At Manitowoc at that time, they had a plan that if you didn't finish high school, you had to go to this vocational school and learn a trade, I mean they were way ahead of times there. They learned plumbing and they learned tin-smithing and they learned carpentry and all that kind of stuff. Well, they thought this would be a good course to have, so I had a class one night a week, and the same group came but anybody could come. I think there was practically no tuition, they paid me just a modest fee, which was all right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What did you instruct in?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well just painting. I'd set up still life or sometimes a model, and they would either draw or paint it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Do you recall what was your approach, did you work closely with them or would you lecture very much?

MERLIN POLLOCK: I sometimes demonstrated. I'd put up a still life for instance and show how I would go about painting it, or a figure or a portrait, or something like that, and then they'd go ahead and I'd criticize individually.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you find you enjoyed doing it?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yeah. Yes, and that was about the time when I met Barbara, who was going to become my wife. She was very active in music in Manitowoc at that time, she sang. They had a choral group that was part of Manitowoc and Two Rivers, which is a town seven miles away from there that was very active musically, and this group would compete statewide once, or even more than that, they'd go to Chicago and have these big choral competitive sessions and it worked out very well. [00:24:08] She sang, she and another woman were the only women that sang in this group, in fact they made them honorary members. Well anyway, we became very friendly and then after I'd been teaching at home there, at Manitowoc, the Chicago artist who had asked me if I wanted to come there and teach a class—

ROBERT F. BROWN: When was this in nineteen thirty—

MERLIN POLLOCK: It would have been 1934.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Nineteen thirty—so you were in Manitowoc quite a while then.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Several years.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes that's right, two or three years.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you were very lucky that tide you over. Did you discover, when you were back home, that your family was quite proud or pleased of what you had done?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Oh, they were pleased with what I did, yes I think it brought some honor to the family because it was known that I had won this fellowship and things of that sort. Yes, they were pleased. Then, then I had this offer to teach at the Art Institute, Barbara and I got married. We went down there and got married in December and then I began teaching in January, and I was there for eight years. I taught fresco, I taught mural painting and I taught figure drawing and general drawing. I was there for eight years, until World War II, and then I went into the navy.

ROBERT F. BROWN: I want to ask one other thing. Let's say back in your hometown, Manitowoc, what would be the attitude at that time, of a painter, of an artist, on the part of what I assume is mostly a blue collar population, or a very conservative, conventional—

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well it was a small group that was very much interested, they called themselves the Little Gallery. [00:26:04] In fact, I had something to do with organizing it. There was a woman that was very much interested in this sort of thing and sort of drew me into it you might say, and we had some exhibits of the people who were members, were supposed to do a painting to have in an exhibition at a specific time, I don't know it was twice a year, something like that, and met monthly I believe and were active in that rather small way, with art, and I painted some and taught.

ROBERT F. BROWN: When you got to the Art Institute and you began in January of '35, were you—what were you hired specifically to teach certain things?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Specifically to teach fresco, and I started out by well, doing just that. I taught, I think every morning, five days a week every morning, and some of the students would be working all day on a fresco that they were doing. Each person did his own, some did small panels. We built panels, sometimes four-by-six or four-by-eight, and these were propped up against the wall and they would try to teach them to do their own, mixing their own plaster and applying it and doing all of the things that you had to do to make a fresco. Some of them were quite good and were installed in a few places around the school. [00:28:00]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was this a new program, because they hadn't had that when you were at the school.

MERLIN POLLOCK: The only other person who had ever taught, and that was a very brief time, was this Saint-Hubert, this Frenchman. He was over there for a couple of months once, to teach fresco, but that's where this Charles Fabens Kelley, the dean, got the idea that he'd like to have more of it. I think he felt too, that there was probably too much emphasis on the straight fine art painting that he felt mural painting was an important thing and it should become a familiar thing to most people who had gone through the school, which he was trying to do, and so I had this class, it worked very well. I got along very well with the teachers, Anisfeld was there and he encouraged me very much and I'd have him come in once in a while, give him a criticism.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What were the sort of things were they painting do you recall? Did you give them free rein?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes, they got their own subject matter, they did everything, it was always figures. I think maybe someone tried a landscape but it was usually figures in some sort of a compositional group.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you get involved, now in the mid-'30s, with various artist groups?

MERLIN POLLOCK: No, I don't—the mid-'30s. Well, I was of course—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well at this time, you know, when you were just starting out. The government projects were just beginning.

MERLIN POLLOCK: I should have mentioned that one of the things I did when I was still at Manitowoc, that was 1933 I believe, the—this PWAP started and someone told me that Lincoln High School there in Manitowoc would be interested in a mural in an auditorium, so I made sketches and submitted them to Milwaukee, to Charlotte Partridge and her group, she was the head of that program in Wisconsin and it was approved and I did this mural for the Lincoln High School, that is before I went to Chicago again. [00:30:18] When I was in Chicago then, I wasn't involved with that project at all. I was teaching and painting and I'm trying to remember now, in 1936

maybe, I did—they again, they invited me to come to the project because of my knowledge of fresco and mural painting, and I was what they called a non-certified person. Ten percent of the people on an art project like that could be not on relief, and they were called non-certified. In other words, we weren't certified for relief, and because I had a job teaching at the Art Institute, I didn't—I wasn't on relief, but they gave me a job on the project because of my knowledge of fresco and then I did contribute to the advancement of that technique, on the part of those people who wanted to work in that manner. So then I became part of the project and I also became a member of the Artists' Union and I started out under Increase Robinson and then when she left, George Thorpe came from New York, he was assigned by Washington, to be director, and that was a whole new procedure there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So when you began this work in 1936, on the project, Increase Robinson was the supervisor? [00:32:01]

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes. She was the head of the project and she was a very efficient person, a very dominating woman and hard, and she'd had a gallery actually, on our side there, on Michigan Avenue, an art gallery. She knew Chicago artists and art very well, but the union grew, as unions do, and she wasn't very sympathetic to it I don't believe. I don't remember any particular clashes, but I wasn't one of the leaders of the Artists' Union either, but there were differences, strong differences of opinion apparently, and to the extent that she finally left the project and they brought in George Thorpe from New York.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was the union espousing at that time, that might have been contrary to her feelings?

MERLIN POLLOCK: I think the union people were very avant-garde, the leaders, I mean Orozco was a strong influence there, that kind of direction, and she was more sympathetic to the more traditional things. I think there would be a clash there in terms of direction and I don't think she wanted anyone else to tell her what to do. I mean she knew pretty much, she'd been, as I say, she had a gallery, she knew Chicago art pretty well and she didn't appreciate these young people coming in and trying to tell her what to do.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did the union attempt to tell supervisors what should be painted?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well I couldn't specifically say that. I know that the union marched on the front of the building there on uh, was it 433 East Erie, marched up and down the sidewalk there, objecting to something, objecting to her and the way she was running it, but I can't remember specific issues. [00:34:08] I never was in a sense a joiner. I joined the union as 300 other people did, but I wasn't too involved in these specific problems, that was a small nucleus of people like Ed Millman and Raymond Breinin and one of the Topchevsky, those were two boys that were very, very involved, the Topchevsky brothers. He was actually, I would say, a card carrying communist. We had to—this is an aside. We all had to come one day and to sign a loyalty oath, and we all were to line up, and everyone wondered that the Topchevsky brothers would do because we all knew that they were anti. Well, we got there early in the morning and lo and behold, the two Topchevsky boys had been there first, they had signed the loyalty oath and they were standing in line to help all of us fill out the forms.

ROBERT F. BROWN: I wonder why.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, just to be—well, to show you how much loyalty oath accomplished. I mean that wasn't their motive but they had no objections to signing this thing, whether they believed it or not, and they just wanted to be in the swing of things and it was really a comedy, everybody was laughing about it, all these people could see through this and of course, I think they did too. It was one of those things.

ROBERT F. BROWN: The Artists' Union had a strong—some members had very strong oath.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Very strong. I think it was recognized in Washington. [00:36:00] When you had 300 names it sounded like an organization that had a lot of power and if it was handled in that way it did, although if you had pooled each individual, I think you would have found a wide divergence of ideas and opinions and feelings about this sort of thing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So they had enough power to have Increase Robinson replaced by George Thorpe.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were there any other ways in which the union used its muscle?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, the union then, the easel project and the mural project, there were three artists who, I think it was called a grievance committee; three people appointed by the union, who would sit in on every evaluation. For instance, if I and a couple other people were looking at mural sketches to determine whether they should be carried on, these three union representatives would be there too and would have an equal vote, and Increase would never approve of such a thing, whereas this union did, and everything that was done, any

decision that was made, was made with representatives of the union present, practically having equal vote and equal authority in the decisions.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was that a bit upsetting to you?

MERLIN POLLOCK: No, it wasn't upsetting to me. I didn't think any bad judgments were made, I mean I think the union was pretty good in that. Sometimes a person would come that was not very accomplished, but some of the very good things that came out of that were done by people that came in. That was one of the wonderful things about that project, I mean a person who might have innate ability, never having had a chance to develop it, approve it, had this chance, and I think the supervisors who were making the decision where they could come in or not, the union representatives, they were able to make a fairly adequate judgment. [00:38:20] I don't think we had really, had much trouble in Chicago, not like they seemed to have in New York. I think it ran rather smoothly, although there was a difference of opinion and quite a group of the art project people felt some diversity from the ideas that the union people had, because they seemed to be self-centered in a sense, getting—they got the good jobs, but other people got good jobs too and they recognized a good person whether he was a union representative or whether he was with them or not. There was no really ill feeling there in that respect.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Nor did the union people advocate certain subject matter over others?

MERLIN POLLOCK: No, no, I never heard anything like that at all.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What were some of the—can you think of some of the artists that in your estimate, the project allowed to get a start.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, of course of Raymond Breinin, I don't know whether you know him or not, he was an easel painter. They had shows, for instance, at the Chicago Art Institute, every once in a while there would be a work of easel paintings and his things were standing right out there beautifully done, and I never heard of him before in any of the Chicago shows, nor the regional shows, and he got recognition. I don't remember specifically but his stuff stood out. [00:40:00] There was a German person who had been in World War I, he hardly spoke English, he was kind of a quiet man, and I remember he was telling me how it was to be shelled at battle, the *Lamar* or something like that, and he did some beautiful murals and it got quite a bit of recognition. Even the people from Washington, [Edgar] Holger Cahill talked about him. Here it is, I just saw it here, this right here, his name was Karl Kelpé.

ROBERT F. BROWN: K-E-L-P-E.

MERLIN POLLOCK: That's right, yes, and he did quite—some very impressive things, doing this of immigrants, agricultural panels, [inaudible] but it was immigrants traveling west and how a German person like that, who had none of that background, could come up with these ideas is quite remarkable. There were quite a few people like that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: A man like Kelpé then, this kind of gave him a start didn't it?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes, but of course I don't know what happened to him after this. Then the war came on again you see, and so much of this was lost and whether these people were able to keep going in art or not I don't know.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Some of the other names of artists you mentioned, you mentioned Gustaf Dalstrom.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes. He was pretty much an established artist in Chicago. He was an older man and his wife was Frances Foy, she was a highly respected Chicago painter. There was a man who was supervisor for several years, he started with Increase and he stayed on. [00:42:03] He was the kind of person that had no trouble with the union and he was highly respected by all people. I think Ed Millman was a supervisor for a while but I don't think he got along very well with the artists because I know particularly one person who was very dissatisfied with him, he was quite dictatorial too you know and told people what they could do and what they couldn't do and that didn't go very well.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Millman, what was his position, was Millman political or not?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, at the time I'm speaking of, he was a supervisor, but I don't believe he was a supervisor very long. He got into doing mural painting and easel painting quite quickly on his own.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was he quite a respected painter?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Respected, yes, but also recognized as being quite controversial and quite out for himself as well as anything else.

ROBERT F. BROWN: In what way was he controversial?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, of course he did the mural painting out in Oak Park there, a technical school, a women's technical school, and it was sort of Orozco like figures, very much influenced by the Mexican art, and it was whitewashed over very quickly after it was done, they wouldn't accept it at all out there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was it considered too brutal?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes, too brutal, crude. I have a photograph of it here someplace.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you're saying he's also a bit opportunistic.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well maybe we can talk a little bit later about that. You also mentioned Edgar Britton.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes, Edgar Britton was a very gracious young man. He had studied dentistry somewhere, Ohio or someplace like that, but he had a strong feeling for art. [00:44:07] I don't know, he came to Chicago, his wife was a person who could manage pretty well, she was right in there pitching for him, but everyone liked him. I think he studied with some Chicago artist and I can't remember who it might be, but he didn't ever go to art school I don't believe. He got very much interested in fresco, as I said. He came to the Art Institute and I spent a few mornings with him, going through the procedures of how to prepare plaster and all that, and he did a fresco out in South Chicago I remember, and then he—and I think he got this big job at Lane Technical High School and eventually he did one in Washington, in one of the buildings there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well you helped a number of these people in learning how to—to learn how to do fresco.

MERLIN POLLOCK: That's right. I had studied the technique, which they hadn't, and even there was a young man, he came, had worked with Diego Rivera, I remember he gave a lecture one night, about how to do fresco and he had a lot of photographs, a lot of slides rather. Millman had done a fresco in the city hall, in the Department of Water and whatever else goes with that, and he had a lot of trouble with the paint, the plaster cracking. As it would dry, it would make all these fine hair cracks all over it and this person was giving a lecture, was showing how the several layers of plaster, the final layer of thin plaster, and he brought out that last coat was very, very thin and just an eighth of an inch or less, and half and half, half plaster, half lime and half marble dust, and I was able to show Millman what he was doing incorrectly in his fresco, because he was making that last layer quite thick, and when you add that much lime, half and half lime and it dries, it tends to shrink and cause these hair cracks. [00:46:36] I was able to show him, from these slides, that this man who had worked with Rivera, how differently the surface had been handled, and I think that helped a lot of those people in doing their fresco. I had gotten that information in Italy, looking at those things, and I was able to detect it right away, seeing these Diego Rivera things, where these people hadn't noticed that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So these were fairly simple things to you but these other artists were really quite ignorant of the process.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: They'd never had the opportunity.

MERLIN POLLOCK: That's right, and there was nothing done in this country that would—

ROBERT F. BROWN: It was just beginning, you were beginning the course at the Chicago Art Institute, that was about the beginning.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes, that's right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Then also, you mentioned another artist, Mitchell Siporin. What was your—did you have much to do with him?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Mitch was a part of the union, he was a very close friend of Millman's, and he was again, a very, very intelligent young man. These boys were no slouches, they were really—they knew what they wanted and they went about to get it, to do it. He was a very talented boy and again, I don't know what his background is. He studied, I'm sure, with just some artists, but was able to grasp the complexities of painting much better than a lot of people. [00:48:10]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was he—did you help him, or did you see one of these—

MERLIN POLLOCK: No. No, whatever he got, he got through the other people. I had no contact with him in that

respect, I mean he never came to me and asked me any questions and I never showed him anything. He worked with Millman, he did some—no, he worked with Britton out at Lane Tech and they had—see, the plasterer that did the work out there was the man that I had introduced into fresco painting in my fresco out at Tilden Tech. I was the first man that had this plasterer, this technician, and he did all the rest of the work on the project. He even went to St. Louis and did the work for Millman's—

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was his name do you recall?

MERLIN POLLOCK: I'm afraid I don't know.

ROBERT F. BROWN: I know his form at that time had been pretty radical subject matter. He had done that series of the Haymarket riots.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes, yes, he was—that was one of the things that Increase, you see, would have been opposed to.

ROBERT F. BROWN: After Thorpe came in, these things more or less came into being.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yeah. That was part of the cleavage there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What about another figure that I guess was around there at the time would have been Ivan Albright. Did he come into your world at all?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well I knew Ivan Albright but I don't know anything about him on the project.

ROBERT F. BROWN: No but in mean in general, did you know him at that time?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Oh yes, yeah I knew him, he and his brother. I knew Ivan best, in fact I was on a jury with him once. They were interesting, they were twins you know and their father was a very well-known Chicago painter, but he painted the kind of pictures of a little barefoot boy with a fishbowl over his shoulder; everybody supposedly in Chicago that was anybody had one of his paintings. But these two twins were quite different and the story is that the father would come in to see what they were doing and if the father liked it, they would tear it up or destroy it. [00:50:08] They had a business actually, they did concrete culverts and that sort of thing, out in the country, and they made a living and they bought an old church, which was their studio. In fact, they had the floor cut out so that you could run a panel, raise it way up or raise it way down, so you could paint on the head of a big high thing you'd see and the rest would be down below the floor. Whenever they had a show, a picture in—Ivan had a picture in one of the big shows, he'd have a big price, he'd put \$10,000 on it and if somebody would offer him \$9,500 he wouldn't sell it, I mean if he wanted \$10,000 that was it. He didn't need the money, they had this little business on the side and it was very independent of course, very highly respected, he was very successful.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you see quite a bit of him?

MERLIN POLLOCK: At that time, yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What would you talk about, art? Did you share a lot of mutual interests?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, no I guess I really didn't get into that kind of relationship. I remember being on this jury with him and he was kind of upset because someone else was sort of trying to copy his style and he resented that. He was quite rough in his manner of speaking, he wasn't, you wouldn't say sophisticated or refined speaker. He would use colloquialisms that were common in those days and just, just an ordinary person.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were there other painters that you knew fairly well at that time, in the '30s?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well of course I knew Francis Chapin very well and went painting with him a few times, we'd go out doing landscape painting. [00:52:08] He was totally absorbed in his work. It seemed that he had no hobbies that I know of or anything of that sort. He was painting, painting or was drawing or sketching.

ROBERT F. BROWN: It was all encompassing.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yeah, very much so.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Why don't we look at this 1936 commission for the Tilden Technical High School. This is the large fresco, looks like in an auditorium or a large classroom. Can you describe what was the theme of it.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, this was done, it was out on the South Side of Chicago, the southwest sort of, and there are steel mills out there in the immediate back of the stockyards. It's a rough, rough neighborhood and steel

seemed to be an appropriate subject because something that families might be working in and all that, and it was—I made the sketch.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you submit it to somebody?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yeah, I submitted it to the jury.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Partly supervisors and partly the art union?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes. It was approved and so I did a large cartoon mural, everyone had to do that, a full size drawing on big brown wrapping paper, or they had the big rolls of paper, and then that was checked for any things that the supervisors would feel should be changed.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What were the supervisors looking for in this?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Oh I suppose just drawing and things of that sort. In the ones that came from the Treasury Department, they were looking for subject matter that would be offensive to the sponsor, to the recipient of the thing, and to a degree they were looking for that here too. [00:54:09] I remember there was a mural done out in Oak Park, in a public school, that was controversial for a long time afterwards. In fact, I remember after I became mural supervisor, I had to—I got a woman from the University of Chicago was the authority on children, children's development and head of the art school of Chicago Art Institute and some doctor, to go out there and pass judgment on the thing because they wanted to tear it down and this committee said it was perfectly all right, it didn't have to be torn down because it wouldn't create nightmares and that kind of thing, and so whether it stayed or not, it was up while I was there I know but whether it stayed forever.

ROBERT F. BROWN: In a project such as this, that shows heavy industry, in a rough industrial part of Chicago, did they consult with the families around there about what they might want to see?

MERLIN POLLOCK: No, I never did.

ROBERT F. BROWN: I'm curious, how appealing to a steelworker's child, is a big mural of daddy's workplace could be.

MERLIN POLLOCK: I think well yes, that's a very good question and I never did. I don't know where I would have gone really. That would have—if there had been a PTA and maybe there was, that would have been the place to go, but there were a lot of blacks and apropos to what you just said, when I was supervisor, I was sent down to some town in Southern Illinois that had a post office mural that was being poorly received by the people that lived there. I looked at it and it had a lot of horses, horses done in kind of a small heads and narrow necks style horses that you might see in some of the old English paintings or something of that sort. [00:56:11] I went in a bar and I sat down and I had a beer and there were several fellas sitting around there and I said, "You've got quite a mural here in the post office," and a couple of them started in right away that these aren't horses from our town, whatever the town was, these aren't so and so horses, these are—we don't ever have any horses like that and they're all wrong. So that was the whole root of the trouble there and I reported that back to my supervisors, my people that I was responsible to. But your question was very good, I suppose that could have been done, but I guess there just didn't seem to be that much time. I was anxious to get going on a mural, I don't know who I would have gone to. That school was, they had a couple policemen outside that patrolled all the time, to keep the kids from running in and out, there were hoodlums out there. One teacher got his nose broken in the change of classes by the kids running down the hall, knocking him down. It was tough, but I sat up there every day, right in front of all those kids and painting, and they must have gotten something from that, I mean see it going on piece by piece, each day.

ROBERT F. BROWN: About how long did it take you to do this? You had your plaster man there prepare the wall first.

MERLIN POLLOCK: He would be there the first thing in the morning, so when I got there I was ready to paint.

ROBERT F. BROWN: How much would you paint in a day, about what size?

MERLIN POLLOCK: A square yard maybe, or a little bit more.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you had that big color cartoon as your guide.

MERLIN POLLOCK: The cartoon wasn't in color, that was—I had a small sketch in color.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, a sketch in color, right. [00:58:00]

MERLIN POLLOCK: The cartoon was on this paper and that was cut up in sections and the outlines were

perforated with a little dressmaker's wheel, little dots, so that you laid up and placed on the wall, and then you take a little powder puff or a sack of powder and tap all along those dots and it would leave the dotted lines on the fresh plaster, and then you would make your outlines.

ROBERT F. BROWN: This was after the plaster man had put the plaster down, that thin skin.

MERLIN POLLOCK: That's right, yeah, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Then you worked with those dotted lines.

MERLIN POLLOCK: That's right, and then at the end of the day, you would cut off the plaster that you had not painted. You would stop at an outline of an arm or a head or a hat or a pillar or a post or something, and you'd scrape all that plaster off so the next day he would joint onto it and one of the tricks was to make a good neat joint so it wouldn't show. You can look at some of the old Italian paintings and you can see the joints very, very easily, you can see that they weren't as adept at making a good coating as they might have been, even Michelangelo, some of Michelangelo's things.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So this work, one—do you feel that you were able to unify at the end, you used the [inaudible] teachers; you had unity in the end. That's difficult to achieve, you were creeping along segment by segment.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yeah, yeah. Well of course that was all done in the original design.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You couldn't go back if the color didn't seem quite in key with the other colors.

MERLIN POLLOCK: No, you couldn't go back, you shouldn't go back. People have done it but it always—the beauty of fresco is the luminosity, that white plaster gives you that luminosity and if you paint over it with something opaque you kill that, it would show as a dead spot on the painting.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you really liked this, doing this.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes, I enjoyed that very much.

ROBERT F. BROWN: At the same time, you had a full teaching load.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yeah, well I taught—I was teaching half days at the Art Institute, and so I had—but I would sort of stagger my time there and I'd get away earlier some mornings, to get out on the job. [01:00:10]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well it's about that time that—is that when you submitted something in competition for Anchorage, Alaska post office?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yeah, at that time, one day down at the project, they had gotten a notice from Washington that they were going to send a few artists to the Virgin Islands, I don't know why, but to paint there, for some records, some purpose, and they were inviting the project head to submit some recommendations, and she or somebody there asked me if I wanted to go and I said, "No, I don't want to go to the Virgin Islands, I want to go Alaska." We'd been reading a good deal about Alaska and I was very much interested again, to see my boyhood, was interested in the north country and the woods and that sort of thing. So I got home that night and we talked to Barbara and we decided to send a night letter to Washington. I have forgotten who it was directed to but we made—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Parker.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Parker?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Parker, he was the bureaucrat.

MERLIN POLLOCK: That's right. So we made out a 25-word night letter and send it to Washington, and I think it was about two weeks later, I got a telephone call, I think this was from the project, how soon can you get ready to go to Alaska. I called my wife and well that was a very exciting time. They took three artists from Chicago and three from Minneapolis, I believe, three from New York and three from Boston.

ROBERT F. BROWN: There were 12 of you.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes. Three artists, no two artists from Chicago, John Whalley and me, we had our wives, we paid for them, we paid for all of their expenses, and then Mecklem, Austin Mecklem from Woodstock. [01:02:19] One of those artists, no a couple of them were from Woodstock, come to think, the New York artist I believe, and he brought his wife, Mary Ann Appel [ph].

ROBERT F. BROWN: And your purpose was to make paintings and sketches of Alaska, and possibly work them up into murals?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, the purpose was, as I interpreted it and understood it, Alaska had been very much isolated the year before, or maybe a couple of years before. There was a longshoremen strike on the Pacific Coast and none of the shipping that ordinarily sent food supplies up there was in operation, so the Alaskans were in a bad way, they got none of their regular supplies up there and they had to live off the land pretty much. That's when the Matanuska Project was started, they wanted to bring farmers up there to raise—have a farm community up there that would at least raise some chickens and eggs and vegetables and all that kind of thing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Make them a bit more self-sufficient.

MERLIN POLLOCK: That's right. They were trying to promote this whole idea and so they had to promote Alaska, to get people to go there, to bring it more into the family, you might say, of the United States, because they—I firmly feel that they were anticipating a war with Japan at that time, you could sense it, that they were trying to do something to protect Alaska from being completely cut off. [00:04:03] And so we were going out there on a promotional plan, you might say, and we did, we were assigned to different areas, to make sketches and paintings, and then these things were used in different ways. Some of them, one of them went to the World's Fair, one of mine, I know, and one of them was in a book on Alaska, and other people's were in this book, and there was—you were in exhibition. I had a letter from somebody out in—from some person who eventually became the dean of the University of Texas, that he had seen one of my paintings out there in some exhibition. I don't know how they got around or where they are now, but it was a promotional scheme and whether it was valid or not I don't know. We enjoyed it tremendously.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well you mainly worked in watercolors?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Watercolor and casein a while, some used at that time.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You did coastal areas and then up around Mount McKinley.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes, yeah, yeah. We were at Matanuska itself for a month or so I guess, five weeks, six weeks. Barbara, being a singer, was very active in some of these things and when we were there, the community, the Matanuska Valley—

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ROBERT F. BROWN: You were talking about your involvement in Alaska and your wife's singing, what happened.

MERLIN POLLOCK: When we were there then, the supervisors had been appointed by Washington were in the sense recalled, and the community of farmers, they took over the operation of the cooperative themselves and they were the sole authority. They had a ceremony, turning this over to the farmers and Barbara sang a few appropriate songs at this ceremony, on the stage there in the local school, and it was a kind of interesting affair.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well these were people, I think you said earlier, a lot of them were from Wisconsin.

MERLIN POLLOCK: From Wisconsin, Minnesota, the northern tier of farm states.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you were familiar with this sort of person weren't you?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes, very much so, in fact we became quite friendly with several of them and followed their—years afterwards, we got cards from them and so forth, we've sort of lost track now.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Now although you've lived in Chicago quite a while, and then Europe. You weren't particularly an urban type.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Never.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You always liked the chance to go to Alaska gave you the outdoors.

MERLIN POLLOCK: That's right, that's right. That's really one reason why I'm in New York of all places here, because we have the Adirondacks in our back door and all this surrounding country here, it's beautiful country. Well anyway, we stayed there until fall, until it was closing, all the miners were going back to the States and all the fishermen were going back to the States, they all comes up in the spring you know, that is most of them do, the people who worked in that town. [00:02:00] We went out, we had come up with them in May and we went out with them in November. It was very interesting just to be there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: In 1937. Some of the other artists you were there with, well Vernon Smith had come out of

the Boston area. What was he like then and what was he doing?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, I remember he did very beautiful watercolors, he was quite adept at watercolor. The thing about a few of those people like Smith and a couple of others, they were so used to the East Coast and the ships and docks and fishing vessels and so forth, that they were a little bit disappointed when they got to Alaska, because on the coast you have fishing boats and docks, and they didn't think it was much different, but of course when they got inland or got away from the coast, got into the mountains and all that it was different.

ROBERT F. BROWN: There was another one, Prescott Jones.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes. Well he was—he stayed very close to Smith, they palled [ph] together all the time, in all the assignments, they were assigned together to go to certain places.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you were given assignments. You were assigned to the Matanuska Valley?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: To the mountains.

MERLIN POLLOCK: That's right, we were assigned, that is John Walley and Austin Mecklem, and I, were assigned to the Matanuska. We were Ketchikan first, and then we went to Juno and then we went to Matanuska, and then we went to Mount McKinley Park and then we went to Fairbanks, and then we sort of wandered back on our own after that. Some of the other people went to the other towns, different towns.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What sort of work did John Whalley do there, and also in general. You knew him in Chicago.

MERLIN POLLOCK: I knew him in Chicago, he was—John Whalley was very much, he was a talker, he was very interested in progressive things, government. [00:04:04] He had done some mural things in Chicago, mural sketches, he did a large screen in one of the schools, for a stage, which I think was pretty much of a chore for him. He did a lot of small drawings. I can't remember any big projects that he did.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you and he temperamentally pretty much alike? You said he was a talker.

MERLIN POLLOCK: No, we were quite different, I think in that respect. Who wrote, *The Culture of Cities*? You know him, he's a man that has written several books and very much interested in the city and its development and evolution. I'm sure you've heard his name, I read about him the other day again, unfortunately my mind—but John Whalley was very much engrossed in this man's work, he's a very significant man in the evolution of American architecture.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Lewis Mumford.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes. He was very, very much interested in him and he talked a great deal about him, and he had his book there and he would read, and that's the kind of a person he was. Now I don't know what—how he was chosen to go to Alaska, he was originally from Montana actually, and he knew the mountains and all that kind of thing but somehow he either asked to go or they asked him if he wanted to go.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well in your case you asked didn't you?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yeah, well I would not have been able to have gone, I don't think, because there was another man that wanted to go, from Minnesota, from Minneapolis, who was also a non-certified person and he had—he was older and had a much more established reputation than I did, and I think he would have been chosen if I hadn't written this letter. [00:06:04] I don't know whether my letter prompted this project or not, whether they had been thinking about it or whether at least it got it off its feet.

ROBERT F. BROWN: It's hard for you even then, to have a clear idea of just what they had in mind sometimes, the WPA, is that right? You sometimes didn't know just what overall goal they had in mind?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, I would say generally, the WPA, you knew they wanted to help artists, I mean that was the—here were a group of people that were out of work, just like a lot of other people who were out of work, but they didn't want to assign them to digging ditches or to building roads or something like that, they wanted them to work in their field, and Roosevelt and the people he was with had enough good sense to see that there was an opportunity to put people to work there in a constructive way. So I knew that in the first place and then otherwise, they wanted to—Holger Cahill, who was the head of the WPA art project, he was very strong on American art, he wasn't sympathetic to Matisse and Picasso and that sort of thing, he was an American art advocate you might say, and that was another thing. As I said about Alaska, I think that was primarily a promotional thing, they wanted to get more interest in Alaska and keep it from being so isolated. They were certainly aware of the possibility of a war in the near future there and we had a few experiences that sort of

brought that forth. One, well, there was a man that was constantly following us around, that was doing everything he could for us. [00:08:07] He took us to the Alaska, Juno, goldmine, and showed us through that. I guess he worked there, showed us how the gold melting there, you see great pots of it, you know, molten gold. The other places he took us around, showed us the scenery and he always wanted to be with us, and one morning—he lived up the hill from us, from where we lived in Juno, we lived on a steep, steep hill and there were mudslides and all that, and his wife was pregnant. One morning he had disappeared, we heard he disappeared and the FBI was after him, he'd run across the border into Canada. He was a spy of some sort but I don't know what he was trying to get from us. I think he didn't believe that we were artists, that we were up there for some other purpose too.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So there was a bit of that possibly in the air.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes. Of course the year after we were there, the Japanese were in there so strong, they were coming into the inland waters of Alaska, doing a lot of soundings and so forth, the fishermen were fighting with their rifles, they were shooting them and all that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: The Japanese fishermen were coming?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, yeah, they were disguised as fishermen.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Cross talk.]

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yeah, they shouldn't have been there but they were in there and they were taking soundings and doing all that kind of thing you see. The fishermen had quite a war going on there, before the war started. So Washington knew something was afoot, and it surprises me that Pearl Harbor was such a surprise to them, because they certainly wouldn't have been surprised in Alaska, I don't think.

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ROBERT F. BROWN: This is a continuing interview with Merlin Pollock, in Fayetteville, New York, Robert Brown the interviewer, and this is July 30, 1980. I think Mr. Pollock, you wanted to begin today, talking a bit further about the competition for the mural in the post office at St. Louis.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes, I thought I might mention a few things about that competition, about the way that Millman and Mitch Siporin got the commission. It was a very big job, of course \$29,000, and I can't remember whether the stipulation was that it was supposed to be done in fresco, whether it had to be done, but I kind of think it was. I know I didn't—I don't think I knew anyone who actually submitted sketches. I know that the Treasury Department in Washington were not happy about, or was not happy about the sketches that they did receive, and so the thing sort of was hanging in limbo, and then Millman, Ed Millman and Mitch Siporin went to Washington and gave them a good sales pitch I believe and got the commission. There was a lot of criticism by the Chicago artists, about this, although as I say, I don't know anyone who really submitted sketches, but the fact that Millman and Siporin were very high in the Artists' Union, there were over 300 members supposedly and that they used that as a prestige—[00:02:13]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Springboard or platform?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yeah, I guess you could call it that. They got the commission and they were criticized but I think they did very well there. I think somebody had to do this and the fact that they had enough gumption to go down there and really work at it was to their credit, rather than to be criticized. The thing was, that was a \$29,000 job and that sounds like a lot of money, it did at that time, but they, they had to hire—rent a loft in Chicago to do the big, full scale mural cartoons on paper, and I don't know how long it took them to do that but they worked at that for quite a while, and then that had to be photographed and approved by Washington. And then when they did go to St. Louis, the man, I was the first man to have him to do frescoes, he was an old, old plaster man who had done interior stuff like that a long time and he was very good.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Who was that?

MERLIN POLLOCK: I can't remember his name, but he was kind of a Dutchman or something, I think he was a foreign extraction, but he was very good, he knew how to do that type of work, he adapted very readily and very quickly, but they had to pay him union wages and he had to hire a helper who got union wages, and they only worked for well, a few, three, four, five hours in the morning and they had to pay him a full day's wage, and by the time they got through, I know they claimed that he got more money than they did. [00:04:03] So actually, it wasn't too much of a money making proposition. I don't remember how many weeks or months it took them to finish that job, but it's a big job and I'm sure they worked at it quite a while, so the \$29,000 became another insignificant—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Against their expenses.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes that's right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were they both men that you knew quite well at this point?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, I knew Millman better than Siporin, but I knew them both. See that was one thing about the Federal Art Project, the WPA in Chicago, you got, got to know everybody that was working in art and it seemed that there was a gathering together, with exhibits at the Chicago Art Institute and other places, and there were meetings at times and you got to become quite familiar with these people. You knew their idiosyncrasies and their possibilities and how good they were and how temporary, or how outdated they were, and the artists came out from the cracks all over the place you know, and somehow or other you, as I say, you became—you got in contact with them. So, I knew Mitch pretty well, I was at some parties that he was at and I saw the work that he was doing and I talked to him. Somehow or other, I knew Millman better, I don't know why, I guess he was a little bit more active in the union and I was mixed up with that part of the time.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was the union quite politicized?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well yeah, in the sense that the Jewish group were very strong in it, simply because at that time the Nazis were raising hell with the Jews in Germany, and this was something for them to relate to. [00:06:07] In other words, the communist side of it, not that anyone was a radical communist, I don't know, there were a lot of pinks. There were two boys, brothers, the Topchevsky brothers, who really were, I think party members. I think I told the story on the tape the other time, I'm not sure, we all had to sign a loyalty oath one day and we knew it was going to be everybody on the WPR Project. We knew this was going to take place and everybody was sort of tittering about it, wondering what the Topchevskys were going to do, because they knew that actually, they really shouldn't be signing it, the way they were talking and the way they were acting, they were peddling the *Daily Worker* and that kind of stuff and they were talking about the Nazis and fascist. Well that morning we got there and lo and behold, the Topchevsky brothers had been there before anyone else, they had signed the thing and they were right at the head of the line, helping everybody fill out their forms. In other words, they well, the sort of fooled everybody. They were right there being very helpful, so that everybody did the things correctly, but they, the union was, as I say, more or less dominated by those people. I remember the morning after the news had broken that Hitler had signed a treaty with Stalin, and I met some of these fellas on the street and they were shook up, they just didn't understand it, they couldn't understand how that could possibly have come about, very, very, very upset about it. [00:08:10]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well your work in Chicago, then you did the—I think we've talked somewhat about your—

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: In 1941, you became supervisor of mural painting for the Federal Art Project in Illinois. That then lasted what, until you went into the navy in 1943?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well—I'm just trying to think specifically. The project changed from an art project, a real art project, to one where we worked with the navy and with the army and with the military services, doing an awful lot of work for them. It became something entirely different and that then, when the war got underway pretty well, that sort of faded out and yes, then people became—I can't remember the dates there ,but started going into the services, enlisting or being drafted and that kind of thing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you enjoy being a supervisor?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well I didn't—I wasn't disappointed, I mean yes I enjoyed it. Again, it took me around to many of the places where the work was being done and I had contact with the people for whom the work was being done, and I found it was much easier to sell other people's work than it was to sell my own. In other words, it was easy to really give a big picture for somebody else than it would be for yourself and that was interesting. [00:10:00] I went down to the southern part of the state in time.

ROBERT F. BROWN: There were some good painters, some good people?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yeah sure, there were very good people.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were there some, any that particularly stand out in your mind?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well yeah, Ralf Henricksen was an outstanding young man, actually if I hadn't known him at the Art Institute as a student but I also knew him very well as a painter, he did mural painting in Chicago. After the war, I recommended that Michigan State hire him, they were looking for somebody, and they did and they were very, very happy with him. He of course died just about—he retired just a couple of years ago and died the

same winter, went out West, was going to spend the winter out there and had a heart attack. Mildred Waltrip was another very good painter, there was Ethel Spears.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was it Eric Dalstrom?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Not Eric, Gus Dalstrom. He had been the head of the mural project and he took a job at the Field Museum as a painter, of the sets and all that sort of thing, and I took over for him. He's the man that told me he said, "Now whenever you get a letter or get any message that says urgent, leave it lying on the desk for two weeks and it will either be completely taken care of by that time, or forgotten, or there's plenty of time to take care of it." [They laugh.] I don't know whether I followed that advice but I always remembered it anyways.

ROBERT F. BROWN: During this time, were you able to do a lot of your work, your own painting?

MERLIN POLLOCK: No, no, I wouldn't. [00:12:00] I had a couple things started or one thing, a mural started, that was supposed to be finished by other people, just from my sketches and so forth, but it really never got that far. I guess we folded up before that was finished.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was your military service, in some ways it was related to your art training?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yeah. They were looking for people who were visually trained, and this was the ah—I've forgotten that name, at Ohio State, they had a psychologist there who worked in the realm of vision and you reacted to the different ways to what you could see, and he developed a way of instant recognition of planes and ships. The army had one that they called, let's see, wings, engine, fuselage and tail, the WEFT System, where you had to analyze the plane by the shape of the wings and by what kind of engine it had and what the fuselage looked like and what the shape of the tail was. Renshaw was the man at Ohio State, it was instant recognition, I mean you were—you saw the whole thing just like as you see a man walking down a block away from you and if it's someone you knew, even if he's walking away from you, you'll be able to recognize him just by the way he walks, just his general shape and actions, and that's the way you were supposed to learn to recognize ships and planes and it worked quite well. So they took artists, they took architects, there were even a few opticians and there was quite a group, they had several groups. [00:14:05] There were about 30 in our group, that went through the basic training and there had been about three or four, or maybe more, before our time.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And then you were to be placed with what, the artillery?

MERLIN POLLOCK: We were in training groups. Some of them were sent right out on the carriers and so forth, as identifying officers, but my job and a lot of people in the same category, were—I was placed, I was at Corpus Christi most of the time and there was a big training base for pilots. We were teaching them these—we had slides and they were flashed on the screen, it started the 25th of the 2nd and the 50th 2nd, the 75th of the 2nd, and we'd talk about these planes prior to that, and then each day they would come in and part of the lecture was flashing a bunch of these slides, different ones, we'd get new slides all the time and they'd have to recognize the plane and they had to mark down, there was usually 40 at a time and they were graded then, on how many they missed and how many they didn't miss, and ships and all that sort of thing. We also were in charge of gunnery, all these people were taught how to lead, you know you shoot at something, just like in skeet shooting and trap shooting, well they all—we had big skeet fields, trap fields too but most skeet, and they all had to go through that and be able to become quite proficient in hitting the targets, because as fighter pilots that's what they would be doing. And then some of the people got involved in visual aids, projection, all other kinds of visual training, and even link trainers and things of that sort. [00:16:10]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Why do you—why did they pick so many of you artists and architects do you think?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, because I guess they felt that we were used to looking at things with our eyes and reacting that way, rather than reacting mentally, like the army was doing, analyzing it intellectually. The wings, the shape of the wings, the shape of the kind of engine and the fuselage, they felt that was much too slow for a fighter pilot because he had to react instantly and they did. There had been stories and reports of how, I guess it was a whole British Tank Division had been knocked out by their own people, because they didn't recognize the tanks, it was in Africa, and things of that sort, there was a lot of that going on. It was quite effective.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well you felt then, that you were really doing your part didn't you?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you feel good about that?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yeah. I was—what was I then anyway, 37 I guess. I wouldn't have been drafted and I didn't have to be in the war, but everybody felt that they should be, it's different than it is now, and I went where they sent me, I did what they told me to do. Some of the fellows were very unhappy. There were a lot of other officers

when I was in Corpus Christi, when I first got there, in different categories, that wanted to get to sea, wanted to get on a carrier, and they'd take a leave and they'd go to Washington and they'd see their congressmen and work awfully hard to get overseas duty, but I didn't do that, I just did what I was told to do.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you never did go abroad. [00:18:01]

MERLIN POLLOCK: No, no.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you were discharged when, 1946 or so?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yeah, in '46.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you kept on beyond the end, well beyond the end of the war.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yeah, yeah, there was a good deal of cleaning up to do you might say, and well, I stayed until I came here, see I came over.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You came directly from, from navy service.

MERLIN POLLOCK: To Syracuse.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And how did you happen to come to Syracuse?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, in the last months of duty down there at Corpus, I had written to several places, looking—I wanted to get back into teaching. I didn't want to go back to Chicago, I liked Chicago as a city, but I liked the outdoors and I just felt too boxed in, in Chicago, you had to go so far to get any kind of outdoor life there at all. I told this to this Ross Anderson, who is now the curator at the museum, he came from Chicago, he said, "Oh, but there's the forest preserve out there." Well, to me that's just a little string of trees along the river you know and a lot of people in on Sundays, a lot of radios blaring, that isn't what I call outdoors. Well, I could have gone to Oregon, I could have gone to Texas, Michigan State was very eager to have me, but I came here because the man who had been the dean at the Art Institute and with whom I worked, had also gone into the same service that I did and he was coming here as dean, and so he offered me a job here.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And that was Norman Rice.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Norman Rice, yes. [00:20:00]

ROBERT F. BROWN: You worked very well with him in Chicago?

MERLIN POLLOCK: That's right and liked him, like his wife, she was a very agreeable person, not one of those people that's always trying to run things and we got along very well. So I came here and was very happy that I did.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You came here in what capacity, what were you to do?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Teach painting and related things, drawing, just the regular routine art subjects. Well, I was just here a year or even during the first year, I sort of got drafted into this graduate program business.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was that something new?

MERLIN POLLOCK: No, it was not very strong. They had a graduate program but the man who was supposed to be head of it didn't want it anymore, he was retiring and so I sort of was nominated and I took to it and I did it all the years that I was at the university. It got to be quite large. Of course, shortly after I took over, we began to get the GIs, you know, they were coming back to school and we had a large, large program, a very good program too, because these people were serious. They were there because they wanted to be in it, they had gotten all that Joe college spirit, they used that all up in the army or in the navy. They were very serious and most of them got married or were married and making their own way, getting the GI benefits, tuition and all that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well now most of these people were thinking of careers as painters or sculptors?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: They were?

MERLIN POLLOCK: They were. You sometimes wonder how there would be room enough for all of them, but a lot of them really made it out very well.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Now as a graduate program, this meant people who had probably had several years of art school behind them. [00:22:01]

MERLIN POLLOCK: They theoretically had to have a bachelor's degree, or in the rare cases perhaps the equivalent, but it was usually a requirement.

ROBERT F. BROWN: They had to have a bachelor's degree, couldn't simply be an art school certificate.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, some of the art schools—

ROBERT F. BROWN: This is not getting degrees.

MERLIN POLLOCK: They were all giving degrees about that time but by that time. I think though, if we—I can't remember specifically, if we'd had a good applicant, they had to show work slides and we had to get their records, their transcripts and also recommendations, and we talked to them if we could, and if they really were outstanding, I think we would have made some kind of adjustment, but this all went through the graduate school. There was a dean of the graduate school and he looked upon all people coming in for graduate study in kind of the same way, I mean he didn't—wasn't apt to just let anybody in just because we wanted them, they had to meet their standards too.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Who was this dean there?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well it was a man by the name of Ganders [ph], and now—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Norman Rice was what, dean of what?

MERLIN POLLOCK: He was dean of the school of art.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Okay.

MERLIN POLLOCK: It was a graduate school, was all of the university, anybody in the sciences or anybody, came through that office and they kept their records and we had records too of course, but they had to approve of anyone that we nominated or agreed to accept.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Could you describe Norman Rice a bit, he was dean until into the '50s or so.

MERLIN POLLOCK: [00:24:02] Yes, he left in 1954, to become dean of the Carnegie Institute, now it's Carnegie Mellon I believe, in Pittsburgh.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What were some of the things as you look back, that you think he accomplished?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, in the first place, as a person he was very sophisticated, dignified, and yet had a very good sense of humor. You were sort of attracted to him as a person, as a man, he had a lot of character and a lot of—what's the other word I'm trying to think of?

MARGARET: Charisma.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Charisma, that's right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh he did, in what way did he have charisma, what do you mean?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, he was a good looking man, he had a beautiful speaking voice, he was tall, he had manners, he seemed to be able to adjust to people very well, a certain amount of dignity and yet humor.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you given sort of free rein in your teaching in the beginning?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes very much so. The university, the art school had become quite, well ingrained I guess you'd call it. There were a lot of people teaching who had been students there and had gotten their degrees there and then had come back and were teachers, in fact so much so that in 1954, when Norman Rice left and Dean [August] Freundlich came, he was instructed by the chancellor, to not hire anybody who had a Syracuse degree, and that came about, the accrediting, what is it, the accreditation group that comes around every five years, something like that, had made quite a point of stating, in their report on Syracuse School of Art, that there were too many people with Syracuse degrees on the faculty. [00:26:22] Well, that's the way it was when we came there, there were a lot of people who had grown up in the school and were now teaching and they felt it was too much.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What did you see happening?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, it was—

ROBERT F. BROWN: It was too narrow.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yeah. The teachers, people teaching painting, you could look at a painting, everybody did the same identical thing in one person's class, they painted the same way, there was no individuality at all. Not that some good people didn't come out of that, but it was very strange to look at, I hadn't seen anything like that when I was teaching at the Art Institute or when I was a student there, there was a lot of variation. Everything was very, very regimented and there were some good people. There was one man, Hekking, who taught his students to draw beautifully, I mean really beautifully, but some of the painters were so cut and dry that Norman Rice, the first thing he did—or they had departments, there was Department of Painting, Department of Interior Design and that sort of thing, and he just there were no departments any more, all the chairmen of those departments were in a sense relieved of that responsibility and there was a lot of feeling about that, pro and con. Some of the people were very pleased with that and some of the people were very, very disappointed and fought it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: He felt it was overly structured.

MERLIN POLLOCK: That's right, yeah, and so he—I was here from Chicago and I don't know how many others. [00:28:08] We were called the "Chicago gang" for a while, but all that was broken down and for the better, I think. Now, when he left of course, then August Freundlich instigated departments again.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was Freundlich the next one or [Laurence] Schmeckebier?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Schmeckebier.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Can we go back a little bit more, to your first year. Now you mentioned William Hekking as a teacher of drawing, he was very good at that. did you get to know him at all?

MERLIN POLLOCK: I knew him as a person, yes. He was a tall, I don't know what expression to use. He came from Maine, from the Northeast there, and he has this sort of equine [ph] type of face, very weathered, he walked and walked and walked a lot, and he swam in the sea up there. In fact, he went on a couple of summer expeditions on some of the government boats that would go way up into the arctic for research purposes. He liked to paint the sea, that was his painting, he did pretty well, very realistic, with big rolling waves, but he could really draw. He had been the director of the Buffalo Museum for a short time and in fact, Syracuse awarded him an honorary doctorate so that he would have a little bit more prestige in that job. I don't think he stayed there very long, he wasn't happy with it or they were unhappy with him, I don't know.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Who were some of your other early colleagues in your first years there?

MERLIN POLLOCK: The what?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Some of your early colleagues during your first years.

MERLIN POLLOCK: The ones that came from Chicago or the ones that were here?

ROBERT F. BROWN: No, here, the once you got to Syracuse. [00:30:00]

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, there was Dick Wedderspoon, who was a painter, he was one of those who was very happy to see Norm Rice come and the way he ran things. He retired, oh I don't know, he left maybe four or five years or maybe before that, after Rice came, and he went to New Hope, where he had a home, and he was quite active there as a painter. Of course, Montague Charman was head of Interior Design and he's still around, he's in England right now, he's in his high 80s.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was that quite a good, a good department, interior design?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes, it was quite—well, his was fabric design, I'm sorry, his was fabric design, and I'm trying to think of the woman who was head of interior design, Marjorie—

MARGARET: Gardner?

MERLIN POLLOCK: No.

ROBERT F. BROWN: If you can't remember her name, it doesn't matter too much.

MERLIN POLLOCK: She left and took a job out at the University of Iowa because she was very unhappy with Norman Rice.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Now this graduate program in art, was that set up only in 1947? You say it already existed here.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yeah, they had a few people taking graduate courses and it seems to me that the only ones were those in art education, that I can remember that first year. No, Ralph Laidlaw got his in interior design. He made a large, large model of one of the renaissance palaces in Florence, and that's still owned by the museum, they have it but there weren't many. [00:32:00] As I say, then all the GIs came back and it just went right up, we had 17, 20 people doing master's work in sculpture or in painting or that sort of thing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you prefer working with the more advanced students or did it ever matter to you?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, I seemed to work with the more advanced students, I don't know whether I did that by preference or whether it just happened that way. I didn't have—I had some beginning classes, drawing and I think watercolor, but most of my stuff was advanced people.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were there quite a few of your students that went on to be rather prominent artists?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well yes, they—we did see, some years ago, tried to track down some of those people and I'm just trying to think of some of the names now, those names slip my mind so readily. One did the shaped paintings that, all the big museums have his work.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What, abstract work?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yeah, just you know, the ability, sort of a frame underneath it as if you were building a wing of a plane or something, but in different shapes, and then they stretch canvas over that or he did, and painted it in different colors.

ROBERT F. BROWN: The students, even when they were students here, were given fairly free rein, they could be quite expressive as far as you were concerned.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes that's right, they could. In fact, it got a little bit too much so at times. There were a few good students that couldn't take that kind of freedom, I mean they needed more discipline and they wouldn't come to class or they'd stay up all night and then sleep all day or something of that sort, and that did cause some trouble and I think was something we had to work on. [00:34:18]

ROBERT F. BROWN: The earlier students, the returning, particularly the returning GIs, they were much more serious and regular.

MERLIN POLLOCK: They were yes, that's right, that's right, very much so.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you notice by the '50s, was this beginning to change though, is this when you began to see more experimentation?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well yeah, you got younger people later on, there were more the usual college person. I don't know though, we were quite restrictive, I think quite selective rather, I should say, in the people we got, and they all had to show portfolios of their work. It wasn't much trouble really, that way, everybody really worked. It was only when you got around the '60s, you know that period of time, when you really had problems with students being quite independent, rebelling against this and rebelling against that, rebelling in their painting, the kind of painting they were doing or at least it seems they were or they thought they were and well I guess the whole thing is changing again.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was there, in your mind, ever a problem with not being near a major center like Chicago or New York or something?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well I of course missed being—when I was at the Chicago Art Institute, where I taught for eight years there, the gallery, the big museum, the beautiful museum was right there and you could go into that place, you could take students and talk about different things right in the gallery. They had contemporary shows, they had the old masters there all the time and yes, that was missed because the Syracuse Museum here was really nothing, I mean it had a reasonable show and it had occasional shows brought in from elsewhere but there wasn't any—not enough money to really do that on a grand scale. [00:36:20] Ceramics, they were strong in, because they had the National Ceramics Show every two years and that was a strong part, but I did miss the Chicago artists, but you could go to New York you know, you could get a room, a good room, for oh, you could even get them for three dollars. For seven dollars, you could stay at the Barbizon-Plaza, I remember getting a room there for seven dollars. There were restaurants, cafeterias, where you could eat quite reasonably, it wasn't a problem then. I sometimes think about that and I just try to equate that with the salary we were getting then, whether it really was any less expensive than it is now or not, I don't know. In those days, when I came, I started

at \$3,500, and that was pretty standard for teaching art, and now my goodness, what do they get, twelve or more to start out.

MARGARET: To start out.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you try to get to New York fairly often?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, quite a bit yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you able to paint regularly during these earlier years here or did you find your duties are administrative and other teaching duties taking up all your time?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well I painted regularly. I never was a prolific painter, I mean I never turned things out, I worked hard on my things but yes, I painted all the time.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What sort of things were you doing by the 1950s, did your style change do you think?

MERLIN POLLOCK: [00:38:01] Has it changed now?

ROBERT F. BROWN: No, from the 1950s, had it changed from what it had been earlier?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, most of the stuff I did was landscape, things related to the woods, to the wild places, and I always had a certain affinity for that sort of thing, that's why I've liked it here at Syracuse and we were—we had the summer school, which I ran, while Barbara was taking care of all the chores. She was sort of a housemother.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So this is something that started what, in 1948?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Forty-eight or '49.

ROBERT F. BROWN: This was through the gift to the university of Carl Loeb wasn't it?

MERLIN POLLOCK: That's right, Carl Loeb, he owned this lodge, it had been his family's place for a good many years, his kids, his sons, I don't know how many sons he had, were there with him, and he was having trouble with the taxes that the county was charging him. They didn't do anything for the road, it was a very bad road, and they wouldn't do a thing to help make it navigable, and he had to do that all himself, and they kept taxing him quite heavily and so he got angry. This is his story, he told us this when he was up there once. He bought the lodge next to it, which was owned by the [P.] Ballantine Beer people, and I've forgotten where they got it but there was a lot of buildings. So he gave that lodge and the Pine Brook Lodge to the university, because they were schools and didn't have to pay taxes, so he was getting back at the village or the county because they couldn't charge these people any taxes, and that was his revenge. [00:42:08] His son had a place across the lake and so he wasn't involved in that anymore.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Who went? You went up there of course, because you loved the outdoors, but you were also—you wouldn't be able to do your own work too much if you were also running that summer—

MERLIN POLLOCK: We usually had two other instructors and the three of us taught, and then we had each week we had somebody would come in and spend Friday, Saturday and Sunday, just talk and demonstrate and do things like that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was this usually people from the outside or from the university?

MERLIN POLLOCK: No, they were people from New York or places like that, wherever we could get somebody, with a name and who would come for what we could play, which wasn't too much, I think it was \$150 or something like that, and plus their travel expenses, and we put them up in the lodge and fed them.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were there any notable experiences during the summer school that you remember, any of these guest painters?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, I don't know that I could say anything notable. We had Peppino Mangravite, who was a New York artist, he taught at Columbia later, he always was very popular, I mean he was really a showman. He'd get there and start criticizing and most of the people that were really outstanding were showmen, they knew how to do this and they could just get the students excited about things. We had Bill Palmer there one time too.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Hamilton. Yes.

MERLIN POLLOCK: I'm trying to think of some of the others.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Who were the students, would they be ones who were here during the regular year?

MERLIN POLLOCK: [00:42:02] In the beginning, we offered, the university offered, many scholarships or half scholarships, to enable good students to come, to bring them there. Actually, some of them just got the whole thing free, but they set a sort of tone. We had people who would come there from as far away as New Orleans. I remember there was a woman—

MARGARET: Chicago.

MERLIN POLLOCK: What is that?

MARGARET: Chicago.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes, Chicago. Yes, we had also, scholarships to various schools, but in addition to those students, we had adults who wanted to take art courses, and this was—the school was advertising some in the *New York Times* and I think in some of the art magazines. It never was a money making proposition though. The last year that we had it, it just broke even, but by that time the university felt that it should be making more money, so that it was abandoned.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Why did they think it should make money?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, to pay for the upkeep of a camp like that, which is very expensive, just the maintenance of keeping things from falling apart, the logs from rotting and all that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well that's—

MERLIN POLLOCK: And food service.

ROBERT F. BROWN: That was a pressure that went against being able to subsidize young art students.

MERLIN POLLOCK: That's right, yeah, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So although it was pleasant, it was sort of not the ideal situation was it?

MERLIN POLLOCK: No. No, we were always aware of that yes, but we didn't let it bother us too much, we enjoyed it while we were there. It wasn't easy for us, I mean we had the girls in one room, one building, and we had the men in another, and some of the girls would—well, we'd get into town. I remember one night I heard canoes paddling about three o'clock in the morning and there were some fellows from an orchestra were heading across the lake you know, trying to get to where the girls were and that sort of thing, and I'd get out there and sort of tell them that the place was closed for the time being. [00:44:18] We had to be very, very careful of all of that. I always say that the reason that I claim that it was quite a success and that we did a pretty good job is that in the five years that we ran it, we never had a drowning or a pregnancy. I think that would be quite a record for any school like that now. The kids were not supposed to swim at night but I know they did, they'd have moonlight swimming way down and away from where we were, and of course I found out much more about that after the thing was closed and some of the kids would tell us things that we didn't know. It was a nice bunch, we got along with them, they got along well with us.

ROBERT F. BROWN: When Laurence Schmeckebier came in as dean in 1954, did that mean some changes in the School of Art? You've mentioned industrial design.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yeah, they all were—he seemed to be set on really altering that program and he had no love for the people that were running it, there was no interrelation there at all, and it was kind of a battle all the time. In fact, they even brought in like Buckminster Fuller, to try to support them as against Schmeckebier, but finally in the spring they all resigned. [00:46:10] I think that they thought that they were going to shake the school so that they would get what they wanted.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was it that he objected to or what was he trying to change?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, it had been, the industrial design program had been developed by Antonin Heythum, who was a Czech and Norman Rice brought him here, I don't know Rice had met him someplace, and he had done industrial design. He had been related to, I mean closely associated with people like Buckminster Fuller. I don't think he was ever at the Bauhaus but he seemed to have a lot of that kind of backing or feeling, and he was very much opposed to such things as styling. He thought that industrial design should be not just aesthetic, but it had something to do with people's lives and all that kind of thing, it was very—he had a different philosophy, and I think that Schmeckebier was pretty much his thoughts were consistent with what was being done in designing of cars and all that sort of thing, you know the big flowing lines and all that, and as I say, he brought these people here from Detroit just to look over the whole situation and that caused sparks from the

Industrial Design Department. Antonin Heythum had become quite ill, I think he had cancer of the neck, and he went back to Czechoslovakia just to recuperate but he died there and then Dick Koontz was his—the man that came with him, a young man that sort of was running the thing and Schmeck didn't like Koontz at all and he didn't think that he had any background to really be head of a program that Schmeck thought should really be an outstanding part of the school. [00:48:22] It may be that Laurence Schmeckebier was right because although Dick Koontz did do some industrial design after that, he sort of drifted away from it and I don't think he really did anything. He had an injury from the service and I think he got some substantial compensation for that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: How did you stand on this, did you go along more with the Bauhaus ideas of Heythum and Koontz?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes, I had a lot of respect for their ideas and most of these people were my friends. I was just in the middle, you know what I mean, and I didn't tell them that they should retire, I mean resign, I never would have said that and I was surprised when they did.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What effect did Schmeckebier's coming have upon you in the fine arts or whatever it was called, that part of the School of Art.

MERLIN POLLOCK: No effect. He had always, apparently a great respect for me, we never had any problems at all.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Could he be a difficult man to deal with?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Very much so, oh terribly difficult. There was many times between some of the faculty there was shouting and really violent disagreements. There was a woman, Mildred Landis, who was head of the art education program, she had been brought here by Norman Rice and the woman who, Catherine Condon, had been the head of it for a long time, but she was one of those that had their learning pencil technique, pen technique, and all these things to teach the kids, whereas Mildred Landis looked at it entirely differently. [00:50:16] She insisted that the rooms be all painted in different colors, bright colors, so there was a liveliness there, it was an old building. She felt that if you were going to send these students out to teach art in public schools, they should know what a good environment is, they shouldn't be working in a dingy place and then expect to be sent out to someplace and try to just change their whole life. I mean she was very progressive and very positive, and she and Laurence Schmeckebier fought all the time, and so she resigned at the end of his first year.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Why would he have fought with her, he didn't agree with her, their personalities were different?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well their personalities were different. She really rubbed him the wrong way, you might say. She didn't try to just meet to him and adjust to him and let him know what she was about, she just was pretty much of a dictator. She was on the chancellor's neck, the vice chancellor, she was a fighter. She got what she wanted but raised a lot of animosity, generated a lot of animosity. Then she went down to the University of Miami in Miami and taught there, and she stayed there until she retired.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What about, did the School of Art have a collection? The museum was developed during these years wasn't it?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yeah, the School of Art had practically no paintings at all. There was this one large painting by Morris, you know the Louvre, a painting of the Louvre, which Norman Rice found in one of the rooms of the Hall of Languages, where they were teaching English classes and all these classes; it was just stuck back someplace and it had some holes in it, and he immediately recognized what this was and had it taken care of, had it repaired and renovated and carefully stored. [00:52:36] That, as far as I can remember, was probably the first valuable painting. They had several paintings that were copies. When a person used to get a scholarship, they had an annual award that you'd compete for, in painting for instance, and maybe it was \$1,000 or \$1,500, and they would go to Europe. One of the stipulations was that they would have to make a copy of a masterpiece and bring it back, and they had some of these hanging in the halls.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So there was really very little.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Very little, but Schmeckebier really went after it, I mean he started—he got money—Piskor.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Frank Piskor.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Frank Piskor, yes. He worked on Piskor a great deal.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was Piskor a chancellor or a vice chancellor?

MERLIN POLLOCK: He was then head—let's see, oh what was his title?

ROBERT F. BROWN: But he was above Schmeckebier.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Oh yes, yes. What did you say?

MARGARET: Academic Affairs.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes that's right, I guess that was his title.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Dean of Academic Affairs?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes. He was pretty much over everybody, he was sort of—he worked under the chancellor and was his right hand man and well, there was a vice chancellor too that he was under, but Piskor and Schmeckebier got along very well. [00:54:14] Piskor wanted to know more about art and Schmeckebier was a very ardent teacher, and they would go to New York and visit galleries and Piskor always managed to find money someplace to buy something, and so they started that collection and really, really worked at it. I don't know whether they're gathering any—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did that happen to be much of an—did that affect you at all very much, their collecting?

MERLIN POLLOCK: No. Well, they bought some of my paintings.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well that, was that an attempt to try to gather contemporary art? I know Schmeckebier had a program of exhibitions and commissioning work for the university, he would have outside artists come in.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Oh yes, yeah. Yes that's right, he did that. Well, I'm trying to think of some of the artists now.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But that was a great change right there.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Oh yes, yes that was entirely new.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And don't try to fish up all the names. That doesn't matter.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes, he did that each year. In other words, in the summer school catalog, he would, if he got it arranged quickly and soon enough, he would name this particular artists who was going to be artist in residence during the summer session and people could work. It was usually a mural and people could work with him, or this person or woman and get their—earn their credits that way and there was several of them that did that and worked very closely with a man doing a thing. [00:56:09]

ROBERT F. BROWN: As you look back now, what do you feel you got from here when you came to Syracuse and what did you think you accomplished? You've talked about your yearning for the outdoors and that was one reason that brought you here.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes. When I came, I almost immediately went over to the college of forestry and tried to determine what was available there, and well I had finished all the work for a degree program at the Chicago Art Institute. I may have said this in a previous part of the tape, but at that time to get a degree there, you had to take courses at Northwestern or the University of Chicago, you had to take some of your academic courses, and somehow or other, I never had time to do that. I was working, elevated restaurants and stuff to get enough money to keep me going, and so when I came here, I thought I might do that and I was doubly interested because here was a forestry college and I had a great interest in that, and so I went over there and I registered for courses. I took courses in ecology, which was a word that wasn't very commonly known then, and dendrology, which was the study and identification of all the trees of the area, and of North America really. [00:58:00] I took forest zoology, which was talking about the animals and the life of the—the relationship of the animals and the things that lived in this region, with the environment. I took courses in botany at the university and I took courses in astronomy, a whole year of astronomy at the Department of Physics.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was your interest there?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Oh, I saw the stars all the time.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You wanted to know about them.

MERLIN POLLOCK: I wanted to know more about them, what about that whole aspect of things, I mean those are things that I always was interested in and they became quite easy for me to get to. I didn't have to travel long distance, it was right there, it was a shame not to take advantage of these things. But then I also took courses in English and literature, history, some of those things that I used as academic credits to complete the work for the

degree at the Chicago Art Institute. I got to finish the work for the bachelors and for the masters then, while I was here.

ROBERT F. BROWN: That was something you felt you wanted to do, that would make you feel a bit more accomplished?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, yeah, I wanted to explore these courses, it was so easy to do and I was young and I had a lot of interest and energy, and I thought at the same time, I might as well complete these requirements which the Chicago School of the Art Institute permitted me to do.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Do you think that also, all these out—these were inside interests, something apart from your—what you're employed to do. Do you think this perhaps allowed you to approach your own teaching, and then you were several times a dean, in a rather calm way? [01:00:07]

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, yes, I think that's a good word.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Plenty of these outside areas to put your energy into as well.

MERLIN POLLOCK: I think calm is a word, I think that's one descriptive statement that would fit and that people would agree with. I think that's why I got along quite well with the faculty, I mean I wasn't a hothead or I wasn't always trying to find fault with things. I think I did it in a much more quiet way than a lot of people would. If I had been dean over a long period of time, I would suspect I might have made some changes, but I didn't try to do anything like that while I was just in these, I'd be dean for a year and you know you—there really wasn't enough time to do anything that you wanted to, and I don't know if that's what I would have done.

ROBERT F. BROWN: There were some changes you might have made.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well I think I fought more for space, for adequate space, for decent places to work, because the Art School always seemed to be short-changed that way. Even when Ivan Mestrovic was here, I mean the space that he had was really very inadequate for what he was doing and I did that, those were things that I did. Actually, I got some good space the last time I was dean, I was able to get a much better space for ceramics and for sculpture, and for the graduate painters, yes I worked that quite a bit, that sort of thing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Does this indicate maybe, that the administration looked at the School of Art as a stepchild?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well that's a good word, I think a lot of people would agree with that. That's a strong statement but I think a lot of people would agree with that. [01:02:02] The salaries in the School of Art were always lower, at least we believed they were, than in many of the other places, and the story is that it was easy to get artists as teachers because there was so many of them, they would be glad to have a job like that, where it was much harder to get physicists and mathematicians and all that sort of thing, they had to pay for those. So even though those people didn't make—didn't bring in the money in terms of student tuition that we did and yet what we did helped to pay for them. The School of Art was always way in the black, always has been, it's been one of the paying institutions, but by the same token they were, I think they were very much shortchanged in terms of space and all that sort of thing and still are, they fight for things, but they've got a lot more than they used to have.

ROBERT F. BROWN: When you retired, did you feel you accomplished quite a lot?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well I think I felt I had done a good job, I certainly wasn't ashamed of anything. I felt that I had done a good job and I guess I must have because well, I had that citation there a few years back, when they were honoring certain people that made a contribution to the university. There must have been other people who felt the same way.

ROBERT F. BROWN: In your retirement, have you been able to pursue things that you'd had to postpone?

MERLIN POLLOCK: I don't—well, I probably at times, I work more consistently. I did a series of those color abstracts there over the last two or three years have worked on them, which I stayed at pretty regularly. [01:04:13] The trouble is when you're—with me, and I think with a lot of people, when you're at a university, when you're teaching like that, you get into something for a while and then you get involved—

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ROBERT F. BROWN: This is side two.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, when you're at a university, when you're teaching, you get into problems every once in a while, a committee decision has to be made or other things and it's easy to be drawn away from your painting. You get going at that for a while and then it's hard to get back again, that's one of the big problems. Vacations

and summertime was the best time to get back into the swing of things.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Often doing other things then, with the summer school.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes that's right, or teaching summer school.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you resent a bit, the continual interruptions?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, I don't know, it took it a matter of course I guess and as I say, the salaries were never high here, and you welcomed the opportunity to make a little extra money. When we built this house, we were—I was getting less than \$5,000, and it isn't easy to build a house. We laid the whole floor ourselves and I built the kitchen and did all the painting, and heaven knows whatever else we did, just to make ends meet. A lot of people had to do that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you ever think of sort of aggressively pushing your paintings on dealers and the liked, to see if that might open up?

MERLIN POLLOCK: I didn't do that, no. I guess I felt that I never got a body of work. I'd get some good paintings but I wouldn't have a dozen or 20 or something like that and I always felt well I don't have enough really, to try and push. [00:02:00] I had one of my paintings, big paintings, it was in a faculty show at the Lowe Art Center and there was a gallery in Chicago wanted my work but again, I didn't feel I had enough to really go into that. I didn't have the time and I don't paint fast, I mean I'm not prolific, and I never follow that up at all really. They had seen, as I say, one of my paintings, a rather large one that I had done, and it was at the show, and I had a show for instance, at Michigan State University, when first they had that new gallery. Who gave that gallery to them, gave them money? Oh, one of the five and ten stores.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Kress, or something?

MERLIN POLLOCK: That might be the name. Well anyway, somebody saw one of my paintings, there were a couple of them in the Lowe Art Center, and asked me to have a show there, which I did get a lot of stuff together. I think I could have, if I worked at that, but somehow or other, I guess I didn't have that kind of an ambition and I was always sort of willing and sort of satisfied to be involved in the other things at the university and did them as best I can.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well you did your painting a great deal, you might say for yourself, for the great pleasure of doing them.

MERLIN POLLOCK: I suppose yeah, just that you—it's part of your life actually, when you get that far along, it's something that you just do and when you don't do it, you feel a vacuum of some sort, I mean you almost have to do it. Just maybe like somebody else plays golf and tries to be a very good golf player, something like that, you try to be a painter. [00:04:04] You're constantly stimulated by what you see and what you hear and what you read, and it's hard to sit back and not do anything. I think you feel, as I say a vacuum, you feel very uncomfortable if you're not doing anything.

ROBERT F. BROWN: One of your great loves is the outdoors and a good deal of your work is of nature. What do you, in your work, try to capture or express from the—from nature?

MERLIN POLLOCK: I think if I were to try to pin it down, it would be always the, the uncontrollable. For instance, I did a painting called *Windswept*, that the university has, and it's just a lot of movement, a lot of wind and rocks and that sort of thing. I did rain, another one was called *Fury*, which the university has. It came after one of the big hurricanes went up the coast, and things like that, I don't do just nice quiet sunsets and things of that sort. It's more, it has a little bit more action in it and activity, and I would rather do a storm for instance. That one, there's one in there, well these things unfortunately, yeah the color, they need the color. This one here—

ROBERT F. BROWN: What's the name of this?

MERLIN POLLOCK: This is *Hyde County Lake 1968*, that painting I could have sold a dozen times if I'd had it done. More people liked the painting and talked about it and still talk about it, but I haven't don't any more just like that, oh maybe a few over time. [00:06:10]

ROBERT F. BROWN: And when you moved to abstracts, which you have in recent years, is that a major break or is that simply a part of the way you look at the uncontrollable, as you said, in nature? Do you think they're related in some way, the two types.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yeah, there is a, well there's a lot of thrust and counterthrust and that sort of thing in this thing, and in terms of color and black and white. There's a lot of abstraction here too, I mean the mass of these rocks as it builds up this way and these diagonals picking up across there. Well, there's a lot of the same sort of

a positive structure in, in them. Here this one, the wind is blowing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yes. And some, like this one called *Odyssey 1969*.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, unfortunately it isn't—the color isn't there and you can't—this is a cobalt blue and this is strong and dark here, and there's some orange in there, and it was the colors react against each other. I was going to say fight but it isn't that, they react as a push and pull, and rather positive.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So abstract elements such as color, reflection.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes. They're not complacent normally, there's always something happening.

ROBERT F. BROWN: These are—so this is something that your painting has always been something that's you've always worked at when you could, I mean as you said, it's a vacuum if you don't.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes. [00:08:07]

ROBERT F. BROWN: No matter what your other responsibilities were, this was something that was a compulsion with you.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes, yes, I guess that's why a person becomes a painter or an artist. The one here, the tumbling water and the rocks.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Sure.

MERLIN POLLOCK: There's a couple like that. I think someone said recently, that although they didn't get out into the woods so much, as much as they'd want to, or into nature as much as they wanted to, there was a great satisfaction to know that it was there. Well this is the same way, I mean I may not have been off into the wild places as much as I would like to or lived there as much as I'd like to, and yet I sort of related to it this way, in kind of a—and also, I think outwardly, I'm not a very expressive person. In other words, I'm more quiet and more reserved, even shy I suppose, and yet, my inner nature comes out in these things, I mean it's just the opposite of what I think I look like or act like to people. For instance, now when Barbara, my wife, said that I always listened, which I guess I did, yet I think I have a certain amount of impatience too, that I keep under control I guess, but in my painting I think these things come out. [00:10:08] I paint it and paint it and the thing got sort of quiet, or unresolved, and then I get mad at it you know, and just throw something at it or a couple of whacks at it, or turn it around or do something and all of a sudden I see something happening which I develop and it gets more in the direction of what I want.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And what you want, do you think it's force maybe or the liveliness that happens?

MERLIN POLLOCK: Well, yes force is part of it I think. It's an expressive quality that is related to what I said in the beginning; the more uncontrollable aspects of nature, and things that aren't all fenced in, in other words. This is very vague and sort of a subconscious thing, but I believe that some of my direction is related to that kind of idea. I'm sure there are times when that doesn't apply but I feel it has a lot to do with the way I've gone in my painting. I suppose when I was a student, I did abstract things quite a bit. We had an instructor there at the Chicago Art Institute that did nothing but abstractions and I was in his class and did very well.

ROBERT F. BROWN: That was who, do you remember?

MERLIN POLLOCK: John Norton. He did the murals in the ceiling of the passageway into the Northwestern Station, if you ever cross the bridge there and you walk the long, long corridor, going up a long incline and if you look up, it's all about newspapers. [00:12:16] Now let's see, the *Tribune* had something to do with that, I can't remember now, what the connection is but it's something to do with the *Tribune*. Anyway, I studied with him, he was very strong. He was the only one at Chicago Art Institute at that time, that really was interested in abstraction.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well that would be fairly unusual at that time anywhere, among teaching.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yeah, yeah, because everybody was still in the French school, you know Degas and Renoir and these people, even Matisse and Picasso were normally talked about, they were beginning to be shown in the exhibits at Chicago Art Institute, and we looked at them and looked at them, but it was rare that any teacher would go for that at all at that time. It was rare here too, when we came here you see, that was '46.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Somewhat later.

MERLIN POLLOCK: There was no one doing that at all, not at all.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well at any rate, Norton's teaching may have given you an early release or a sense of working in the undefined abstract.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes it did. I was pretty good at that. We used to have, the school used to have a competition each month or I don't know why it was any more, but we'd have to do a mural. We'd get an assignment, we'd all go into a room, we were supposed to be there all day long, we could go out for lunch for a half an hour, and we'd get an assignment of a wall in a doctor's office or a hospital or something, and we're supposed to do a mural for that thing. We'd have to do the black and white in a certain scale and then do a small color sketch, and knock things out, and for some reason or other, I was pretty good at that. [00:14:07] I don't know why, but partly because I approached it abstractly, I mean if there were figures and so forth, they were all conforming to some geometric structure, and I certainly got a kick out of that. Some people couldn't do it at all, some good painters, they couldn't do that at all.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But your compositional sense was very developed.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Yes, that's true.

ROBERT F. BROWN: While others might have been still fumbling or working intently with color.

MERLIN POLLOCK: Color and painting a head, for instance, or painting a portrait, they knew how to draw and how to develop that sort of thing but beyond that, if that's the work—

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