



Smithsonian
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Oral history interview with John Carlis, 1968
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with John Carlis in September 1960. The interview was conducted by Henri Grant for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

HENRI GRANT: This is Henri Ghent interviewing John Carlis, painter, sculptor. John, where were you born and when?

JOHN CARLIS: In Chicago, 1917.

HENRI GRANT: In Chicago? 1917? Are you an only child?

JOHN CARLIS: I'm an only child. I feel close at the moment to fellows and girls I grew up with. I go back to Chicago now and then to see them. I suppose it is part of getting along in years. I feel they're my brothers and sisters. I'm unmarried and I like seeing their grown up children and their children.

HENRI GRANT: Are your parents still alive?

JOHN CARLIS: Neither. My father died in the late forties and my mother died three years ago which would be 1965.

HENRI GRANT: Were either of your parents artistic?

JOHN CARLIS: No. My mother wove in later years. She came out to San Francisco when I was there and studied weaving. And I bought her a loom and she did well with it. And I wish she had started years earlier. She had a ball weaving.

HENRI GRANT: Well she did have, let's say, latent artistic qualities.

JOHN CARLIS: Well, apparently, yeah.

HENRI GRANT: And your father? What did he do for a living?

JOHN CARLIS: He was in the night club business and in insurance. My mother as a girl worked in banks. She was a secretary and an accountant. And she went down to Durham, NC, as a girl and worked as a secretary to Mr. Avery in North Carolina Mutual. And then in Chicago she worked in Jesse Binga's bank. And I guess she was working there when she met my dad.

HENRI GRANT: That was the North Carolina Mutual Insurance Company? In Durham?

JOHN CARLIS: Yes.

HENRI GRANT: Yes, I see. Does your mother come from the south originally?

JOHN CARLIS: My mother was born in Chicago and when she was several months old my grandparents moved to northern Michigan where she was raised. And then she taught in a country school in northern Michigan at eighteen. And then after that, I guess when she was twenty she went down to Detroit to a business college. But she had a very good high school education. She had four years of German. The first job before teaching was somewhere right after high school, was with a German merchant in the same town that she kept books in German, and talked to the clients in German. And she had four years of Latin and was valedictorian of her class, and gave her valedictory in Latin.

HENRI GRANT: Oh, how interesting. And tell me a little bit more about your father. Where does he come from?

JOHN CARLIS: My father was born in Dallas and grew up between Dallas, TX and Ardmore, CA, I mean, Ardmore, OK. He had two brothers and one was shot down in the streets of Dallas when he was seventeen and the other was pushed in a vat of boiling oil. Which I have just written about, I mean, about other things for this thing for Bob Merrill. I think it had great influence on my father's life, losing these brothers in this awful way.

HENRI GRANT:

JOHN CARLIS: She was very, well, my attitude has been very different, I think, that, well, I never cared for

arithmetic or math. And mother had been very good at math and she always felt, yes, that she had the German outlook. She might have been in Germany before the first World War. You know, she was the kind of person who would have understood that approach, yeah. She was careful, industrious and for me to study which I appreciate, you know, more and more in later years. knew I wanted to go to art school and helped me in every way she could. I went on scholarships but I know, you know, after I was grown I realized that were parents who said to their kids, no, you know, you have to do this. But said, all right, my son wants to be an artist, so that's it. And she*d study.

HENRI GRANT: Was your father equally encouraging as far as your artistic aspirations were concerned?

JOHN CARLIS: Yes. Excepting that my parents were divorced when I was a teenager and lived together only off and on when I was a kid. But when my father was home he was always encouraging.

HENRI GRANT: Are you saying that your parents were separated a good deal of your childhood?

JOHN CARLIS: Yeah, yeah. They, it was very curious because they were close in so many ways and yet had problems. Probably the problems had to do with color.

HENRI GRANT: To do with what?

JOHN CARLIS: With color.

HENRI GRANT: Oh, I see.

JOHN CARLIS: Because my father*s brothers had been murdered by white men and he had decided, you know, he was going to make his way, I mean, his underlife in Chicago as a young man with a certain attitude about making it and a hidden resentment about white people. And his, all of his values were sort of white-oriented. I mean he felt that was a kind of middle-class existence he had to work toward. And my mother*s mother was white and she had grown up in a white community, in northern Michigan. And they were both very happy in movies where the quote society unquote movie . And they loved dressing up and going out.

HENRI GRANT: Was your mother very fair-skinned?

JOHN CARLIS: They both were light. No, no, my mother was a good deal more than my dad.

HENRI GRANT: What is the origin, natural origin, of your father*s name Carlis?

JOHN CARLIS: Well he thought maybe it was Portuguese. He thought maybe his father was a Portuguese Negro. There was just the name Charles, but was in slavery misspelled.

HENRI GRANT: He never knew his father? Right?

JOHN CARLIS: Yes, but his parents separated early. My father*s mother was a daughter of a white slave owner named Wilks and a slave woman, and was very light. Her husband was darker. My grandfather Carlis was called Squire and, I guess, sounds like quite a personality. But I think that their marriage was rocky because my grandmother Carlis was torn because of her kind of life and being half white. And wanting to be like her white cousins. And she thought a great deal about gathering and holing onto property. And just trying to think back in recent years I thought maybe that was part of the problem in their marriage.

HENRI GRANT: Quite possible.

JOHN CARLIS: But he left and he went to Arkansas and Grandma Carlis raised her sons. They were grown practically.

HENRI GRANT: How did this affect your own life? Your childhood, growing up in sort of a racially mixed family as it were?

JOHN CARLIS: Well, I grew up in an integrated neighborhood in Chicago where there were black and white families interspersed along the block. I, you see, because I loved my Grandmother Campbell, my mother*s mother, so very much and she loved me I never could think about white people in the same way a lot of my playmates did. And I went to a white Sunday school. I went to a Christian Science Church. My mother and grandmother were members of the Christian Science Church in Chicago. On Sunday mornings I went to that church where there were only half a dozen Negro families in a fairly big congregation. How did it affect me? I think it affect me in feeling that all good things were in white society until I was a teenager and began, I think it was through studying art actually, I began to realize a few things. I remember studying African art for the first time in high school, art history classes, and come home with photographs and books. And mother saying but they*re savages, aren*t they? And I had to explain to her and began studying anthropology and things. But the

thing that I'm trying for Bobbs Merrill has been especially difficult, I think, because it does attempt to probe problems of middle-class Negro life. And is a little more, or rather, more complete than the black areas. Gwendolyn Brooks whom I knew in my twenties had grown up in the more solidly black environment.

HENRI GRANT: This was the poetess?

JOHN CARLIS: Yes, and has written rather marvelous things completely out of a black polarity. And, of course, Chicago produced Richard Bise who lived, in our area that we called the black belt, because we lived farther out. But I feel my experiences are valid and that I've a statement to make too, I mean, writing and painting that is part of America.

HENRI GRANT: Tell me about some of your childhood school experiences, you know.

JOHN CARLIS: Well, I suppose color is the outstanding thing. One of my chums who is quite a dark had a mother, who is still living, who could pass for white and worked in a downtown office as a white person. And when the school term began each year there were several, half dozen mothers, who always made it a point to find time to come in and meet the new teacher. My mother did and Walter's mother did and several others. And Mrs. Tucker would come in and the teacher would say, yes? And she would say I'm Mrs. Tucker, I'm Walter's mother. And the teacher would spin. It would take her a few minutes to recover and the kids would be rather amused because we went through this every year. And it always amused us that the white teachers didn't know, didn't realize that there were little black boys who had mothers whose skin was quite white and that their mothers loved them.

HENRI GRANT: It's quite a revelation for some?

JOHN CARLIS: Yeah, and Mrs. Tucker was quite chic and quite aristocratic bearing, and Walter had a teacher who was senile one year who was collecting a salary simply because she was someone's relative and they put her on the payroll. And we used to bait her and she was quite ill. It was sad because you could sometimes have glimpses of the fact that she had been a great teacher. But her hair was just a ratty mess and she smelled, and she had and she had clothes pins, I mean, big ones safety pins in her clothes.

HENRI GRANT: Real Eccentric.

JOHN CARLIS: She was an eccentric and a very sick old lady and she made a point of having her lunch -- she had lunch with the teachers for some weeks and then they must have laughed at her. So she would pick out a class, not the white kids, but the Negroes and she'd tell different ones each day, I will have lunch at your house tomorrow.

HENRI GRANT: Would it actually happen?

JOHN CARLIS: Yeah. They'd go home and tell their mothers that the teacher was coming to lunch. And so when she told me I told my grandmother, because my mother worked and we were at my grandmother's house. She said all right, fine. So she prepared a special lunch. When Mrs. Osborn appeared, Grandma looked rather surprised because she had on a worn, smelly, dirty purple, faded purple winter coat done up with a big safety pin. And during the lunch she picked up her napkin and lustily blew her nose in it. So . . .

HENRI GRANT: Is this a white teacher or a black one?

JOHN CARLIS: A white teacher, an old white woman, who had been assigned through a political thing. So she was out in a couple of weeks because my grandmother and mother had talked to other mothers in the neighborhood and my mother went downtown. They probably sent her some place else, but she was not in our neighborhood school

HENRI GRANT: Did you like school?

JOHN CARLIS: Yes. The older I get I think I had a rather happy childhood. It was, we were actually an area of maybe a dozen square blocks within a white, a large white area. Nowadays it's black for miles around. But in those days it wasn't and so we had a rather unusual neighborhood situation where we were all very close and knew one another. The status of most of the Negro families there was that the men worked in the post office. There were a few, there was a lawyer that I can think of, there was a man who was an inspector in the stock yards that had hired at an average salary. There was my father who worked in insurance sometimes and there were other men who had office jobs of one sort or another. Most of the men had very nice cars. My father always had a Cadillac or a Packard. We had a Boy Scout Troop and a Girl Scout Troop and as teenagers we had a boys and girls social club. And in those days we were banned from white dance halls even a few blocks from where we lived. And certainly from downtown. But we, I'm very glad that my aunt was sponsor of this club and that parents in the neighborhood all thought it was a good thing for us to have, this boy-girl club. And we met I think

twice a month at different homes and at one another*s houses. And then we had a dance in the winter and a couple dances in the summer or the other way around. We had these parties and it kept us out of odd places, you know.

HENRI GRANT: Yeah.

JOHN CARLIS: It was kind of a good thing. I*m the only one, you know, who*s trying to be an artist. The rest of them are very sold and one of them left the neighborhood and came back to New York just before we started this little club. He was Robert Lowery who was fire commissioner of New York City.

HENRI GRANT: Today? Yeah, yeah.

JOHN CARLIS: Another fellow out of that bunch is an architect for the Chicago Public Schools. He*s in the public schools system. And another fellow is in the Chicago Fire Department in a high kind of job. And many of them have their little businesses and there are many teachers. Why I mentioned Gwendolyn Brooks was after I was sixteen and we lived farther over east in the Negro area. My father took a flat and thought it would be better for me and better for all of us to be nearer Negroes who were doing things. As it turned out it was, because we were right across the street from Good Shepherd Community Church and I heard Richard Wright speak there and I heard A. Phillip Randolph and heard Walter White and people like that. And I*d go with kids in the neighborhood. We*d hop on the elevators and go down to Orchestra Hall to the Ballet Russe and to hear Mario Anderson and Paul Robeson and Roland Hayes.

HENRI GRANT: It sounds like a very varied cultural childhood you had.

JOHN CARLIS: Yeah. There is an actress in New York today, a Negro actress, whose name is Oseo Archer. And I don*t know whether you know her.

HENRI GRANT: I know the name, but I don*t know her personally.

JOHN CARLIS: She*s a gifted and wonderful woman and she has a son exactly my age. We were playmates years ago in Inglewood. And at the time they lived in Inglewood her husband was an intern. He was doing his intern work and she worked downtown in Chicago in a dress house to help her husband through med school. And he later became head of Provident Hospital in Chicago and then Dean of Medicine at Howard. But while I was still growing up in Inglewood, Charles* parents moved down to Fifty-first and South Parkway when Dr. Adams became head of Provident. And they were then in a higher income bracket than us people out in the sticks. And Mrs. Adams called, Oseo Archer is her maiden name, of course, Mrs. Adams called my mother and said they had enrolled Charles in a private school which was in a town house on Michigan Avenue and that they were very informal classes, and that French was taught and they sat around the fireplace. They had some very top teachers and the teaching staff was all Negro and that I should be placed in that school. And my parents talked it over and it wasn*t inexpensive but they thought about it, about maybe that was what to do. And they decided . . .

HENRI GRANT: It was or was not expensive?

JOHN CARLIS: It was a little bit expensive.

HENRI GRANT: I see.

JOHN CARLIS: And my parents considered it even though it was a little bit expensive. They considered it for me as a possibility that it might help. And then they both said well the public schools are quite good, my school and it was good and it still is today a good grade school. But I felt slighted. I mean I wanted to go at the time.

HENRI GRANT: Yes, of course.

JOHN CARLIS: But in later years I*ve been glad that I had the public school experience. And of course I grew up right during the Depression when there was very little money. I think that that experience was good, too, because I made friends out in the North Shore and I went to a lot of interesting evening and parties and knew people. But I also one year or another worked in odd little neighborhood stores and washed windows and scrubbed floors and, you know, took magazines subscriptions, door-to-door things. I remember I had one job for a year in a little delicatessen that paid three dollars a week.

HENRI GRANT: That was a lot of money.

JOHN CARLIS: Well, the carfare was only seven cents to get me to high school and I had the rest of the money for any little odds and ends.

HENRI GRANT: When you were in high school is that where you really began to pursue an art career in earnest or was it before that?

JOHN CARLIS: It was before. I wrote for a catalog for Saturday classes at the Art Institute when I was eight. And I got a notice back then that said you had to be twelve. So then I saved and when I was twelve I registered in Saturday classes. So when I went to high school I'd been going to Saturday classes at the Art Institute for a year already. And I knew when I was in sixth and seventh grade that I wanted was an arts course. And I studied for four years and had a very good art history class and the teacher was Miss Manual who was quite good. And I had the job of carrying the lantern slide to and from the classes so I felt closer to the material in handling slides. And I took examinations for scholarships during I think, maybe my junior year. And there was a school called the American Academy of Art down on Michigan Avenue. And I won. And then they discovered that I was Negro and I couldn't have it. It was a very tough thing for my teacher to tell me that I couldn't have it because . . .

HENRI GRANT: Oh, they didn't give you the prize?

JOHN CARLIS: No. Well they told her that they were very sorry but they did not accept Negro students. So she was more upset than I was. But in my senior year the day after our prom, there was an examination in the Art Institute for a scholarship to be given one graduate of the entire Chicago public school system and I went down and won it. And so I got into, I had my art education in because I had a one year scholarship and during the middle of my first year I began working cutting mats for the annual exhibition and I did janitor work. And also had an extended scholarship so I got on through.

HENRI GRANT: John, how do you account for the fact that you were not upset when you didn't receive the prize that you had legitimately won?

JOHN CARLIS: Well, I think maybe through my mother's attitude. When I go to church today in New York I go to St. Mark's in the Bowery because I'm very interested in what Father Allen is doing in that neighborhood. And when there was the first march on Washington in 1962 some friends persuaded or interested me in going down to St. Mark's in the Bowery and going along with them in their buses. And so I've gone to St. Mark's which is Episcopalian. But my mother was a staunch Christian Scientist and her attitude was simply that there is no loss. She said that wasn't the place for you, and there'll be something better. And I think that was helpful.

HENRI GRANT: And you believed it?

JOHN CARLIS: Well, I must've. I was fourteen or fifteen.

HENRI GRANT: And very impressionable and because your mother said it one is inclined to believe it.

JOHN CARLIS: Yeah, but I had been entered in the Christian Science Sunday School when I was four.

HENRI GRANT: I see.

JOHN CARLIS: And had gone every Sunday so that I was very much indoctrinated in that kind of thinking.

HENRI GRANT: In retrospect do you think that that theory or attitude was right?

JOHN CARLIS: I think so at the time.

HENRI GRANT: I mean now, today.

JOHN CARLIS: Oh, no, today I would fight.*

HENRI GRANT: So in retrospect you'd, you wouldn't say, accept it?

JOHN CARLIS: No, no.

HENRI GRANT: I see. When you were a child did you like to read a lot?

JOHN CARLIS: Yeah.

HENRI GRANT: What sort of things did you like to read?

JOHN CARLIS: I'm sorry to say, fiction. But I read lots of things. There was a very good branch library in the little park near us and I read, oh, I remember doing the Dewey Decimal numbers for the art books. And I read a lot of things like that before I was ten. And I was given the Book of Knowledge, you know, that encyclopedia set when I was nine, I think. And it's a pretty good set of books. And Charles Adams, I mentioned, had gotten the Britanica and I was a little jealous of that. Anyway I liked the Book of Knowledge and I read that a lot. And I had a library card which I used from the time I was eight. And I did read a lot more than I have in recent years.

HENRI GRANT: Do you recall in your childhood any sounds, tactile, or visual associations you have occasion to call upon now that you're a man and an artist?

JOHN CARLIS: The first thing I remember visually is a necklace my mother had which was some yellow beads twisted glass with bits of yellow metal. And I remember quilts. And I remember in particular a kind of raspberry pink washed out edging on the quilt. In recent years I began thinking about painting a certain things. I was having dreams of certain kinds of structures and they were recurrent. And I said to someone, you know, I think I'll paint dreams because, you know, it's surreal and I've been thinking of all these old structures. And I hadn't been in Chicago in years and I went back and went out to the end of Jackson Park Elevated Line and there was the structure I'd seen as a kid which had come back to me. And over a block from our house in a little cottage that site way back on they lot with a long, narrow walk leading up to it. And I had remembered that and that had been coming back in the recurrent dreams. And I was rather interested that, you know, I could go back after forty years and see these things.

HENRI GRANT: Very interesting. Your religious background, and I do think you consider that you background was a fairly religious one, do you find that that has influenced you as an adult?

JOHN CARLIS: No. Well, I think it modifies my life somewhat. In New York I went, I've been through some rather rough years and I prayed. I know people who don't, you know, have anything to do with pray. I went as I say on Sunday mornings to a Christian Science Sunday School. It was a very full, I suppose, religious childhood because Sunday evenings I went to Negro churches in the neighborhood and there were half a dozen. I went to one or another and I heard a great many different pastors speak to us and neighborhood fathers who would come in and speak to us. You know, my family background is religious. My grandfather read his Bible. My grandmother read her Christian Science lesson every day. My mother and I read together every morning before I went to school. So now there is that. And my mother explained what she could about Judaism to me as a little boy. When there were Jewish holidays she'd open the Bible and show me the Passover and where the Blood had been put on the doorposts. And then she bought matzos and said this is bread, unleavened bread, dear. And this is what our Jewish neighbors have and what it means. Which I am grateful for.

HENRI GRANT: Yes, it helps you to understand them and their religion which I think is very intelligent, certainly desirable. John, now, when you graduated from high school in Chicago -- did you graduate in Chicago?

JOHN CARLIS: Yes.

HENRI GRANT: And what happened after that?

JOHN CARLIS: Well, as I said I took an exam for a scholarship at the Art Institute of Chicago and won. I was seventeen in April of 1934 and I graduated in June. And in September I went to the Art Institute and I probably was one of the youngest people there.

HENRI GRANT: Do you hold a degree?

JOHN CARLIS: No.

HENRI GRANT: No?

JOHN CARLIS: No.

HENRI GRANT: How many years did you stay at the Art Institute?

JOHN CARLIS: Seven.

HENRI GRANT: Seven?

JOHN CARLIS: But I worked there as an assistant instructor in printing and they wouldn't put my name in the catalog as an assistant instructor. I asked again and again. And there were other, I mean, there were white students who did assistant teaching who got credit. But that was one thing they felt they couldn't do.

HENRI GRANT: Do you think that was because of race?

JOHN CARLIS: Yeah. And also I wasn't, well it was that I suppose also I hadn't been asked expressly by the office to teach printing but I was being paid a small salary as an assistant to the printing arts instructor. I was paid fifteen dollars a week, every two weeks I got a check for thirty dollars. And the idea was that I was his apprentice. But when the students came in he didn't like working with students very much and he'd turn them over to me at the beginning of each year and say you take them, John, you know. And I'd take them through type cases and how to work with type and how to use the proof press and helped them get there pages done. And usually there were phone class within the term from studios that needed new employees and those students went out and got jobs. And then when there was no one available anymore why one of the instructors would say we have a very good young man here who exhibits with the Society of Typographic Arts and he has worked for us for several years and we'd like you to interview him and he happens to be colored. And they'd

say, well, don't think about it. We don't want any niggers and we don't want any Jews.

HENRI GRANT: Oh, I see.

JOHN CARLIS: And Katharine Kuh from New York was in those days placement secretary for the school and a good friend of mine because I'd worked for her, helping, she had a little gallery, helping arrange her new shows. And we became quite good friends. So she was anxious to see me placed in a job.

HENRI GRANT: What's her name?

JOHN CARLIS: Katharine Kuh. She's the art critic for the Sunday Review of Literature. She used to live practically on the other side of this wall. She lived right around the corner here. Anyway, she would try to me and they would, the officers, this was say 1937 or so, '38. They'd say the same thing to her, which would be very upsetting since she was Jewish. So she'd say, John, I just put them on the black list. (laughing)

HENRI GRANT: Oh, great.

JOHN CARLIS: She'd be so angry.

HENRI GRANT: John, when and how did a personal identity apart from your own family begin? Because you told me how close you were to your family, how much you loved them, and how much they loved you, etc., etc. But when did you begin to establish a personal identity apart from your family?

JOHN CARLIS: Oh, I suppose, during the war in San Francisco. That was a time of, you know, cutting the apron strings. I wanted to enlist and I was helping at home. Then I was earning more money. I was helping. But and finally most of my friends were in the Army and my mother was dead set against my enlisting. And I went to Frank Neil and Dorothy Nail's house one evening and there was a chap there who was working as a dining car waiter between Chicago and Oakland, CA. And after he left they said, John, that's what you should do, get away from home. If you got a job as a dining car waiter out west you'd have a war deferment which would please your mother and then also you could be earning and also you'd be away from home. So I went downtown the next day and I was hired.

HENRI GRANT: How old were you when this happened?

JOHN CARLIS: I was twenty-five.

HENRI GRANT: Now, let's go back, after the Institute for about seven years at the Institute of Art in Chicago and after you finished studying at the Institute, that's when you went to San Francisco?

JOHN CARLIS: No. There was a break of, let's see. I know I was at the Institute seven years. Seventeen, so there was a year when I was not there.

HENRI GRANT: I see.

JOHN CARLIS: But during the time I was there I painted and exhibited. I also met Alain Locke and I worked with a group who helped to establish the Southside Community Arts Center.

HENRI GRANT: In Chicago?

JOHN CARLIS: In Chicago. And it used to be very busy. Of course, I was a lot younger, but we all worked with countless things far into the night. We'd have daytime jobs and then work late at night. And I painted. I also did free-lance work. I did some book designs for one or two private persons. And I did bookplates and line labels and things like that. But I painted and exhibited in Kansas City at the William Nelson Rockhill -- is it memorial or?

HENRI GRANT: I'm not familiar with it.

JOHN CARLIS: And I exhibited at Dillard. I won a prize at Dillard University and I exhibited in Atlanta and at MacMillan Gallery in New York City. And a painting was reproduced in Art News out of that exhibition. And I had a painting reproduced in Alain Locke's book, The Negro in Art. I also taught evenings. I had a class in design at the Southside Community Art Center. And I had a class of women who were mostly domestics, older women. And I loved them. And they liked me and we got on very well. And I would bring material from the Art Institute's Slide Department and started them all on various projects that were more or less scaled for each one. And they came very faithfully and I enjoyed them. This broke when I went west, of course. During the time I was at the Southside Community Art Center a woman named Enis Cunningham Stark came and taught a class in poetry. She was a white lady from the north side who was a rather important art patron of the day in Chicago. We became friends, I mean, everyone in her class. Most of the people in her class became good friends. And Gwendolyn Brooks was in that class and Enis encouraged Gwendolyn a great deal. And she used to bring records of various poets which was rather new in those days. But she had recordings of Yeats reading and of Rachel

Lindsay and Langston Hughes and various people. Langston Hughes visited the class. Peter de Vries who no writes for The New Yorker so often and is a wonderful novelist was a great friend of Enis* and he took the class on several occasions. And the girl he eventually married was a friend of Enis* and she took the class when Enis went to Europe or California or somewhere or other. I*m trying to think of other people who were connected with that.

HENRI GRANT: Now John, let*s go back to when you left Chicago and went to San Francisco. What did you do there?

JOHN CARLIS: I worked for the Southern Pacific Railway for a month as a dining car waiter on a train which went to Portland, Oregon. We also went down to Los Angeles. We went into El Paso, Texas, on one trip.

HENRI GRANT: Why did you only work for a month?

JOHN CARLIS: I boarded, well, originally I lived I think for maybe a few nights or maybe a week at a hotel which was owned by the Southern Pacific Railway and one of the men worked with said that he and his wife lived in a house of a man and his wife who had a vacant room, and that perhaps I*d like to live there. And I went out and it seemed much nicer, and Mrs. Richardson suggested I work in a ship yard. She said you can make a lot more money and why travel and not make any money. And she said if you want to be war deferred for your mother*s sake and all that, why not try and get in the ship yards. So one afternoon when I was in town and off, I went to the ship yards and like zoom I was in. And started the next day as an assistant ship fitter. And that was a great experience. It was out-of-doors and there was the noise of building the ships and I wore overalls and it was very removed from the Chicago world of art which I had wanted very badly to move in and be a part of. It was outdoors. I was the assistant to a white ship fitter who was illiterate and had problems reading the blue prints. And it was a few days before I realized seeing him turn the blue prints around, that he was illiterate. And so he seized the fact that not only was I literate but I could read blue prints, and got me a job placing in boiler foundations. The parts looked very similar in hand but they were each of slightly different proportion because of the shear of the ship. And so I then was sent back and forth to the mold loft and then plate shop. And had a job setting these, working with him setting these engine foundations in the ships.

HENRI GRANT: Well, did you have any time to paint during this period in San Francisco?

JOHN CARLIS: Yes. I worked days and in the evening I was off I think at four o'clock and I*d get out and I*d rush home which wasn*t many blocks away and bathe and go right to the Oakland Library. Maybe I*d go downtown and have supper, but I think I had supper with that family more often. And then I*d go to the library and to the picture collection which was on the second floor in those days. And there was a Miss Rogers who was quite an interesting woman. And she talked to me about printing presses in San Francisco, and private presses in the Berkeley area. And talked about painting and talked about, we talked about folk music and John Jacob Miles. And I think he had appeared on radio program in San Francisco. And she had a brother-in-law who was associated with that. And then she said one evening that Negro History Week was coming and would I make a poster for it. So I made a very ambitious poster. A painting of a figure and panels of lettering as if they were carved in stone. I did it at night in my room because I wanted to attract attention in Oakland and I thought also, Miss Rogers had been very nice to me. And I wanted to do the very best thing I could do. What happened was that a former assistant of hers, a fellow who had worked in the library, saw it and told her he would like to meet me. He was a Californian, of a Danish California family, and he said he*s like this poster so much. So then we met and after a few meetings decided to take a loft in San Francisco, which was my idea. From Chicago I knew about people who were living and working in lofts and I said in our free time why not paint -- he painted and had gotten a M.A. degree, as a matter of fact from Cal -- and make things for some shops and stores. And I think my draft board called me again and I was deferred because I was at the ship yards and then later that work ended and I was in an aircraft plant down the peninsula and Milts was down there too. We were a team, riveting bomber noses. We won a War Bond prize for riveting bomber noses. And then we started making a line of greeting cards. I was anxious to produce beautiful books and I thought anything we could do that was toward printing what would build up some printing experience and sources and money, maybe, toward presses would be good. so one day I went into Amberg Hurst, which was the smartest shop in town and said I would like to design a group of Christmas cards for you. And they said, well, it certainly would be and why don*t you bring us in something. so I did and then they said, well, now we like these very much, but why don*t you change this, or modify this, or we like this. What we*d like would be twenty-four designs and we*ll wholesale them. And maybe, you know, run a hundred and a quarter, a thousand, or something like that. So I went back and worked on them, but then I also made some sketches of San Francisco scenes of the cable cars and the Ferry building and Fisherman*s Wharf and things like that, and quickly got them printed and hand colored and went to Paul Elder*s Bookstore and old them. And I met Mrs. Elder who*s very nice and I said might I put the name of your shop on the back of the cards. And she said, oh, that would be fine. We*d like that. So I produced a line of line cuts, hand colored of San Francisco scene cards for Paul Elder and Company and sold them. And then a little later when Amberg Hurst gave me an order for around \$2,000 for cards they said, well, of course, you understand you can*t sell any place else because we*re going to wholesale. And I said but I didn*t understand. I said I had been selling at Paul Elder*s.

So by maneuvering that way, I was able to sell to Gouse when they came. They came the next week and they wanted things. So that was the way we started in business.

HENRI GRANT: Oh, I see. So how long did this association last?

JOHN CARLIS: We were in business nine years. We developed a letterhead, wholesale decorating arts and we made -- Milts mad mosaic table tops and we made, we got a kiln and made tile for fireplace facings and for table tops and bathrooms and showers. Then we made more and more greeting cards and then we bought at 1827 Union an old building. Our friends who had been buying around San Francisco at that time told us that is was not a wise investment, but we needed to be on a business street for truck deliveries. And it had two stores and we could make a flat big enough of the two of us on the second floor. And I redesigned the building and we painted it Mediterranean and white with pink and white trim. And made the second floor very modern. All of it was completely modernized. We put in a new foundation; we found we had to. It was all shored up and a foundation what shot in concrete. And we had a little atrium upstairs and a patio at the back. It had French doors everywhere. California you can have a lot of light and flowers and things. So it was very pleasant.

HENRI GRANT: So when you left San Francisco was that when you came to New York?

JOHN CARLIS: No, we decided that we wanted to live in the country and we sold out in San Francisco, or Milts wanted to. I didn*t.

HENRI GRANT: The business?

JOHN CARLIS: No, the house, the property.

HENRI GRANT: Oh, I see.

JOHN CARLIS: We sold it and we bought a big house and a big barn in Greenwood, CA, which is between Auburn and Plasterville. It*s in the mother lode country. And Miltson wanted a mother lode country kind of house with a porch all around it. So, it*s actually a New England style. And we found one for thirty-six hundred dollars and got it. And then we spent about ten thousand fixing it up and fixing up the barn. and Milts refused to have a telephone, so we had . . .

HENRI GRANT: Why is that?

JOHN CARLIS: A quirk of some kind. And our business was growing oddly enough. I mean after eight years even in that little post office in Greenwood we received in the mail every day half a dozen postcards from shops asking whether they might have our Christmas catalog or whether they might have our birthday line. And it seemed that we were at a place where we could have had a very decent living and working not too hard at it and then lave free time to paint which is what we wanted. What actually happened was that we were so far removed from our sources of paper that in the fall when our orders came which were more orders than we had every had we were unable to fill them. We had always prided ourselves on doing the card orders quickly and well and delivered promptly. And it was very difficult to have handfuls of orders that we couldn*t fill.

HENRI GRANT: Yes.

JOHN CARLIS: We*d drive down to Sacramento to the Paper Company which was the same company we had dealt with in San Francisco. And we*d say we need so much more paper. We would buy in the spring a quantity of paper and another quantity in summer and then plan on the paper houses, Lewis Salback, which had known us from the beginning in San Francisco would stock certain cover papers for us which we would buy in September and October and November. but they wouldn*t do this in Sacramento so we had a bad season. I was upset about it and went away for a year.

HENRI GRANT: Where did you go?

JOHN CARLIS: I went to Europe. I traveled in Italy and south of France and Spain. And I had a rented cottage in the Canary Islands.

HENRI GRANT: Well did you do any work there?

JOHN CARLIS: I painted. I painted and I read. I sent to England for paperback books. And we*d worked very hard for a long time and I needed a long rest I guess. I imagine I painted and I made notes about things to write.

HENRI GRANT: John, aside from you painting at the Art Institute in Chicago did you every study, for example, in San Francisco or in New York?

JOHN CARLIS: No, I have never bee in regular art classes in San Francisco or in New York. In Chicago I studied ceramics at Holhoff*s and a friend of mine in our school days, Lawrence Jones, lived and worked at Holhoff*s. He

worked in the dining room as a waiter and had a little room in the tower. And a close relationship with Miss Adams who had the old time social attitude and is very friendly and he introduced me to her and she was quite a figure. She'd come down to dinner and he had a gold-headed cane. She was quite a personality. And I would I remember going several seasons to her house to study ceramics.

HENRI GRANT: Tell me about the things that you painted when you were in Europe for that year.

JOHN CARLIS: Oh, that year I painted rather differently. They were gouaches and I suppose rather impressionist. The big loose representations with bright color and gardens and landscape scenes modified out of things that I saw, could see out of the window where I was surrounded by the views of the sea or the banana plantations and things like that.

HENRI GRANT: How would you describe your style of painting?

JOHN CARLIS: Well, I've had several styles. And the things I think I'm doing at the moment are not like any of them. I showed you a record album cover a moment ago which was a kind of . . . it was the way I painted in the thirties -- of Negroes in a rather romanticized north African backgrounds and lots of drapery, I mean, clothing that was draped. I think that today there is so much to look at. To begin with, the television screen which most families look at numberless hours each week. And there's a great deal of drama in news photographs in all the magazines. I seem to feel that the things I'd want to paint would have a . . . I'd like to use paint as an area for social protest. I'd like to paint, I'd like to use the news photographs of the recent disturbances, of the rioting in Chicago, for example, in a stylized way. I'd like to do that. I'd also like to do a series showing, well, a popular theme for white American artists seems to be the family around the model and the model is black. And in the artist's studio I'd like to do a shift on that, you know, a black bourgeois family, a bourgeois artist, and a white model. And a popular theme for white artists, at least in the twenties and thirties and they'd say "Afternoon Idle" and show the Negro nursemaid or the colored girl with their little children and the white people sitting on the steps. And I'd like to reverse that and have a white nursemaid and a black family. I'd like to do that kind of thing for shock value, for whatever it's worth.

HENRI GRANT: This prompts me to ask you if you are interested in breaking or bending conventions as it were?

JOHN CARLIS: Yeah, both. Breaking and bending.

HENRI GRANT: Would it be done for shock value, for shock value's sake? Do you think it would be helpful to do this in formal and educational context?

JOHN CARLIS: I think, I think, yeah, I'd like certainly not to do it to be antagonistic but just to try and make people think about how things are. Like isn't there a book called World Upside Down or to just, you know, turn things the other way to examine, to give people a chance to examine things a little more closely.

HENRI GRANT: John, I know that you paint and you've talked a good deal about that, but you've also sculpted. Let's talk about your sculpture. I saw some things that were done, I believe, in wire.

JOHN CARLIS: Yeah. Well, years ago in Chicago I worked in terra cotta and I studied mold making at the Art Institute and I made animal things in those days. I think I gave a photograph of a horse around here. I used to make casts of that and sell it to friends, but not so many years ago, in New York -- I've forgotten how it started -- I started working with iron wire and I got terribly excited about it and I made some sculpture in iron wire instead of soldered and had them gold-plated. Peter Fink, the photographer, liked them very much and bought one. And another friend, Gertrude Carlin, who's a jeweler here in town liked one very much. And Elvi Elder, the set designer, has one. Let's see, Rught Aaronson, who is with the firm in the Empire State Building, has another. I think I have a photograph of it here. I exhibited them at the Far Gallery, and Bertha Schaefer had them. These were all small things, none taller than ten inches. And Lee Nordeness showed some in an exhibition which had a theme of athletes. And he said, well I happened to meet Lee on a plane trip to Detroit, the day people went to visit the Archives of American Art. And we talked and he said, you know, if you want I'd like you in a show. And I like these things. If you want to make some things that were athletic. So I made some polo players and other things. But that's really the extent of my work as a sculptor, although I'm at present time making some maquettes of things for Mrs. Allan Learned who has a little gallery called The Sculpture Gallery a few doors from the Museum of Modern Art. And they are showing some photographs and some maquettes right now up in Albany for things hoping to place, to show things that would be developed for university campuses. And I talked to her about the possibility of things being enlarged by professional caste and boiler makers and people like that. That interests me. I don't think it's at all necessary for an artist to himself work with big forms, I mean, no more than it is for an architect to build a house that he designs. I think that I have a sense of form and can make maquettes of things which can be placed in front of a photograph of a building and give some sense of it. And then go ahead and have a builder make it.

HENRI GRANT: I think sometimes things in miniature can be as effective as something, you know, that's blown up in size.

JOHN CARLIS: That*s larger. Well, of course.

HENRI GRANT: That*s definitely larger.

JOHN CARLIS: Well, traditionally sculptors have given work out to people who point it up and make it bigger. And there*s been a lot of, there*s been some feeling that it*s just lost sculpture or it wasn*t as good, which I don*t believe in a bit. I mean, I saw the Picasso sculpture in Chicago a few months ago. It*s absolutely marvelous and he didn*t built it. And it*s a great break-through, I feel in sculpture for public places because it uses the same sheet metal that is used in buildings and skyscrapers as they go up today, parts of the skyscrapers. And it*s, it has a kind of lightness. I don*t think sculpture has to be monumental and heavy necessarily.

HENRI GRANT: In order to be good or impressive.

JOHN CARLIS: No, now more than a piece has to be, you know, one . . .

HENRI GRANT: Has to be loud.

JOHN CARLIS: . . . has to be loud or something.

HENRI GRANT: Yes. John, do you have any heroes, I mean, do you have any current heroes, painters, sculptors?

JOHN CARLIS: I think Frank Lloyd Wright was a decided early hero. I knew about him first in high school and I read his autobiography and was quite impressed. And then in the Chicago area there are so many examples of his work that are easily seen. The Robey House was not far from where we lived and I knew that. And then during his school days we made field trips to various houses. And I remember in art school days I used to work often at night in the museum print shop and then at nine o*clock I*d cross the street and spray table mats in a sweat shop run by one of the teachers. she sold plastic table mats that were lacquer sprayed and I*d work there until two o*clock in the morning. And then get on the Congress Street elevated to go home, and I*d look up at the tower of the auditorium which Wright writes about and of his days there working with Adler and Sullivan. And I*d think of his being young and starting out life and how he had to fight for his position and for the chance to be head of that drafting room. And I*d think, well, if he can make it I can. And it*s two a.m. I*ll be all right and I*ll be back in the morning.

HENRI GRANT: Who were some of your friends and associates in the art world?

JOHN CARLIS: My friends have, well, it was Romare Beardeu who introduced us. Another friend is Mrs. Norman Bell Geddes, who is known as Edith Leechson in the business. She works in theatre as a costume designer.

HENRI GRANT: Are there others?

JOHN CARLIS: Well there*s Mosell. Do you know Mosell Thompson? I think you said you did. You know, Mosell is a great designer and for years he did Macy*s Christmas display. The displays that face -- what*s it called? Herald Square. Probably few people realize that a black artist was responsible for those. But he did the drawings and models for Blair Display Company. Or Bliss! I think it*s Bliss Display. And Mosell has also done a great many show posters that have been plastered all over Broadway and in the daily papers. And he has done things for WBA, for WBAI. There*s a radio station that he has done lots of things for. I see Jim Stout and we have lunch and dinner and talk. He*s a black art director at Seventeen. He*s been there about ten years now.

HENRI GRANT: At Seventeen Magazine, is it?

JOHN CARLIS: Yeah. And Jimmy Newman who is an artist representative and is black. And we*re old friends. Aldzier Cortor I used to see a great deal of. I think he*s probably moved out of town now but he was just last year in a big exhibition up in Harlem at Fifty-fifth and Broadway. Eldzier had two Guggenheims years ago and he*s reproduced in most books about black artists. He*s been shown twice in Life Magazine in great big color spreads of his work.

HENRI GRANT: Do you know Norman Lewis?

JOHN CARLIS: No, I don*t.

HENRI GRANT: You don*t?

JOHN CARLIS: No.

HENRI GRANT: Do you know Spinky Alston?

JOHN CARLIS: Oh, yes, yes.

HENRI GRANT: You told me earlier that you are unmarried.

JOHN CARLIS: Yes.

HENRI GRANT: And you also spoke about traveling a year in Europe after you left California, but you also went to Africa, didn't you?

JOHN CARLIS: Yes, that was four years ago for Harry Belafonte.

HENRI GRANT: Where was it? It was Kenya that you . . .

JOHN CARLIS: Yes.

HENRI GRANT: What did you do there?

JOHN CARLIS: I was an assistant art director. I was an assistant to John Pratt who is married to Katharine Durham and I had a work shop where we copied old masks in a light-weight plastic material. The idea behind that was that we would use half a dozen masks in one dance and maybe twelve or more in another. Not only are those things valuable and impossible to have in such number but very heavy to transport and heavy for the dancers to wear. So I had this shop where we copied them in light-weight material and then painted to look as if they were old which was exciting. We also made four models of the sets. And we made two versions. A larger version and a small one. And we made trials of, oh, dyed fabrics and things like that that were used in the show.

HENRI GRANT: How long were you there?

JOHN CARLIS: I was there four months. Other people stayed longer and the project never came to pass, unfortunately. But it was fun while we were there.

HENRI GRANT: What's life like in Kenya?

JOHN CARLIS: We arrived around September first which was the tail end of the rainy season. And I guess the rainy season is pretty rough because it rains hard just about twenty-four hours a day.

HENRI GRANT: Wow!

JOHN CARLIS: It stops for a little while but never at the same time but for a little while in the afternoon and that's usually when you put woolen clothes out on the line in the sun to keep them from rotting. But it still has the look in spite of several tall buildings of a sleepy French colonial town. The old houses have wide upper verandahs and jalousies and the streets are planted with huge trees. I think some of them are mango trees. And there's an African market which has all kinds of local produce. There's another end of the market where all of the consumer goods come from Red China, batteries and things like pots and pans and handkerchiefs and things like that come from Red China because we won't deal with Kenya. There were things like shoe polish and dentifrice that we bought and used which were made in Red China and we were told we couldn't bring them home, of course. None of that stuff could enter the country.

HENRI GRANT: Did you ever meet the President?

JOHN CARLIS: Yes, I did. I have the greatest admiration for him. He is very impressive figure. I met Malcolm X in Kenya.

HENRI GRANT: Were you equally impressed with him?

JOHN CARLIS: I was, well, more impressed. I talked to him for three hours, for one thing. I went to meet, I was introduced to the President, but Malcolm -- he said he was just Malcolm, not X. He said I don't use the X anymore -- had been to Mecca and had an entirely new attitude. One which was quite different from the attitude that I had seen on American television. And he was a more impressive man.

HENRI GRANT: John, what about your political affiliations?

JOHN CARLIS: Well, I'm a Democratic but you know it's a moot question today.

HENRI GRANT: Yeah, pretty tough. What do you think about . . . ?

JOHN CARLIS: Humphrey?

HENRI GRANT: Humphrey and Nixon, Agnew and Muskie, McCarthy.

JOHN CARLIS: Well, I think the Agnew -- Nixon thing is just international fascism and I believe in McCarthy. But

the way things are set up politically here I suppose I'll vote for Humphrey because I think that's the only way I think the party could stay together is to at least right now try and get Humphrey in and see what he can do. I think it would be disastrous to try and break and made another party at the moment.

HENRI GRANT: Do you think it's possible for Humphrey to be his own man having aligned himself with the current administrations* foreign policy with regard to Vietnam and a good many other things?

JOHN CARLIS: Well I hope so. Look how Johnson shifted after he was elected. We all voted for Johnson, or at least I did, hoping that when he promised, when he said anti-war, I got right in there. So he certainly shifted.

HENRI GRANT: So it's just as fair for Humphrey to do an opposite turn as it is for Johnson to have shifted after he was elected.

JOHN CARLIS: It seems so. It seems so to me.

HENRI GRANT: Well let's hope that he will. What are your sentiments about the Vietnam War?

JOHN CARLIS: I think it should be ended. I think that it's a ruthless war of aggression.

HENRI GRANT: Do you agree with a great many Americans that we shouldn't be there at all?

JOHN CARLIS: I agree with the people who say we shouldn't be there.

HENRI GRANT: John, you seem to have your hands full with your paintings and the commercial art you do to sustain yourself financially. I'm wondering if you had any time for hobbies?

JOHN CARLIS: No, I don't think I have any hobbies beyond trying to do things I've talked about. I listen to music; I like to dance, you know. I enjoy being with friends, have dinner. Oh, theatre, I would say, I'm very interested in theatre as an art form. And I'm interested in films, you know, just how much the film makers feel can be fed to the public at the moment. I'd say seeing films and being away of reading is a hobby.

HENRI GRANT: Are you contemplating any experiments with color or new materials in the future?

JOHN CARLIS: Yes, I'm using them.

HENRI GRANT: Would you elaborate on it, you know, tell me about it.

JOHN CARLIS: Well, for sculpture, that is, my metal sculptures in public places I have some notions which I think are new. At least I haven't seen them around. I'd rather not talk about them too much, but I want to develop models fairly soon to show along lines, I mean, new lines for things like this.

HENRI GRANT: Surely.

JOHN CARLIS: I can say that I think that there are a great many things around us. Look at Times Square -- that use batteries or lights. And, of course, there are a number of artists and a number of sculptors who have been working this way. but not in a monumental way. That's on tack in particular for monumental sculpture in public places.

HENRI GRANT: John, are you currently represented here in New York City?

JOHN CARLIS: Not really. I have photographs of work on file at the Art Information Center with Miss Betsy Chamberlain. but I have not approached a gallery with a great reputation until I have a body of work. No, I don't, to just answer your question.

HENRI GRANT: Do you think you would encounter any difficulty on racial lines, granted that your artistic efforts would be of sufficient quality?

JOHN CARLIS: Not now. I don't think so at all now. I've been invited by a number of galleries and Betty Chamberlain has introduced me at dinner parties at her house to various people who have galleries who've said, "We want black artists."

HENRI GRANT: Other than the incident when you were a child in Chicago, that is of having won a prize and didn't receive it because you're black, have you encountered racial prejudice as a black artist?

JOHN CARLIS: As a black artist I have encountered, you know . . .

HENRI GRANT: Subtle or overt?

JOHN CARLIS: Yes. I encountered it trying to work in advertising studios in Chicago as a kid as I think I said

earlier, a great deal of prejudice or color prejudice. And curiously enough, only the other day I went through a rather curious thing with one advertising office here in New York. I did some work for the Hugh Agency and the art buyer was pleased with what I did. and then he said he was going to call a studio and make an appointment to see this man he*d like me to meet. So I said fine. And I talked to the man*s secretary and an appointment was set up for a Wednesday morning at 9 a.m. When I went in at nine no one was in the office and at nine thirty his secretary came and looked in my direction and she said, oh, you. We he won*t be in today and I*m very sorry but our manager will see you. And I tried not to show her that I thought it was rude to not even ask my name. I mean, I could have been anybody coming in. She didn*t know that I was the man and it seemed fairly obvious that the owner of the studio had said I don*t want to see this fellow and so that*s that and I*ll be out of town today. So I said, well, I*ll come back. And she said, no, no, no. She said Mr. So-and-So, our manager, will see you and it was as if she*d said I*ve been instructed to say that Mr. So-and-So, our manager will see you. And I thought it was a little strange that she didn*t say good morning, are you Mr. Carlis? I*m so sorry but Mr. So-and-so is out of town today and I was unable to reach you yesterday afternoon but I*ve been trying to get you on the telephone to say that he couldn*t see you today. But she didn*t say that. So then when I saw the manager he looked through my things rather quickly and he said, you know, I know things are really tough. Aren*t they? I know things are really tough out there but this isn*t the kind of thing we need. And how long have you known So-and-So, this is the art buyer who sent me, and I told him. And he asked about the job that I had done for them which was kind of far out and he said, well, he*s a kook anyway. You know, he*s really kind of a kook. And so then he said, well, I guess things are pretty tough but thank you for coming in. Gee, I*m very sorry Mr. So-and-So was out of town today, I really am. And I said, well, it*s quite all right. So then I went out and the receptionist looked at me in a very unfriendly way, you know. And so I smiled and I said good morning, thank you very much and good-bye. And I called my friend and told him that I wished they had let me know that the man I was supposed to see wasn*t going to be there. And I said that the manager who saw me commiserated with me about how tough things were, which I didn*t appreciate. So he was furious and he called that office. And the man called me shortly after and apologized. He said I*m very sorry I was called out of town and I*m very sorry my secretary didn*t have time to try and reach you and say this. And the reason that my assistant mentioned business being tough is that it really has been. He said we just haven*t had anything in the last two months and he said it* really been very tough. So when I saw my friend again for drinks I told him that. And he said that*s just not true. He said, I give them half a million dollars worth of business a year. Oh, I guess I old him all this on the phone. He said he called him right back and said I*m very sorry to know that things have been so tough for you. Which I thought was very amusing. I guess from my point of view that*s an example of color prejudice. In galleries over the years I*ve found very little of it. It just was that we, I and other black artists I knew, just simply couldn*t afford as easily as many white artists to devote time to painting and have things to show to white galleries. But I feel, I think, that the better galleries have always been open. I think there*s been very little prejudice. maybe, maybe not, excuse me, but maybe not for big commissions, you know. Maybe I feel that if there*s something with \$50,000 involved why they are less apt to shoot it to a black artist than to a white artist.

HENRI GRANT: As you well know we are experiencing a steadily mounting rise of black nationalism in our country. Has it affected you and your approach to your work?

JOHN CARLIS: Yes, it has.

HENRI GRANT: In what way?

JOHN CARLIS: Well, I have a contract with Bobb Merrill writing about growing up in Chicago, and this began with Doubleday four years ago. And it was just about complete but my stand has certainly been, I would say, has been modified considerably over the four years by all the things which have come about in the news. Four years ago when I took the outline into Doubleday they were interested. It passed their editors three times and then flunked out on the fourth go-around. Then it went to an agent, Carl Brandt, and they took it around to various publishers who were leery of this material and felt it was too far out. Of course, in the four year period they can*t find enough material because of the shift. And because there is a demand to know about black life in the United States.

HENRI GRANT: What*s the title of the book again?

JOHN CARLIS: Well, the working title is Coming of Age in the USA.

HENRI GRANT: I see. And it will be published by whom?

JOHN CARLIS: Bobbs Merrill and Company. The editor there is bob Emerson whom you may know.

HENRI GRANT: Will this be in novel form? Will it be fiction or what?

JOHN CARLIS: It*s, well, like we say, you know, there*s no market for a novel today. And that the whole thing, information and fiction is shifting so. It*s like painting and sculpture. I mean, you go to openings and you see the

was moving out like sculpture and colored so that the painting has become a sculpture. I have this thing with a great many people talking. I talk but a great many other people talk. And so I feel that it has a cumulative affect which is rather like montage. I'm very excited about this project, I really am.

HENRI GRANT: Will it be a long book?

JOHN CARLIS: It's fairly long. It will be maybe 250 pages after it's edited. And it has photographs of my family that go back to 1860.

HENRI GRANT: Fantastic.

JOHN CARLIS: Because I went home and found some old tintypes and other things. And I've lost a great many pictures but the publisher wants to include these and I think it's a good idea, and I think it would be a good idea for white Americans to see lots of the photographs. Many families have many, many more than I have that and have some notion of black life in the United States from snapshots and -- what do they call? Salon photographs.

HENRI GRANT: Yes.

JOHN CARLIS: . . . as well.

HENRI GRANT: John, will this book be geared strictly for commercial consumption or will it also be available to schools and . . .

JOHN CARLIS: Oh, both. I hope so. Both.

HENRI GRANT: How long did it take you to write the book?

JOHN CARLIS: Well, I've been with, I started four years ago. I sent three pages to Doubleday's and within a day or two had a note back from McCormick, the editor and chair, and it said everybody who had read those pages is very interested and thinks you can write. And I'd like you to come in and talk about it and talk about an outline and maybe a contract.

HENRI GRANT: But they are not in fact publishing it?

JOHN CARLIS: They're not publishing it, no. As I say, I made the outline and I had not an advance. What was it? I can't think of the phrase -- anyway I had a sum of money which I will repay out of my first royalties from the other publisher. And I went on working with it and a secretary called me one day and said, oh, you should be very pleased, it passed the committee this afternoon. I said, gee, swell, that's great. So she said, however, there are three other committees and I'll call you in a day or two. So in a day or two she called or, I guess, another week and she said, I'm very happy to tell you that it passed the committee this morning. And I said, fine. So then another week went by and there was another committee and I passed. And then there was a final committee and I didn't. And I was saddened, of course. And Ken McCormick called me in and he said, you know, if it makes you feel any better, you were in the company of some very good established writers who were kicked out this morning.

HENRI GRANT: But that doesn't pay very big dividends does it?

JOHN CARLIS: Well, I felt, it was kind of him to tell me that, though. He needn't have. I mean, I started out with something and seemed to be moving along with it and I've run into people who've had manuscripts under their arms for ten or twelve years, walking around with them. So I'm pleased as punch that now there's a definite, I mean, this thing is going to appear in the spring.

HENRI GRANT: Is this your first attempt at writing a book?

JOHN CARLIS: Yes.

HENRI GRANT: Did you find it difficult?

JOHN CARLIS: Not, no, because I've a Chicago friend, a white writer, whose name is James Purdy and James wrote something called Malcolm a few years back which I was quite interested in. And I said I wanted to write. I've wanted to write for a long, long time but felt I needed more experience, just in life. And I talked to James about it and he said you've got to write about things you really know about. That you've really lived through. And so I started writing about my childhood.

HENRI GRANT: Evidently it was interesting enough to be of interest to publishers. Because I think it's quite fantastic.

JOHN CARLIS: Well, I think it was fortunate, yes.

HENRI GRANT: Speaking of books and publications. You also have a book coming out called How to Make Your Own Greeting Cards.

JOHN CARLIS: That*s right.

HENRI GRANT: Coming out this month, September.

JOHN CARLIS: Yeah, yeah, that*s right. That*s with Watson Guptil. That*s a great firm.

HENRI GRANT: Let*s talk about them.

JOHN CARLIS: Well, someone suggested that I go in and see Watson Guptil. My studio is on Forty-six Street, a block away from them. I*m between Fifth and Sixth and they are over near Broadway. So I phoned the editor and I was able to make an appointment and went in. I said I had some ideas for "how to do it" books. And I had several roughed out but I said that among them is something about greeting cards. And I said I*d been in the business for nine years and I brought some invoices and ads and samples of the cards. And he said, well, great, it*s a great subject and a lot of people are interested, so why don*t you do it. And you start and we*ll give you a contract and an advance. It worked out that way.

HENRI GRANT: So, it*s coming out very shortly.

JOHN CARLIS: It*ll be out in a few weeks.

HENRI GRANT: Great, great, great, great.

JOHN CARLIS: It*s in their fall-winter catalog for 1968.

HENRI GRANT: And, of course, you*ve done covers for Opera News . . .

JOHN CARLIS: In New York, I was art director of Opera News Magazine for a couple of seasons. Mosell did a cover for us which you may have seen. It*s a big cover.

HENRI GRANT: If you had the opportunity, would you prefer to live in Europe, Africa, or any other country other than the United States?

JOHN CARLIS: Well, that*s quite a question, but I . . . yes, I think I*d like . . . I*ve never lived in London or Paris. I*m fascinated with Dublin. Maybe that*s a hobby, a lot of armchair traveling. I don*t know about living abroad, but I*d certainly like to see other countries and I*d like to see East Africa and be able to live there a little while. I think there*s a great sense of tomorrow and promise in Africa. It*s the kind of thing we*ve lost in this country. Maybe we had it here in the 1870s or so, but I think it must be in Tanganyika and Kenya. It must be terribly exciting. I know Kenya is, even with all of their problems.

HENRI GRANT: Getting back to the question of being black. Would you prefer to be known as an artist who is black or as a black artist? What are your sentiments on this?

JOHN CARLIS: I*d prefer to be known as an artist. Or better yet, I*d prefer to have my work known. I don*t think, you know, we don*t think of Pushkin as, you know, a black poet or a poet who is black. You think of him actually as a Russian poet.

HENRI GRANT: He definitely was black?

JOHN CARLIS: Yes, absolutely. His grandfather was black, wasn*t that true?

HENRI GRANT: Yes.

JOHN CARLIS: I*m very happy to see the work "black" used because I think nowadays instead of Negro or colored, I think that black has been avoided for so long in this country that it*s healthy to bring it out. And say that it*s just as right to use as white. And I*m disturbed when white American friends say Americans, meaning white Americans, and Negroes, meaning something else.

HENRI GRANT: Yes, yes, I know what you mean. Do you think that the Negro artist should now direct his efforts exclusively to the black community? That is, by exhibiting exclusively in black communities, colleges, universities, etc., or do you think he should sort of divide it between the non-black community and his own community?

JOHN CARLIS: Well, I think he should work for the entire society. I don't think a black graphic artist or painter should work for the black community entirely any more than a singer or dancer or whatever. Any more than Sidney Portier should make films for a black audience.

HENRI GRANT: I agree with you.

JOHN CARLIS: Good.

HENRI GRANT: In summing up, John, would you just tell me in your own words where you think art is going or headed in this country, either as a black artists or just as an artist. What are your sentiments about the direction art is taking in this country?

JOHN CARLIS: Well, we hear a great deal about the population explosion and I think that without a doubt the larger cities or the de-centralized cities or whatever they are, the superblocks, are going to demand another kind of art. Something that is quite new. I think that the vogue for large paintings and for larger-scaled sculptures is going to become a, very much a reality that the superblocks and the new spaces will demand another kind of thing. I remember in art school days, a teacher talking about painting and saying that very soon we'd be flying on much more frequent flights all over the globe and looking down at the earth. And she said for centuries men have been painting things close at hand, but as we look down at the earth we'll be painting other patterns. And she said we'll see the rivers and we'll see the cities from up on high and that will be an entirely new kind of vision. And in recent years when I've made quite a few jet flights I feel, you know, how right she was. That there is a new kind of vision and probably form new buildings and new ways of travel we're going to have a painted, sculptural kind of aesthetic that will be seen from a new angle. You might say, you know, is the era of painting over? I don't think so. I think there will always be a place for a small picture. I think portraiture will continue as long as there are people that the image of people we love we will want to have near. But I feel that naturalistic painting will move away and that there will be more and more knowledge of plastic means. And I think the television screen static shows patterns that are interesting many times and certainly the new titles for films show what can happen with all kinds of new images. The washes of color and the textures and I think that there's going to be more and more of an appreciation for the essential elements of painting rather than of literal representations of objects and things.

HENRI GRANT: Thank you very much, John Carlis.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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