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Oral history interview with Charles Henry
Alston, 1968 October 19

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Transcript

Interview

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH CHARLES ALSTON

OCTOBER 19, 1968

INTERVIEWER: AL MURRAY

AM: AL MURRAY

CA: CHARLES ALSTON

AM: Let's start with your birthplace and your early childhood.

CA: What are you going to do, ask me questions?

AM: Well, just go ahead and talk, tell about where you were born, and when and . . . ?

CA: Well, I was born in Charlotte, North Carolina, in 1907. My father was an Episcopal minister. I didn't know my father very well. He died when I was quite young, before I was three years old. But he was apparently a very highly respected citizen in Charlotte. He was the rector of this Episcopal Church which had also a parochial school attached and he was principal of the school. In fact he was known in those days as the Booker T. Washington of Charlotte. That was when Booker T. was at the height of his performance. As I say, he died when I was a little less than three. I stayed in Charlotte until I was about seven, I guess. My mother remarried and came to New York to live. Incidentally, my mother married Romy's uncle.

AM: Romy Bearden?

CA: Romy Bearden's uncle. that's how the connection . . . we call each other cousin. We're actually not blood cousins but we're cousins by marriage. For two of three years after that I stayed in the South with my grandmother. And then eventually we all moved to New York. So that practically all of my early training, schooling, and what not is out of New York. I remember North Carolina very vividly because even in those days (and I was very young) the red clay used to intrigue me. I'd get buckets of it and put it through strainers and make things out of it. I think that's the first art experience I remember, making things. I say that I left Charlotte very early but up until the time I was about, oh, twelve of thirteen, I always went back and spent the summers there. So by that time I was old enough to manipulate the clay and I could make things. I remember I made a head of Abraham Lincoln. And I even got ambitious enough to try a nude figure. And I almost got a severe whipping out of that because at one point I got stuck on the exact formation of a woman's breast and I asked my aunt to let me see her breast. I didn't do that again. But mostly I grew up in New York City. I attended grammar school here, went to De Witt Clinton High School and from high school went to Columbia. I came to of Columbia and worked a year as a boys' work director at a little community house in Harlem, the Utopia House. Incidentally, that's where I discovered -- and I insist that I discovered -- Mr. Jacob Lawrence. Jake was a kid of, oh, about ten years old. Mothers used to leave their children at Utopia House in the morning while they went to work; they'd have a program for them, and then the parents would pick them up after work. Jake was one of these kids. I had an art class as one of the activities and Jake was interested. And I noticed almost immediately what an interesting eye this kid had. He didn't work like the other kids. He knew pretty definitely what he wanted to do and it didn't relate to the typical kind of thing that children of that age do. At that time he was interested in very fantastic masks. I showed him how to build up forms and make papier-mache masks and then he would paint them. I wish there were some of those masks around today. I think probably they've all been destroyed, probably. But they were fantastically interesting. I'm glad I had the sense at that time to realize that this kid had a very unusual, unique kind of talent, and way of seeing things. I wouldn't even let him watch me paint. And I tried my best just to protect this very unique quality in Jake. It's funny, I mean, because just about the same time another kid was there who is now a rather well-known lithographer, Bob Blackburn. But Bob was a different kind of kid. He was a much more selectic type. Bob could watch you do something and in five minutes he could do it. But Jake was not interested in what you did. I mean he had his thing. And I didn't mind of Bob asked questions or wanted to see. I'd show him pictures. But Jake I tried to keep a little separate. I don't know how I got on that.

AM: That was after Columbia. Suppose we leave this and go back to Columbia in a little detail. What did you take at Columbia, and what not?

CA: Well, when I finished high school -- I was very active in high school. I was a member of the Artister. I was a pretty good student, and I was art editor of the magazine, the Clinton Magpie. I ran the art club. So I was very much interested and had the chance to -- at least I had the offer of a scholarship to the Yale School of Fine Arts.

AM: What year was this?

CA: Oh, my God, let me count back. That was roughly 1924 or 1925. I graduated in 1925. I don't know whether it was just plain dumb luck or what, but somehow I had the impression that to come right out of high school and go into an art school would deprive me of certain aspects of education that I didn't want to be deprived of. I thought I was young enough to go from high school, take a general course in college and that it would be time enough then to specialize. And I thought perhaps going into a school of fine arts might limit the other cultural aspects that I was interested in. I was interested in music and poetry and the theatre. And I wanted as broad an education as I could get. I've never regretted that decision, as a matter of fact. So I didn't go to the Yale School of Fine Arts. Instead I went to Columbia. I took a general course at Columbia. (The reason I hesitate is I'm trying to remember.) Because I think at that time I decided that maybe a career in art wasn't economically practical and that maybe I had better opt for something that related to art but had more promise of security. So I decided to point my course toward architecture, a pre-architectural course. That was a big mistake because the math floored me. I had a very bad background in math and when I realized how much math I had to have for architecture I didn't look like a good idea. Plus the fact that I got a little discouraged about architecture. I stayed in pre-architectural work for about a year and when I saw what was happening, particularly to Negro architects, I mean redesigning store front churches and that kind of thing, that didn't appeal to me at all. And the only established Negro architect that I knew at that time was Tandy. And Tandy was a man of vision and talent. He was not always too practical. He thought in his terms, a whole area or city, this kind of thing. And he just didn't live in the right time -- I mean there was no opportunity for one to do this. Most of his work was in this reconstructing a brownstone or making a church out of something. There was just not any other opportunities available and you didn't see much prospect of getting in one of the big established firms. So that summer I worked as a bellhop at a hotel out in Glen Cove, Long Island, and most of the other bellhops were kids going into medical school. And I got the crazy idea just through associating, palling around with them, that I wanted to be a doctor. So I came back and changed my course from pre-architecture to pre-medical. Well, that was a bigger mistake. When I got through with physics and chemistry and all that foolishness, I realized that was just not my bag. So I finally did what I should have done all along; just took a general course majoring in fine arts and history. I could handle these things. I only flunked one course in my whole school career. That was physics. And that really shook me up because I had gotten 100 in physics in high school in the regent's and it was exactly the same subject matter. I couldn't understand why I couldn't handle college physics and I was so concerned that I went back to high school and talked to the head of the physics department there. I said, "I can't understand it. It's the same subject matter." And he told me not to worry about it too much. He said actually Columbia uses that particular physics course as a weed-out to keep the quotas going into medicine small and they deliberately make it obscure. Because I knew kids who were taking the same course in university extension or other areas who got through it all right. But it was a knockout in the college. And you got no help. You'd go to the professor with a question (incidentally, the professor wrote the book), and he'd just look at you and smile and say, "Well, that's for you to find out." Well, anyway, I had a fairly good time at Columbia. I drew for "The Jester," and I was art editor of the literary magazine. I knew I couldn't be editor of "The Jester." I never had a particular love for Columbia. Most kids have some of this alma mater feeling of sentimentality about going back to reunions. I don't have any of that feeling about Columbia. I don't know whether or not to get into all the aspects, but I've been very concerned recently about what's happening over there now. And I've been very interested in supporting these kids, particularly the black kids there. Because, whether I approve of all their tactics or not, I think they at least have the guts to articulate and do something about things that have griped any number of generations of Negroes who've come through Columbia, just subtle things that indicated Columbia's attitude. For instance, even in college there were one or two art courses, like a course in figure drawing, that I was not allowed to take; there might be a white nude model. So I was exempt from that course. It was a prerequisite for other courses but they skipped it over. Little things like that. Also I never had any real intimate feeling about Columbia. I never felt that they were straight on racial situations. Anyway, I graduated and for a year I worked, as I said, in this boys' club. And then I got the Arthur Wesley Dow Fellowship in Fine Arts which allowed me to get my masters at Teachers College. And I suppose that was a turning point for me. Because I wasn't really interested in teaching. But at the time Teachers College had some of the most advanced teachers in New York in the art field. A great number of the faculty had studied in Paris at the L'Hote Academy and they were way out. My first introduction really to modern art was at Teacher's College. And because I wasn't particularly interested in the teaching side and was more interested in the creative side, I think I got a lot more attention from the teachers than the average run of teachers coming to get a Masters. There were two or three people who were very influential in my later artistic development: a man by the name of Charles Martin, for instance, who was a wonderful teacher. Primarily Martin was an artist who had to teach, as so many of us have to do. That was roughly the time, too, of the high point, I might say, in Harlem. I mean Harlem was a fantastically interesting place in those days, in 1928, 1929. Harlem was really a cultural center in this town. And this is the only time I remember, with the exception of the night club era, the Cotton Club and Connie's Inn, and Small's, when downtown came very often to Harlem. And it was a very exciting time. I was a little young. Luckily I got in just on the fringe of it. It was on its way out, really. But I can remember wonderful sessions with people like Claude McKay and Langston (Hughes), Wally Thurman, Walter White. Incidentally, Walter White had a great influence on my life. Walter, as well as being a driving force in the NAACP, was an intellectual and a writer of considerable ability. But the one

thing I always think back to about Walter was the things he did for young people he believed had promise. I haven't seen much of that since. I mean a young kid is not usually thought of in terms of being invited to a party of the older group. But Walter invariably when he was having people of importance -- the Carl Van Vechtens, the visiting literary giants from Europe or what not -- would invariably invite two or three of the young people. And Walter was the kind of a guy if you had a problem, if you wanted to get to somebody, if you thought talking to a particular person might be helpful, you could call Walter anytime and say, "Walter, do you know So-and-So?" And invariably he knew the person. And he would always go out of his way to arrange these things. He did an awful lot for the young Negro writers and artists during those times.

AM: Were you aware of James Weldon Johnson, or did you have any particular personal contact with him?

CA: Yes, I knew James Weldon Johnson. I knew his brother, Rosemond Johnson, too. I think I knew Rosemond better than I knew James Weldon. James Weldon was a little more austere and more difficult to approach. At least I never got to know him that well. I don't know, that was a very interesting time and it did a lot of good. And I think it did a lot of harm, too. Because it got to be a vogue. It got to be a fashion. A lot of the Negro painters and writers were taken up and they were lionized and there were parties and what not. And it was almost that if you could write a straight sentence you were a writer, you know. I think it led to some false values. It led to some people thinking they were more talented than they were. And then, when things came close to reality and the vogue was over, they were kind of lost, you know, confused. Of course, people like Claude McKay and Langston and Bud Fisher and Walter, these people survived. A lot of us survived. I think by and large it was a good thing.

AM: What would one see during that time coming into Harlem touching some of the spots, some of the action places, a young man in Columbia and just out of Colombia, would find?

CA: Well, let's see. I must think back now.

AM: Well, think of me in Mobile. I was younger. But I was in Mobile and we were getting a fallout from all of that because, as you know, in the South people were constantly going to the Northern centers.

CA: Yes.

AM: And so this thing was very, very closely related. It seemed very, very fascinating to me. The songs that were being played would be down there very, very early and we had visions of what it would be like to go to Harlem. I know certain people who certainly were living enchanted lives by our standards in terms of romance connected with it. You were one of them.

CA: Well, I remember the Harlem of a little later date than that. I was talking about the very beginnings of the Negro Renaissance. I suppose this goes into the Prohibition era -- I don't think the Depression had really set in with its full intensity. But Harlem was a great place. The thoroughfare, the promenade was Seventh Avenue. And Seventh Avenue was a very handsome street. And of a Sunday you'd stroll along Seventh Avenue in your best clothes and look over the passing parade of beautiful gals, you know. The 135th Street corner was our meeting place. You could stand there and in the span of a Sunday afternoon see anyone who was anybody in Harlem. The night life was fabulous. The corner saloons, back rooms jumped, you know, places like Hotcha and Mike's and little places that had back rooms. You'd go into Hotcha and Bobby Henderson was playing the piano, Billie Holliday was singing. You'd go across Lenox Avenue to the little bar across from Harlem Hospital and Art Tatum was playing the piano. Ethel Waters was here. The place just jumped. Dickie Well's place on 133rd Street. God, some of the names escape me. Tillie's Chicken Shack. Gladys Bentley's Place. And you sort of did a tour. In the evening you'd pop from place to place. And, as I say, you had as many people from downtown in Harlem in those days as you had Negroes and nobody thought of anything happening to them. You went through any side street . . . some of these little joints you had to go down through a basement, through a yard and have people open up so you could be identified. but it never occurred to you that anything would happen. That's a long time ago.

AM: So, during that time what was happening with you in terms of painting and what not? Now I remember I'm sure, partly as a result of the type of involvement, of artistic involvement of people like Walter White and W. E. B. DuBois and James Weldon Johnson that magazines like The Crisis had an artistic involvement. They had illustrations, woodcuts, and so forth.

CA: That's right.

AM: They were interested in rendering what they now call the black experience in terms of plastic expression.

CA: I think one of the first paintings I ever had reproduced was in Crisis. I've forgotten who was the editor then. It may have been Elmer Carter, who was the editor for a long time. He also was a very interesting man who was one of the movers of the cultural and intellectual growth of Harlem. But I think that's the first publication in which I ever had a painting.

AM: There was a certain awareness, as is indicated in Alain Locke's book *The New Negro*, a certain awareness of African roots or of some spiritual or aesthetic affinity with the African background. There was an acceptance of and a working out of an African heritage on the part of artists of that period -- Aaron Douglas and people like that.

CA: Yes.

AM: I was very much aware of that in high school and so forth, that this was happening. And there wasn't anything special, there wasn't anything shrill about it. It wasn't all that it should have been but there wasn't a lyrical shrillness about the identification that we sometimes get these days on the part of some -- what is sometimes called the black consciousness movement.

CA: Yes.

AM: What was your awareness of African art? The Schomburg activities . . . ?

CA: Well, here again I have to go back to Alain Locke. I think my first exposure to African art was through Alain Locke. Alain Locke came up here with an exhibition of African sculptures, masks and what not, for the Schomburg Collection. I went around there while he was arranging the exhibit and this was the first time I'd seen any number of examples of African art. I was fascinated with them. And with Locke right there on the scene I probably asked a million questions about them and I had a chance to hold them and to feel them. And they have played a tremendous part in my work. I think if you look at my work you can see that very clearly -- the kind of plastic feeling about the figure. It's very close to African art. I know for a long time I had to almost consciously make my stuff not do a long neck on a figure. One or two of those very delicate lovely pieces were long-necked. About that same time I became aware of European painters who had discovered African art. And they were my first idols in painting. People like Modigliani, for instance, and that of course was a tremendous influence in my early painting. Fortunately I think I realized that this can get to be a pattern kind of thing, a very affected kind of thing. But, as you say, there was this very definite consciousness and great pride. I think the difference probably was that in those days it was a Negro pride, it was the new Negro. Today it's the African thing, the black thing. It wasn't as specific then. I think, of course, the whole pattern then was moving toward integration rather than separation. I think the emphasis was "look what we have done here and look what we can do and look what we are doing." It was an early effort to enter the mainstream.

AM: At the same time would you say, or would you not say, that entering the mainstream was not, as some youngsters now indicate, a matter of getting rid of everything that was black? The very emphasis that people like Locke and so forth were placing on African sculpture and African art, the whole business on the new Negro meant that they were integrating in the fullest sense of the word. They were taking black elements into the mainstream.

CA: Right.

AM: Would you say that's so? This was my impression and I wondered if this were true?

CA: Yes.

AM: Because a lot of people now overstate it, it seems to me at any rate, and you can concur or not, they imply that entering the mainstream is indicative of self-hatred or the rejection of black heritage and they feel that they have to reassert an interest in black heritage to keep people from getting away with it. For this there was no time any greater than in the 20's and you saw more African masks and so forth illustrating books and what not than before. Somehow or other this has been forgotten so I want you to recall some of that just for the record. There was a great involvement. And you had white people who knew they were going to see something black when they came to Harlem.

CA: Yes. This brings up a lot of interesting questions and I know that I don't have all the answers for them. And it involves this whole movement of whether separation or integration is the thing. Of course I believe in the integration principle I think. Maybe it's because I'm of a generation that believed in that. I think it's the most realistic and the most desirable attitude. However, I do feel that there's nothing wrong with some emphasis on the nationalist aspects of this thing. Just in looking around seeing these kids, you know, with the natural hair; I like it. I like the thinking behind it, the affirmative quality of it. This is my hair and it's good. You remember the time -- well, I don't remember whether you do or whether you're too young -- but you talked about "good" hair and "bad" hair. And good hair was straight hair and bad hair was kinky hair, you know. I like this business of the growing self-confidence, the feeling that I am an individual, I am like I am; and that is distinctive, and it has quality and it has beauty. I think this is an important thing. And I think I sense an attitude of confidence, of self-confidence in these young people that I didn't see in a general way earlier. I mean it's in every aspect: the quality of their voice, their willingness to speak out. And I think this is a good thing.

AM: Now there is a political aspect of what we're talking about. There's also an aspect which is essentially an aesthetic aspect. It seems to me that sometimes the political reaction should be based on misconceptions of certain aesthetic preoccupations. For example, I always thought (and I just want your reaction to this) back in the 20's and the 30's when women were wearing their hair in certain ways -- I never myself was aware of any lack of identity with Africa because of those stylings that they were using, the fantastic imagination which was applied, the pull back thing with the buns going up. It looked very African to me and I thought it was consciously that. I wonder what you think. When I think of certain performers and how they used to wear their hair. The fact that the texture was different didn't keep it from seeming to be very African to me.

CA: I don't think it was self-consciously African. It might have been

AM: But it did look like African sculpture to me.

CA: It might have been instinctively or intuitively aesthetically right, I mean. The character of a Negro head, the high cheek bones, the simple planes and the relationships of the planes in the head (I don't know whether this is true or not) but I think any sensitive person would see that a certain way to do the hair is appropriate to that kind of a face. What I'm trying to say is I think now it's done very self-consciously in terms of "I'm going to be African in look now."

AM: But is that political or is it aesthetic?

CA: I think it's political today and I think it was aesthetic then.

AM: Well, that's a distinction. Now I think that some of the political stand, you know, at least part of the stand which is political was sometimes a misconception or just an ignoring of what was going on. They acted as if everybody was trying to look white. And it seems to me if you remember

CA: Well, let's face it, there was a lot of that.

AM: That's true. But one of the spiritual forces in the new Negro movement was a white man, a Dutchman named Carl Van Vechten who became so interested in how Negroes looked that he photographed them and emphasized

CA: Well, in those days (not to cut you off) You mentioned Carl Van Vechten. And I knew a lot of other whites who used to come to Harlem very frequently and were very sympathetic and had a certain empathy with the Negro. I know it's happened to me. Very often these people saw or were aware of the beauty of a Negro face or head much more quickly than a Negro was. Maybe that's because as a Negro you see it every day so you don't notice it. But I can remember many occasions where a white person said, "Gee, isn't that a beautiful woman?" And yet unconsciously -- and I think this is true particularly among middle-class Negroes -- a beautiful colored girl was a light brown-skinned girl with straight hair, let's face it. And I think whites were more willing to accept Negro beauty as Negro beauty, not insofar as it looked like white beauty, in those days at least, than Negroes were. And don't forget that in those days, too, the ideal, of course, the ambition was to reach a middle-class status. And what could that mean? It meant acting, being, and having as much a white middle-class pattern as you could. I mean a measure of success almost was that you had achieved what the white middle-class person had.

AM: Well, what about this aspect of that (this has long intrigued me); let's say, if certain Negroes are concerned with achieving in terms of what white people were doing

CA: Well, look, take an example of that. In those days we would be very impressed with a Ralph Bunche as an Under secretary at the U.N. or a Thurgood Marshall as a Supreme Court Justice. My God, that would have been fantastic. There would have been no question about these achievements as a source of pride. But I hear just as often as not today, "What the Devil! So Thurgood Marshall and Ralph Bunche; they don't mean anything to us."

AM: Well, does that indicate a viable insight into the nature of the country? Is that understanding of the meaning of a Supreme Court Justice rich, or is there something lacking in it?

CA: I think it means that these are people that don't touch their lives. These are token people and, to go to an extreme, they might as well be white, as far as the struggles today are concerned. In that they are supposed to function as a symbol of Negro achievement I'm not so sure any longer that they do. I'm not so sure that a great portion of the Negro population doesn't look on this kind of thing as -- well, forget him; he's not with it any more.

AM: You mean to say that we have nine men on the Supreme Court and the young Negroes feel that they have used just one of these nine men as a symbol and that they do not have an awareness that he is a Negro sitting at a table where the highest . . . ?

CA: I don't think they feel that that Negro on the Supreme Court, that one of nine men, is someone who has any particular and specific reference to them; that now he has gone over and been lost into the whole mainstream. He's no longer a champion. And I think what they're looking for today are their champions.

AM: Their champions for what?

CA: Their champions in the sense of not moving -- well, let's put it this way. I think they would feel, for instance, even with the unpopularity today of, let's say, the NAACP, I think they would feel that a Thurgood Marshall is more valuable as the head of the legal department of the NAACP, as far as the Negro is concerned, than he is as a member of the Supreme Court.

AM: Well, do you have any conception of what they would want him to do; what he would be working toward, as the head of the Negro legal department? In other words, are their objectives more sophisticated or more naive? How does it strike you?

CA: I think it's more naive. I think in part this whole thing has a great naivete to it. I think very often in the face of what the immediate possibilities are, the long-range possibilities are lost.

AM: Well, to get back to this other white thing, I want to get your response to that. White people that Negroes in Harlem were coming in contact with, people somewhat similar and very integrated through Carl Van Vechten, people who were coming into Harlem because they liked Negroes, Negro-ness, blackness, African heritage and all this, it seems a bit ironic to me that these Negroes would overlook the fact that one thing you would do if you were white would be that you would be interested in Negroes. In other words, the white people that you integrate with, that integrate most readily tend to be interested in blues, and jazz, and dances, and what not. How do you miss out on . . . how can anybody say in effect that these people are running away from themselves when they integrate, because the type of person who rejects Negroes is not really in contact with Negroes? In other words, that's a roundabout way of saying what effect did the contact with white people who came into Harlem have on Negroes?

CA: I don't think it had much effect at all except in a very small area. And here again I think you have to face what the situation is today as compared to what it was then. I think on certain levels and involving a very definite minority of people you had this empathy, this understanding. I don't think there was much interest even among those people in those days in the guy who was living with roaches and rats in 124th Street. And I think what's happening today is happening in relation to those people. If anything this is a people's revolution. I mean this is the time of the little man saying his piece and demanding to do his thing. The old Negro Renaissance era was the appreciation of the talented tenth and I don't think many of those people, no matter how sincere they were, were concerned with what's going on today, what today is concerned with.

AM: That's another way of saying that the emphasis then was aesthetic?

CA: Yes.

AM: While today it tends to be more political than aesthetic?

CA: Yes.

AM: What relationship do you see between the two? Now basically you're a painter. It seems to me (and here again you were close to the actual goings on) that one result of the integrated experiences and so forth of Countee Cullen, Walter White, Langston Hughes and so forth, was that they were Negroes, knew it, emphasize that. In other words, the contact with the whites emphasized their blackness. None of these people tried to write "white" as it were. Nobody in the new Negro movement, as they called it, was emphasizing whiteness. Personally they were interested in integrating contacts and so forth. But artistically they were creating blackness.

CA: Not in the same way. It was a romantic kind of time with few exceptions. You mentioned Countee and Langston. Sure they wrote black. And it was kind of romantic and in some cases maybe a mild protest or at least the establishment of a comparison to -- what's that line of Langston's? ". . . to make a poet black and bid him sing" -- is that the line?

AM: That's Cullen I think.

CA: Is that Cullen? This kind of thing. The only one that had . . . What you felt had a really intense anger about this thing, not a romantic kind of exposition of injustice, was Claude McKay. You felt an anger, you felt an intensity, you felt an emotional involvement in this. Which I never felt in Countee Cullen or even in Langston Hughes. I mean that was cute. It was folk stuff. The kind of writing about Negroes that appeals to a great segment of the white population. It's saleable, too. And I could never quite feel that this had the basic depth of

emotional resentment that I felt in Claude McKay.

AM: But the thing I'm trying to get at here, to get your response to, was what's the phrase? Kiddo, slop on Seventh Avenue with the sole of my shoe -- I was walking on Seventh Avenue making a tour which you were describing representing the texture of life. There was something there. And of course it was romance and there's nothing wrong with romance. Now that found its way into song, into poetry, also into art. When you're walking down and making the tours and so forth, what was the role that resentment was playing? In other words, there was more to life in Harlem. I didn't think of the resentment when I used to see little Creole babies walking around -- what that projected in terms of going home to Harlem and that sort of thing.

CA: This of course was all on the heels of the discovery of the Negro -- don't you think there was a good element of hope in that time that this thing is going to move apace with a certain continuity of improvement, and then all of a sudden it didn't happen. And a great disillusionment set in. I mean kids no longer believed this. They believe okay they let us go so far and that's it. And it isn't really going to progress to the point that seemed to be indicated in these earlier manifestations of interest. I think the whole thing that has happened today is that people have gotten to the point where they don't believe it any more. Just like I just finished a picture and I don't usually go in for long titles or titles at all, but I'm terribly tempted to call this picture (it's just a simple figure of a Negro man against a red sky looking as frustrated as any individual can look) and almost just as intuitively as I looked at it I felt, "you never really meant it, did you, Mr. Charlie?" You know, I mean this hurt almost, our believing, and seeing on the part of those people who seem to be most concerned, seeing that when it came down to the real, actual implementation of going the whole distance, it wasn't going to happen, you know. It wasn't going to be -- this continuity of involvement. And I think it was a disappointment and a disillusionment. I think it was all those things. I think they pretty much think that even those people who are willing to go a certain way, never have they really a full commitment to total absolute involvement and integration. And I think it shows. I think it's a matter now that look: you've had all the chances in the world; you've said this; you've done studies of this. But you're really not going to make it happen and I'm not so sure you even want it to happen.

AM: Well, what in a fundamental sense does this mean to a painter?

CA: What do you mean, a painter as a painter? I mean before you're a painter you're a human being and you're involved in what happens. And I think this creates quite a few problems for the painter. Certainly I know if you are sensitive in any way you're concerned about all of the aesthetic questions that are involved in painting. You're concerned with what goes on in the international scene, about general developments in art, new movements, new attitudes, new ways of seeing, completely on an aesthetic level. You can't help at that same time -- that's why I think the Negro painter in this country has a slightly different problem from a white painter -- you cannot, while you're concerned with these things that involved the aesthetics of art, you cannot but be concerned about what's going on around you and how it affects you, your people, this kind of thing. So that you're torn -- at least I know I am -- you continuously ask yourself the question: Is this the way I should paint? Or is this important with things going on here? Picasso I think said that art is a weapon. Should I commit my painting to visualizing, as I see it, the struggle that's going on? Or should I close my eyes and keep myself and my painting apart from that, involve myself perhaps in other ways that relate to the struggle but keep the painting apart? Right now these are questions I think that most Negro artists have to ask themselves. Now you take a person like Ralph (Ellison). Ralph insists that you keep the art apart.

AM: No, I don't think that's what he really means. He means, I think he means that whatever you do, if you're doing it in terms of a given medium you must master that medium . . .

CA: I agree with you.

AM: . . . before you can do anything. In other words, if fiction reflects life, it can only reflect life if it's good fiction. Otherwise, it's something to be a distortion of life. Now this brings us to what I was thinking, as you were talking. Can you say that the political awareness of the younger painters adds up to better painting?

CA: I certainly can't say it at this point.

AM: Do you see, or can you hazard any guess as to why it isn't adding up? Is it political? Or is it aesthetic? Is it a shortcoming in socio-political vision, or in the misconception of what art involves, that is, painting involves?

CA: That's a tough one. I don't know. As a teacher -- and I've been teaching painting for thirty years I guess -- I sometimes feel that what I see presented as black art is motivated much more by the political aspects of the situation than the art aspects. I think this is difficult to make clear. I think it's perfectly all right to use art politically. It's been done. It's been done beautifully by Daumier, Goya. But always behind this was a thorough and solid background in the aesthetic aspects of the art. It's after the mastery of the elements of painting or printmaking that then you can speak out politically with great authority because you have such mastery of the tools involved. I mean you can make a statement. Maybe what I'm saying is that I think there is a great anxiousness to make a statement before you're equipped to make the statement in that particular medium.

AM: Well, I think this is what is involved with Ralph -- that if you master the medium then when you make the statement So a decade before it happened he had written about the riots, he had If you're writing politically, you're not likely to do it. But if you're writing mastering the dynamics of literature you're likely to be a prophet without a political prophet or any other kind -- I think this type of thing when you say they're trying to make the statement before they're equipped to make the statement, I think that the irony and artistic creation -- I just want your reaction to this -- is that if you do master the equipment before making the statement, since you do have a statement to make, you probably come out without too much sweat.

CA: Yes, I think this is true. I think just because you're involved.

AM: Right.

CA: I agree with that completely. What was I going to say in relation to that? I think also if you do have the kind of work, study, research, effort, behind your talents that a person like Ralph has, that when you do make a statement it not only relates to what the particular problem is or the local problem, but it has the overtones of universality. I mean this is not just the plight of the black man in Harlem. It's the plight of any disadvantaged person anywhere. And I think the more you strike that key the greater it is as art or literature. And I think this is the aspect of this thing -- of course they're young still -- but this is what is missing as I see it. Also I think, I detect, there isn't a particular interest in doing what this demands. It's I want to do it now, you know, and so you don't get a great amount of listening about it. "Sure you had to do that. But we're a new breed. Your standards, where do they come from anyhow?" you know. Well, I don't think the standards are black, white, green or what not. The thing that makes an African mask great is the thing that makes a great painting by Rembrandt great, really essentially, you know. And I think this may be just an evasion of the issue. And I think this is very shortsighted. Now, on the other hand, I think possibly that the potential for creating something distinctly out of a black experience is more prevalent today than it ever has been. Because I think that the general affirmative attitudes about things and the pride, the feeling of personal dignity and identity, these things are much more in the forefront today than they ever have been; and also an appreciation not in a local sense of certain cultural patterns as important patterns. Who'd have ever thought of talking about soul food downtown twenty-five years ago? This kind of thing. I mean this is my thing. I mean I know doggone well that these people who had lots of contacts with the white world and -- if you had invited the most empathetic white person from downtown to your house to dinner, you would not serve collard greens and pigs feet. But I think you can do it now. I think it's this affirmative thing. A Jewish person doesn't apologize for serving lox and bagels. But for a long time we ate pigs feet but we wouldn't serve them except in our own little grouping.

AM: There were people twenty-five and thirty years ago who were talking about it downtown. I think you could find a dozen or so titles in Ellington alone which refer to Miss Jackson's barbecue and various things like that.

CA: Yes.

AM: That people would celebrate. They were celebrating these things. In other words, those people who were expressing themselves as artists regardless of the fact that they might have been thought of as popular musicians. As mature people involved with expression, they were expressing the texture of their lives and in any number of songs they were celebrating it and singing it downtown. It's an interesting thing.

CA: Yes, it is. But look how long those very songs were not appreciated or approved by a great segment of your so-called more advantaged Negro population, you know. I think actually in some respects in a generalized way it was a white audience that made Negroes aware of the qualities of blues and work songs and that kind of thing. "I mean that is all right for a certain class of people. But I'm beyond that. I can appreciate opera and lieder and what not. See how much I've progressed!" I mean they certainly would not feel that it was an indication of their superiority, their appreciation or performance of this particular kind of thing.

AM: Well, speaking, let's say, in the context of aesthetic criticism, isn't this a matter of historical or cultural perspective and doesn't this always come by some type of comparison with other things? In other words, if you go in for lieder and you go in far, far enough and you meet enough people interested in music in the abstract sense or in the hifalutin sense, your perspective develops to the point that you begin to look at these indigenous details with a fresh eye which you can't see as long as you're involved with it. In other words, the young people who are now celebrating black art or African sculpture are still bouncing it off Picasso, Paul Klee, and people like that. It adds to the perspective which they're developing which they could hardly do by just going straight to African sculpture because that would put them in ritual, not art, but ritual, right?

CA: Yes, I don't know, but it's a little confusing. Let's go on to something else. Maybe we can come back to that.

AM: Right. Well, let's go back. Suppose we start here. When did you begin to think of yourself as being committed primarily to painting, and what were some of the forces which worked to bring this self-conception about?

CA: I think I was committed to paint . . . for as long as I can remember I've been committed to paint. My interest in drawing began very early. I had an older brother who used to draw. He was more interested in mechanical things. But he used to design locomotives and automobiles. As I think back on some of the drawings of automobiles way back (and this is fifty years ago, my God!), some of them were so prophetic of things that have happened that I have very often wished that he had had the opportunity to go to a technical school and take up engineering and designing. But I used to watch him draw and I used to copy his drawings, and that's why I could design a pretty good car myself, you know, fancy fastbacks and what not. And, as I said, the experience with the clay in North Carolina. I can remember as a kid I always said I wanted to be an artist. I don't know why. There was not any art to see around Charlotte, North Carolina. I have since heard my mother say that my father was fairly good and when he was courting her he used to draw little pictures in the margins. Maybe part of it is inherited. But I cannot remember any time that I wasn't interested in art.

AM: Maybe you saw some of the margins.

CA: I don't think so. I don't know where it comes from. I really don't. But I actually never remember a time . . . I got my first oil painting set as a present when I was in high school. I still have the first painting I ever made -- it was a self-portrait. And I can't remember a time since then that I haven't painted. I painted all the time. For a while I thought, well, this doesn't make sense; maybe you'd better think about some commercial application of this thing, you know. And I got interested in commercial art and I did a lot of it. I've illustrated books, and I've done advertising, book jackets, record covers, cartoons. I remember in the 30's Romy and I both were tremendously interested in cartooning. We used to take our ideas around to all the magazines. And we never became Essence Cambrooks, but we got published here and there -- in Redbook, Colliers, The New Yorker. I've done covers for The New Yorker. I've illustrated articles for Fortune, and various other magazines and newspapers. During the war I worked in the Office of War Information doing editorial cartoons for general newspaper distribution on some aspect of the war effort. then when I came out of the Army I went very much into the commercial field. I got married while I was in the Army and decided I'd better think seriously about those aspects of art that were more lucrative than painting and sculpture are. However, I never stopped. It was a sort of compromise thing. I'd do some of each.

AM: It was for economic reasons while you continued the other.

CA: Yes. And I did very well for a couple of years in the commercial field. But I was never happy with it. I made a lot of money -- not a lot of money -- but I made good money in those days. And finally I just couldn't take it any longer and I said to my wife, "I can't do this any more." She's always been very sympathetic and she said, "I've been seeing it coming, so I think you just ought to stop." So I stopped. And that first year after that was pretty tough. In that year, which I think must have been about 1947, if I made two thousand bucks I did well. And before that with commercial art I was making up to twenty thousand, twenty-five thousand; and doing it part time. Now that was partly because people who could do commercial art were in demand because the war was going on and a lot of people were in the Army. There were many more opportunities for work. But I determined that I just had to quit it and take the consequences. It was about that time that I got a job teaching at the Art Students League. That helped. I still was not sure I had made the right decision; you think you can paint pretty well; your friends think so; but is that enough? And just at a point where I had greatest doubts that way the Metropolitan bought one of my paintings. That was a tremendous lift. If the Metropolitan thought enough of my painting to buy one for their permanent collection, maybe I did make the right decision. That bolstered me quite a bit. And after that annually I had several reasonably successful shows. And I sold paintings to the Whitney, to the Detroit Museum, and to a lot of good private collections. So that's what I've been doing ever since. Along with this I've always taught. Partly because of the economic necessity to teach.

AM: Did you teach before the Art Students League?

CA: Well, I was even teaching then on a small basis. I directed the Joe and Emily Lowe Art School up in the Bronx. Then for a while I had a private class. So I've always taught and I like to teach. I wouldn't like to be in a position where teaching took up too great a portion of my time. I'd like to maintain the feeling that I'm a painter who incidentally teaches rather than a teacher who incidentally paints. So I kept the teaching down to a part time, half-time situation.

AM: What is your teaching involvement now? What has it been?

CA: I'm at the Art Students League. And I'm an associate professor of Fine Arts at City College. I'm actually what they call an adjunct associate professor because to date at least I have refused to take a full schedule. So I work both of these places on a part time basis.

AM: That takes about how many hours a week roughly?

CA: Roughly about, oh, about twelve hours a week.

AM: You don't feel that that encroaches as much on your time?

CA: No. It isn't so much the time as it is the orientation. When you spend a great portion of your day helping people paint their pictures, you come home and face your own canvas you're sort of empty sometimes. And the interruptions at regular, arbitrary times; I could be in the middle of a painting and look at the watch and say oh, golly, I've got a class at two o'clock, and I really don't want to go; something gets cold. It's not ideal. Sometimes I think the best thing in the world for a painter -- and most painters I know have to do something to live -- is to do something that has no relation to art at all; maybe a night watchman or something like that; or be a mathematics teacher where two and two is four and no argument and no discussion.

AM: But mathematics would hardly be your speed.

CA: No, mathematics would not be my bag. No siree.

AM: Being a watchman would require seeing in a certain way.

CA: Yes. But at least you could be quiet and meditate and not have any crossed strings.

AM: Let's talk about painting or painters, things that you have done. You mentioned Modigliani and others. I'd like to have you reminisce for just a moment about things that you have seen and how they affected you, museums, galleries, things like that. Sometimes one thing might have a big impact on you, might change your direction or might just give you another dimension, a new insight.

CA: Yes. Well, I suppose the modern movement in general once you got with it had a tremendous influence on your work. I would say the great modern painters, the Picassos, the Braques, the Modiglianis, the Soutines, people like that, and the African art which has been an abiding influence on my figure work. They've all had an impact on me. You can't come up through our systems of education without having the influences of the great masters of the Renaissance and Greece and Egypt and what not. But I've found that I've reacted more deeply I think to primitive or neo-primitive aspects of those various art eras than I have to the high points. For instance, I like early Greek sculpture better than late Greek sculpture. I like the simple frontality kind of approach of the Egyptians and I like the -- I don't know quite how to describe it -- well, I think Malraux describes it although I don't remember specifically how he describes it -- but you take an African statue, the emotional impact is out of the plastic arrangement rather than the illustrative things in the piece of sculpture. It's not the quality of a scowl or the beauty of a smile that gives you this tremendous emotional reaction. It's the way these forms are combined. It's the form itself. It's the beauty of the form. Almost an impersonal kind of thing. And I think you find this in all primitive arts. As I say, if you're educated as Western man --let's face, we are -- an African-American has a sort of double heritage, you know. I mean he's got one that's biological and one that's environmental. Certainly all of the training that you get is Western-oriented. When you first decide you're going to be an artist and you have the opportunity to go to art school you're immediately thrust into the context of Western art. All the other aspects of your education are Western. So this is part of your heritage, too. Now in our case because of what America is like, way late in your life you become aware of this tremendously beautiful heritage out of Africa. So you have both of these things working.

AM: Did you have any particular involvement with certain things which were happening in painting in the United States in the 30's? I'm thinking of the type of thing that some Negro painters seem to have derived from Rivera, Siqueiros, Orozco, and even Benton and Curry.

CA: Oh, sure. You're involved with them. They were big influences I mean, Orozco and Rivera were tremendous influences on all artists, black and white, in this country. I don't think they're as great an influence now. There's been reshuffling, re-evaluation. We were all involved because we were involved in other ways with the social realism of the 30's. Because many of us, if not most of us, as a matter of fact, were on one or other of the Art Projects. I happened to be on the mural project so I was particularly aware of the Orozcos and the Riveras. As a matter of fact, I used to go down to Radio City when Rivera was painting the one they destroyed. And between his broken English and my broken French, we managed to communicate. And I was very much influenced by his mural work. And a great number of the painters on the projects in New York, most of us were members of the Artists Union, which was an organization I suppose which would now be considered the left wing organization if its day. But it dealt with the problems of the artists and kept the Federal Projects on its toes about providing for the artists and raising standards and what not. You couldn't escape the social implications of painting then. I think most of us went through that stage where we did an amount of social realism.

AM: It seems to me that there's an interesting comparison or contrast somewhere in this particular statement, or that could be extended from the statement we were talking about a little while ago. Those Negro painters who were being influenced by Siqueiros and Orozco, by the social realism, were not escaping blackness; they were very much concerned with projecting black experience in terms of proletarian thinking maybe.

CA: No, I think they were more or less interested in doing good painting. I think the blackness element was

there. How can I say that? I think the only painter that I remember who was consistently concerned with this in a very deep emotional way I would say was Jake Lawrence. And his awareness of his immediate environment has been a constant thing in his painting and in a very fresh dramatic way. I think in the painting of Bearden, for instance, his early painting was pretty much in terms of searching, as any other artist was searching. You'd experiment with what was going on in Europe, you borrowed from Picasso, you borrowed from here, you borrowed from there. You were interested in god painting and you were interested in keeping up or knowing what the contemporary developments were and exploring them. Now just by virtue of being what you are and living the experience you're living, I think your subject matter tends to be that with which you are most familiar. But I think that was incidental. I don't think it was in terms of a conscious projection of a racial thing. I think later with Bearden it got to be. I have one of those early paintings, too. We both made a trip South one year and I think we were very much impressed with the rural Southern scene. And Romy came back and did a series of very large gouaches on brown paper that . . . well, did you see his last exhibition?

AM: Yes.

CA: It's almost come full circle. These things have the same quality in a more contemporary aspect that these early paintings I'm talking about had. I'll show you one of those before you go. It's very interesting if you haven't seen how close it is. These were more literal, conventionally figurative (I don't mean that they were academic in any way at all). But the same feeling, the same preoccupations are in his last show. I think this last show of his is the one that comes closer to touching what has really been the reality of his experience, of the reality of his reactions, let's say, not his experience. Let's face it, none of us have had too much of that experience actually as experience.

AM: Yes. Well, from an artistic point of view, what we're very much concerned with is the increasing sophistication and complexity of his language as a painter.

CA: Yes.

AM: So he's getting nearer to himself.

CA: That's right.

AM: And I think it's interesting that there's a consistency of preoccupation over a period of time so that when he reaches a sort of new mastery of the form he can get out of him what he did in a much simpler manner then, and yet there's a simplicity about the overall effect of these latest things. But the language that he's using, that is, the devices, the techniques and so on, reflect to many other things in the process.

CA: That's right. This is the thing which we were talking about earlier. We are very different kinds of painters. Romy has had -- well, not as much as, say, Jake. Now Jake has had I think the most consistent line in his work of any of the painters we're talking about that I know. Romy has explored, Romy is some parts of an intellectual. I remember he spent almost a year just copying old masters, not for the sake of copying old masters but to find out what they had, how they designed. And I think he found it very fruitful. He's been involved with the semi-Cubist approaches to painting and always I think recurring were those much more personal things, or things out of memory, or race memory, or whatever, they would recur too. However, I think his work generally has a more consistent thread through it than mine. I remember Genauer said once about an exhibition I had, she reviewed it and one of the remarks (I don't know whether she meant it as criticism or not but I always thought it hit it right on the head as far as I was concerned); she said "Alston refused to be pigeonholed." And that's been true. I mean I do a series of abstract paintings concurrently with a series of figurative paintings. I'll do very realistic things -- I don't mean academically realistic things -- and very far out avant-garde things. And I don't stay too long with one of them if I can see the logical conclusion of it. I mean I'm curious about . . . I want to explore different and new unknown territory.. I couldn't do this kind of thing where some painters You go and you see twenty paintings and they're variations of the same thing, maybe it's a horizontal band of color and a couple of blobs and variations on that. That would bore me stiff. On the other hand, there's no consistency about it because there have been several recurrent themes in a period of my work, let's say, twenty years or so. They manifest themselves in various ways but they've been pretty consistent in their reappearance periodically in my work -- the family, for one thing, the blues, a group of paintings I call "African themes," These are just sort of variations on thoughts about African sculpture, African design, African pattern, that kind of thing. Those three themes have been pretty recurrent, and along with this a protest theme. Every once in a while you just get angry enough to do a very definitely protest picture. I suppose it was about five years ago I did practically nothing but abstract paintings, pretty much or somewhat abstract expressionist in background. And then all of a sudden I felt the need for the figure. I'm really impatient with the impersonality of most of the things I saw around me and for me I've always had this need for a contact with the human thing, you know. And I just deliberately began working with figures. And I think essentially that's why I am a figure painter. I've got a curiosity, maybe too much so, so I can't resist the explorations into painting that I know isn't particularly me. On the other hand, I've always felt that I've brought back something from these things that goes into your painting

and enriches it. But I think primarily I'm a figure painter and I'm concerned about people.

AM: But your figures sometimes become very abstract.

CA: Yes, they do. You know, this is a critic's label as much as anything else. The critic wants you to have a certain kind of consistency. Maybe it makes his job easier. I don't know. But one of the favorite phrases in reviewing is "this artist hasn't quite reached a stage of consistency." Which to me is bunk. I mean this is the dullest thing in the world to me, this kind of consistency. Also I feel abstract about some things, and I feel very specific about other things. I don't care about being pigeonholed or having this great business of consistency. I think for any painter who paints honestly, if you look at a body of his work and you are perceptive, you can see his signature.

AM: Speaking of the theme of the family that you mentioned, I saw one in particular . . . I saw it in the Art Students League in a window. And it was in the other show over at CCNY.

CA: Yes. It's now in the new NAACP offices. They bought it.

AM: That's right. I did see it there also. There's a quality in that which suggests some of the ambience of a Henry Moore sculpture.

CA: It's funny that you should detect that. I do sculpture, too. I don't believe I have any photographs here right now. Here again, there's a primitive quality. It's an earthy quality. It's this almost a bit of nature, you know, like a Henry Moore sculpture looks like it's a piece of nature. And there's this almost severe frontality, this impersonal thing. It doesn't refer to anything, it's the man-ness of man or the woman-ness of woman. This kind of thing appeals to me. It made Henry Moore appeal to me. Some of my sculpture, my early sculpture, is much more influenced by Henry Moore than even my painting. But there is that quality, that frontality; it is almost a static kind of thing.

AM: You spoke of modeling and so forth with clay. As you mentioned it I suddenly realized, we used to do this in Alabama. We used to play with these clays. Of course dealing with clay as we were dealing with it in the States, was not out of a traditional thing, it was something quite indigenous to the hillside it came from.

CA: To the earth it came from. Sure. In my sculpture I haven't done much modeling. I don't particularly like to model. I've done it, as you can see. I like to carve. I mean it's a much greater challenge. You know, you cut out the wrong piece of wood; that's it. Clay I can put back and I can modify and what not. But there's always to me a greater satisfaction in the carved figure. And there's an element of just plain exhaustive work about it. I mean the kind of fatigue that comes out of a day with a heavy hammer on a piece of stone is a very delicious kind of fatigue, you know. It's a very satisfying feeling. I like carving very much better than I do modeling. I sound old-fashioned because nobody is doing either one right now. And I've never worked with the welding techniques. You get older and you don't have the time. I bet twenty years ago I would have just out of curiosity. But there came a point where I just had to get down with myself and just say cut it out. I catch on to things quickly. And that's not necessarily a good thing. I'm fairly versatile. And this leads you into a dilution rather than intensity. At one point I was doing lithography, engraving, sculpture, painting, all these things. And along with that some commercial work, illustrating books and things. I said you've got to cut that out, you know, narrow that down and pour it all into one or two things because you can spread yourself too thin.

AM: Well, I hesitate to say it, but in the roader sense of the term, in your formative period, were there any particular masters who impressed you that you remember more than others?

CA: Oh, sure. Sure. Piero della Francesca I think of among Renaissance painters. And who has escaped Mr. Picasso, let's face it. As I said before, Modigliani; there's something about the sensuous quality of his things that appeals to me very much, and the affinity with African sculpture his heads have. Who else? Well, in my very early days I was very impressed with Aaron Douglas, too. Aaron had quite a quality. Those murals that he did were -- decorative, yes -- but they were beautiful things. I was a great admirer of Doug's. And even later with Barthe. I used to go to Barthe's studio and pick up little pieces of knowledge here and there about how you handle clay. And he was very helpful in things like that. What got me into carving was a sculptor by the name of Ahron Ben-Shmuel, who is a fascinating man for one thing, and I think one of the best American sculptors. He doesn't even do sculpture any more. After exploring figurative things to what he felt was the limit for him, he began looking at abstract form. And his reaction was that there's no point in his doing it; it's all been done. I mean he looked at nature and saw a great variety of forms in an abstract way and just decided he couldn't add anything to this. He was a very strange kind of guy. He was a black and white kind of man, you know. It as all of this or nothing. So he just quit. And I don't believe Ben has picked up a chisel since he sold his tools and began painting. But I don't think he's ever shown. But Ben got me into sculpture. I had seen one or two of his things and liked them. He came up to the studio and I told him I'd love to learn how to carve. And he took me and got me a set of tools and got a piece of stone and he went through every tool and said this tool can do this, this one can do that and he said that's all anybody can teach you; you're on your own. Which I think is pretty true.

AM: Another question with a comment I'd like you to make: What with all the talk about black consciousness and self-respect and pride and so forth, I think that something should be said to indicate the actual nature of the life of a contemporary artist. In other words, of course you've all been in contact with Romy Bearden

CA: Well, I taught Romy; I taught Jake.

AM: Right. This is true. At the same time you were not isolated from the other painters of your own generation in New York. I've gotten the impression since I've known you that you're very much aware of what other painters are doing and these people you regard as your contemporaries without any artificial, either racial or political, separation from them.

CA: Yes.

AM: What about mentioning some of your contemporaries, colleagues -- Adolph Gottlieb and other people that you may know or you're in contact with; some of the other part of this whole world of the contemporary artists in New York?

CA: Well, I suppose I've had a lot of contact because of the League. As you know, the League has as instructors practicing artists, I mean nobody there is a product of a teachers' college or that kind of thing. These are people who are active in the field -- that's one of the prerequisites. And the roster of teachers at the League usually runs around fifty painters and sculptors and what no so that you do have day-to-day contact with a great number of painters. And going back before that in the old days of the Art Projects you had a great deal of association with other artists. Somehow that kind of thing has disappeared a little bit. There used to be meeting places, places where you'd get together and kick ideas around. And one of the reasons we formed the spiral group was that we felt that this kind of thing had disappeared and there was a great need for it. Particularly among the black artists. We at least needed to get together and talk informally, exchange ideas and perhaps discover some mutuality of direction, or at least see if there was a common denominator anywhere. Maybe there wasn't. Because we had all kinds of people. We had people who painted hard-edge abstractions, sort of romantic landscapes and figures. All kinds of people were in it. We just felt that we needed to get together and discover whether we had things in common and, if possible, work out some kind of general broad philosophy. And I think this kind of thing does help. There are all kinds of questions that come up. For instance, one of the things that has concerned me throughout my painting life has been the business of the segregated show. I have always been pretty unalterably opposed to the segregated show. This all started in the very early days back in the 30's when the Harmon Foundation used to have an annual show of Negro painters. And you'd be in the show that that was that until the next year when you'd come out again and be paraded. The critics, sort of, at least I felt, pulled their punches, didn't apply the same standards. And I've always felt that the Negro artist cannot make it except in meeting the best of the competition from his contemporaries and that to artificially group him aside and apart was not giving him the chance for a full and total development. And at the same time it was setting up what to me was a false premise -- that there is such a thing distinctively in this country as a Negro art. I don't think so. I think you have a certain kind of American experience, be it an experience as a Negro in America, but it is an American experience. And I think it's an important experience and I think it ought to be in the mainstream of American experience. I think to set up a little category like this even in those days to me said separation. I just didn't approve of it so I have refused consistently to show in segregated shows. There has been disagreement about that. Or at least there hasn't been firm conviction about it. I remember once at International Business Machines somebody reminded them that in their collection they didn't have any representation by black artists. And they said, "So we haven't. Let's do something about it." So they invited, oh, about twenty-five Negro artists to submit to them four examples of their work. And this invitation was also a commitment to buy at least one of the four, which was fine. Then they planned to get the pieces they had brought together and set up a jury and give prizes for the best of those and then to send this group on tour (they tour their collection, you know). Well, the first superficial reaction was, gee, this is swell, you know. The prizes were good. I think the first prize was \$1,500. The second prize was \$1,000. And the third prize was \$750. But I objected to it. I said, "I don't buy this." I know that their intentions were good and they were actually being advised by representatives of the Negro group. As a matter of fact, they asked Hale Woodruff I believe to give them a list of these 25 or 30 prominent Negro painters that they should consider. Well, I got hold of Hale. I said, "Hale, this is not right. In the first place, I don't think it's productive of the best results to have a closed competition. It's all right for them to buy our pictures at what are market prices and include them in their collection as part of an American collection." I said, "But to single these out now and give prizes -- if I'm going to be in competition, I want to be in competition with all kinds of artists. I think this is a rigged kind of competition that is not particularly beneficial." I said, "I also feel that I don't want to see them circulating this as a separate group outside and apart from their total collection. I would like to see these things integrated into their total collection so that they send portions of that out in a normal way; but not as a special group. These are our Negro pictures." Well, we had a big fight. And it was partly a fight of economics. A lot of the kids could have used the money. But you can't do it on that basis. And I finally convinced them that this was not the way to do it. I think the result was that these people were very surprised and their respect for us as a group of artists went up considerably. That we were concerned about a principle. And I think this is important. Before we get off the integration thing I want to tell you a little bit more

about what happened at Spiral on that. Then things began changing. We began to feel an awareness of the fact that there were an awful lot of black kids around the country who never got a chance to even know that people like them were doing things in various fields and with competence on a par with anybody else. And we felt that this was something that we had a responsibility about. This brings up again the business about a segregated show. Well, realizing this was a very definite need and there was nothing in the books to indicate to these kids, certainly noting the history books they read, we felt (or at least I did, I shouldn't say "we" all the time because a lot of people disagree with me) that there's a subtle distinction between a segregated show imposed on you from outside -- like some groups say "wouldn't it be a good idea to have a show of Negro painters" or some college says "in connection with our Negro history let's put on a show of Negro paintings." That is imposed upon a group of Negro artists and it's a completely different thing from a situation where a group of Negro artists out of their own motivation decide to do a segregated show for a specific purpose which they think has merit. Now maybe that's a subtle distinction but I think it is a distinction. So on that basis I will show in a segregated show. But now with all of this focus on the problem and the struggle it's gotten to be a kind of bandwagon. Every week you get a letter from some little college or something, "We're having a Negro festival." And I just say to the devil with it, you know. I think it's not good. I mean I think what the Negro artists needs is to be recognized. He's a Negro and black and his painting may have very definite evidences of that fact but let's be in the mainstream. You mentioned earlier people like Willie Mays, Jackie Robinson, or these kids that are in the Olympics now, you know. These kids are competing against any and everybody and they've got some thing. I mean this noise without the background and the basic ability and this kind of thing prove that, prove that you can stand up and demand that it be shown with the work of artists.

AM: I think this ties in precisely where this began, about contact with the other artists. Again, as a result of the Art Students League and as a result of the fact that you go to museums, and galleries, you go to openings, you keep up with what's going on. That's why you're such a restless experimenter, among other things. Once you're in contact with that, it's sort of impossible to withdraw from the challenge which they pose.

CA: That's right. But I mean what is to keep anybody who has any interest, curiosity of any validity, from doing this? My point is spend some time and some money on educating, let's say, the people in Harlem. This is their city. They pay taxes. Anything in it like a museum belongs to them as much as it belongs to anybody else. And for God's sake start using these things. Transportation is no problem. You don't have to set up a separate thing here in Harlem and say there's your museum.

AM: In other words, you want the Metropolitan Museum accepted just as Yankee Stadium is accepted.

CA: Right! Absolutely.

AM: Or as Madison Square Garden is accepted.

CA: Absolutely! And I think these kids coming up ought to feel that anything in the city of any cultural value is as equally theirs as anybody else's. I would love to see -- I would be tickled pink -- I'm not one of these people who wants to see Harlem preserved. This is no longer our neighborhood or our cultural enclave. This is a ghetto as far as I'm concerned. And I'd like to see every darned old building torn down. I'd like to see more buildings like the State Building built in that area so that it is also used by all the people. And I think the more of these specific ethnic things you put in the community the more you are building a fence around the ghetto. I don't see that at all. There's no point in having a segregated show in New York City. Now there may be in little towns where nobody ever gets a chance to see anything. That's a different thing. But in any urban center like Chicago or New York or Philadelphia you don't need this. And art is no different from anything else. I mean Duke Ellington or Count Basie don't have segregated performances. They don't need them. They can compete with the best there is anywhere in the world. And they know it. And they do it. And they produce. Now until we can get to that situation as painter, we're just nowhere. You can't just sit down and lick your own wounds, and make all kinds of rationalizations and say, "Isn't this good?"

AM: Right. The records that are made by major companies are distributed wherever records are bought. You can buy an Ellington record whether you're in Atlanta or in Cheyenne. You don't have to go to Harlem or go to the black part of town in order to find an Ellington record.

CA: That's right. This of course is the long-range thing. I recognize that with the young people there's an impatience. And there's an honest feeling that we want our kids to have -- I want them to have, too, but I want them to have the whole hog; I don't want them to have just this little slice of something.

AM: It's enough trouble with somebody forcing you out or away from the center of things. Certainly an artist who is aware of that is going on in the big wide world of art cannot allow himself to be restricted either in his interest as he faces his canvas or in what happens to his canvas after he has finished it.

CA: And I think we've spent a long enough time now pointing out "look what's happened to us." Sure it happened. But it happened. There's nothing we can do about it. It was wrong. It was unjust. It was brutal. It was

unfair. But that's happened. And that does not give you a total reason to say that because this happened to me now give me all those things that I didn't get then. I think there should be a concentration on the business now of give me every darn opportunity to make up that time and give me the opportunity for learning every darn skill you've got so that you've got absolutely no excuse. And let me demonstrate to you that I can do it as well, if not better, than you can, and concentrate a little bit on telling those kids, "get out and work like the very devil and learn everything that is out there. You know, then do whatever your thing is. But get every technical skill, every basic knowledge that you need to do your thing." This may sound old-fashioned. This is the talk of another generation I know. But I don't think I'm deaf to the dreams of these kids. I have a lot of identity with them. I see them every day. I know that they are sincere and they're intense. But I think there still is an area where maybe the older people can have a little bit of wisdom on this.

AM: There has always been that area in every generation in the history of man where they transmitted things.

CA: Now you've got to distinguish between black power and mouth power; you know what I mean? I hear a lot of mouth power.

AM: It's the difference between revolution and the rhetoric of revolution.

CA: Yes. Of course I don't know, maybe we're getting away from painting. [MACHINE TURNED OFF]

AM: You were speaking about the business of learning skill.

CA: Well, I've heard this argument, and it has some validity. Well, look we don't want to do what has been done. I haven't heard this much recently but there was a time at the beginning of this movement when you sort of felt that perhaps the black man serving as the conscience of this country could make a tremendous contribution; that perhaps he didn't want to become a part of a society that had so many basically wrong things operative in it, and that maybe he could make a contribution by correcting these things. This to me was a very hopeful thing. I said, "learn everything that you need or that fits you to compete in a contemporary world." Now perhaps having learned these things you might change the world tremendously, I mean just by knowing these skills, the reapplication of these skills in different ways might create a better world. But you can't do it without knowing these things. You can't do it without the skills. Some people seem to think that when you say that you mean go out there and imitate, learn these things so you can imitate what they're doing. I don't mean that at all. But I don't think you can work with any authority unless you learn even some of the things that you know need to be discarded. You've got to know them, understand them and know how to apply them before you can even discard them or before you can improve on them or change them. I don't know whether that's clear or not.

AM: Well, people have arguments speaking the same language -- right?

CA: Yes.

AM: You start out to have a dialogue

CA: But you've got to know the language.

AM: Then you might find you have an argument instead of a dialogue, but you are speaking the language.

CA: That's right.

AM: And you know what the issues are. You're taking different sides on the same issues or at least on recognizable issues -- right?

CA: And you have such a knowledge of that language that you can mold it into any pattern that you want to mold it into. But for God's sake let's get this language. Let's get the language.

[END OF INTERVIEW]