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Oral history interview with Chet Harmon La  
More, 1974 Apr. 22

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# Transcript

## Interview

**DB:** DENNIS BARRIE

**CL:** CHET LA MORE

**ML:** MRS. LA MORE IS ALSO PRESENT

**DB:** The date is April 22, 1974. My name is Dennis Barrie. I'm here with Chet La More -- artist, writer, educator. The following tape will deal with the life and career of Mr. La More. As I have specified, many of the questions will deal with Mr. La More's activities during the 1930s in New York. What I would like to start with would be some kind of background information if we could have it. What type family and setting were you born into?

**CL:** I was born on a tobacco farm in Dane County, Wisconsin.

**DB:** A tobacco farm?

**CL:** A tobacco farm. My father was undoubtedly a tenant farmer -- I'm assuming this -- he certainly didn't own the farm. My father came from a very mixed immigrant background -- French-Canadian, English, Irish, Pennsylvania Dutch. My mother was Danish. That was the general background. They were a working class family. Neither one of my parents had a great deal of formal education, probably grade school level. From there, we moved to Madison, Wisconsin, and essentially I was raised in that university town. I think that's about it.

**DB:** What did your family do once they moved to Madison?

**CL:** My father was an unskilled laborer who was quite adept at self-education. He ended up as a quasi-automobile mechanic working in a garage for the local utility company.

**DB:** You said that Madison is a college town, was very much so then. What kind of influence did that have on you? Any?

**CL:** Oh, a tremendous influence. In those years when I was growing up Wisconsin, and Madison in particular, was dominated by the La Follette family and the Progressive Republican Party. And during the years when I was a student there, the University of Wisconsin was dominated by the La Follette appointed regents; the regents of the University were appointed by the governor. For the most part, the whole atmosphere was Liberal and Progressive not always in the state but at least very much so in Madison.

**DB:** What sort of aspirations did you have while growing up in Madison? I've asked you if you wanted to be an artist, but did you want to go to school, did you want to be an artist?

**CL:** Oh, I had a momentary affliction that I wanted to be an architect because somebody caught me making a drawing of a house. I'm glad I evaded that. That was about the size of it. No, there was no particular encouragement or anything like that. What happened was that during high school I took a lot of art courses. And then I decided to go to the Layton School of Art in Milwaukee because there was no art school in Madison, and the art department at the University was not very good in those days. But, fortunately I suppose, one member of the staff, Arthur N. Colt, quit the University art department in high dudgeon and started a small school of his own. So the year after I graduated from high school, I went to the Colt School of Art for a year and a half.

**DB:** What was that?

**CL:** It was a small art school taught mostly by Colt who was a student of Charles Hawthorne at the Art Institute of Chicago, and then maybe he would have a design teacher around, but it was mostly his efforts. We took life drawing, drew still life, painted from the modes -- a very traditional, academic sort of training.

**DB:** This was in Madison?

**CL:** In Madison.

**DB:** At that point had you committed yourself to being an artist? Was that what you wanted to do?

**CL:** Oh, yes. But before that opened up, I was going to be a commercial artist. So I escaped that fate too. I've been sort of lucky, I think, two times around. But once I started painting with Colt, the die was cast in that

direction. The only change that was made was that after I went to the University of Wisconsin, I decided that I had as much interest in art history -- not that it was my primary personal interest but educationally speaking -- so I did two degrees, a B.A. and an M.A. in art history and criticism with the idea that I could teach in a small college in a department which included both fields.

**DB:** I see. Who would you say in those early years was perhaps most influential for you to go into art and stay in that field? Was there one particular individual?

**CL:** In relation to the decision to do this?

**DB:** Yes.

**CL:** No. I think that was just sort of common sense. In contrast to now, and aside from Yale and Carnegie Tech, there were very few art departments in the bigger institutions. Within the midwestern universities, those that had art departments were more or less like the University of Wisconsin; they were on the weak side. They had very few people and mostly had art education teacher training programs for public schools and were filled with what I would describe as obsolete teaching types -- people who were not active professionally and never had been active professionally. So it was logical to get a better education. Meanwhile, I worked on my own in painting. I had a studio and did what I could on my own.

**DB:** The studio was in Madison also? **CD:** Yes.

**DB:** And what kind of things were you doing? **CD:** It's a little hard to remember. It was sort of standard French influence, still life painting. I did a lot of portraits of friends, and some figure painting mostly under the influence of people like Derain and Matisse. These were painters that I was getting to know not through the Art Department but through the Art History Department and through College Art Association traveling shows. But essentially, it was an extremely isolated and provincial situation. There were virtually no people in Madison that did art or were interested in it. There was a local art association which brought in the College Art Association shows. Very little was going on.

**DB:** What would you say was the most extreme show they would have? Would a Matisse show, possibly, be considered very avant garde?

**CL:** It would have raised the roof if they had a Matisse show, really. The College Art Association then was the chief distributing agent for traveling shows. They would send around shows which were interesting enough, but they wouldn't have been way out. I don't remember too many specifics, but I remember seeing Maurice Sterne paintings and things of this kind -- people who are now, justly or unjustly, more or less forgotten. Occasionally, you might see Picasso drawings. The other influence was that we could go to Chicago and see the foreign section of the Carnegie International which was shown at the Chicago Art Institute every spring. And there you saw all the major figures. Of course, Chicago was close to Madison and even if you were pretty broke, as everyone was, you could get down to Chicago maybe once a year for a day or two and see art. There were not many galleries in Chicago, but the Art Institute itself had, for instance, a room of Renoirs, a room of Modiglianis, a room of Braques, so you could see really fine paintings there.

**DB:** While in Madison, did you support yourself through art?

**CL:** No. No, of course not. I had about three jobs. I had one job where I turned on the lights in store windows at dusk every night; five miles I could do that in one hour flat. That was one job. I taught an evening class in a vocational school, a class in commercial art of all things. I had to have a minimum of ten students, and the age limit was, oh, one year it was from fourteen years, I think, to seventy-two years. I taught people how to do show card lettering and things like that. That was one job. I used to run slides for the department. No, there was no making a living out of art, of course not.

**DB:** Were there any patrons for art in the area?

**CL:** No.

**DB:** And you said there was a very small artists' group --

**CL:** Well, there were a few students, but the students weren't as they are now. They didn't get very good training, and they didn't hang around the way students tend to remain in Ann Arbor and shift over into a professional basis and show. Of course, there were no galleries, and there was very little interest. If you were interested in painting, it was regarded as, oh, I would say not exactly a social affliction but something pretty close to it.

**DB:** Did you ever have a show in Madison?

**CL:** Yes. I had my first one-man show in the Wisconsin Union.

**DB:** That's the Student Union of the University of Wisconsin?

**CL:** Yes, the Student Union had a gallery, and it brought in a few shows, too. I had forgotten about that. I had a show of drawings and small paintings there the year I left Madison.

**DB:** Why did you leave? Maybe it's obvious but why did you leave?

**CL:** I left because I had my last appointment teaching in the department a summer appointment as an instructor. It was the end of the road as far as Madison was concerned. There were no jobs. It was a very isolated situation. So I took off for Baltimore.

**DB:** Now why Baltimore?

**CL:** I had friends there, a friend, my oldest friend was there. And I regarded it as a stop on the way to New York. I was on my way to New York. But this friend was broke and hungry. How much money did I have? I had a \$150, I think. I got \$200 for six weeks of teaching. I think I had a \$150 left. He was broke. We ate up the \$150. So it took three years to get to New York.

**DB:** What year did you go to Baltimore?

**CL:** 1933. But of course I met my wife there, so I guess that's why I really went there.

**DB:** But you didn't know she was there?

**CL:** No. I didn't know she was there. But there must have been some reason.

**DB:** There must have been something. So you went to Baltimore at -- well, not quite at the height of the Depression but in one of its worst years. It must have been fairly bad in Madison, was it not?

**CL:** Oh, yes, it was very, very bad in Madison. I could have made a living in Madison by continuing to work for the public utility, but at least I had sense enough to realize that it was better to starve to death than to do that because if you get stuck in a rut town like that, you're stuck forever.

**DB:** Yes, literally. Was the situation in Baltimore worse financially?

**CL:** Well, financially it was grim. I had a monthly budget of \$25. I could pay rent, \$15, and I could eat and smoke Bull Durham on \$10. I didn't make it very often. But Baltimore was more interesting because, first, there was a group of active young artists, and they were around in the center of town so I had a studio in the center of town. I immediately met people who were doing things. People would stop in at the studio to see what you were doing. That made a great difference. Also, I got a few little jobs through the Baltimore Museum of Art, especially through Adelyn Breeskin. One month I painted a five-by-seven foot mural for The Bernard Freudenthal apartments. For this I got \$25 plus material. That added up to a grand total of \$40. So that month I didn't have to eat so much oatmeal. Then I also did another small job for Mrs. Breeskin. She had political connections so I catalogued the State collection of paintings in the State House at Annapolis. Mrs. Breeskin later became director of the Baltimore Museum of Art and then director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Washington. I don't know what she's doing now. She's still around.

**DB:** So you got a job cataloguing . . . .

**CL:** I catalogued the State collection, the kinds of portraits they have hanging around the State Houses. It was mostly a matter of trying to maintain your balance holding a yardstick on top of a very high stepladder measuring and annotating these paintings. It didn't amount to anything, but it took care of my living expenses for a month. And then, of course, in December 1933, the PWAP, the first federal project came along.

**DB:** You were in Baltimore then?

**CL:** I was in Baltimore. I was given an assignment, and I did do a job which lasted about six months. And that was clover because if you were in charge of a job, you got \$42.50 a week, as I remember.

**DB:** Which was fairly considerable from what you were living on.

**CL:** Oh, sure. You could afford a 75 cent dinner with four course beginning with cherry stone clams.

**DB:** Before we get into the actual Project, I'd like to know, first of all, how you met Mrs. Breeskin, and just who were some of the other artists in Baltimore that you met who were on the scene working and painting. I'm not

very familiar with those.

**CL:** Well, they were mostly local people. Herman Maril was around; he was on the first Project. My friend Sam Swerdloff was painting portraits, and he had contacts with the Baltimore Museum. It was a small situation. Roland McKinney was Director of the Museum.

**DB:** Oh, yes.

**CL:** They had a local show there, and McKinney did make contacts with the local artists. You didn't have to be a great man -- a Matisse or a Picasso -- to walk into the Museum and talk to the director. We could see things which were not hung in the public galleries. All of the artists had this kind of contact. I met Mrs. Breeskin through my friend Swerdloff. When somebody would come into the Museum and ask, "Do you know of an artist who might be able to do this or that for me?" the Museum people would send that person down to see an artist, and then you could work it out. They took no particular responsibility for it. But there was a sort of friendly working relationship; not too friendly because artists never liked museum people that much and museum people sure as hell don't like artists that much. But Maril was around. And Aaron Sofer, a graphic artist who did very good quick figure sketches. And Walter Bohanan. It's hard to remember because many of them were local people. Some of them are still there. Eddie Rosenberg had a studio in the building where I worked. I think Rosenberg is still in Baltimore. Mervin Jules was in Baltimore. It was an interesting group. Many of these people lived at home. There was a smaller group which had studios downtown.

**DB:** Did you live in your studio?

**CL:** Oh, sure.

**DB:** How large a group would you say it was possibly? I'm just curious.

**CL:** Not terribly big. I'd say around ten or twelve people.

**DB:** So it was fairly small.

**CL:** This core of people. Then there was a much wider group of really native Baltimore people that participated in the local shows, but they were not around with that younger group. We were all very young. I was probably one of the oldest. I was maybe twenty-four at that point -- no, in 1933 I was twenty-five years old.

**DB:** What was Mrs. Breeskin's position?

**CL:** She was curator of prints in the Baltimore Museum. Later after McKinney left, she became Director of the Museum.

**DB:** So through her and others, you found some temporary jobs. Then in December 1933, the PWAP project started in Baltimore?

**CL:** Right.

**DB:** And was that run out of Baltimore at that time? Or was it run out of Washington?

**CL:** PWAP was a funny project. A number of people took credit for it. One of these was Edward Bruce who was a friend of President Roosevelt. Undoubtedly, Bruce had something to do with it. There was a great deal of pressure from the New York artists at that time -- of which we were not aware -- to start something. I think there had been a few local things in New York. But I didn't know about them in detail. I believe Harry Hopkins got the money from the Public Works program which was operating. There wasn't a WPA then. He got the money from there, and he made an allocation of these funds. It was a very peculiar project. It worked this way: If you were on the museum director's good list, you were called in, and this is the way the setup was -- go out and find yourself a wall somewhere. It should be in a public institution; they were the only people that were eligible for these murals. Convince them to let you have the wall and agree on a subject, do the research on your subject, and come back "One week from today" with scale sketches to submit. And if these are approved, you can go ahead and do the job. Now the intention was that this project would last for a very short period of time. For the most part, I think it lasted for from four to six weeks. Actually I worked for six months on a mural I did which was eight feet high by one hundred and ten feet long. There were two assistant artists on it and a technician and a model full time. This mural was in the Polytechnic Institute of Maryland. It was a history of sports.

**DB:** You said that you had to go out and find a wall. Literally, were you the one who went over to the Polytechnic and said, "Do you need a mural?"

**CL:** Well, I went over and explained to them and talked to the principal and the assistant principal, and they thought it would be marvelous to have a mural in the faculty dining room -- typical of course -- of something

which was healthy. So I visualized a row of milk bottles or something. It was incredible. So I proposed this history of sports. I picked out this huge wall in the student cafeteria because I guess I didn't have sense enough to scale it down a little bit. Anyway, I thought I could do it; and as it turned out, it got done. They didn't particularly like this idea, but they accepted it. It finally ended up in a real fracas. The male nudes in Greek section were not draped originally so it ended up in a fuss about that. And I'm not at all certain that the mural is still there; it has probably been painted out by now, like so many others from those years.

**DB:** Yes. So you actually did manage to work, though, for six months with the PWAP project for fairly steady employment?

**CL:** That's right. Well, on the basis of that and the money one could save you could keep going for another year practically -- well, maybe not for a whole year but for some time.

**DB:** Were you fairly fortunate to get a project of this size? You say most people were there for four to six weeks.

**CL:** It wasn't a matter of being fortunate. It was just a matter of having the nerve to pick a wall knowing that they would not leave it unfinished or assuming that they would not leave it unfinished. But it wasn't even a contrived thing. I just wanted to do a big wall. I had done a five-by-seven foot mural; and probably the biggest thing I had ever done before that was thirty inches. So I was filled with ambition. So it turned out.

**DB:** Did you do anything else in the Baltimore area for PWAP?

**CL:** Later on after a gap, I worked for the Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP). This was a sort of refined version of WPA. I worked on that starting in about 1935. I did mostly mural sketches. They were running a mural program for post offices. They had a relief art project for which you had to be on home relief to be hired. And then they also had other competitions which were open. I had nothing to do with those. So I designed murals, none of which were acceptable. I never did do a mural on TRAP. I ended up doing lithographs based on the mural designs which I had done. The Library of Congress has a set of these, allocated to them from the Project. The problem with TRAP was that it was coordinated into this federal building program. They had very little imagination. So anything I did there I thought was very dull and pedestrian. It was a living, and I liked printmaking. It wasn't until I got on the WPA Graphic Division that I really began to work in the way in which I wanted to work. TRAP used to talk about "distinguished" designs. I don't know what a distinguished design is. And I don't think they did. What they meant by this was something which was sort of polite. George Biddle did murals for them. He was very well suited to this kind of effort. He did murals for the Justice Department in Washington. He was a pretty polite painter and distinguished -- which I certainly wasn't -- and it all worked for the best. But it really wasn't my bag. I didn't like them much, and they disliked me even more -- I'm sure of that.

**DB:** Was there a lot of red tape involved in working with these projects? I mean, did you have to deal with a lot of officials and a lot of -- ?

**CL:** No. They would send you, say, the name of a post office -- in one case, Easton, which is on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. So you would go down there a talk to the local people and see what you could do. This post office was scheduled for a mural. You paid your own expenses going down which nobody thought to compensate you for. I went to Easton, Maryland, and talked to the people. Well, it was another "bottle of milk" deal. The Eastern Shore of Maryland is an interesting area. It's an agricultural area with a lot of itinerant workers. But the people I talked to were the people who were infatuated with Chesapeake sailing canoes. Do you know what a sailing canoe is?

**DB:** Not really.

**CL:** Well, neither did I. But they wanted a mural which had to do with Chesapeake sailing canoes. Well, I couldn't think of anything. You know, I wasn't interested in doing damn boat races. I suppose today I'd just flip on one. But in those days I was more earnest about it, not more sincere but more earnest. Of course you couldn't get together. It had to be acceptable to these people in the community and anything in the way of design that I thought of simply wasn't acceptable.

**DB:** Can you think of a design you submitted?

**CL:** Oh, I suppose it had to do with agriculture and that sort of thing. And they couldn't have been less interested in having anything that mundane in their post office. If it had been a historical survey of, say, the English settlers on the Eastern Shore who would have been Catholic I think, or the sailing canoes, or fox hunting, or something like that, they would have gone for it. But anything that had to do with the basic industries or the activity of the community . . . Well, it just was not a very suitable assignment for me for them. I think from their point of view they were perfectly right. And I certainly felt I was right from my point of view. But the two didn't work together.

**DB:** You worked on the TRAP project for six months starting in 1933 and then you worked on the federal project in 1935. In between, how did you support yourself? Was this again -- ?

**CL:** Well, it was very catch as catch can. It was going from one job to the other for a few months at a time. I had one show in Baltimore. I worked very hard in the studio because there were a good many things that I needed to learn. I worked long hours at drawing. I felt that while I drew well academically, I couldn't draw the sort of thing that I wanted to draw. I worked hard on figure composition in which I had no training at all. So in one way or another, one got along.

**DB:** Was there an Artists Union in Baltimore?

**CL:** There was an artists association which we all formed. It was quite different from the unions . . . It was really formed around the rental issue which came up at this time. It included a good many people, some of whom were middle-aged and had been around. They had shown in the regional show for many, many years, and they had nothing to do with this downtown group of young pros (if we were pros). There was no place for the artists to meet. These people came in from the suburbs and from the outlying areas. It was a nice little organization. It was befriended by Dal Emmert who in those days was the art critic for the Baltimore Sun. It published a very small newspaper -- the Art Voice. I was editor and staff, I think. I know I was editor, and I did most of the writing for it which dealt with problems. Most of the problems for that group revolved around the Museum, revolved around the need for outlets for shows -- all of the things which the community didn't have. There were very few artists who were interested in public employment, in government employment.

**DB:** I see. There were relatively few.

**CL:** It was in truth much more of an artists' association than it was anything like an artists' union. But eventually, many of these organizations sprang up around the country. And eventually as the federal arts projects got under way, they tended to turn into artists' unions especially in the larger centers such as Philadelphia, Chicago, Minneapolis, St. Paul, Milwaukee.

**DB:** Did the Baltimore association turn into a union?

**CL:** No because people left Baltimore. Mervin Jules went to New York. I went to New York. Nothing ever took in Baltimore. There was never a federal art project in Baltimore.

**DB:** Really?

**CL:** Never. Evidently, there weren't enough people. You had to have a fairly large group because WPA was sponsored by the States, except in the case of federal projects, and they were brought in, and they were linked. But they were not under the same administration. They were linked administratively with Washington. And so you have to have a considerable group in the arts, and this never happened in Baltimore.

**DB:** That's interesting. I can't quite figure out why. Maybe because it's so near to Washington or something.

**CL:** There just weren't enough artists. And it was very peculiar . . . You see, to start this you had to have a number of people who were on relief. For instance, I don't think Herman Maril was ever on relief; he lived with his family. Walter Bohanon lived with his family. There were very few people who were floating around who were completely on their own. In this sense, it was kind of a local group. People came in and out, but for everybody who came in, more wanted to get out.

**DB:** So is that why you got out? Why did you leave?

**CL:** I left, let's say, to improve my environment. I left for the same reason that everybody left. Everyone who was moving was moving toward New York. The federal art projects had this peculiar quality: they fixed people in their locality. That's why many aspects of the project were regional in character. You could not move. Otherwise, the whole Federal Art Project would have ended up in New York. Naturally, all the Chicago people would have moved into New York. The reason why I could move was that the one advantage of the Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP) was that you could work anywhere in the country. You were fixed into your salary region. You know, WPA paid salaries according to the regions. New York was one of the highest salary regions. Baltimore was down the list a ways, I think second or third. But I could transfer and keep my job. I could go to New York and still keep my job.

**DB:** Would you get a New York salary then?

**CL:** No.

**DB:** You'd get a Baltimore salary?

**CL:** I was a second-class citizen economically speaking.

**DB:** So when you actually made the move to New York which was in -- what year was that?

**CL:** 1936.

**DB:** You were still with TRAP?

**CL:** Yes. I was on the payroll, and I stayed on the payroll. And for a little while after that, there was a TRAP in New York. It was run by Mrs. Juliana Force. She had been a big wheel in some of the earlier projects. She was head of the Whitney Museum, and the Whitney was downtown on Eighth Street. It was a very different New York than it is now.

**DB:** Yes, I'm sure it was.

**CL:** And I might add it was a much more pleasant New York, too.

**DB:** I probably won't argue on that. Were you married at that time -- in 1936? Mrs. La More: Yes

**DB:** I have a question here: when you first came to New York, what sort of artistic and political circle did you move into? What was New York like for you coming from Baltimore, well actually, from Wisconsin to Baltimore to New York? What kind of situation did you fall into or gravitate into?

**CL:** Well, what you gravitated into was a situation of isolation actually. I can remember we lived in a one-room apartment, no kitchen, with a long, long hall and a tiny room just big enough for a bed and small table. Well, let me explain it this way. In the spring of 1936, the New York Artists' Union had called a national conference. People came in probably from as far west as Minneapolis and St. Paul -- I don't remember any more. I still meet people that I met originally at that conference. I came in representing the Baltimore group. So I knew that much. I attended that conference. There was an effort on the part of the New York Artists' Union to establish some sort of a national organization because obviously many of the problems were national in scope. So I had that connection. But when we moved to New York, we lived in this little place a way off on West Fourteenth Street near Tenth Avenue. I was working doing my Project work. I enrolled in a couple of classes in Teachers College at Columbia University because, frankly, I wanted to do some work with Belle Boaz. And I did take a course with Belle Boaz who was a marvelous person. And also I wanted to form some connections with people in education because I was still interested in teaching; and you can drop out entirely. I didn't know any artists in New York. The only way I could meet people was through the Artists' Union.

**DB:** You didn't have friends in New York before you went there?

**CL:** Yes, I knew one or two people, but by this time they were gone, or they were all peddling their own fish. Nobody opened up their arms and embraced you. You know, you were just another guy coming in to New York the way everybody else that could did come in. In those days, the artists were fairly concentrated. And people got to know each other through the Projects.

**DB:** Through the Projects?

**CL:** That's right. On the pay line, and signing in. During that conference, for instance, people were still going up on Fourth Avenue to an armory and signing in every morning. I was staying with a friend of mine. I remember walking up there, and we met Adolph Dehn. Adolph was working on this Project so he was going to sign in. And my friend was going to sign the time sheet. You had to go in every morning to sign the time sheet. Which was, of course, a ridiculous waste of time. By the time you signed the time sheet and then what? They all worked at home. They were working. But it was a very isolated thing. What happened then was that after a time, and I don't remember exactly when, but it might have been very early that fall, maybe later, I became a member of the National Coordinating Committee or Corresponding Committee of the Artists Union. That was logical when I was in the Union, and they needed help on that. I was from out of town, I knew a lot of out-of-town people, so I became a member of that committee. Then later on, I don't know exactly when, but sometime during that year, TRAP decided to discontinue TRAP. So it was a matter of trying to get people transferred to WPA. Well, naturally that was my job, and so I became very active in that. And that's how I got -- really that and through the National Committee -- was how I got involved in the Artists Union.

**DB:** I see. On this transfer project?

**CL:** On the transfer business. We got everyone transferred including La More. Then automatically -- and fortunately -- I went onto the Graphic Division of WPA.

**DB:** When you came up to New York, you were going to represent the Baltimore group. Was this the same time you came to attend this conference?



**CL:** I went to the conference as a delegate from Baltimore. Then I went back to Baltimore, and in the course of that, we decided to move to New York later, a few months later, in the fall.

**DB:** Were you very interested in unionism before you had made the move to New York -- in the Artists Union?

**CL:** Not particularly. It was obvious that if anything was going to get done that artists would have to get together on one basis or another. And even if you were going to cope with a local museum situation and regional shows as we were dealing with it in Baltimore, that was the issue. Actually, we boycotted one show.

**DB:** Oh, did you really?

**CL:** Yes, we boycotted a show there.

**DB:** Why did you boycott it?

**CL:** Because they wouldn't pay very modest rentals. Earnest Fiene came down from New York. He was a member of the organization in New York that had started all this brouhaha about rentals. So he finked. He came down and juried the show, and we boycotted it because they wouldn't pay rent.

**DB:** What was the outcome of the boycott? Do you remember?

**CL:** They didn't pay rent. And we didn't show that year. And Fiene made an ass of himself. I suppose he was a victim. Everything was so mixed up. He should not have come down.

**DB:** The rental issue was a very big issue at that time, wasn't it?

**CL:** Yes. It was the chief issue in relation to the museums. This was when artists and museums were strictly in an adversary situation.

**DB:** You got into the union circles and worked with the National Committee. Who were some of the people you worked with in those days, you remember?

**CL:** I don't remember any more. Between doing my Project work, and working on the Committee, and going up to Columbia to class, and sort of rattling around New York, I didn't have much connection with artists per se. As a matter of fact, during all the New York years, while I knew literally hundreds of people, I wasn't close to any of them in particular. I operated very much as a loner. I knew an awful lot of people, but there were no close personal or professional ties. Wouldn't you say that that was essentially right? Mrs. La More: Yes. I think a lot of people knew you that you didn't know and couldn't call by name, that you didn't know that well.

**CL:** I knew people that I worked with closely in the Artists' Union from time to time, but this, you might say, was a business relationship almost.

**DB:** Not an artistic relationship?

**CL:** Not an artistic relationship. I was working on my own. There were groups around. For instance, there was (1) The American group, (2) The American Abstract Artists, and (3) The Ten. These were people who, whether or not they had a great deal in common artistically, formed a professional group, an exhibition group based in a way upon a certain amount of prestige, real or imagined -- I don't know which. Then, there were groups of people that knew each other very well. Gorky had a circle of people which included Willem de Kooning. Some other people became attached to it later, people like Resnick and Tworkov. But these things changed from time to time. Tworkov originally wasn't part of the de Kooning group. And there were people like de Martini. They went to the same place in the summer, and they all worked together. Remo Ferrugio was a friend of de Martini, and they had a very close relationship as artists. They worked rather in the same mode, and you always saw them around together. But I didn't participate; I didn't have much time for socializing. I was a very busy guy.

**DB:** How many hours of your time did the Project take usually?

**CL:** Well, for the Project, you were responsible for doing a piece of work within a certain limit of time -- I forget the limits. Now anybody with any facility at all could do this very easily. Some people did find it difficult. But most of us were young. On the mural project, for instance, Stuart Davis worked set hours on his mural. He did it down at the Project headquarters because it was a huge job, and he lived in a small place. This was not the job he did for Radio Station, WNYC, but another very, very big job. But if you were on the easel or graphic project, your time was your own. But unless you were extremely foolish or lazy, you worked every day, and everything related to the work that you did for the Project. For instance, in those days I did no painting at all. I was a graphic artist entirely, which made for some difficulties later on when I wanted to get back into painting. I did graphics for the Project, I did graphics on my own. Mostly I did drawings and monotypes and compositions in black and white (and color) for lithographs or wood cuts. I worked every day in a very disciplined way, and I was

busy most every evening particularly during the week. So there wasn't much time.

**DB:** How much of your time did the Artists' Union connections take up? Was it a vast amount?

**CL:** During the years when I was really active, I was there at least five evenings a week, 4-6 hours each day.

**DB:** They had a headquarters building?

**CL:** Originally, they had a loft on Sixth Avenue just between Eighth and Ninth. Then they moved up further on Seventh Avenue which is in the Chelsea area. And after the Union went with the CIO, it moved uptown. In my opinion, it was a disaster to move uptown into the theater district. Artists don't belong in that section of New York. Actually, I don't know what happened to the Sixth Avenue place. I suppose they made some changes or something. But that was a natural there. But, you see, there was always something going on that had to be taken care of. And, you know, all of this was volunteer. No one was paid except clerical help.

**DB:** Right. So, from your first connection which was with this National Committee, Correspondence Committee, to get the people moved from the TRAP program into WPA --

**CL:** The National Committee carried on correspondence with local organizations. That was one thing. Then there was the specific organizational problem in New York of taking TRAP people over onto WPA. That was a matter of negotiating with Mrs. Audrey McMahon. Mrs. McMahon was head of the Project and working out the quotas with WPA. Those were two separate things. But they were the two first things that I happened to be involved in, and I happened to be involved in them because it was just natural; it came out of my background. One of them involved my own job and the other involved the fact that I was the only out-of-towner on that committee.

**DB:** Did you work a great deal with Mrs. McMahon?

**CL:** Everybody worked with Mrs. McMahon. She was a terrific gal in her own way, and I think a very, very good administrator. But it was necessary to maintain certain amenities. We met with Mrs. McMahon regularly. She recognized the Artists Union as a negotiator for all of the Project personnel. She never questioned that and found us very useful. And we were useful to her. If it hadn't been for the Union, in many cases the Project would have been riddled by administrative cuts and other things of that sort. Mrs. McMahon was never allied with the political point of view of a national administration that asked for inadequate appropriations which were less than the preceding appropriations or anything of that kind. She was interested in running a good Federal Art Project in New York City. Sure, we talked about it. She was very interested in developing the Art for Subways on which the Union did a lot of work, and which came to nothing. But it was well worthwhile. And many things which were of common interest. The Union's interest and the administration's interest in New York were not antagonistic. They weren't antagonistic nationally either. What was good for one was good for the other.

**DB:** What brought on the antagonism? These people who were really not connected with the Project in the sense of administrators not connected with it?

**CL:** Well, the antagonism -- the confrontations take place when, for instance, you have a situation where three thousand people are laid off for no reason at all except that the administration didn't ask for enough money. It got all the money it asked for but it didn't ask for enough. And -- well, what are you going to do?

**DB:** This was not something done locally? It was something done -- ?

**CL:** Done nationally, yes. The local administrators were not approving of the cuts. But there were many other things that were done. For instance, the Project had supervisors. Now let's take mural projects. You had to get approval of the local sponsor. Let's say it's a hospital that somebody has designed a mural for, and they don't agree with it. My row of milk bottles and sailing canoes again. Somebody has to adjudicate this. Well, it might be an objection to subject matter, it might be the business of the people not wanting something which was an abstraction, not being sympathetic with it. Well, as I remember, the way these things were adjudicated was through review boards. In the first place, sketches would be submitted for acceptance or change. Every time you did a graphic, you submitted a drawing, an idea in graphic form for it, and these were approved or disapproved. Sometimes they were rejected arbitrarily. Now, on these committees mostly the administrators sat, but they had the contact with the sponsor. In the case of graphics, it didn't matter because you could allocate the prints or not; people picked them out. In the case of murals, this could be very touchy. Well, one of the things that we worked out, over the opposition of the supervisors, and with Mrs. McMahon's support, was to get Union representation on these committees, one person, the purpose being just to sit there and listen. You see, when you have an outsider so to speak, people are not inclined to get so arbitrary in their decisions. There had been some trouble with mural projects which was not trouble from sponsors but, in the Union's opinion, was trouble from the supervisors. The minute you have a representative from the Union sitting on the committee, the supervisor, if he was in a mind to be difficult -- and generally they were not, they were artists and decent people and they wanted things to go -- but occasionally, you know, people are human. They would get into difficulty,

and they would tend to watch it and couldn't act in an arbitrary fashion if someone was there carefully scrutinizing what was going on. That was all we wanted. Supervisors didn't want us to have this. Mrs. McMahon thought it was a great idea.

**DB:** Did you ever sit on one of those committees?

**CL:** No, I never sat on one.

**DB:** After working on those transfers to the WPA, what other sorts of things did you do with Union?

**CL:** I worked on the magazine, Art Front, but in its declining days. I know there is a lot of curiosity about Art Front. Art Front started out long before my day. It started out as a publication probably supported by private donations from interested dealers and patrons, people who wanted to help. It started out as a publication which, in a way, served as a focal center in lieu of a central organization; it was a spokesman for different points of view. For instance, the controversy between Stuart Davis and Thomas Benton was publicized in Art Front. By the time I got to New York, this magazine was presumably the official organ of the Artists' Union, and yet it had very little connection with the Union, very little. The editor was not an artist. There was, I think, one union person on it who was business manager. The thing was supported by the proceeds of the Art Front Ball which was a ball held either over in Webster Hall or up in Harlem each year to raise money to pay for this thing. Aside from that, it had become very, very remote and rather irresponsible. The printing debts on this were fantastic. One of the things I was responsible for was trying to get the magazine on a decent keel so that it wasn't bleeding the Union white on printing bills. The Union was responsible for those bills, and yet the Union as such had very little control over the magazine. In effect, Art Front was not an organ of the Union. People who had no particular connection -- they might have been members, but they would come in and want to run an article on so and so, something by which they were fascinated but which was not necessarily of general interest. It was an interesting magazine, but it was a luxury. Eventually, it went down the drain on money grounds. I had some experience in publications in Baltimore. As I remember, the Union executive committee asked me to go over and keep an eye on the magazine financially and report back. They weren't even reporting back particularly. And in the course of this I participated; I was a member of the editorial board of the magazine, I wrote for the magazine, and did everything I could. Finally, it flopped because of money, not because anybody axed it. It was very disassociated by that time, as I remember. Its heyday had been in the early days when people like Stuart Davis were there. He was very good, he was a wonderful polemicist and wrote very, very well. He was one of the most clear thinking and articulate people around, particularly in the Abstract Group. I think in those days the magazine had been much more vital. I never had the impression that there was that much vitality left. I wrote a long article contrasting the Treasury projects with WPA. I wrote it under a pseudonym because at the time I wrote it I was still working for the Treasury people. That's the one thing I remember. It was a very long and exhaustive article. There was a lot of misunderstanding about Treasury Projects and the FAP. The tendency was to consider the Treasury projects as being superior because they emphasized, well, "we only have distinguished artists" and all this malarkey. The truth of matter is that they were stuffy and rather mediocre, and they didn't have young people, and if they did have young people, they conformed. The atmosphere was different. You couldn't blow around there because you were always reminded that really you were not only an artist but you ought to be more than a bit of a gentleman, too. And nobody was interested in this. But there was a certain amount of confusion, particularly in New York, because many artists bought this.

**DB:** That the Treasury thing was very -- ?

**CL:** Yes. Well, if you got a big commission like Shahn did or Refregier did. Sure, there was considerable money and prestige involved.

**DB:** You say that Art Front wasn't the official organ for the Union. By the time you joined Art Front to work, how often did the editorials reflect Union stances? Did they reflect Union stances?

**CL:** I suppose they did in the sense that while I was there I would make every effort to see that an editorial covered the current situation, the central economic issues. I stayed away from -- if somebody loved Mondrian and wanted to run an article on him, I didn't interfere with it, though it was not exactly central. They could have done an article on Mondrian and sold it to Art Digest or something like that. But it was in part justified because there was an interest in this. At that point, I didn't happen to be interested in Mondrian, although I was later. But it had this sort of amorphous reaching out. It did some good things. For instance, it published, I think, for the first time in this country The Dreams and Lies of Franco, the Picasso etchings; and things like that. Nobody else was touching this. And Art Front did it. I'm not sure that I'm right about Art Front. It was sort of a mixed bag one way or the other, and I was very aware of the money problems and of the fact that it was disconnected. And I think also the fact that nobody was hammering at the doors of the magazine asking for space to express their points of view.

**DB:** Oh, really?

**CL:** No.

**DB:** Was it ever very controversial, I mean in the sense that when it hit the stands did it have very heavy reaction?

**CL:** Oh, sure. You know, all the Mondrian haters would get up in a dudgeon about wasting space and their money on a long article on Mondrian. And all the Picasso haters would do the same thing on The Dreams and Lies of Franco. If you published a magazine without any controversy among artists, it would be a sad sack of a thing, I'm afraid. Of course, there was controversy. But, by and large, I can't really remember ever hearing any great insistence on the part of a large number of artists that this magazine continue. I think if there had been, it would have continued. They had enough money to buy the magazine. They had enough money to go to a ball.

**DB:** What issues were you particularly concerned with while writing for the magazine? You mentioned this one. What other things particularly did you write?

**CL:** That's the only thing that I actually can remember that I dealt with. I assume that I wrote some editorials or lead articles on economic affairs. I was the only person around who was in touch with that.

**DB:** Economic affairs of what?

**CL:** Things evolving out of the Project which affected the artists. But publication dates were sort of scatty, it depended upon money, etc., so you really couldn't use it in a direct organizational sense very much. It didn't come out often enough nor regularly enough for that.

**DB:** How did the Unions keep in contact then? I mean, what did they use? This was not its official organ. Did they have -- ?

**CL:** It was, and it wasn't. The Union picked up the bills on Art Front. The magazine had an office completely away from the Union. I can't ever remember hearing the editor come and make a report on anything or listen to people. You see, usually a Union paper is run very directly by the Union. Well, this was not and should not have been a Union paper; it should have been broader than that. But, you know, by this time, people were doing a lot of different things. Stuart Davis and a lot of people were involved in the Artists Congress, and this whole situation which had given rise to Art Front had changed a great deal. The Union had sort of inherited it and, I think, was glad enough to do it but with shifting interest. It just became sort of a kind of irrelevancy, I would say.

**DB:** How large was the staff of Art Front?

**CL:** Three or four people.

**DB:** Three or four? That's all?

**CL:** There was one business manager, an editor, I was on the editorial board maybe there was one other guy. Maybe five or six people. That's all I can ever remember seeing around that office.

**DB:** Do you believe there was anybody outstanding on the staff as far as writing is concerned?

**CL:** Not in my day.

**DB:** Stuart Davis maybe at one time?

**CL:** Yes. I used to have a file of the magazine. The earlier issues were quite interesting and quite good.

**DB:** But later issues lost their punch sort of?

**CL:** Well, I remember them as being not particularly interesting.

**DB:** What was Meyer Schapiro's involvement with Art Front?

**CL:** None while I was there. He was probably involved at some other time earlier.

**DB:** But he had no connection then?

**CL:** I don't remember it.

**DB:** Let's see as I collect my thoughts here. If you want to take a break go right ahead.

**CL:** No, no, go ahead.

**DB:** Some questions now on the Artists' Union in general: Would you comment on the types of divisions you found within the New York Artists' Union when you first joined?

**CL:** Well, this is one of the questions which is repeatedly asked. I think the best article, the best summary of the spirit and the whole approach which was characteristic of the Union is contained in Gerald Monroe's article "The Artists Union of New York" which was published in the College Art Journal. It can be found in the bound volume of 1972-1973. I think he got the spirit of the whole enterprise better than I could express it. His article is based on a great deal of information, and I think he was pretty much in tune with it. Now with this business of divisions, in any organization, you have differences of opinion. I can remember things where people disagreed on one score or another. It would have been a sad deal if they hadn't. I know that there are people around who have fixed on this, and I think it's them, not the situation. I don't know what they were doing or where they were, but I doubt very much that they were working within that organization. It was possible for people of many divergent points of view to work in the organization and/or to participate in the organization. I think Gerry Monroe describes quite accurately the relationship of the active membership which was quite large from time to time -- after all, the Project had two thousand people on it at its peak -- and the general membership which was not particularly active although a tremendous number of people were active in one sense or another in the organization on the committee in relation to subway art, or in relation to the teaching project -- a tremendous amount of activity. I think that some people in retrospect feel very sorry for themselves, you know, all the suffering they endured during the Depression. The truth of the matter is that they were very lucky that they had jobs; they were very lucky that there was an organization which protected them in their jobs and also protected them in their right to do the things that they wanted to do. So, I think that any divisions that were there were really of minor consequence. I'm serious about this. I think they have become highly exaggerated --

**DB:** In retrospect?

**CL:** In retrospect. There are always some people around who are feeling sorry for themselves. Frankly, I am not amused by it. I think those people -- I know of a few -- are not people who have made any great contribution. There are always people who are very self-centered and egocentric. I think they still are, and I think they were in those days. But they could function. For instance, in relation to controversy in regard to the mural projects, in one case, it could be an abstract thing; in another case, it could be a matter of some type of social or possibly political subject matter. It wouldn't make any difference. This thing would be defended on its merits, not on the basis of any organizational attitude toward art. I think these are the divisions that you are possibly referring to. The Union took no attitude -- nor could it afford to take any attitude -- in relation to art as such.

**DB:** That's what I'm sort of trying to get at because there is much talk that there was a conflict between those members who were social realists and those who were essentially abstract in their painting, and I wondered how much there was that conflict.

**CL:** Well, what kind of conflict do they refer to?

**DB:** Well, in the sense of I guess just what type of thing should be done by the artists on the Project, the artists in the Union.

**CL:** Of course there was difference of opinion. In those days I did social realist art and satirical art. Certain people would approve of the social realism and would disapprove of anything satirical. I submitted work of both kinds. I also did a lot of industrial landscape. They went to the review committees. They were accepted, not on the basis of subject matter, but on the basis of presumed value as a print to be done by the Project. Look, Stuart Davis did at least two big jobs for that Project. Gorky did a job -- at least he designed a job -- for the Newark Airport which those clowns have lost.

**DB:** Right. Supposedly.

**CL:** They dumped a lot of the work. You had everything on the graphic project; you had people who were doing satirical things; and Morley used to do quite abstract things. I can't remember one single instance of the Union taking a position on this basis, not one. Nor do I believe that there ever was. There might have been a minor incident. There were arguments among artists. You know, if you're doing a certain kind of work, you think you're right. Otherwise, you wouldn't be doing it. And naturally, if you think you're right, you're rather inclined to think that the other guy is wrong. Sure, personally, I was very, very convinced in those days that I was doing the sort of thing which interested me and that it was right for me to do this. And I wasn't particularly sympathetic with people who were doing something else. I did not think that Gorky was a great artist in those days. But it was not a matter of saying he was one thing or another. I wasn't interested in what Gorky was doing. Just recently I saw a very nice, a very fine early Gorky -- where was it? -- in Santa Barbara, right? -- a very, very handsome painting. But no one would have said that Gorky didn't have a right to work the way he wanted to. But of course, the arguments went back and forth. You would not have had an American Abstract Artists group if they hadn't felt the need to be groupers. Obviously, they felt the need. Who argued with them about it? Most of those people

were members of the Union, too. I can't remember anybody criticizing them for having an American Abstract Artists group. There was a group of sculptors formed which included all types of sculptors, Project and non-Project. The abstract group was the one which was most programmatic. But within the Project, there was the Design Lab. This was a Bauhaus thing. Irene Rice Pereira was employed in the Design Lab -- I think that was what it was called -- completely non-objective, not abstract, non-objective. And this was very, very far removed from the attitudes of the satirists or the social realists. They all existed. And, frankly, if anybody is kidding themselves that they were oppressed, they are full of crap. Nobody was oppressed by this. There were probably more people around who were committed to a social type of art than were not.

**DB:** It seems a natural thing considering the times.

**CL:** Well, during the times and all the rest of it. There were regionalist around. And there were very, very polite artists who were still pursuing the sort of thing which I pursued when I was still in Madison very much under the influence of the French like Matisse and Braque. These were the easel painters who loved that kind of work and did it. And why not?

**DB:** There wasn't any campaign to have more than one type of art rather than another?

**CL:** Not that I can remember, and I think I would remember.

**DB:** And you never felt pressured yourself in any way to work in any one style?

**CL:** No. I did what I pleased. I got a little pressure, in a sense, public pressure, because I was inclined to flip over into satirical type of things. The gallery in New York wasn't particularly sympathetic. It was a bit on the earnest side on that. In those days, I was showing with the A.C.A. And this wasn't quite understood. Well, it was understood, but there wasn't much sympathy with it in a sense. To put it fairly, I would say that there were some reservations. But let me tell you that if you call this pressure, the kind of pressure I got later on the New York scene from commercial dealers was enough to raise a hair even on my head, and I have very little left. Now the only thing that I would say is that, for instance, it is perfectly possible that individuals got into arguments and exerted pressure. I'm talking about the Union position as such. I think that if anybody had tried to exercise such a position on a committee . . . . I know that if I had heard of it I would not have approved of it. I might have been in sympathy with their point of view, but not in sympathy with pressure, definitely not. It was a live and let live situation, which is more, I might add, than some of these people propagated during the 1950s. It was definitely not live and let live. I think of two people in particular whose names I won't mention who were up to their necks in trying to develop a monopoly on ideas and outlets during the 1950s. There were a lot more than two but these two people -- and I know what their attitude was toward the 1930s too.

**DB:** What do you think were the crucial events in the history of the Artists' Union during your time in it?

**CL:** I made a list of these things --

**DB:** And why do you think they were so crucial?

**CL:** Well, because of the nature of the organization, I would list as the most crucial issues the constant crises in relation to employment. Now I'm thinking here notably of 1936 starting off with that 219 arrest on the first sit-in, and the brouhaha of 1937. Everybody thinks mostly about the Washington delegation East 42 Street sit in. This actually was a fight that went on for over six months. It cost thousands upon thousands of dollars and left an organization completely dead broke and in debt at the end of it. Over 600 people were back on the job, but that Union had to be reorganized and membership brought up to date. You don't come through a thing like this without some terrific organizational scars. And there were others later. But these were the ones that I remember. Growing out of that, I think the next most important thing was the campaign for the Federal Arts Bills. There were a number of these. And I think the important thing in relation to these was the fact that the Artists' Union was the initiator of coordination between the various unions, and these were AFL unions, the craft unions in the theater such as stage hands and scenic designers, Actors Equity, the musicians union, etc. Now these organizations cooperated on the basis of supporting a Federal Arts Bill. The Artists' Union initiated this sort of thing subsequent to these very, very tough campaigns and in an effort to carry it over on a more permanent basis. I don't think we would have federal sponsorship now of any kind if this hadn't been done. I would doubt it very much, regardless of the form that it takes. That's very arguable -- you can argue about that and the kind of ambience which surrounds current federal sponsorship. It is still very important that this was done. I think the third most important thing that we did was the support for the Spanish Republic. The Union membership raised enough money out of very small resources to buy an ambulance, equip it, and send a driver to Spain. That was a very fine thing to do. There was also a series of symposia and talks. These things could be very, very funny at times. We were one of the few organizations that were doing anything. In this sense, when Monroe points out that the Union was an intellectual center, he is quite right; it was. One of the funniest things that I remember was when the Baroness Hilla von Rebay, the head of the Guggenheim Museum, was invited to come and talk about the sort of things that the Museum -- or she -- liked which was composed mostly of Bauhaus things. Sam

Putnam who was a very abrasive character -- of course he was a writer but he was also a critic -- he was a big supporter of the opposite point of view up on the ILGWU labor stage where they had produced the musical, Pins and Needles. Oh, this was one of the funniest things. What a business with the Baroness stalking out in high dudgeon! It was really very exciting. And I remember another occasion when Leger came to speak at a Union meeting. Ben Carp translated for him. There were lots of things of that kind which were very important and I think tend to be forgotten now. I think the fifth thing is the defense of the artist work in the process of actually making the Projects work, the defense against any sort of censorship . . .

**DB:** Oh, I see.

**CL:** . . . on the part of sponsors and on the part of administration. Very complicated at times. And I'm sure the Union made mistakes here as well as everyone else making mistakes. But there was an effort to keep track of this. People brought complaints like this to the Union, and it dealt with them, and it was very important. It was very important because it kept the Project free of a bureaucracy. It was impossible in the face of this situation to develop the kind of bureaucracies that we are only too familiar with now. And it was a good thing because once a bureaucracy gets entrenched you've had it. That never grew up. And I suppose the last and an important thing was the affiliation with the CIO United Office and Professional Workers. I was in on this, of course, but I can't really remember . . . I know it included textile designers, those poor girls that were so badly exploited. And there was some talk with the Cartoonists Guild. I don't know whether they actually came in. Some commercial artists did. But looking back on this, I regard it really as an error in judgment. At the time, it seemed very logical to form a connection with a progressive wing of the labor movement. I don't think it would have ever occurred to us to go into the AFL Building Trades Council, people like this. But in that atmosphere, it seemed sensible. And yet, I think it practically destroyed the unique and maverick quality of the Union and sort of levelled it out. You can see what has happened to the CIO unions now. Can you imagine an Artists' Union in that setup? Holy Toledo! Talk about Auslander's. I think it was a perfectly natural thing to do at the time, or to consider. Probably more time should have been taken about it. I think now that it was really a mistake. I didn't think so at the time. But you could see the erosion afterward, the loss of spontaneity in character. This was due partly to the kind of pooping out of the Project, the diminution of the numbers, getting closer and closer to World War II and all the rest of it. But I think it would have been better if we had settled for support both ways and no affiliation.

**DB:** Who courted whom? Did the Artists' Union court the CIO?

**CL:** The Artists' Union initiated it. The CIO didn't have to initiate anything. Alan Hayward sat in that New York office like a spider in the middle of a web and people came to him. The United Mine Workers had money, and they were pouring money into this. And there was such a need for that kind of breakthrough and support in the labor movement generally. He just sat there and people came to him with organizations to put in his lap.

**DB:** What did the people in the Artists' Union think they would gain by this CIO affiliation?

**CL:** Well, I think they felt they would gain support. I think it would have been impossible to have predicted that the industrial phase of the American Labor Movement would take the form that it has taken, that it took really quite quickly. It was quite a utopian understanding.

**DB:** Did you and the others at that time think that the Federal Art Project would go on at that point for -- ?

**CL:** Well, if it had been up to us, it would have gone on; that's for sure. And who knows, perhaps if it hadn't been for the war, there could have been an orderly transition, although I doubt it. I don't think it would have carried through a period of political reaction. And there were some real Project haters; lots of them. There were a lot of them.

**DB:** That was one of the questions I have: would you comment on the witch hunt of the late 1930s?

**CL:** For some reason or other, I don't cue in on it very much. I know that it happened. I know some people that got fired. I don't think it hurt any particular group. I think it hurt individuals badly and the whole enterprise and was sort of cheap and political in the sense that you can take advantage of this and -- END OF SIDE 1 SIDE 2

**CL:** One of the things you raised in the question was: did this have any effect on the social realist movement. Well, frankly, I wasn't aware of it. I don't think it did. I don't think that things like this affects peoples' artistic convictions. But I will tell you what I think did have an effect on it, and that was the Soviet pavilion in the 1939 World's Fair in New York. It was completely astonishing to walk into that pavilion and see, I swear it must have been one hundred feet of Soviet workers, male and female, all in tennis whites carrying garlands of roses -- shades of the Saturday Evening Post -- unmitigated bilge. On top of that, there were all those machine paintings storming the Winter Palace. It was so incredibly vulgar and such a demonstration of what not social realism could be like but socialist realism. And there is a difference between the two. I don't think that it was any particular news to anybody, but what it demonstrated in a public way was the complete subservience of art to a political regime. It didn't make any difference what political regime. That happened to be a Soviet pavilion but the

German pavilion would have been as bad, and so would the Italian pavilion. Well, I think that did have an impact. But this gets tied up with a number of things: a change in time and an infusion of certain elements in the American art scene which weren't there really in a major sense before, in a minor sense, yes. But the big Picasso retrospective at The Museum of Modern Art, which I think was in 1939 too, was a shocker, and seeing a painting like Guernica had tremendous impact. So did the Miro show which was held in conjunction with the Dali show. Well, they weren't in conjunction, they were at the same time. The Miros were on the outside in natural light, the Dalis were on the inside in a dark labyrinth with spots. But I think the thing that has to be understood -- and I wrote something about this -- social realism as it existed, as it developed in the 1930s in the United States, was based upon an idea of art being engaged in events, in circumstances outside of itself. It would be the opposite of a movement of art for art's sake. In this sense, it was diametrically opposed for instance, to the abstractionists. In the case of Stuart Davis, you had an abstractionist who was dealing with American subject matter, a particularly American street scene subject matter. Maybe that's why he was so devastating with Thomas Benton because he resented Benton's regional and anecdotal approach. But I think that social realism in the United States had less of a political point of view than a social point of view which could vary enormously. It could be as compassionate, for instance, as Kathe Kollwitz' things, or it could be as acidulous and brutal as George Grosz' things in the 1920s in Germany. And generally, it gets lumped together all in one package, which is always a mistake when you're talking about art. It was highly diversified. As the people who were involved in it grew and matured in their own point of view, they developed their own attitudes in relation to it. And they might still have been interested in trying to relate to a general social theme, but they were doing it in a much different way and certainly not in a programmatic and illustrative way which was the level at which that Soviet pavilion existed. That's the important point that I wanted to make. I think this was really a change. It came through a number of circumstances. And undoubtedly the beginning of the war had a tremendous effect because it broke everything up.

**DB:** Yes. And you don't think it was so much the enemies of the Project or the enemies of social realism that in a sense really brought its change?

**CL:** You mean the politicians?

**DB:** You can put politicians in there.

**CL:** Well, politicians are very omnipotent in their own area. Actually, they don't affect anything very much in this area. I would be extremely skeptical about it. If Hitler couldn't do a job -- and obviously he didn't do a complete job on progressive art in Germany -- I don't think that any American politicians have ever had the pizzazz to do it. They have tried all right. But it was sort of yahoo business more than anything else. But the attacks on people to deprive them of the means of making a living -- that is serious. But then artists have always found a way of countering it and doing what they felt they needed to do.

**DB:** The attacks on people hurt, but they weren't the key blow to this at all?

**CL:** No. I think it was the changing circumstances; people were changing, we were going into a different historical period. And just as American regionalism wore itself out and came to natural end, this thing tapered off and changed form through historical process.

**DB:** Would you comment on the Somerville Advisory Committee in relation to this?

**CL:** I don't remember anything about it.

**DB:** You don't remember anything about it?

**CL:** No. I was in a few meetings with Somerville. Of course, it was the beginning of the end of the Projects once he took over.

**DB:** Right.

**CL:** But I can't remember. He made like a big colonel; he was very easy with the threats. You'd think he was running a platoon. He was stupid and arrogant, really. But it was bluff; person to person, it was bluff. I can't remember anything about the committee. I know that there was one. At that point, I was not really in the center of things any more. I was in the center enough for him to threaten to fire me once, but that was just blowing hard, too.

**DB:** So you didn't feel any particular pressure from this committee?

**CL:** No. Somerville's tactic was to sort of set up these things as kind of threats and waggle them around and occasionally produce something. But it was a blow to come under his authority because the specialness of the Projects under federal sponsorship was gone. It should never have been done. He had absolutely and completely



no sympathy or understanding at all.

**DB:** No interest in art?

**CL:** No.

**DB:** Would you say that one of the crushing blows to the Project would be the Somerville -- ?

**CL:** Yes. A shift in an organization like WPA was bound to have an effect because as long as the Project had very good support, it could have been stopped. Obviously, it couldn't be stopped. I don't remember the details of how and when it was done.

**DB:** What about the Artists Congress of 1940?

**CL:** I remember going. I remember being scheduled and speaking. And I remember Soriano sitting around and doing caricatures of people including one of me; they were published on big sheets. But I can't remember a single thing about it. That was during the last few months I was in New York. That summer, I went out to Ohio State University and taught summer school. And I quit the Project. The next year, we were in Connecticut. I worked on a show, my first one-man show in New York. So I was pretty removed. I can remember that there was a Congress, but I can't remember anything about it.

**DB:** You don't see it in light of all this going elsewhere as also an end to the movement and an end to the Artists' Union and to the Project? If I remember correctly, I've read something about that 1940 Congress and that it was a slightly divisive Congress.

**CL:** Yes, you're probably right that there were different points of view. Now that I think about it, I remember one fuss involving somebody, but it involved someone who was always a difficult person. He got into an argument with somebody. It might have been political -- I don't know. But as I remember it, it sure wasn't the good old days when you felt that there was a momentum forward. But it was almost impossible to feel this. We were a year into the war. The war itself was divisive . . . . People had a lot of different attitudes toward the war in those days. And it was the war more than anything else that fractured the solidity of the artists' movement. After that you had Artists Equity with which I have never had much sympathy. It's a cake-cutting organization. Who gets the biggest slice of the cake? At any rate, that's the way they started out. I guess it's better than that, but I have never had any interest in it. But when you split up a group, some people go to war, some go to the factories, some stay home. It's never the same again. It can't be.

**DB:** Do you feel that the Artists' Union was very politically motivated?

**CL:** What do you mean by 'politically'?

**DB:** Okay. Well, there have been many charges against the Union, you know, from its enemies that it was a front organization at times, and they don't see it as a very valid union in the sense of fighting for artists but rather fighting for a particular point of view. Did you ever see it that way?

**CL:** During my days in the Union, I can remember one occasion when a resolution that I considered essentially political was introduced to a meeting. It was the sort of thing that I never condoned once I was in a position to stop it. I don't believe that organizations exist for the convenience of political parties. I'm not very political anyway. I was a union person. But I'm sure that these stories exist. I'd like to know what they're based upon. An organization that nearly killed itself protecting basic economic rights -- a front for what? I would like to see proof of how many times that union was manipulated for political purposes. Was the Spanish Republic thing manipulated? Or was the membership of that Union genuinely in sympathy with the Spanish Republic? Well, you can or can you interpret that as manipulation?

**DB:** Right.

**CL:** Well, you know, the Spanish Republican government happened to be a legally elected government, and Franco was running an armed insurrection. I don't know what people are talking about. There were people of different political opinions in the organization. But I don't see it. I don't think a case can be proved for it. I really don't.

**DB:** What kind of painting were you doing by the end of the 1930s and early 1940s? Now, you said earlier that you were doing graphics basically.

**CL:** Well, earlier than that I was doing graphics. Then I began to paint again. It was a very difficult thing because I was getting back on an altogether different basis. I was no longer working from models or still lifes or this sort of thing. So I started out doing very small paintings, really miniatures, under five inches. And the reason I started out doing these was because I could manage them. I could make the transition from drawing to painting

because I didn't have to blow them up. These were satirical paintings. My first one-man show in New York, which was in the spring of 1941, included mostly satirical paintings -- to wit, a satirical portrait of Neville Chamberlain, anti-war, but basically satirical. There were very few, if any, so-called social realist things. I think probably the last time I showed that kind of painting was in the 1939 World's Fair. Recently, I saw the painting here, and I destroyed it; it was pretty bad in my opinion. But from that point, I began to expand and develop a new approach that resulted in the kind of work that was shown in the Perls Gallery show in 1944. During the last years in New York, I was very influenced by Klee, which was no secret, and by Miro. I think I matured rather slowly because I was always involved in other things. And I was in the war in Europe. And I was teaching. After the war, I became involved in certain things I had never been involved in before. Through no choice of my own, I was teaching design, and this was an immensely broadening experience, and from that point on, my work expanded a great deal. So by the time I showed with Carlebach, the work had changed. Around 1950, I had two shows at the Carlebach Gallery. One was of caseins. I had the problem also of finding a medium. I never liked oil. So after the war I found caseins. In the 1930s, there was no such thing; you had to make your own. I had to work small in egg temperas. One show with Carlebach, I suppose, could really be classified as abstract surrealism; that was the tag that people were using for that kind of work which was meaningless. The other show was of water colors which I think probably I should not have had. Many of these were done during the war. It doesn't matter any more, but I think the casein show was the better of the two. But then these shows took place in the atmosphere of the first Barney Newman show and all of this 10th street business that was going on, hardly an ambience for me. From that point on, I began to travel. I had worn something out. We did a great deal of traveling in the United States. For the first time in my life, I saw a completely white landscape and a completely black landscape. Landscape began to have much more influence. I almost stopped entirely doing figurative things. It has been more or less that way ever since in terms of painting. However, in 1954, I began working in sculpture. The earlier small bronzes which I did, which were welded bronze, were figurative. They substituted for the loss of the figurative in the painting. For ten years, I worked mostly -- not entirely -- but the main emphasis for ten years was in sculpture. I reached the point where I was doing very large things for as long as I was physically able to. For the last five years, I haven't been able to do them. And I'm not that interested in it any more. But the painting has gone on and grown, and I think it's fair to say that it's essentially and intentionally surreal, but it's surreal without being orthodox in the Dali type of Freud ichnography and that sort of thing. It's very hard to judge your own work, but I think it's much more in the direction of what is now called the poetic type of surrealism where you try to establish a certain ambience in the work. But there has always been a certain amount of fantasy in it for better or worse; sometimes for worse, I think. That has been the direction. But actually since we came out here to Ann Arbor for the first time, I've had adequate space. It's very difficult for anybody to realize that Stuart Davis in the late 1930s was living in a place which not much bigger than this room; he lived there and worked there.

**DB:** It might have been twelve by twelve?

**CL:** Well, this room is about fifteen by fifteen. It was a little bit bigger than this but not much; not a bit over twenty by twenty. A tremendous number of artists never had adequate space and this conditions you. Even this place conditions me to work in a certain size. If I had a huge barn, I'd probably be doing much bigger things, although I love small things.

**DB:** Just as a sort of parting question: Why did you leave New York in 1942, and why did you come to the University of Michigan?

**CL:** Well, I left New York in 1942 because I had had this show. Mervin Jules and I had done a joint show of Color Prints for Children which toured for years and years. We made some money, but we didn't make a living from it. Frankly, I left New York because I got a teaching job in Buffalo. It was just that simple. We moved to Buffalo. I taught there for a year. Then I went into the Army for two years. I came back to Buffalo and taught for two more years. That was an impossible situation -- classes of sixty students and a complete mess administratively. So it was a question of quitting there and going to Paris on the GI Bill, and at that point, this job came along. Well, you know I was raised in a university town and spent years as a student there. I don't have the objection that a good many artists have to university life. I object to some aspects of it, but it's perfectly compatible. So I came out to Ann Arbor because I felt that it was a reasonable situation. I could work independently. And, frankly, it has worked out very well. I have had probably the best creative years I have ever had here with more freedom and more resources. And at least I could undertake sculpture which I never would have been able to do in a city like New York. I couldn't have afforded it. We like small towns. I guess that's it.

**DB:** Any regrets ever about leaving big New York?

**CL:** No. I wouldn't move back to New York. We could move back at this point, but I wouldn't dream of doing it. Being in a big center like New York, being in the eye of the hurricane, so to speak, is marvelous when one is young. It's nothing at all when you are old, when you're getting older, it's silly. You need privacy, peace and quite. But it's an experience that would have been very sad to have missed. That's for certain.

**DB:** Well, I'm done. Would you like to add any final comments?

**CL:** No, I think not.

**DB:** Okay then. Thank you. END OF SIDE 2 END OF INTERVIEW