



Smithsonian  
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Oral history interview with Herbert J.  
Brown, 1965 November 29

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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Herbert J. Brown on November 29, 1965. The interview took place in Natick, Massachusetts, and was conducted by Geoffrey Swift for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's New Deal and the Arts project.

The original transcript was edited. In 2021 the Archives created a more verbatim transcript. 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

GEOFFREY SWIFT: This is an interview with Herbert Brown, who was, from 1939 through 1940 and 1941, the assistant to Thaddeus Clapp, the director of the Federal Arts Project in Massachusetts. The interview was made at Mr. Brown's home, 17 Greenwood Road, in Natick, Massachusetts, on November 29, 1965. The interviewer is Geoffrey Swift.

Now, we might get underway by having you give us a little background on what you were doing, Mr. Brown, before the Project began, or before you got on the Project. You mentioned that you were on the Music Project for a little bit, and other such things.

HERBERT J. BROWN: Yes, well, I left Harvard and started to try to make a living at a very bad time, of course.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Right.

HERBERT J. BROWN: And I was somewhat a trained musician, and wasn't able to keep sufficiently busy playing music, although I did have an orchestra at the time.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HERBERT J. BROWN: So, I went to the Mass State people. I knew a chap there. Asked him what he was doing on these various projects around. One of the things that I thought I might do would be to capitalize on my music by either teaching or working along some line on the music project.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Right.

HERBERT J. BROWN: So, he sent me to a place where they asked what I did, and so, I told them, I played second-rate piano, and saxophone and clarinet. So, for a short time, there, whenever they called me, I appeared wherever they said to appear, and I either played piano or I played saxophone.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Were these just general social functions, the—

HERBERT J. BROWN: Yes, appearances they were making at public gatherings. They appeared at the various hospitals.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Nothing like a standard dance or something like that?

HERBERT J. BROWN: No, it was all concert work.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Concerts, and they're generally something with a public function to them?

HERBERT J. BROWN: Yes. It was a two-hour duration, and maybe two or three times a week.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Right. And you kept this up for, what—

HERBERT J. BROWN: Oh, maybe two or three months.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Two or three months.

HERBERT J. BROWN: And then I got into the archives, where they thought they would use my ability with paperwork and so forth.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. You'd had engineering training?

HERBERT J. BROWN: Yes. And so, I worked there, setting up controls and procedures, and that pretty much was over, and at that time, they suggested I got out to the Art Project.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HERBERT J. BROWN: And I went out there in '39, I think.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HERBERT J. BROWN: At that time, Harley Perkins was the director of the Project.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Right. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HERBERT J. BROWN: And he talked with me, and I had the job of handling the paperwork.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. You didn't know anybody on the project before you joined? In other words, this wasn't a friendship sort of thing, this was—

[Cross talk.]

HERBERT J. BROWN: No, I didn't know anybody, no.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: The state sent you?

HERBERT J. BROWN: Yes. The paperwork, there was—it wasn't greatly involved. Setting up time and production reports and inventory controls, purchasing procedures, and accounting for the material.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Budget controls and things like that, as well?

HERBERT J. BROWN: Yes, I had to make up the forecasts and how they planned on utilizing the money. I had nothing to do directly with the artists from an art point of view. We did index their work when it came in and file it.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Right.

HERBERT J. BROWN: I had more to do with the periphery departments, the picture framing and the wood carving and the carpenter shop. That, from the angle of the planning and scheduling, because that was done pretty much to order. People that took paintings, for example, and the paintings went to all the different public buildings. When they came in and made their selection, they would then have to be framed.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Right.

HERBERT J. BROWN: Of course, the watercolors went into mattes with glass.

[00:05:02]

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Right. And you more or less had what amounted to a big gallery?

HERBERT J. BROWN: I suppose it was that way, yes.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: And those who requested works from the Federal Arts Project to be hung would look through and find up whatever they wanted, and then they could take those?

HERBERT J. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And we kept the records of what they took. One of the things that I did try to work out was to set some sort of material value. Not an aesthetic value or an art value, but the canvas and the pigment, so that the organizations that did take paintings, that were in a position to do so, they reimbursed us for the supplies.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: I see.

HERBERT J. BROWN: So that we had the supplies as an inventory that kept turning over all

the time.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. That was the only payment they made, however, was something for supplies?

HERBERT J. BROWN: Yes, yes. There were many fine paintings there. Some of them, I'd like to have.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Yes. Did you keep the artists informed as to where their works were going? Or were many of them interested—most of them interested in what happened to their work after it was given over to the project?

HERBERT J. BROWN: Some of them were. Some of them were very much interested, and we, of course told them where their paintings were, where they could be viewed.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HERBERT J. BROWN: There was a gallery at the Art Project itself that kept changing all the time.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: So I've heard, yes. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HERBERT J. BROWN: Reggie Zalles had charge of that. He's in Washington.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: I see. Z-A-L-A-S?

HERBERT J. BROWN: Z-A-L-L-E-S.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HERBERT J. BROWN: And of course, there was a group of them that selected the paintings that would be put up in the gallery.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HERBERT J. BROWN: There was Thaddeus Clapp, Gordon Smith.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Did Morrison have anything to do with that, when he was around?

HERBERT J. BROWN: On occasion, yes. Harley Perkins, Sam Green. Sam Green did a lot of etchings.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Yes, I've seen some of them. He was the supervisor in the Boston area, I gather?

HERBERT J. BROWN: Yes.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Was he supervisor for all of Boston, the chief supervisor for Boston, or just of a group of artists? Because I haven't talked to him, yet. I'm going to talk to him soon.

HERBERT J. BROWN: I think pretty much Boston, and then Vernon Smith was down the Cape.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: And Vernon Smith, yes, who's still there, I gather.

HERBERT J. BROWN: Yes, he's a fine artist.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: He was also on the project as a painter and a supervisor?

HERBERT J. BROWN: [Simultaneously] Supervisor, yes. [Coughs.] And then there was Bertha, Betty, Betty Moohall [ph], I guess her name is.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Oh, yes, Moutal.

HERBERT J. BROWN: Moutal.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Moutal, yes.

HERBERT J. BROWN: Yeah, she was in the *Index*.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Yes, I keep running across her name, been trying to find her. Is she still around, do you know?

HERBERT J. BROWN: Gosh, I don't know.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: I think her name is McMillan [ph] now. She's married. Nobody seems to be able to find her. Well, no matter.

HERBERT J. BROWN: But there was Bill, in charge of woodcarving. Thaddeus would know his name.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Yes, I do believe I have his name someplace. I've been trying to look him up.

HERBERT J. BROWN: They were five woodcarvers. It'd be interesting to talk about the woodcarving projects, since one of the outstanding things that I noticed that, people might think, because it was a WPA project, for example, that the different crafts that were in there would come in and just put in their time and collect their money, but it wasn't that way at all. I thought one of the jobs that I might have, that I might be concerned with, would be getting the production out.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HERBERT J. BROWN: We didn't have to worry about the people at all.

[Cross talk.]

GEOFFREY SWIFT: It was no problem.

HERBERT J. BROWN: As a matter of fact, they took pride in what they were doing. And they were men that obviously were used to doing a day's work.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. As we speak of old-world craftsmen, they were of that variety.

HERBERT J. BROWN: Yes. And they really put out the work. And—

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Non-production workers, non-assembly line workers, men who were used to hand work and took the old pride in craftsmanship.

HERBERT J. BROWN: Yeah, they kept going all the time. The frame shop, [coughs]—that frame shop, the fellows in there were right out straight all the time. They really suffered from a lack of picture framers. There were four of them in there, three brothers, and Tom, I'll think of his last name, was in charge of it.

[00:10:13]

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Were they considered part of the woodcarving project, or was that something—

HERBERT J. BROWN: No, that was a separate department.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Separate department, yeah.

HERBERT J. BROWN: And we used to move the work in there. And we didn't store framed pictures as such. Canvases that came in would be put into storage. They would be rated and reviewed.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. They would be on their stretchers, anyway.

HERBERT J. BROWN: Yes, yeah. And they would be stored in that fashion. And then only after someone selected them would they be taken out and framed.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: How do you mean "rated and reviewed"?

HERBERT J. BROWN: Well, they were discussed with the supervisors and the artists, and Thaddeus himself did quite a bit of that work. I think there was a significant improvement in many of the artists, just through getting the expert attention that they were getting.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And they did get expert attention, that is from their immediate supervisors?

HERBERT J. BROWN: Yes, and from the people, Harley Perkins and Thaddeus.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Now, how would that process work? For instance, [HERBERT J. BROWN coughs] a young Boston artist would finish a painting, or a series of paintings—

HERBERT J. BROWN: Well, he would be visited while the paintings were going on.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Right, by his supervisors.

HERBERT J. BROWN: Yes, and then, he would—

GEOFFREY SWIFT: I gather, more often than not, also by Thaddeus, would also visit—

HERBERT J. BROWN: Yes.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: —as many painters as he could, yeah.

HERBERT J. BROWN: And they would bring their work into the Boston office, usually by appointment, by schedule, and their work would be discussed with them. Thaddeus had a perfectly marvelous way of working with the people. It was almost an indirect form of criticism. It was never, This would be better if you did that, but, Might we not consider it this way or that way.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: I see, yes, uh-huh [affirmative].

HERBERT J. BROWN: And I think—

GEOFFREY SWIFT: In other words, a good potential teacher.

HERBERT J. BROWN: I think everybody enjoyed bringing their paintings to him, because even if they were horrible, and some of them, even from my layman point of view, were horrible, he was very gentle. And he lectured, of course, all the time that he was there.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: He did. About the project, or about art in general? I know he lectures now —

HERBERT J. BROWN: Both.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: —Clark University. [Cross talk.]

HERBERT J. BROWN: [Coughs.] And he lectured about the project and its place in the economic scheme of things.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. To whom? Anybody who wanted to hear?

HERBERT J. BROWN: School groups and church groups.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Right.

HERBERT J. BROWN: I used to attend them, when I could, because I enjoyed them. And he frequently had slides with him that he used to get at the Fogg Museum.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Were these rating sessions formal or informal? They sound as if they were probably reasonably informal sorts of sessions.

HERBERT J. BROWN: They followed a definite pattern, but they were informal. It wasn't coming before a court or anything of that sort.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: It's not like the sort of thing that you'd expect a jury before a painting show, during which it's, Yes, no, yes, no, we'll accept this, we won't accept that.

HERBERT J. BROWN: Well, that decided, to a large extent, in what rack we put the painting.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: I see.

HERBERT J. BROWN: Where we might have the artist's painting in a top rack, or some of his other work would be down below.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: I see.

HERBERT J. BROWN: People that came in that were looking for certain types of paintings, well, as I recollect, the top row was perfectly all right to give to anybody, and some of the work in the lower racks was just work of good intention, but not high-quality art.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: I see, so you had them rated qualitatively, not necessarily by style or subject matter or anything like that?

HERBERT J. BROWN: We had them indexed. We knew—

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Medium—

HERBERT J. BROWN: No, pastoral scenes, seascapes. Many of the artists tended to do the same thing. If, back in those days, if you had mentioned still life, I could, just through hearing it, although I wasn't involved with it, rattle off a half a dozen names that always gave—that always did still life.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Even though, I gather, at the same time, there was a great deal of individuality, as far as styles of painting go, in New England at that time? More so, for instance, than in some parts of the country, where this Mexican mural influence of people like Diego Rivera is very strong, in Chicago, for instance?

[00:15:02]

HERBERT J. BROWN: Well, they did some fresco work, there, too.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: In Boston?

HERBERT J. BROWN: Yes.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Yes, I know. That was done on the PWAP, the Public Works of Art Project, that preceded, of course, the WPA.

HERBERT J. BROWN: Well, they did fresco samples, too.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Fresco samples?

HERBERT J. BROWN: Right in the area.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. These were WPA people?

HERBERT J. BROWN: Yes.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Because, of course, the lines became very confused, there, for a while, with the various treasury relief art programs.

HERBERT J. BROWN: I think there was some teaching going on, there, too, because—

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Yes, Reverend [ph] Clapp mentioned a school was set up as training for the younger, less experienced artists.

HERBERT J. BROWN: It wasn't unusual to find one of the supervisors in there with four or five people. And I know that on the *Index*, there was very rigorous training in that, and that was simply beautiful work.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Yes, I've heard something about that. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HERBERT J. BROWN: Much better than the photographs.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Yes, with Elizabeth Moutal and Suzanne Chapman at the museum school, I gather, at the museum, was responsible for developing this technique for rendering crewel embroidery.

HERBERT J. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEOFFREY SWIFT: I've seen photographs of them, I've never seen them side by side, but I've heard that many times, a piece of crewel embroidery would be put beside a water coloring rendering of the two—

[Cross talk.]

HERBERT J. BROWN: We exhibited them side by side.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: —and people would be tempted to touch them to see which was real and which wasn't.

HERBERT J. BROWN: They had to, really, you know.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: As far as the office work was concerned, what kind of people generally came in looking for paintings to hang, to exhibit? These were organizations or individuals?

HERBERT J. BROWN: And schools.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: And schools.

HERBERT J. BROWN: Libraries. Public health hospitals. Federal government agencies, like the custom house.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Did a very large percentage of the work that you received from the painters eventually be—was it eventually loaned out to—

HERBERT J. BROWN: A considerable amount of it was. Of course, the racks were full at the time I left the project. I don't know what the— I left the project, and then Dorothy left shortly after that, so she wasn't there at the time the project ended, either.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HERBERT J. BROWN: So, the final disposition of the paintings, I guess they went into storage.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: They did go into storage, I gather. Yes, that's all a little cloudy as to where they are. Some artists have tried to get back some of their paintings. I think Jack Levine, for instance, at one time or another, some of his paintings were tried to be recovered, and Hyman Bloom, another painter, whom I gather they had a little difficulty getting to exhibit. He had a penchant for destroying his paintings. And one more interesting story about it, Morrison literally almost had to tie him to his chair one day in the studio, while a New York gallery person was there, and they went over and picked out certain things and gave him a big show in New York, and it was the beginning of his success.

HERBERT J. BROWN: Yeah. Some of the artists were very reluctant to—they were shy about their paintings. They were very reluctant to show them.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Jack Levine, of course, and Hyman Bloom, were two of the younger painters on the Project, and two of the more talented, I gather.

HERBERT J. BROWN: Yes.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Jack Levine, well—they've both, of course, gone on to considerable reputations for themselves. At the time, they were very young, in their teens. And I gather, though, this may have been before you were on the Project.

HERBERT J. BROWN: No, I knew Jack. I met Jack.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: But when he went on the Project, I gather there was a little difficulty, because he was thought to be too young. Was there a minimum age for painters on the Project that you can remember?

HERBERT J. BROWN: No, Jack was on there at the time I went with the Project.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I guess they tried to put him on in 1935, when the project first began, and there was a certain amount of difficulty because official channels decided that he was too young.



HERBERT J. BROWN: Well, Jack was an odd person, and you either liked his painting or you didn't like it. Jack would sit and talk with you, and I was impressed with the way he carried on.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: A very articulate man?

HERBERT J. BROWN: Yes, and he had a point of view, and I guess his paintings are—what are they, social satires?

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Social satires, yes, that sort of thing, yeah. The sort of thing that was very popular in the '30s, and he's kept on doing them, and some of them pack quite a wallop.

HERBERT J. BROWN: Of course, many people don't like his paintings. Of course, a lot of people don't like Picasso, either.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Exactly, yes. Well, his paintings, Levine's paintings, have a powerful statement. A strong message, as well as any formal qualities, stylistic qualities, so they offend certain people.

[00:20:07]

HERBERT J. BROWN: I think one of my favorite painters was Karl Oberteuffer.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Yes, now—

HERBERT J. BROWN: He was a watercolorist, and I think—of course, my brother, Jim, was an excellent painter, so I had some exposure to art. Jim could have made his way as a highly successful portrait painter, but he did beautiful watercolors.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: He became an architect?

HERBERT J. BROWN: He became an architect. He's doing architectural work now.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yes, Thaddeus Clapp mentioned—there were two Oberteuffers, weren't there? It was a father and a son?

HERBERT J. BROWN: A father and son, yes. The son is the one I'm thinking of.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: But they were Classicists and quite traditional, [HERBERT J. BROWN coughs] and did beautiful work.

HERBERT J. BROWN: [Clears throat.] The mother also was a painter. But his watercolors were superb. And yet, people didn't pick them out. And I like them tremendously. Because I think watercolors are a harder medium to work in than oils, anyway, to do it well.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: In many ways, I think they are, yes. Lawrence Guffman's [ph] wife has become a fantastically good watercolorist. Do you know her work?

HERBERT J. BROWN: No.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Oh, I can't remember her name, her professional name. She does magnificent work.

HERBERT J. BROWN: Was it Betty Baxton?

GEOFFREY SWIFT: No, no. Well, I'll think of it as we go along. But, well, how were your relations with Washington? I imagine you carried on a good deal of correspondence with Washington?

HERBERT J. BROWN: No, [audio wobbles] I didn't have any—all I had were the—well, through the state office—well, Washington had an office in the state.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Yes, I know.

HERBERT J. BROWN: And I dealt primarily with people there, and I only dealt with a relatively few people.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: It was more or less a question of getting funds, of the allotment of funds

for the Art Project?

HERBERT J. BROWN: I never had any trouble with that.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: But this was more or less your dealing with them?

HERBERT J. BROWN: No, preparing the documents.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: I see.

HERBERT J. BROWN: I guess Morrison had the job of getting the funds.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: I see. The routine, sort of, day to day reports to the—

HERBERT J. BROWN: My responsibility, as I viewed it, was to keep some order and documentation. And those artists, most of them, they didn't care whether they kept records or not.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: I'm sure, yes. But, it was certainly good to have a man with meticulous engineering training [inaudible].

[Cross talk.]

HERBERT J. BROWN: And the other responsibility I took was to keep the overhead down, so that the funds could be used for the artists.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Right. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HERBERT J. BROWN: I felt [clears throat] that it was an art project, and out of \$1,000, [\$]990 of it should be spent for art, and only spend the [\$]10 for the clerical support, and that's, really, in effect, all I was.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: What were the people like in the state office—the state administrative office of the WPA? Were they cooperative?

HERBERT J. BROWN: They were fine with me, yeah. People would run out of materials, although I tried to set up records that would flag when they were running so low that they would run out of them, and if people were running the risk of being idle. They were very cooperative. I could telephone in, and they would telephone the order, rather than going through the four, five, or six days to fill out paper and process it.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HERBERT J. BROWN: And the people handling the personnel records in there, they were fine. I set up very simple, but at the same time, very effective records. [Coughs.] I kept everything—well, in card index trays, so that I was cross-indexed all the time.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: I see.

HERBERT J. BROWN: So that I could pull out—I not only had an alphabetical file, but I had a geographical file. I numbered everything.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: It was pretty much up to you how you wanted to set up the day-to-day administrative operations of the Project?

HERBERT J. BROWN: Oh, I had carte blanche.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: In other words, it wasn't the sort of thing that you might expect to find today, with [HERBERT J. BROWN coughs] big, loose-leaf books full of procedural instructions coming from Washington? Practically none of that?

HERBERT J. BROWN: No, no. They did have their circumscribed procedures for put-ons and separations and making it out in four copies.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Yes, well, that sort of thing, but by and large, the actual business operation of it was up to you?

[00:25:00]

HERBERT J. BROWN: Yes, and one of the things, as I mentioned before to you, I didn't have to be the conscience of the Project at all. That was a misconception I had, and I was happy to change my mind. I felt that there would be a certain amount of—

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Political shenanigans or—

HERBERT J. BROWN: Well, no, performance accounting.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: I see.

HERBERT J. BROWN: You know, just having artists collect their money every week without at least making an effort to produce things. I think they went the other way. I think, at that time, they were only required to work four days a week.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HERBERT J. BROWN: I think many of them worked five or six.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Right.

HERBERT J. BROWN: And turned the work in.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Well, it's funny, I think this is probably typical of painters, especially those who are committed to their profession. They're thankful for, I'm sure, and I've heard this from all of them I've talked to, they were grateful to be given some subsistence so that they could keep on painting, and nothing could get in the way of their painting.

HERBERT J. BROWN: There was no such thing as overtime, of course.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: They didn't look upon it as a job, at all, of course. Just somebody helping them do what they wanted to do.

HERBERT J. BROWN: And I did hear stories that, I don't know if it was pride on their part, or what, but they might not consider a painting good enough to turn in, so they'd hide it and do another one. And I talked with Vernon Smith one day about an artist that hadn't turned some work in, and Vernon told me, he said, Well, I was down there talking with him, and I said, 'Well, what have you been doing? Have you just been walking around, looking to get ideas?' And he said, After I was there for an hour, he pulled out this tremendous amount of work that he wasn't happy with, and he didn't want to turn in.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: I see.

HERBERT J. BROWN: But he had been working. It made all the difference in the world.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Were there a set number of paintings that a painter was required to turn in, or not?

HERBERT J. BROWN: I think the supervisor gauged that pretty well. People who were doing block prints, there would be a run of 25 or something on a block print. But I imagine that there's no such thing as so many square inches.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: No, no, it would seem strange to me, if I were a painter, to have somebody say, You do so many paintings this week, and so many paintings next week, and I'm sure that that was all handled rather delicately between supervisors and the painters themselves.

HERBERT J. BROWN: [Coughs] We used to prepare a lot of Masonite board for them. We'd cut it up and give it to them.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: I see. And yet, as you said before we turned the tape on, they frequently did not make use of the supplies that were provided by the FAP.

HERBERT J. BROWN: Oh, I'm sure they didn't. The amount of paintings that were turned in there, I'm sure added up to more pigment and brushes that were given out. In fact, I know there were artists that never drew any supplies at all.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Do you suppose it was because they were not

aware that they were available?

HERBERT J. BROWN: No, they all knew it.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: They all knew, but simply preferred to, perhaps, mix their own.

HERBERT J. BROWN: See, one of the ways we handled that, we had a very good man in charge of it, Jack Nutting [ph], in charge of the supply room, and as the supervisor made his rounds, he would take a requisition that a painter might have. You know, if it's ink white or any of the colors. Then, while he was going about his business back in the office, Jack Nutting would fill the requisitions.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HERBERT J. BROWN: And also keep individual records, so that a correlation could be made of, well, how much work is this man doing, and how much supply, and so on, and so forth.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HERBERT J. BROWN: But, as I said, by and large, they were a highly moral bunch.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Indeed. Proud and jealous of their work.

HERBERT J. BROWN: Yeah, they wouldn't take anything.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Well, that's encouraging. Encouraging, indeed. Tell me, did you have very much contact with other state offices, for instance, in Connecticut, or such things?

HERBERT J. BROWN: No, just to visit them.

[00:30:00]

GEOFFREY SWIFT: There was, of course, contact on other levels, with Morrison and others. [Coughs.] But you, as an administrative person, didn't exchange information or suggestions with people in Connecticut or New York or Vermont, Maine, or New Hampshire?

HERBERT J. BROWN: No, I visited them. Not frequently. And they visited us, and we discussed how we were handling things.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HERBERT J. BROWN: Of course, I was concerned with having good accountability. You never know, some nut might point the finger at you and say, Well, you're getting \$500 worth of painting supplies a month, and what are you doing, peddling them on the side? And so on, and so forth. And we didn't want to even run the slightest risk of anything like that, so we kept very good records.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And encouraged the others to do the same.

HERBERT J. BROWN: Yes.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Well, now, of course, each state project was technically an individual project, but yet, Morrison was in charge of all of New England. Now, did this mean that, since he was in Boston, more or less, was the Massachusetts state project considered more as the headquarters of New England? Did people report to you, or—

HERBERT J. BROWN: No, he had his regional office in Cambridge.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: In Cambridge.

HERBERT J. BROWN: Which was physically entirely apart from—

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Apart from yours, and administratively, as well?

HERBERT J. BROWN: Yeah, we were out at 881 Commonwealth Avenue.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Right, uh-huh [affirmative]. So, they were two entirely different functions?

HERBERT J. BROWN: And then, when they moved from Commonwealth Avenue over to Cambridge, that's when I left.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: I see. And that was in 1940, '41?

HERBERT J. BROWN: '41, yes. I then went to Curtis-Wright [ph] and went back into industrial engineering.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Looking back on it now, from this vantage point, are there any things that you would think of that you would have done differently as—you think places that the project might have missed out, in this area in particular, or places where they were particularly strong? Of course, everybody points out how strong the *Index* was in New England, and the marvelous production the *Index* had.

HERBERT J. BROWN: Well, I think it was tremendous. I think it was really one of the outstanding things that happened to protect that investment the country had in the art field.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HERBERT J. BROWN: It was really a fine thing. I'm not at all sure—The reason why I hesitate—I'm not at all sure how you set up criteria for creative artists. I think what you finally do, you take the whole barrel, for fear of losing the Jack Levine, for example.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Right.

HERBERT J. BROWN: Even though I'm not a big fan of Jack Levine's, there are other artists whose work I'd much rather have hanging in the living room.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Sure, sure. But when they're at that stage, they all need encouragement.

HERBERT J. BROWN: And the fact that, I think one of the things you could check, though, without being—I don't know—well, you could check the sincerity of the artist. And you could check from where he had been going to school and so on and so forth. Was he looking for a sinecure, or was he really concerned with—

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Yes, I don't suppose it took a supervisor very long to discover whether a painter was dedicated to his work, or simply wanted to dabble in painting [HERBERT J. BROWN coughs] and live on the project. Now, what did you do when, you of course, earlier, mentioned that the vast majority of the painters on the project were sincere and worked not just four days a week, but five and six, and all working hours, but you must have come across some who were kind of slackers, goldbrickers?

HERBERT J. BROWN: I don't know what happened to them. It wasn't my problem.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: It must have been a touchy situation, since it was a relief project, first and foremost.

HERBERT J. BROWN: Yes, and it wasn't my problem to deal with the disciplining of artists. I did have it for the carpenters, the woodcarvers, the frame shop.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: And yet, you say there was no problem to speak of in that area, either?

HERBERT J. BROWN: No, Tom Marsden, that was the chap who I was trying to think of. He was in charge of the frame shop. Well, he had operated his own frame shop down in Copley Square.

[00:35:06]

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HERBERT J. BROWN: And then it folded because of lack of business, but he was a superb picture framer.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HERBERT J. BROWN: And the Traeger [ph] brothers. There were three Traeger [ph] brothers. And the four of them made up the frame shop. And they did gold leafing, and they did this

final craftwork—

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Did you ever put the woodcarvers to work on the frames? Did they ever exchange talents, so to speak, so that the woodcarvers would be set to work carving hand carved wooden frames, or did that ever come about?

HERBERT J. BROWN: We had very little of the decorated—we bought molding, picture molding, picture frame molding, and put that together.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Well, actually, of course, that kind of decorated Baroque frame was not so fashionable then, anyway.

HERBERT J. BROWN: No, it wasn't. The woodcarvers were primarily concerned with getting out furniture. We made lecterns, desks, in fact, I think half the state house has—

GEOFFREY SWIFT: I've heard there's a great deal in there.

HERBERT J. BROWN: —wooden desks that were beautiful. They are works of art. And lecterns and chairs that go on the podium, each side of the lectern.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Decorative wall paneling, as well?

HERBERT J. BROWN: Yes, all types, things. And then, as fill-ins, they did bookends and trays.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: How were the bookends and trays disposed of?

HERBERT J. BROWN: To the schools.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: To the schools. So, it was always going to public institutions. I suppose, actually, they had to. They couldn't be sold to private people. It just wasn't within the scope of the project.

HERBERT J. BROWN: And where a school might need several pairs of bookends. And if we didn't have the carving capacity to do them, we would mold them out of plaster and just give them another four or five pairs out of plaster.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: I see. Were there—

HERBERT J. BROWN: The bookends were beautiful. I wish I'd had a pair, but of course, that wasn't in the cards to get.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Yes. Was there ever a public showing of any of this woodcarving? Was it thought, for instance, [HERBERT J. BROWN coughs] at the time that [inaudible] sufficient quality that it should be gathered together?

HERBERT J. BROWN: Well, at different times, there were showings in the schools.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: In the schools. Did you ever move woodcarvings into the gallery you spoke of?

HERBERT J. BROWN: Yes, we did that, too. And of course we had, apart from the woodcarvers, we had some sculptors that carved in wood.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Yes.

HERBERT J. BROWN: They were part of the creative art group.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Was there a certain amount of give and take between the woodcarvers and the sculptors? I can imagine—

HERBERT J. BROWN: No, the woodcarvers—

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Little snobbishness on the part of the sculptors?

HERBERT J. BROWN: No, they were two different breeds of cat, really.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Different breeds of cat. They probably had really no—

HERBERT J. BROWN: The woodcarver was a craftsman.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: They probably had no reason to communicate.

HERBERT J. BROWN: No, they didn't. They were all very friendly. I just recollected now, how I happened to—my first contact with the Art Project was when I was with the archives. I visited the art project to select paintings to hang up in the archives office.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. This was the archives—

HERBERT J. BROWN: Survey of Federal Archives.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Survey of Federal Archives.

HERBERT J. BROWN: P. M. Hamer [Philip M. Hamer] in Washington. Is he still the archivist?

GEOFFREY SWIFT: I don't know for sure. Now, did that come under the Federal Writers Project?

HERBERT J. BROWN: No, that was entirely separate.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: That was, again, an entirely separate project.

HERBERT J. BROWN: Yeah.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Not really a relief project at all, I gather.

HERBERT J. BROWN: It was. I was, on all of these projects, I was an exempt, non-relief worker, as working more in administrative—

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Oh, yeah, well, I'm aware of that, sure. The administrative personnel was always hired over and above the—you were considered overhead.

HERBERT J. BROWN: We were necessary evils.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: You were the 10 percent you were talking about.

HERBERT J. BROWN: That's right, yeah. So was Dorothy, my wife.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Right. Well, that of course—were you married in those days, or you were married after the project?

HERBERT J. BROWN: No, we got married right after it.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Right afterward, yes.

HERBERT J. BROWN: When I went into industry. No, we got married in '42. We left the project in '41.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: I was going to say, if you had been married during the project, you would have been in better shape than the painters, whom I gather, only one member of a household could be on the Project. And this was the problem with Lawrence Guffman [ph] and his wife. They were married both just after they got out of school in, I think, 1935, but only he could be on the project, and she was never on it, although she was a full-time painter and a housewife, as well. Well, no few people living in sin, I gather. Certain problems there.

[00:40:01]

Well, anything you'd like to add while we have the machine going, that you can think of? Any people you can think of, or anecdotes, amusing or otherwise?

HERBERT J. BROWN: Well, I can remember one time, when we were exhibiting some abstract painting, that the artist came in and had us turn his picture up the other way.

[They laugh.] [HERBERT BROWN coughs].

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Oh, well, history repeats itself. That's happened various places and various times.

HERBERT J. BROWN: And once in a while, we'd have an artist be so particular that they would show a great amount of interest in, well, exactly what kind of molding was going to go on the frame, and how was it going to be treated, was it going to be stippled, or—

[Droning noise begins.]

GEOFFREY SWIFT: And then, of course, there were those at the other end of the spectrum, who couldn't have cared less. As soon as it was out of their hands, it was up to you to do what you wanted with it, yes?

HERBERT J. BROWN: Although, a number of the artists, they had free access to the racks, too. And you'd notice that they would walk out there, and they'd thumb through their paintings to see if they were going out, or whether they were staying there or not.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yes, I can imagine that, yes.

HERBERT J. BROWN: I don't know, I guess the [coughs] paintings that are out are still out. I believe they're still out in their different places.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: They still are, yes. It would be—

[Cross talk.]

HERBERT J. BROWN: I never knew of any [inaudible].

GEOFFREY SWIFT: It would be interesting to have them collected, or valuable to have some kind of an index made of them. I don't think that it's likely ever to be done. But, there are, of course, any number of frescos or murals of one kind or another that have been painted over in the years since, as tastes change, and tastes especially in subject matter, not only in style, in high schools and grammar schools and hospitals and the various other places they were put.

HERBERT J. BROWN: And some of the buildings are torn down.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Buildings have come down, and all kinds of changes have been made. And so, they're fast being lost. And of course, the easel paintings, the individual paintings, they're just as easily lost. They're easily put in the storeroom, or—

HERBERT J. BROWN: Those are the ones I was thinking of, more.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: In later years, the principal of the high school takes one home when he retires, or something like that. So, any number of things can happen to them. So, I just wonder how many artists are curious [HERBERT J. BROWN coughing] about what's become of their work.

[Droning noise begins to decrease.]

HERBERT J. BROWN: Well, as I gather it, although the producing of—[side conversation: Yeah, we'd like some.]—the producing of easel works of art was extremely desirable, and a lot of attention was paid to it. I think preserving the artist was the number one objective, as I think back on it.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Indeed, indeed.

HERBERT J. BROWN: I think you put your finger on it when you said they're a proud bunch.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Sure, sure. Yes, they're just as proud as the craftsmen in their own way, and perhaps even more, in some ways. Because—[Cross talk.]

HERBERT J. BROWN: Go ahead.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: They know they're not only technically proficient, but they're supposed to be imaginative. Whereas the wood craftsmen generally worked, probably, from patterns and such things.

HERBERT J. BROWN: But the popular cartoon conception of the WPA, the "We Putter Around," leaf raking and so forth, that couldn't be farther from the truth.



GEOFFREY SWIFT: Although, it's only natural that the general public, given the prejudices that the general public usually has against artists, and the real lack of knowledge of just how artists carry on, and all they know about is the bohemian life and such things, it's only natural that this would be the general reaction of the public to such an art project. What are we doing subsidizing artists to go have wild parties or such things?

HERBERT J. BROWN: Yeah, I guess the layman thinks it's a waste of money to support an artist, but I don't think so today. I think that—

GEOFFREY SWIFT: No, indeed not, well, I guess the administration in Washington doesn't think so, either. They've got a new bill on the fire that's just been announced. But was there a very large outcry, by and large, against the Arts Project around here that you remember?

HERBERT J. BROWN: More against the Theater Project.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: More against the Theater Project? How so? The subject matter in the drama?

[Cross talk.]

HERBERT J. BROWN: Oh, I guess they thought that they were socially left-wing.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Left-wing, yeah, and critical of the government, I gather that—

HERBERT J. BROWN: That communists were using that as a front.

[00:45:00]

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And, then, of course, the wonderful story about Senator Somebody-Or-Other being accurately quoted in one of the plays in New York, a third of the nation being, you know, ill-fed, ill-clothed, ill-housed, and this caused a tremendous stink.

HERBERT J. BROWN: But the artists that I talked with, as I met them, they didn't talk politics very much.

[Audio begins to fade in and out.]

GEOFFREY SWIFT: No, they talked painting, no doubt. This is generally the way, among themselves.

HERBERT J. BROWN: I'd love to know how many of them are still in art.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Yes, I've been tracking them down, one by one, and a fair number that I've come across are still, in one way or another, in art. Some are commercial artists, some teach, some are, strictly speaking, fine artists, supporting themselves that way, and doing one thing or another. So, still most of them that I've come across are still in some way connected with art.

HERBERT J. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEOFFREY SWIFT: I've yet, in New England, to find anybody on the project, a painter or a sculptor, who has gone off and done something entirely different.

HERBERT J. BROWN: Even Thaddeus is still connected with art. [Inaudible.]

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Yes, yes, he teaches art history at Clark, and is delighted with it.

HERBERT J. BROWN: [Coughs.] Well, it didn't surprise me that he went into the ministry— [Inaudible.]

[END OF AAA\_brown65\_8420\_m.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

