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Oral history interview with Archibald Motley, 1978 Jan. 23-1979 Mar. 1

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Transcript

Interview

DB: Dennis Barrie
AM: Archibald Motley

DB: Today is January 23, 1978. I am here in the home of Archibald Motley, a Chicago artist. My name is Dennis Barrie. Today we're going to talk about Mr. Motley's life and career. I thought I'd start by asking you to give us a little background about your family, about the family you came from.

AM: Well, I'd like to start first with my two grandmothers, the one on the side of my father and the one on the side of my mother, maternal and paternal. The grandmother that I painted was on the paternal side. She was the one I think I told you I cared so very, very much about. She was a very kind person, a nice person, she had so much patience. I've always hoped that I could continue her teaching that she taught me when I was young. I think I've done a pretty fair job of it because I still have the patience of Job not only in my work but I think I've it with people. Now I'm going over to the other grandmother. She was a pygmy from British East Africa, a little bit of a person, very small, she was about four feet, eight or nine inches. She used to tell me an awful lot about slavery. She was in slavery. The other grandmother wasn't. The maternal grandmother on my mother's side she was in slavery, I think, in Tennessee and also in Louisiana. She talked to me so much about slavery and told me so many wonderful stories about it. One of them was that she had a very good master and mistress. They had three or four children in their home and when the tutors came around to teach the master's children, that is, the white children, they also taught the little colored kids in slavery. So she could write very well. She had, possibly, an education comparable to, oh, that of a seventh or eighth grade child. Her writing was very distinct and very legible.

DB: That is pretty impressive.

AM: She used to tell me so many tales about slavery. But the thing that impressed me more -- you know, you hear so many tales about how the slave owners being so mean and how they beat the slaves. But she said she didn't get any of that at all, she said that she considered herself an exception being in that family. She was with a family by the name of Craighead; that was the name of the family that owned her. She said she was treated with all the dignity and courtesy of anybody in the world. She said they bought them very good clothes, they clothed them well. Of course, there was a big difference in the slaves that are called domestic slaves and the slaves that worked out in the fields. There was an awful big difference. Those slaves lived in little shanties around the plantation and never came to master's home. All their food and everything was taken out to them, to those shanties, and they didn't have to come to the master's place to get their supplies or anything like that. Of course, those people working in the fields were considered a little more type than those working in the home, what they called the domestics. She said they treated her just lovely, she got nice clothes, nice shoes, they made them take good care of themselves, they made them bathe. They had good food to eat; they had the same kind of food as the master and the family had. So she said it wasn't difficult at all. She said she liked it, she loved her master and mistress. And I think in that painting I did called Mending Socks you'll notice in the left-hand corner there's an oval painting of a woman....

DB: Yes.

AM: Well, the woman in that painting was her young mistress. They gave her the picture when she was freed. And she took care of that, oh, like a very valuable diamond of something. She had it in the house there in a closet. So when I started that painting I told her, "I'm going to put it in this painting." She said, "Oh, how beautiful that will be."

DB: She was really proud of it.

AM: That's just what I did. I think the painting tells a very beautiful story. I'm talking about the painting of the mistress. You can see in her that she has all the characteristics of a real human being, I mean a person full of love, respect and kindness and I could really believe my grandmother when she told me that she was so kind to her because I could see it in the picture.

DB: That's interesting. Did your grandmothers live with you?

AM: Yes, she lived at home with us when we lived on Sixtieth there.

DB: This was your maternal grandmother?

AM: Yes, the other grandmother was gone. No, this is grandmother here, this is my paternal grandmother, my father's mother.

DB: Right.

AM: She lived with us out there. The other grandmother lived with us, too. And I want to tell you something that's a little funny. Let's see, when she first came to live with us I think she was about eighty-seven or eighty-nine years old. She lived to be 102. So at the time I think she was about either eighty-eight or eighty-nine years old. We had an upstairs and downstairs, we had two bedrooms upstairs and I had a studio room, oh, about as large as this entire place here facing north, you know, north exposure, and there was a little bedroom off the side of the studio where she slept. Of course, during the day she'd be downstairs all day. In those days the hot water was heated by a little gas heater and then you had that tall galvanized tank. The heater was right by the tank and, of course, the heat from the tank and the gas would heat up pretty nice and she always sat with her back against the tank to keep her back warm. She'd sit there all day puffing on her little pipe. Every night at nine o'clock I used to come and get her. I'd say, "Grandma, it's time for you to go to bed now." She loved me so much she'd say, "Is it time for me to go to bed, son? It's kind of early, isn't it?" I'd say, "No, Grandma, look at the clock." I'd show her the clock. It was nine o'clock. I'd say, "Now I'm going to take you all the way upstairs and I'm going to pull your covers down and you've got to go to bed and get your rest." She'd say, "Thank you, child, you're certainly one sweet boy." I'd carry her all the way upstairs and put her to bed. One night we were having a party and there were a lot of wild women there and quite a good deal of drinking going on an dancing and so on. My mother said -- it was about seven o'clock but it was going into winter, I think it was in the fall of the year and the days were getting shorter, you know, at seven o'clock it's dark. So my mother said, "Why don't you take your grandmother upstairs." I said, "Oh, no, I wouldn't do that. I wouldn't cheat her and tell her a lie." My mother said, "Well, she's annoyed back there, she's not comfortable with all this noise and loud talk and so forth. You take her upstairs and just tell her it's nine o'clock." So I said, "All right." I didn't want to do it because I didn't want to lie to her. So I went back there and I said, "Grandma, it's nine o'clock, I'm here, I've got to take you upstairs." She said, "Is it that late?" I said, "Yes, it's nine o'clock. I'm going to take you upstairs." She said, "All right, honey, take me in your arms." I said, "All right, come on." I grabbed her and took her upstairs and put her to bed. The party lasted until about three or four o'clock in the morning. The next morning I went up. She was getting out of bed earlier than she usually got up. She used to get up around, oh, nine o'clock. I think it was about seven o'clock. I said, "Grandma, what are you doing getting up so early". She said, "Oh, honey, my back hurts me so bad I must have been lying down in bed a long time." I said, "It's the same time, Grandma, I put you to bed at nine o'clock." She looked at me funny and I could see she knew I was lying. So she laughed about it. I said, "Yes, Grandma, I did take you to bed a little early because we didn't want to annoy you. We thought it would be better if you would go to bed."

DB: What did your parents do for a living?

AM: My mother only stayed home; she was a schoolteacher in the South before she married my father. After she married my father she quit teaching. My father was a railroad man, he ran on the Michigan Central and New York Central from here to New York. He was operating a buffet car. I don't know if you know what a buffet car is?

DB: Pretty much I think I do.

AM: They serve drinks and so forth mostly and light lunches, little snacks, sandwiches and so forth. He was running on the Michigan Central. I think I told you about this canvas....

DB: Yes, that you borrowed from....

AM: Yes. Well, that's where I got the canvas that this painting was painted on, off Michigan Central, a train called the Wolverine. I don't think that train is running any more.

DB: I don't think so either.

AM: I used to take my father down to the yards when he was going out to where they make the trains up and then they back it into the station when they're getting ready to go out on a trip. I used to take him in the car quite a bit. During the wintertime the yards there -- there was no way of cleaning them, getting snow away of anything --it was very difficult for him because he was partly paralyzed in his right leg, it was just a little weak in the ankle and he sort of dragged it a little bit. I used to take him down when he was going out on a trip. Of course, that saved him from stumbling all through that snow and possible falling down.

DB: You occasionally went with your father on the train, didn't you?

AM: Yes. Then during the First World War when I was home from school during vacation he said, "You're home now, Arch, I'd like to take you around the country so you can travel around and see some of the country." I said, "Okay." So I went with him and, oh heck, we took soldiers all the way out to -- we hauled them from Los Angeles, San Francisco, down East to Hoboken and various other places in the East, Philadelphia. Well, we went into every state in the Union really. I was with him all that summer when I was out of school on vacation. We traveled all over, all through the South. I'll never forget one time we were down in Georgia. We were waiting for a streetcar down there in Atlanta on Peachtree Street. That's one of the principal streets in Atlanta. My father said, "I'll pay the fare." I had a newspaper and I was reading it as I got on the streetcar and I concentrated on it so much that I forgot about the laws in the South. I wasn't supposed to go to the front. So I was reading the paper and walking along, after a while I found myself in the front of the car. The conductor was in the back and he yelled, "Come back here you so-and-so" using very vile language, "you come back here. You must be one of those smart'uns from up in Chicago or New York or somewhere." It just came to me then and I felt like a fool. I was never white in my life but I think I turned white. I just stood there and held the newspaper down and looked at him. I walked back there. Then he got so nasty, he began to curse me out and call me all kinds of names using very degrading language. I just couldn't take it. And he made me very, very angry. I used to have quite a temper. I've gotten over that now. My father was standing back there and he was just looking at me. I said, "Now listen here, I'm going to knock the so and so out of you, and I hauled back to hit him. My father grabbed me, "Hold on, Arch, don't do that. You're in the South now. I'd like to see you around for a few years longer." I said, "I'd like to be around a few years longer, too." So that was the end of that. We just got off the car. I was still mad. Oh, I was so angry I didn't know what to do. There was no reason for that. He could have spoken to me in a more --in a lower tone. But he wanted everybody in the car to know that he was in control.

DB: Was your family an artistic family?

AM: Not that I know of; only Willard when he came along.

DB: Your brother?

AM: Yes, my brother. I was the only one in the family as far back as I can remember, and as far back as I know that took any interest in the arts. Willard used to talk to me a good deal. Willard had an awful lot of respect for me. That's one thing I have to say about him. He had an awful lot of respect for me. He listened to me. And I used to talk to him about the various books that he'd write. I used to try to get him to write more books dealing with his own race. I thought that would be very good for himself and for the race and for everybody concerned. But Willard, like myself, all my life I was raised in white neighborhoods where we all associated. It never made any difference. We went to their parties; they came to our house. They had birthday parties, Valentine parties. All the young people sent cards to all of them; it made no difference. Of course, when we moved into that neighborhood out there that was an Italian neighborhood and Willard came up with a lot of young Italians. And many people wondered why he wrote that book Knock On Any Door. Well, I know why he wrote it, it was because those were the only young people that he knew; they were Italians. And I think if you recall Knock On Any Door is about an Italian family.

DB: Yes.

AM: The name was Romano. And that's where he learned all that. He knew them better than he knew his own people because every day he went to school with them, he associated with them, played baseball with them, played basketball with them and they associated. So he knew more about them than he knew about his own people.

DB: Was that the same for you, too?

AM: That was the same for me. And to tell you the truth, you know, I was quite a kid; I recall when I was in the fifth grade at school there was a poolroom around the corner from school. I remember the name of the fellow that had it, his name was Ricks (R-i-c-k-s). And do you know what I used to do? I used to take my lunch, go over there, sit in the poolroom so I could study all those characters in there. There was nothing but colored men there. The owner was colored. I used to sit there and study them and I found they had such a peculiar and such a wonderful sense of humor, and the way they said things, and the way they talked, the way that they expressed themselves you'd just die laughing. I used to make sketches even when I was a kid then.

DB: That early?

AM: In the fifth grade I used to make sketches of them. I used to go over there every day to that poolroom and study the characters there. They would be shooting pool, sharpening the pool stick, getting the pool balls out of the rack, and so forth. So I said, heck -- you know, we lived in this white neighborhood, we were the only colored family living within a radius of about three miles. The only way we could contact any of them was to go around to 35th and State Streets, or go east of State Street over around Prairie, Indiana, Calumet Streets, over in there. So in order to study them I made it a habit to go to places where they gathered a lot like churches, movie

houses, dance halls, skating rinks, sporting houses, sometimes not only sporting houses but gambling houses. I knew a guy who was a gambler. He said to me, "I'm going to take you to the club tonight, Archie." I said, "What kind of club is it?" He said, "Oh, it's a nice club. I'll take you there." He took me to a darn place where they were gambling. I've never believed in gambling in my life; I never gamble. I sat there with him just watching them at the table playing poker, you know, gambling all night long. In the morning when I came home I was so tired. I said to my mother: that darn fool just took me to a gambling joint; I didn't want to go there; I thought it was some kind of nice club where they danced and had music and so forth.

DB: You said you were sketching as early as the fifth grade. Did you always want to be an artist?

AM: Oh, yes. Even at that young time all the space around the books where there wasn't any print I had all kinds of drawings in the books. They told me: you didn't come here to learn how to draw, you came here to learn how to read and write and do arithmetic; those are the things we teach here; of course we have an art class but that's minor, that doesn't mean anything. Well, I didn't feel that way about it. That was the most important thing in my life. And then some of the teachers that liked art used to encourage me. They'd say, "Oh, that's all right; we can erase that out of the book; it's only in pencil anyway; that's all right, go ahead, Archie, draw some more."

DB: Did you take art courses in school?

AM: Yes. Even when I went to high school I took art courses.

DB: Painting? Or drawing? Or what did they have?

AM: Yes, painting and drawing. When I was in high school I used to make all the posters for the affairs they had like soccer games, football posters. They had a bulletin board and they'd put it up on the bulletin board. Many of the kids in the class didn't know how to draw and, oh, they used to worry me to death to do their drawing for them.

DB: Did you do their drawings for them?

AM: So I had quite a job on my hands.

DB: By high school did you pretty much think that that's what you wanted to be, an artist?

AM: Oh, yes, definitely. I'm a person that thinks far into the future. I'm still that way. I don't look to tomorrow or to next week or a couple of weeks from now or a month from now. I'm always looking very far ahead. I asked my son just a few months back if, when he was younger, did he ever have any idea what he wanted to do. He said, no, he never gave it a thought. Well, I knew what I wanted to do when I was nine years old.

DB: Can you think why? I mean was there any one reason why you wanted to be an artist so much?

AM: I don't know. To tell you the truth, to be honest with you, I just felt it was the only thing I could do; I couldn't do anything else. That's the way I felt within myself.

DB: How did your family react to this? Were they encouraging or discouraging?

AM: They didn't discourage me. Shortly before I finished high school I told my father I was very anxious to go to the Art Institute School; I just wanted to paint and draw, that's all. He wanted me to go to medical school to study medicine. I don't know whether I've told you about the experience I had with medical school?

DB: No, you didn't.

AM: Well, I'll tell you. I had a friend who played football with me when I was going to high school. I played halfback and he played with me for a couple of years. His name was Jean Langston, I'll never forget him; he died some years ago. He was a very good friend of mine. He was studying medicine at Northwestern. I asked him if he wouldn't like to come to the Art Institute School and I'd show him around, show him the work the students were doing and the paintings and sculpture in the Art Institute. He came down there and he said he enjoyed it so much he came four or five times. One day he said to me: I want you to come to medical school and visit me, Archie; I've been here four or five times and you've never visited me. I said: okay, I'll come. We made an appointment and I went up there with him. As soon as they opened the door you could smell all that disinfectant and all kinds of medicinal smelling things. I became sick at my stomach right away. It was during the lunch hour. He said, "I'm going to take you upstairs." I said, "Okay." He took me upstairs to I think the third or fourth floor. He opened the door and I looked in there. They had about twelve or fifteen corpses. There was one corpse that they had dug up from the grave. He told me it was some woman who had been buried two weeks. Her skin was all black, had started to deteriorate. They had cut about a square foot of flesh from her stomach and the students there had little instruments and they had their eyes right on it and they were digging in there. I asked Jean what they were doing. He said they were tracing the nerves. Then he said: I'm going to take you to another

place where you can see some nice things. I was ready to leave then. He opened the door and we went into another room. Before the door was opened I could hear things falling like something heavy hitting the floor, like a bowling ball or something. Jean said, "Come on in, I'll show you what they're doing." And here the young students had the heads that they had decapitated they were throwing around like a basketball and they'd miss one and the head would hit the floor and go boom and bounce up.

DB: Oh, that's terrible, terrible.

AM: Those medical students were really nuts. And they had people, men and women corpses in all kinds of positions, they had some raised up and they had their legs crossed; one guy had a cigar in his hand. I said, "Well, Jean, I'll never come back here again."

DB: Medical school wasn't for you.

AM: I said, "I want something more beautiful than this."

DB: But there was at one point I read that Frank Gonzales of the Armour Institute was interested in giving you a scholarship for engineering or something like that.

AM: Yes. I'll tell you the way I met him. I think some of my contacts have helped me an awful lot and this is one that really helped me a lot. My father told him that I was just coming out of high school and that I wanted to go to the Art Institute School. He said, "Well, you tell your son to come down here and see me." He made an appointment with my father that I would come down to his office the next morning. It was at 33rd and, I think, Dearborn Streets, the old Armour Institute which is now Illinois Tech. They've put up a lot of new buildings. One building there is in his name, "Gonzales Building." I went down there and saw him. He was a very fine man, a very wonderful person. He said, "I'd like to see you become an engineer, an architect. If you want to study architecture, I'll give you four years of architecture here and you won't have to pay anything at all for it." I thanked him graciously. I said, "I wouldn't care about being an architect. I thank you so very much. I think my place is at the Art Institute of Chicago." He said, "Well, I'm making you a good offer. I'd like to have you think about it." I said, "No, I thank you very, very much, Mr. Gonzales, but I'm only interested in going to the Art Institute." He said, "Well, okay, I'll pay your first year's tuition down there, after that you're on your own." I said, "Okay, that's fine with me."

DB: So he did pay the first year?

AM: Yes. I shook hands with him and walked out. Every once in a while he'd call me up at the Art Institute to find out how I was getting along.

DB: Very nice.

AM: And after the first year I got a job down there.

DB: Working at the Art Institute itself?

AM: Yes. I think I told you about that.

DB: Yes, but I can't remember what you did.

AM: I used to get there at seven o'clock in the morning when I first started. You know where the statuary, the sculpture is around the Institute there, they're on wooden pedestals. Well, my job was to go through all the galleries where the statuary was with a feather duster and just whisk the dust from the bottom, just from the bottom of the statue.

DB: Let's talk about the Art Institute School. What sort of training did you receive there? What was it like?

AM: Very, very fine. I had some good instructors. I think they showed a very keen interest in me and not only in me but in all the other students in the class. Carl Buehr, my instructor in portrait painting -- you know, they used to have what they called the concours, that would be each month when they marked the paintings. After the marking of the painting Buehr always had his entire class, regardless of who you were, if you were in his class you were invited to his home where he'd have a nice dinner for you and sort of a party every month. He was just that type of person.

DB: What kind of paintings did you study? Did you study portraiture? or landscape? or what did you study?

AM: When you go to the Art Institute School the first thing you have to study is drawing, what they call antique drawing. That's drawing in charcoal from such things as....

DB: Casts.

AM: Those casts like Venus and this other one over here. You don't work on any live models until you have one year of that. After that you're put in a class doing drawing in charcoal of heads, not the body. Then after that you're promoted to painting class where you paint from the human figure such as nude painting, portrait painting, compositional painting. Composition was the thing that I was more interested in than anything else because I felt that I could build up more paintings in composition and more salable things than I could with portraits and nudes. And I felt it was quite a trying thing. And I found composition got so intriguing, so very interesting to compose something in your mind, your imagination and build it up and make something out of it. That's the way these pictures are all done. I'd start first making small pencil sketches in a small sketchbook and usually for one painting like that I make from thirty-five to forty pencil sketches until I get the thing arranged just the way I want it. There's a lot a composition. The first thing in a composition is knowing the breaking up of space. That's the important thing. After you do that then you get into more things that are complicated. You get into color where you use the various colors like sunlight; there's direct sunlight, shadow sunlight, reflected sunlight. And then you have problems with, well, night scenes; you have problems with artificial light, and moonlight....

DB: Natural light, yes.

AM: You have problems if it's a snow scene; there you get some very crisp problems. That's something I've never tried but I can admire painters of snow.

DB: You never did a snow scene?

AM: I've never tried that type of painting. I was too much interested in these night scenes where you find a lot of these people of my race, the places where they go. That's the thing that intrigued me. First of all, I wanted to get them and then add the light. I wanted to get the characters.

DB: Who did you study composition with, do you remember?

AM: Yes. I studied composition under a man by the name of Walcott. He was very, very patient. He was wonderful.

DB: Walcott? I don't think I....

AM: I studied under Walcott, but I first started studying with Graybill at the Art Institute. He taught me black and white composition, you know, that is dealing in values, shades of values. In that composition class I won a merit award for composition and then, in the portrait painting class, I won a merit award.

DB: How long were you at the Art Institute School?

AM: Four years.

DB: Is that a typical four-year degree?

AM: Yes, the typical time. I started at the Art Institute in 1914 and I graduated in 1918.

DB: Were you interested in any other aspects of art besides painting? Were you interested in sculpting or anything like that?

AM: Oh, yes, I'm very interested, even today I'm interested in sculpture or anything that has to do with art.

DB: So you took courses in sculpting and so forth?

AM: No, I never studied sculpture. I know a lot of sculptors and I've talked with them about their work and so forth and have admired it. But I just wanted to paint, that's all.

DB: Did the School have any kind of philosophy that you remember? Was there any kind of approach to education that you recall at the Art Institute School?

AM: No, I can't recall that they had any approach to education.

DB: What about styles? Were the people who taught there very aware of the styles coming in at that time?

AM: Oh, yes. That's why I can never forget what my instructor Carl Buehr said to me. He said, "I want to tell you something, Mr. Motley. I don't want you to ever change your style of painting. Your style, I think, is something very interesting and I think it's going to do you a lot of good. So please continue it, will you, for my sake." I

shook hands with him and I said, "I'll absolutely swear that I'll never change my style of painting. You can believe it." And I never have.

DB: You never have?

AM: No.

DB: How would you characterize that style? If you had to describe your own style what would you say it was?

AM: Oh, I don't know. I think everybody, every human being is different. You know that yourself. There are no two individuals who do the same thing alike. Now even your handwriting -- you'll find very, very few handwritings that will match yours of mine. Everybody has a different way of writing. And that's the same way it is in painting. If a thing comes easier for you, like your writing, for instance, the way you write that comes very easy for you, if you try to change it, it's very hard to do. And that's the same way it is with painting. You do it your way which is the easiest way for you but which for somebody else may be very difficult.

DB: What sorts of things were you doing in the School? What kind of paintings were you doing? Were you starting to do your Negro scene paintings? Or....

AM: No. But I'll tell you what I did do. I brought some colored models down there when I was going to school. They were very nice about that. If some of the students had somebody they were interested in painting and you talked to the other people in the class -- I knew a girl who was very beautiful, oh, she was a beautiful colored girl. Her name was Liza. I'll never forget her. She turned out to be a hooker, started using dope. She died, I think, when she was only thirty years old. I still have a painting that I did of her. Archie has it in his place there. She's sitting on a couch, she's wearing a green dress with various designs on it. To go back and start the story, I asked the students if they'd like to paint her. She was what is called an octoroon, very light, very pretty, beautiful hair, nice color. The students in the class did a nice job of painting her and they enjoyed having her and they wanted her to come back. I came to find out that she was going down more and more everyday and I just couldn't do anything with her. She used to come out to my place, she liked my mother, she fell in love with my mother. She'd come out there sometimes and stay for a week or two. She'd say: it's so nice to be here with decent people and away from all that company that she was going with. We'd go out to a show there at 63rd and Halsted. She'd buy a lot of fruit and candy and ice cream and stuff and bring it back home to my mother. Sometimes she'd come out and stay for a week or two weeks. Then she'd go away and you wouldn't see her for three or four months.

DB: Were you the only colored student at the Art Institute School?

AM: No, there were a few others there. Let's see, there was Charles Dawson. He's in New York. He's older than I am. I think he's probably dead now. And you've heard of Farrow (F-a-r-r-o-w), a Chicago artist, haven't you?

DB: I'm not sure that I have.

AM: Well, I got my job through Farrow. He talked to the janitor down there. That's how I got my job was through him. I think he's dead now, too. There was one other girl, she was from Texas. I don't remember her name now. She was real black, very black and very ugly, too. I think altogether there were four.

DB: How were you treated?

AM: Very nice, very fine. I was just looking at a notice in the paper I had out there when you came in. One of my best friends in the painting class William S. Schwartz, an artist, died last February.

DB: Yes. I know Bill Schwartz.

AM: We were just like that. He lived over here north, I think in the 600 block.

DB: He died last February?

AM: Last February.

DB: A year ago?

AM: William S. Schwartz. We palled together always. We were always very close at the Art Institute. And Tomonic, he lives out in Berwyn. Tomonic and Schwartz and I used to work together out in Berwyn at Tomonic's place. He had a nice model and we used to work there during weekends, Saturdays and Sundays and sometimes on holidays.

DB: So it was....

AM: And the people were all very kind, they were just as nice as they could be. All the students down there were just lovely. There was only one time that I ran into trouble at the Art Institute, and I'll tell you what it was. There were five guys down there, one of them was -- he used to be a cartoonist for one of the Chicago newspapers -- I can't think of his name but he and another fellow from Minnesota -- I think there were five or six of them. I knew all the time that they were -- I think three of them were from -- there was one from down South, Texas. He used to come in our class there all the time, it would be just as quiet as it is here, all the class would be working, and he'd come in there and make a noise like a cow, very, very loud. And he used to cut his eyes at me. He never had any use for me. I used to stay at the Institute later than most of the students because I just couldn't get out of there, I just loved the Art Institute. I used to work on work sometimes an hour after all of them had gone home. I would just sit there in the classroom and work on it. So this day I was there, I think it was around four o'clock or four thirty. I went to my locker. The lockers were all along the hallway, steel lockers that you could push around very easily. I was there putting my things away getting ready to go home. These guys came from both sides and they smashed these lockers right into me and mashed me in there, and ran into their classroom. I was going after them. I ran down to that room and tried to open the door to that room. They were all holding the door and I couldn't get it open. But if I had gotten in there would have been bloodshed in the place.

DB: That was the exception?

AM: I just figured was that the only thing to do was to go to the dean. I knew him very well. He was a very nice fellow. His name was Keane (K-e-a-n-e). The next morning he was in his office. I went in there after I got through with my work and I told him what had happened. He said, "You know who they are, don't you?" I said, "Oh, yes." He said, "I'll guarantee you, Mr. Motley, that if they ever do that again they're going to be out on the street and they'll never come back here." That afternoon he called me in there; he said he had them in there and he wanted me to come in. He said, "Now you tell me just what they did right in their presence." I told him. He said, "All right. Listen, I want to give you just a little message. This man didn't come down here for this, he came down here to learn to be an artist. With that rough stuff that you're carrying on go somewhere in the alley and do that but you can't do that in the Art Institute. Now the next time this man comes in here and complains about what you've "done you are absolutely going to be expelled." They never looked at me after that. When I'd pass them in the hall they'd turn their head the other way. That's the only trouble I had.

DB: Who was influential -- what artists were you influenced by in your development at that time? Can you recall, were there some that you appreciated more than others?

AM: Well, I always had a keen interest in the old masters. I've always felt that nobody will ever paint the way that they painted. I still feel that way. I think maybe that was the reason that Buehr told me not to change my style because he knew that I had a certain style that was my own, that it was individual and "you ought to stay with it." But the men that I may say that were coming along at this time, contemporaries and so forth, teachers, I think Buehr was a great influence on me not only as a painter but as a gentleman, as a man. I think some of the artists who possibly influenced me more than others were men like George Bellows, John Sloan, Randall Davey. Then I'd have to go back to the older masters. One that I loved so very much was that great Dutch artist Frans Hals. He's such a powerful painter. I'll never forget the painting at the Art Institute of the woman called the Drinker. Oh, it's a powerfully painted thing.

DB: Did you see the Armory Show when it was here in 1914, the show of contemporary painting that was brought here that had the Picasso and everything that was at the Art Institute School?

AM: What year was that?

DB: I think in Chicago it would have been 1914. It had Duchamps' Nude Descending the Staircase.

AM: I've seen that painting.

DB: I just wondered if you saw the show, that big show. It caused quite a stir. That's why I wondered if you had been at the show, or not. You don't recall it, though?

AM: I don't recall it. I may have been, but it's been so long ago -- 1914. You see, that's the year I started at the Art Institute.

DB: Yes. When did you decide -- at what point did you begin developing the theme of depicting various aspects of colored or Negro life? When did that evolve in your work? Very early?

AM: That evolved shortly after I came out of the Art Institute. I knew so many people of my own race, some of them very beautiful, like this girl I was telling you about. I think it was through her that I -- I think I did three paintings of Octoroons. One I called the Octoroon Girl. I sold the painting to Ralph Pulitzer from my exhibition in New York of a girl that I called Aline, an octoroon, back in 1928. I don't know what he had ever done with that painting. You know, I had a lot of difficulty finding out where this painting Mending Socks was. It just happened

that some friend of my son's came in to his place there a few years back and he said to my son, "I saw your father's painting Mending Socks down at North Carolina University." My son said, "Oh! My father has been trying to find out where that painting is." I sold it when I had my one-man show down in New York; I sold that painting with five others to an art collector by the name of Carl Hamilton. Now whether he sold the painting to North Carolina, or donated it, I don't know.

DB: He may have donated it to the school.

AM: But he bought six paintings from me. For years I never knew where the painting was, not until, I think, a couple of years ago.

DB: That's interesting.

AM: And I was wondering and wondering and wondering where it was because I think it's one of the best things I've done as far as portraiture is concerned.

DB: It's a good painting. I've seen pictures of it.

AM: I was so happy to know it was down there. I know it's going to be in a nice safe place. They'll take good care of it.

DB: So you began doing portraits of people such as this woman you've mentioned....

AM: Well, I first started with my own family. Now the first painting I sent to the Art Institute was a painting of my mother. I think I did it in -- I came out of the Art Institute in 1919 -- I think it was done that following year, 1919, the year of the race riot.

DB: 1919 was the Chicago race riot?

AM: Yes. Then you see this is the second painting I did, that was done in 1922. It was in the exhibition at the Art Institute in 1933. You see, so I started first with my own family. And then I painted my father, that painting my son has down there. Then after I painted him I started doing outsiders, just people that I knew, friends and so forth who posed for me. Like women I knew. One day sometime after I was married -- it was some time after that when this picture was done -- I had an apartment, a studio over on Langley Avenue, I think it was in the 4000 block -- I went out that morning to buy something at the A & P store on 39th Street. I was walking around there looking for things I wanted to buy. I happened to see a very beautiful lady in there; oh, she was pretty, very beautiful. I passed her three or four times. I looked at her, I didn't know whether I should say anything to her or not, I thought she may be married, maybe she'll give me a slap in the face, but I'd like to paint her. I was walking around for a long time, I wasn't thinking about the groceries I wanted to buy, I was thinking about her in a painting. Not that I was in love with her; I was in love with what she'd look like on a canvas; I could just imagine. Finally I got up enough steam to walk over to her. I said: "I think you're a very beautiful person." She said, "Oh, you're pretty smart, aren't you?" I said, "No. I don't intend to be smart or anything like that. I'm an artist and I'd like to paint you. You impress me very much. I'd love to paint you." She said, "Oh. You're an artist?" I said, "Yes." She said, "Do you know a lady by the name of Edna Powell?" I knew her when she was sixteen years old, you see. I said, "Yes, I know Edna quite well." She said, "She told me all about you. I'll be at your place tomorrow morning."

DB: So she posed for you.

AM: So she came to the place the next day and, you know, I made one of the nicest portraits -- I think outside of my grandmother's, I think that's the best portrait I've painted. She's sitting -- you know, in those days they wore these little tight hats -- she has one of them on and she has her gloves in her hand. It was a very nice portrait.

DB: So these portraits were the beginnings of portraying various people of the Negro race. What do I want to say -- you did all sorts of people of different colors. Was that conscious effort on your part that you were trying to explore this whole theme?

AM: Well, I was trying to fill what they call the full gamut, or the race as a whole, not only, you know, being terribly black but those that were very light and those that were in between. You'll notice that in all my paintings where you see a group of people you'll notice that they're all a little different color. They're not all the same color, they're not all black, they're not all, as they used to say years ago, high yellow, they're not all brown. I try to give each one of them character as individuals. And that's hard to do when you have so many figures to do, putting them all together and still have them have their characteristics. Do you know what I mean?

DB: Yes, I know exactly what you're saying.

AM: That makes it quite difficult.

DB: When did you start doing street scenes? When did you go beyond doing portraits and start doing street scenes like we have here? I mean was that done in the 20s? Or....

AM: No. I mingled them in. I first started doing portraits as I told you, you know, my grandmother there, my mother, these people that I met on the outside, strangers that I painted, and some friends. Then I found, too, that in the Negro race, or colored race as I call it, they didn't have the money to pay for commissioned portraits. Of course, the white artists had all the white clientele all tied up. They wouldn't come to me, you know, some of these big people that have money, they'd go to their friends, somebody white. So I figured I had learned a heck of a lot about composition. Why not paint compositions and pictures that people will buy regardless of race, color or creed? So it was only that drove me --well, it didn't drive me into painting compositions because I always liked composition. Then I started doing a lot of compositions. I found that they were salable and I didn't have a model.

DB: In many of your compositions of that period you picked out -- as I've said, I call them "street scenes" but they are very -- you took all aspects of life. I mean they look like Saturday night parties out on the street. You consciously did that, you were looking for themes like that, weren't you?

AM: Yes.

DB: And did you prefer to paint people in the street rather than, say, in more proper situations? Did you ever paint like church meetings or anything like that?

AM: Oh, yes, that picture I was telling you about that I think somebody had stuck a knife in the canvas, it's in there; that was a church meeting; I told you that was Holy Rollers down in Pine Bluff, Arkansas.

DB: Yes.

AM: But I've done all kinds of scenes. The thing is I wanted to get people together, I mean a lot of people together, a group, so I could make those differences and give them their different characteristics. Now that painting that was hanging there that I sold. By looking at that painting you could tell just about what time of night it was if you studied it long enough. There's a stout lady in the corner with a grocery bag under her arm, she's going home with her groceries. Well, you know perfectly well that the stores are not open at eleven or twelve o'clock at night so it must be earlier that; it must be right after sunset, you know, whenever the sun sets, maybe about eight o'clock in the summertime.

DB: In creating these scenes did you take persons you saw from one street and another person and combine them?

AM: Oh, yes.

DB: So you created the scenes, in a sense?

AM: Yes. I like to do that. I think that's what every artist has got to learn is to compose like the old masters did with their music, and in paintings they did the same thing. But these artists nowadays -- I feel this way and I'm very sincere about this, I think that every picture should tell a story and I think if a picture doesn't tell a story then it's not a picture. Of course, it's all right if you want to paint something decorative; well, that's all right, too, but that's a decorative painting. That's a lot different than doing something from the heart, something that's very serious. The old saying of Confucius, the Chinese philosopher, that "A picture is worth ten thousand words" there's a lot of truth in that.

DB: In some ways there is.

AM: And some pictures aren't worth a dime.

DB: Or one word. We have to.... END OF SIDE 1 SIDE 2 - MARCH 1, 1979

DB: Today is March 1, 1979. I'm in the home of painter Archibald Motley. My name is Dennis Barrie. This is our second interview. In the first interview we talked a lot about Mr. Motley's family background and early experiences and education. What I'd like to start with today is: in your career in the mid 1920s you received a number of prizes in Chicago exhibitions. For example, you received the Frank Logan Prize in 1925. What did you receive that prize for, do you remember?

AM: Thank you very much, Mr. Barrie. The Frank E. Logan Prize was given to me for a portrait called Mullattress. That carried with it a bronze medal, that was the second Logan Prize. The first Logan Prize was a gold medal. I received the Eisendrath Prize; that was for a young artist who had not exhibited more than five years. That was $200.

DB: Do you remember what you got that for?

AM: That painting was Syncopation.

DB: And Syncopation was a Negro life scene? Or....

AM: Yes, it was a Negro night club scene, dancing with a band or orchestra or whatever you may call it.

DB: Did you receive any critical or public reaction to your paintings at these exhibitions?

AM: Oh, yes, quite a good deal. Especially from Miss -- I don't know whether she was Miss or Mrs. -- Margaret Williams. She was a writer for the Daily News. And also from the Post -- I think that paper went out of service years ago -- but they used to have an art page each Tuesday, an entire page devoted to art. They gave me good reviews.

DB: So it was very favorable? You received favorable reviews for your work? I mean positive.

AM: Yes. Yes. It led to the sale of some of my paintings.

DB: Oh, you did sell some work from this exhibition? Or it led to sales of work?

AM: Yes.

DB: The Frank Logan Prize, that was a cash prize also? Or was it just a medal?

AM: Cash and medal.

DB: How did these prizes affect your career, your reputation in the city?

AM: Well, they helped a great deal. They meant a lot to me. Also they were very, very encouraging, they made me feel that I was partially becoming an artist. I felt that I was growing. But I never in all my life have felt that I was a finished artist.

DB: Why do you say that?

AM: Because we can never find perfection. There's no need to look for it.

DB: That's true. As a result of these prizes you did get commissions for work?

AM: Yes.

DB: Where did these commissions come from? What kind of people were buying your work?

AM: Well, they were local people mostly that I knew who had followed my work here, had followed me through for years. Of course, the prices weren't too much. They were enough so that I could get along. The prices were very, very small. I sold paintings for about $200 or $300, something like that.

DB: We were talking before about race and I don't mean to bring that up too much, but were these people who bought your work were they basically white, or were there some blacks, Negroes?

AM: They were basically white. At that time our people had very little interest in art. And that was a thing I have tried so hard all my life to instill into them that they should have more appreciation of art. We have men who are capable financially to buy paintings but they'd buy everything but paintings. They'd buy nice big Cadillacs or Rolls Royce. To a certain extent that's still true. We have people on television -- not mentioning any names -- who are making millions every year, many of them riding around in the finest cars built, having the finest jewelry that you can possibly buy, but as far as buying paintings is concerned, no, no, that's out entirely. I can't understand it because art is something that is going to live. A car is going to last only a certain number of years. To my way of thinking, I don't think a car gives you what a real work of art gives you. A work of art gives you something that gives an awful lot of depth to your life, to your career, to your thoughts; I think it makes you a much better person.

DB: Oh, yes, it certainly does. Did these -- how shall I put it -- did these prizes open up doors to you? Were you accepted in the art circles of Chicago?

AM: Oh, yes. I can definitely say I'm proud to say, I'm glad to say that practically all of the artists here in Chicago love me and I love them, practically all of them who have made a name for themselves, even my instructors at the Art Institute I thought they were just it. I still respect them for what they did for me.

DB: So you became a part of the art community in Chicago during that period?

AM: Yes, that's right.

DB: It couldn't have been very large in those days? It had to be a pretty small circle of people, right?

AM: It was a small circle, yes, but a very dedicated group.

DB: And mostly were the opportunities for showing your work only at the Art Institute? Or were there other places to show your work in Chicago?

AM: Well, I'll tell you, that's a point that I'm glad you asked me. It's very interesting. That's the thing I wanted to bring up about the Negro artists. You know, in all big cities throughout the United States of America we have large shows that were annuals as a rule. And the Negro artists have always been very skeptical human beings. He's always had -- well, to me personally he has too much of a skeptical mind and he thinks that if he is not white he's nothing. Well, that's not the truth. And that's why I say that racism is the first thing that they have got to get out of their heads, forget about this damned racism, to hell with racism. That's never going to get you anywhere squabbling about somebody being white, or somebody being red or black or yellow. That means nothing to an artist. We're all human beings. And the sooner that's forgotten and the sooner that you can come back to yourself and do the things that you want to do, and to hell with the world -- go ahead and do those things. If they like them, all right; if they don't like them, that has to be all right, too. But you've got to have guts, and the Negro artist more so than any other artist because you know yourself that there are so many obstacles that you have to overcome. And if you don't have the intestinal fortitude, in other words, if you don't have the guts to hang in there and meet a lot of --well, I must say a lot of disappointments, a lot of reverses -- and I've met them -- and then being a poor artist, too, not only being colored but being a poor artist it makes it doubly, doubly hard.

DB: Oh, I'm sure it does.

AM: It makes it very hard. And I've found that my race was the most critical of critics that I had and they knew less about art than anybody else. That's the amazing thing.

DB: Critical of your work?

AM: Yes.

DB: Why were they critical of your work?

AM: I was only trying to -- the thing that I was trying to do was trying to get their interest in a culture, in art. I planned that by putting them in the paintings themselves, making them part of my own work so that they could see themselves as they are, I mean in a more conservative way. I've never cared about doing this modernistic art. That's the reason why. Because you have to take it step by step and you can't start out with somebody who knows practically nothing about art and start with modern art, and then come back to something that's more conservative. You've got to start with that conservative. You've got to start with that conservative thing because every layman lives a very realistic life. Some artists have, oh, various marvelous, out-of-this-world attitudes and imaginations, you know, sometimes some things that you can't really understand. I'm an artist myself and I've seen a lot of strictly modern, I mean real modern things that I can't understand myself. That's why I've always stuck to my style of painting. I've always wanted to paint my people just the way that they were.

DB: But was this criticized by your own people?

AM: Well, I think it was more a matter of jealousy that came from New York because ever since I had my exhibition in New York I've heard rumors around -- you know they were very jealous of me. That group of New York artists they're as jealous of me as they can be. That was due to the exhibition I had down there. Those people down there the last time I was in New York feel what the hell, you've got your group of artists here and we have to send all the way to Chicago to send a Chicago artist here to have a one-man show in New York. They've hated me ever since.

DB: How did that show come about, do you remember? What happened in that situation?

AM: How the exhibition came about?

DB: Yes; what were the circumstances?

AM: I'll tell you precisely. Mr. Harshe was director of the Art Institute when I was going to school there. Well, you know, he and I became very good friends. The way I met him was through Dr. Gonzales who was head of the old Armour Institute which is now the Illinois Institute of Technology. I don't know why Mr. Harshe took such a liking

to me but he used to call be almost every day out of class and I'd go and see him in his personal office. He was a second father to me. I'll never forget the man, I loved him, he did more for me than anybody has done for anybody at any time. I'm deeply grateful to him and I'll always be that way as long as I live. He was formerly from New York. He lost his mother, I think it was in 1927, yes. While he was in New York he went around to -- he wrote me a letter when he came back and told me that he had visited, I think it was six or seven important art galleries in New York. He sent me the names and addresses and so forth and told me to correspond, to get in contact with them. Of course, there's a lot involved, you know, certain expenses like a catalogue and so forth, rental of the gallery. He said whoever gave me the best chance that's the one to take but they're all good responsible people, friends of his. So I wrote to Hellmann (H-e-l-l-m-a-n-n). He was president of the New Gallery, 600 Madison Avenue. He wrote back and said, "Mr. Motley, I'd be very, very happy to have your paintings." He wrote and told me the circumstances, he said: now the only thing I'm going to do is take thirty-three and a third percent of what the paintings are sold for. He said otherwise the catalogue, having it printed, the rental of the two rooms -- he had one large room in front and a small room in the rear -- he said through your friend Mr. Harshe I'm going to let you have the gallery, I'm not going to charge you for it. Well, I thought that was quite a deal. He told me when to send the paintings. He asked me if I'd mind doing a few voodoo paintings, something which I had never attempted but I had done a lot of research on. I told him: all right, I'll do a few. So I did, I think, five voodoo paintings. They went over quite big.

DB: Did they? Why do you think they were so popular?

AM: Well, I don't know. Possibly it was just the mysticism of the thing. Of course, it's a sort of religion; it is a religion, at least they call it that. They went over quite well. I think I sent six voodoo paintings and I think I sold two or three of them, I don't remember -- no, it was more than that, it was at least three or four. I send twenty-six paintings down there and I sold twenty-two.

DB: That's pretty good.

AM: You see, one man Carl Hamilton, an art collector bought six of my paintings.

DB: Why do you think he bought so many?

AM: Well, he said that's the way he bought paintings. I talked to Hellmann about it. Well, he said, that's a good way and you're making a real good start for yourself and I would advise you -- of course, you can get more by selling them -- well, on an individual basis but, of course, he expects to get the six paintings at a certain price. Of the six paintings I sold Mending Socks was one of them. As an individual painting I was asking $1,000 for it. At that time $1,000 was a lot of money.

DB: It was a lot of money, yes.

AM: He got that painting with five others. I have a record of it. That's how the painting got into the North Carolina Museum of Art. I don't know whether this man Carl Hamilton sold the painting to them or gave it to them.

DB: Very nice. All right, let's talk about the show. Did it have a good turnout? Did a lot of people come to see the exhibition?

AM: Quite a few.

DB: Were you there?

AM: Oh, yes. I didn't go down each day. I went down the first three or four days. It was a strange thing. I went down the first day, I walked in, Mr. Hellman had a smile on his face. He said, "Well, Mr. Motley, do you know you've sold a painting already today." I said, "Yes? Who to?" He said, "You sold a painting to a lady from Boston, her name is Mrs. T. M. Murray." And I want to tell you about this painting. It's the strangest thing. I started the painting out life size of a standing figure of a very lovely woman. She was the wife of a doctor. Her name was Cecile. She was a quadroon, very beautiful face, very chiseled features, beautiful features, small very strong sensitive mouth. Hellmann said, "I sold your painting of the Quadroon lady at the price you wanted." I think I was asking only $200 for it. It was a small painting. I'll tell you how it came about. I started the painting as a full figure standing. I'll never forget her. She had on a very soft satin black dress with a little cobalt blue collar around the neck and she was holding a little rosebud in her hand like this looking down at the rose. And she had been kind of ill, she was living at my house at the time, she was a good friend of my mother. She got sick. Just when I was about half through with the painting she passed away.

DB: She was a young woman?

AM: Yes. So I became very disturbed, very disappointed. I grabbed the canvas and tore it off the easel,

crumpled it all up and threw it back into a little closet where I stored things that I didn't need or didn't use. And that canvas stayed in there for about two or three years all crumpled up simply collecting dust. So when Hellmann wrote me and said to try to send at least twenty-five paintings I looked around at the best things I had and what I was doing. I looked in the closet one day and I began to think about Cecile and the painting. I pulled it out, it came out in rags just absolutely messed up. I pulled it out and I'll never forget it. It was a hot summer day, I think it was in July, the sun was shining brightly, I think it was about nine o'clock in the morning. I straightened it out as well as I could on the studio floor. You knew that my father had built a little studio for me?

DB: No, I didn't know that.

AM: Yes. I laid it out on the floor and I looked at it. I went and sat in a chair, I closed my eyes, and I began to visualize Cecile. And do you know the truth positively that the more I thought of her I could see her more clearly after she had passed away than I could when I was painting her when she was alive.

DB: That's interesting.

AM: That's strange, isn't it?

DB: Yes.

AM: I said: I'm going to do something with this darn thing. So I got a pair of scissors, I measured the thing off, I tried to straighten it out, and I cut it down to, I think, It was eighteen by twenty, or was it eighteen by twenty-four; the dimensions were about that. I cut it out to the size I wanted it. I got some linseed oil and I covered it heavily with that linseed oil. It was all wrinkled. It was just the day to do the things I wanted to do. The sun was bright, it was mid-July, it was hot. I had a big backyard there, we had a lot and a half, I put the canvas out on the grass in the yard under that hot sun, I think the temperature that day must have been well up in the eighties. I left it out there under the hot sun all day. I went out there and looked at it. And I was amazed.

DB: Did it straighten out?

AM: It looked just like somebody had taken an iron and ironed it out.

DB: That's interesting. I didn't know it would do that. The oil must have relaxed that canvas.

AM: Yes. You see, the paint hadn't been on there too long. It had a chance to pull the paint together. I had it on the stretcher. I brought it back into the house. It was solid. I tapped the canvas with my finger like that and I said: well, you're just right.

DB: That's great.

AM: So I said: tomorrow morning I'm going to work on it. And I went to work on that painting. I closed my eyes. I was working on the construction of her face and so forth. I think I worked on it for about a week. And, strange as it may seem, that's the first painting that I sold in the exhibition. That's the painting I was telling you that I sold to the lady from Boston -- Mrs. Murray.

DB: Right. So again out of that exhibition you sold how many?

AM: I sold twenty-two paintings out of twenty-six.

DB: That's an amazing success, don't you think? It really was.

AM: And then they gave me such wonderful write-ups there in New York. Jewell of the Times gave me a beautiful write-up in the Sunday Magazine. They had it on the front page of the Times. He gave me the most beautiful write-up I have ever read. He had me come to see him at Times Square. He was wonderful man. He died some years ago. He took me all through the Times plant. He showed me everything, all the presses, and what they call the morgue where they keep the old editions. He took me back to -- I can't recall now, it was a long time ago -- he opened the vault and showed me newspapers they had there, oh, way back from the early 1800s and 1700s.

DB: I read some of your reviews and they were quite good. You know, the only thing I found slightly critical in the review was someone criticized your voodoo series.

AM: Yes. I know who that was; that was the writer from New Yorker magazine.

DB: The New Yorker, right.

AM: Well, I don't blame him for that. I don't paint to please everybody. Some people are going to be dissatisfied.

He didn't like them but he thought an awful lot of my portraits and he did say that as far as my portraits were concerned nothing that was put out by the Academy was any better, that they were just as good as anything put out by the Academy. So that was quite a boost.

DB: When you got involved with this exhibit did you realize that it was a rather major thing for the history of the art world? I mean it is my understanding that you had the first one-man show by a Negro artist in the history of New York. Did you know that when you were doing it? Was it important to you?

AM: Yes, I knew that.

DB: Was it important to you?

AM: No, not when the exhibition opened. I thought I was doing something that possibly was quite worthy of recognition but I didn't think it would leave as big an impression as it did. Of course, that really was the thing that really made me -- that exhibition in New York.

DB: You had some rather impressive patrons in Ralph Pulitzer as you told me about before that he came and bought some of your works from that exhibition. And Carl Hamilton. I mean some pretty big collectors were there and were buying your work.

AM: Oh, yes.

DB: Was there much to-do about the fact that it was the first show by a Negro artist? Was there a lot of that in the paper in the art community? Was there a lot of publicity about that?

AM: Well, it didn't impress that man who wrote the article in the New Yorker. I can't think of his name. He said he didn't know why they were making so much fuss over Motley because he's a Negro, but he did say that the Negro artist had to come into his own some day. I don't know -- I'm not too crazy about criticism that praises too much. I like to be criticized. I like to know what's wrong. The whole world is that way; nothing is perfect in the world. And that's why I told you before that I wasn't looking for perfection. I'm looking for something that's very good but I don't think anybody ever finds perfection.

DB: At the time was it pretty daring on the part of the New Gallery to give you an exhibition?

AM: Yes, it was very daring. As I told you, I just had the guts and the ambition to carry it through. So many colored artists discouraged me. My encouragement all came from white people.

DB: Why did Negro artists discourage you?

AM: I'll tell you why. You tell me who an artist's competition is and I'll tell you who an artist is. Now you take the average Negro if they'd get out of that way of thinking that: oh, I can't send that in there because the white folks, they're not going to have that. They told me that when I was younger, when I sent in paintings like Mending Socks, they said they're not going to have that. White artist friends of mine disagreed with them entirely.

DB: Did many Negroes, artists or otherwise, come to see you exhibition in New York?

AM: No. A few colored people came in. I didn't know them, they didn't know me; I didn't say anything to them; they didn't say anything to me. I used to go to the gallery almost every day for a few hours anyway. But they never -- well, they had an exhibition of their own at the same time I had my show in New York. And they made so much fuss over my show that that's the thing that got them down.

DB: They had an exhibition of what? I'm sorry....

AM: They had an exhibition of Negro art.

DB: They did?!

AM: In New York at the same time my show was going on.

DB: Oh, they did!

AM: Yes.

DB: Where was this at?

AM: I think at the Public Library.

DB: Well, you know, this is a period when people talked about the Harlem Renaissance in that period.

AM: There was no Renaissance.

DB: You don't think there was a Renaissance?

AM: No.

DB: What do you think it was?

AM: I think it was quite an advancement over the work that they had been putting out. I talked to Miss Brady who was head of the Harmon Foundation. I talked to her back in -- I won the Harmon Foundation Medal in 1928 -- I went to Paris in 1929 -- I talked to her when I came back and do you know what she said to me. She said -- and this is the absolute truth -- she told me this herself, "Well, Mr. Motley, we're sorry that the work that the Negro artists are sending in is getting so bad that we're going to shut down." It was just about a year after that they shut down.

DB: So they weren't very positive about what was going on. When you had your exhibition in New York did you then come back to Chicago? Or did you....

AM: I came back to Chicago.

DB: You never lived in New York?

AM: I don't want to live in New York.

DB: But you never did live there?

AM: Do you know what I want to do more than anything in the world. I'll tell you from the bottom of my heart and it's the absolute truth. You know, every artist, and especially the Negro artist here in America, they've been deprived so much, they've gotten absolutely disgusted. For instance, like Tanner. Tanner didn't make his name here in the United States; Tanner made his name in Europe. Artists feel that they're more readily recognized in Europe than they are here in America. Well, me, I'm just a funny kind I'm telling you. I decided and I made up my mind, I said? There's just as good people, both white and black, here in the United States; I know a number of very reputable, decent, nice, wonderful white people who are really on the square, really on the level, really honest that could help me. I'm going to stay here, I'm not going anywhere, I'm not going to Europe. They're not going to chase me out of my own country. I'm an American. I'm proud of being an American. I don't give a damn what color my skin is, I'm going to stay right here and I'm going to fight it out, and I'm going to make my name right here. I'm staying right here in wonderful America. And I love Chicago.

DB: So tell me, how did your show in New York affect your life here in Chicago? I mean did it bring you recognition and fame here in Chicago?

AM: Well, to certain extent. I'll tell you why. After I had the show in New York then that stirred up that colored group there in New York. They were saying and doing everything they possibly could and anybody that would come here for reviews like from Europe like, for instance, that man Dover. I never talked to Dover. The only way that Dover found out anything about me personally was from those artists down in New York. And they're not going to give him very good stories. So he wrote some things that I didn't like. I know they didn't come from me. And things he didn't know only by word of mouth. And he said something in there about my changing my way of thinking or something, I don't remember now just what the passage was. But I didn't like it.

DB: How did you support yourself in those years? You didn't make enough by selling your work, did you? You had to take other jobs, right?

AM: Well, I took a few jobs for a while. But I tell you after I got married I knew that I had a family to support and so forth, had a wife. I sold enough paintings to live on. And then after my show in New York, of course, I sold many more.

DB: So did you sell more back here? Did you sell more in Chicago after you came back?

AM: I sold more in Chicago and in other places, too, besides Chicago. I've had to work practically all my life when I was young, that's why I was so long getting out of school. When I was in grammar school I put in all my time working. My folks were poor. When I was nine years old my father was in the hospital for six months; he was given up for death but he pulled through. He was paralyzed in one of his legs. I had to do an awful lot of work to help support the family.

DB: Did you have a dealer here? Or did you just sell your work on your own?

AM: Well, I had some friends, you couldn't call them dealers exactly. I had people who had some influence in art. They were on the white side. But I'll never forget about Mr. Harshe. I loved that man. I'll never forget him. When I won the prizes at the Art Institute he took it on his own -- and I'm very sorry that he did this -- he took it on his own to write to five of the wealthiest Negroes here in Chicago telling them about me, telling them that I was going to be an outstanding artist some -- which I never believed myself -- and telling them that he would advise them to cater to me and try to buy some of my paintings because some day they would be worth a lot. I didn't know he had written those letters. If I had known, if he had only talked to me first, I would have told him never to have written the letters. So he called me out of the classroom after he had heard from them. I went into the office, he had his head down, he was tapping his pencil on the desk, he had a very disgusted expression on his face. I asked him how he was. He said, "Oh, I don't feel too good, Motley." I said, "What happened? He said, "I hate to tell you. I did something that I shouldn't have done." Well, I started laughing, not knowing what it was. I just laughed. I said, "Well, we all do things wrong sometimes." He said, "Well, you won't laugh about this." I said, "What's the matter?" He said, "You know, I wrote letters to five of the wealthiest men here in Chicago. I could name them, I'm not going to name them, well, I'll name one because he's dead. That's Jesse Bingay who owned a back at 35th and State. All the correspondence I got was in the same category." He shoved the letters over to me and told me to read them. I think they were the most insulting, the most disgusting, the most outrageous, the most ignorant letters that I ever read in my life. All the damned letters were in the same vein. Do you know what they told him?

DB: What did they say?

AM: They considered that an imposition that he was imposing upon them, that he was telling them how to spend their own money, they told him, "You can't tell me how to spend my money, I made it and I'll spend it the way I want to." That's the interest they had in art. That's the interest they had in me. I don't give a damn.

DB: No, I guess not. Getting back for just a minute to the New York exhibition, was it a conscious effort on your part to help correct the image of the Negro in American art? Were you trying to do that with the exhibition? Did you hope you could do that?

AM: Yes.

DB: Did any of the people who interviewed the exhibition review it on this level? Did they talk about what your work had done as far as image?

AM: Yes, I had some people, not all, but some people liked it as painting, but as for doing the thing that I wished them to do that didn't affect them at all.

DB: I'd like to stop for a minute. [interruption] Tell me about the Harmon Prize. What did you get the Harmon Prize for?

AM: Well, they had been giving an award -- I think the Harmon Foundation started out in either 1925 or 1926. They were giving a gold medal and $400 to the artist they considered the best of the year. I won it in 1928. I don't think you ever saw the medal, did you?

DB: No, I haven't seen it.

AM: I have it right here in my pocket, I've been carrying it around in my pocket all the time. I'm trying to get my son to buy a chain for me so I can put it around my neck. It's a nice looking medal. It's hell to get old.

DB: Yes. It's got its rough moments I know.

AM: When I yap about pain and so forth my son says, "Hell, Dad, what are you complaining about. You're almost ninety years old." I say, "I'm not complaining but, hell, when something hurts you it hurts."

DB: That's right; that's true. So you were voted the "artist of the year" by the Harmon Foundation?

AM: Yes. They gave me another award. I spoke to the -- oh, what's the name of that hotel out on Michigan Boulevard there -- a few years back. My son has the plaque. They gave me a plaque. This is it, this is the Harmon Foundation medal.

DB: [reading] "Harmon Foundation Award Fine Arts 1928 Archibald J. Motley, Jr." Very nice. Very nice.

AM: You see, that's a little short watch chain that I had, it's not long enough to put around your neck.

DB: And so you also received a prize of money? Or....

AM: Yes, they gave $400.

DB: They purchased one of your works -- right?

AM: Yes.

DB: Where is that today?

AM: They still have it.

DB: They still have it?

AM: Yes.

DB: You said they finally stopped giving this "artist of the year" award?

AM: Yes. They stopped shortly after Miss Brady -- do you know Miss Brady of the Harmon Foundation?

DB: No, I don't.

AM: She's a very nice person. I've known her for years. She always took a very deep interest in so-called Negro art.

DB: Well, shortly after the Harmon Award you received a Guggenheim. I mean you were really doing pretty well there.

AM: Yes. I got the Harmon Foundation Award in 1928. The following year, in 1929, I got the Guggenheim.

DB: How did you get the Guggenheim?

AM: Well, you know, you have to -- it's the long, long, longest thing. You've got to -- I applied for it first, I think it was in 1927. They turned me down. I said: you're not going to turn me down. In 1928 I had my exhibition in New York. I applied for it again. And I got it.

DB: So you think your exhibition was pretty pivotal to....

AM: It had a lot of influence, yes.

DB: And also on the Harmon Medal, too?

AM: Yes, it had a lot of influence. And then, too, another thing, my friend was on the jury.

DB: Who was your friend?

AM: Harshe.

DB: Aha. He was on the jury. You had a 1929 Guggenheim and it was for foreign travel, right?

AM: Yes.

DB: Where did you want to go and where did you wind up going?

AM: I wanted to go to Paris where every artist wants to go, I guess. They wanted to give me an extension, you know, for another six months.

DB: How long were you there?

AM: A whole year. They wanted to give me an extension for six months if I wanted it. Of course, you have to make reports and show them -- you send back photographs and so forth of things you've done. Then they decide whether or not you should have the six months. I told them I thought a year was enough. I don't know, I was always a homebody anyway. I wanted to be home. I can't find any place like Chicago. You know, I love this place.

DB: It is a nice place.

AM: I love Chicago and I love America.

DB: So did you like Paris when you were there?

AM: I loved Paris, yes. It's a different atmosphere, different attitudes, different people. They act differently; they don't act like Americans.

DB: What did you do when you were there?

AM: Worked like hell.

DB: Did you work a lot?

AM: Oh, yes. I put out twelve paintings in a year.

DB: That's a lot. Did you have a regular studio?

AM: Oh, yes. I rented a place in a studio building they had just built there. It was not far from Sacre Coeur over in Montmartre on the rue Simon de Rueur.

DB: Then were there a lot of other artists around there?

AM: Oh, yes. They were all -- it's a regular studio building. You see, they had a row of buildings like this, then there's a space of, oh, about fifty feet of ground with sculptures and nice grass nicely landscaped between -- there were three rows of buildings. You know, the way the streets run in Paris, they just run all kinds of ways.

DB: Right.

AM: At the front of the building you come down the street there, you're on a street called Avenue Juneau and then you just keep going down the street like a horseshoe and you come around here to the other side of these buildings, and this street around the other side that's called rue Simon de Rueur.

DB: That was yours. Aha. Did you meet a lot of American artists while you were there, or were they mostly Europeans? or were they mostly French?

AM: I met -- you couldn't call him an American artist -- he was a pretty good sculptor -- he became a very good friend of mine; a Jewish fellow born in Russia, his name was Benny Greenstein. He had lived in Paris for eleven years. He could speak French thoroughly. He and I became quite close friends. We found this studio where we were together. He was right downstairs under me; I was on the second floor and he was on the first floor.

DB: Did you speak French?

AM: Yes, well, I'll tell you my folks always spoke what they call Creole. That's a different kind of French entirely. That's not the original Parisian French. It's a mixture of poor Spanish, poor French and poor English. Like if I were to ask you in Creole "how do you feel" I would say "Comment ca va?"; that's Creole. In French it's so much better---"Comment allez-vous?"

DB: Right. What impressed you about the art world of Paris?

AM: The Louvre.

DB: Did you spend a lot of time there?

AM: Oh, I spent so much time there! That was my biggest inspiration. The biggest thing I ever wanted to do in art was to paint like the old masters. There are no modern painters, with the exception possibly of George Bellows -- none of them have ever influenced me. I've gone back far beyond them to men like Rubens, Michelangelo, Rembrandt, a lot of the Dutch masters, Frans Hals, men like that. I gained so much in the faces, especially in the flesh tones. It's remarkable and beautiful if you understand art and you understand the way the light travels on the pigmentation of the skin, how gradually the light changes from warm into cool in various faces. You've got to study a painting a long time to realize what the artist really is doing. Light is very, very important. I used to go to the Louvre and study, oh, I studied Delacroix, I studied all the old masters very carefully. You know, what we call "in" painting, the passages of tones.

DB: Right. You didn't study with anybody while you were there, did you?

AM: I didn't want to study with anybody. Carl Buehr, my instructor at the Art Institute, told me: don't study with anybody else and don't change your style of painting. I found that my style of painting came to me easier, I could do it much better my own way. He said it was like people who were writing, you know, there's nobody that writes just exactly the same way. He said it's the same way with painting. Every artist has an individual way of painting and he cannot paint like some other artist. He can try all day and all night and he can never do it.

DB: Yes. What impressed you about life in Paris?

AM: I thought it was beautiful?

DB: Why was it beautiful?

AM: Well, you're treated so much better there. They treated me the same as they treated anybody else. I didn't expect them to fall at my feet. I expected them to treat me just as kindly as I would them. And they did that and more. In fact, the whole year I spent in Paris I heard the word "nigger" only once. And that came from two Americans. My wife and I were walking along going to what they call the Observatoire, that's where they observe the stars in the sky. I saw two guys, I could tell from the way they were dressed that they were Americans, two young boys. They were sitting on a bench. There are always benches all around France. You can always sit down.

DB: I know. Unlike the United States you can always sit down. There are always benches.

AM: Just as we passed them, we were about ten feet away, one of them said, "Hey, you goddamned black nigger!" Oh, my blood just boiled. In France, too. Here I wouldn't have paid much attention to it. But in France -- you know, they had the idea that they could go over to Paris and carry all that shit over there that they could carry on here they wouldn't stand for it. I went back to where they were sitting -- when I was younger I was pretty husky and I put up a battle. When they said that I went back to where they were sitting and I said: I just want one of you to repeat what you said. Now I'm going to come back here and I'm going to beat the hell out of both of you; just say it once more. They looked at me, they looked like they were scared to death. And I would have fought it. It may have caused a little trouble. But they had no business calling me names like that. I wasn't bothering them. I was walking down the street with my wife.

DB: In your Paris work, how did Paris change your painting? Did it change it at all? Did your year there change your....

AM: No-o, I don't think so.... END OF SIDE 2 SIDE 3

DB: You were saying that your work didn't change much. And you told me before that you did twelve paintings in one year. What type of things did you paint while you were in France?

AM: I painted a beautiful portrait of my mother, I did a portrait of my wife, I did Blues.

DB: Blues is a night club scene, right?

AM: Yes, dancing. This painting up here you never saw?

DB: No. I've been noticing it all afternoon. I hadn't seen it before.

AM: My son has that over there at the Historical Society; it's stored. I have one on the floor there on Potaki that I painted in Mexico. He's got more of my stuff over there.

DB: Oh, really? I didn't know that. Did you do a lot of the night club scene in Paris? Did you paint a lot of that?

AM: Yes, quite a few. That painting Blues. You know, there are a lot of people that are sort of conceited about that painting because they think -- this girl who wrote the thesis speaks of mixed dances and so forth.

DB: Yes.

AM: Well, this little cafe is where I got the idea for that painting. It's practically on the outskirts of Paris, it wasn't far from the Bois de Boulogne or the Eiffel Tower, past that. There was this little cafe, I think it's called Petite Cafe. I went in there one day and I got talking to the owner. He was a Frenchman, was a very friendly fellow, he had never been out of France, he couldn't speak a word of English. He asked me about painting, you know, they call it peinture (p-e-i-n-t-e-r-e) I told him yes. He said, well, there are a lot of nice people come here, speaking in French, I understood most of what he said but, you know, they talk so fast.

DB: Yes, I know.

AM: He said, "You're not working at night, are you?" I told him no. He said, "Well, come tonight, come every night." I used to go down there almost every night. I got to studying the people there. I asked him, "Are there any Americans come in here?" He said, "No Americans, they're all people from Senegal, people from Martinique, people from Libya, people from North Africa and French people, but no Americans. I said, "That's the thing I like about it." So I used to go there with my sketchbook, I'd sit there and order a beer or wine and make sketches of various people in the place. I finally composed a final sketch in my studio for the painting that I have. I went to work on it and it turned out very successfully. The idea is that there are no Americans in that painting black or white. They are all either French, some of the dark ones are Senegalese from Sengal, some of the lighter ones come from Martinique or North Africa. But there are no white Americans. And they think that the black people there are Americans, but they're.

DB: So was it a controversial painting, though? Because in the thesis and other places people have interpreted it as being interracial dancing or whatever early, in an early time.

AM: Well, yes, that's what they say here in America, but over in France there was nothing said about that.

DB: Did you exhibit the painting here in the United States?

AM: Oh, yes.

DB: And what was the reaction to it?

AM: A very good reaction.

DB: So there wasn't anything said about the racial aspects of it at all?

AM: No.

DB: That's interesting. You see, I would think that painting -- I know we've talked about it once before when you explained to me that there were no Americans in the painting -- but I would think that painting shown in the United States at that time would have caused a problem because we had such ridiculous social rules about the mixing of the races at that time. But there wasn't any of that?

AM: I think that's so stupid. I'll tell you the truth, I never in my life hated anybody. I don't care, I don't give a damn what race they are or what church they go to, that's none of my business. If they're a gentleman or a lady and they treat me as such that's the same way I'll treat them. But I'll never do anything to hurt them. I'll just let them alone and if they don't want my company, if they don't enjoy it, I'll stay away from them.

DB: Were you searching out Negroes to paint in Paris? Were you searching out various scenes that were....

AM: No, not particularly because there were not many of them. But those I found I painted. I painted a Senegalese boy, a portrait that I sold; I called it Senegalese Boy. I painted another one of a Martinique Boy that I sold years ago. I painted a Street Scene in Paris up there where I lived. That's hanging now in the Schamburg Collection in New York.

DB: Oh, it is!

AM: That and another Night Scene I made of a club called the Jockey Club. I think I told you about that.

DB: Yes, we've talked about that one.

AM: That's hanging in the Schamburg Collection in New York. Of course, they're all white in those paintings. Only the one boy, the doorman at the Jockey Club that I told you had the real bright red, tight-fitting little suit on with gold buttons down the front, bold or brass I don't know which, brass I suppose. It's a night scene.

DB: Yes, I remember, I think I even saw it.

AM: There's a little French girl walking along, strutting with a short dress on with a little poodle running behind her. They all love their dogs.

DB: I know they do. Did you exhibit any of your work in Paris?

AM: No, I didn't exhibit any of my work in Paris. I brought it all back to America. I had it at the Art Institute.

DB: Oh, you had a show at the Art Institute?

AM: Well, that is I exhibited with an exhibition.

DB: Was the Guggenheim happy with what you had done?

AM: Yes, they seemed to be quite pleased. They send me a report each year of the new members. They're listed in a book -- they sent me a book not long ago. It gives all the names of the winners of the Guggenheim Foundation. Here it is right here. I think it's listed there by years. Look at it.

DB: By year? Yes, here it says page 277.

AM: I think I've marked the page I'm on.

DB: Yes, you did. Here you are [reading] "1929 Archibald John Motley, Jr. Art Institute of Chicago 1929". We're

going to have to stop. We're not finished, unfortunately, but we can't.... END OF SIDE 3 END OF INTERVIEW