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Oral history interview with Howard M. Gibbs,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Howard Gibbs on November 28, 1965. The interview was conducted at Howard Gibbs' home on Lower Road in Brewster, Massachusetts by Geoffrey Swift for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

GEOFFREY SWIFT: This by way of preamble. This is an interview with Mr. Howard Gibbs, Painter, at his home, Lower Rd. in Brewster, Massachusetts on the afternoon of December 1, 1965, and the interviewer is Geoffrey Swift.

I think it might be helpful Mr. Gibbs if we begin by simply having you give us a little something on your background and your training, what you were doing in the late 20's or early 30's before getting on the project.

HOWARD GIBBS: Well, it's sort of difficult to remember really, but you mean when I actually started painting and that type of thing?

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Ahem. Ahem.

HOWARD GIBBS: Well I always wanted to paint. I suppose I started really when I was about 18 or 20. I was born in New Bedford, Massachusetts and I was brought up on the School of Eldorita, whose also born in New Bedford.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Sure.

HOWARD GIBBS: Had been a friend of a great uncle of mine. They had gone to school together and I had always heard about "Pinky" as they called him.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Hahaha. "Pinky."

HOWARD GIBBS: You see it was his very red hair.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Yeah.

HOWARD GIBBS: My great uncle, however, never really thought much of him, although they were really great good friends. And I admired his painting tremendously, which happened that he convinced anybody else locally. In the home town, you were never really good, in your own home town - the hometown boy in the Ritz.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Wouldn't have much trouble convincing people today, I don't think? I think it would be much easier.

HOWARD GIBBS: No, no. I can always remember when I was single that he had at one time sent us to the Bedford Public Library for a purchase. Well I said, "Why didn't you purchase it?" He said, "Was it expensive?" "Well it was fifteen hundred dollars." He said, "It was just too cheap," and that it was awfully black.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Hahahah.

HOWARD GIBBS: So anyway I was right that he was really my god in a sense and I just loved the waterfronts there, you know, what was left of the shipping and whatnot. And had painted quite realistically, more or less in the impressionist tradition. And then I became more interested in people like Van Gogh and so forth and started to broaden out.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: What kind of formal training did you have at this time? What kind of schooling?

HOWARD GIBBS: For a short time I went to the Swhet School of Design in Newberry, but I didn't seem to be getting what I wanted to get, so I just trashed out on my own. I felt that - I had done that more or less all my life anyway. Rather than have any complete formal training. Whatever I did have I couldn't stand it more than a week or so.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Hahaha.

HOWARD GIBBS: I had to run away from it. Then I went down and worked in Bermuda for a while - that was '27 and came back from there and sold - well one of my first canvases, I guess, was the Old Press Halg Gallery in Boston - correctly. And sold seven more and in that year I went to Europe, in '27, Paris. Actually I went to Italy; I had this crazy idea of working in the Northern part of Italy. But at that time Mussolini was in power, as you know,

I'm sure - life really wasn't that pleasant and I remembered I had took some paints over with me and I think I stopped more trains by have the Faschi go through my tubes of paint - to see if I had anything in them that were secret documents.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Really? In the tubes of paint?

HOWARD GIBBS: Yes, they would squeeze them right out. It just about broke my heart to see a studio tube --

GEOFFREY SWIFT: I should say so.

HOWARD GIBBS: Kept me in red, go under the ground.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: So, I didn't know they were that touchy.

HOWARD GIBBS: They were very, very touchy - so were everybody else on the trains. You know the Italians would be furious because the train was being held up and they couldn't get to their destinations. "Oh it's your fault" "It was the painter's fault."

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Hahaha. Forever alienated.

HOWARD GIBBS: From there I went - oh I really couldn't take that pressure at that time, so I went to - well actually I was quite desperate; I said, "I'm going to France." This was in November, I knew that Paris was so cold and miserable at that time, so someone said to me on the train, "Why I just bought a ticket to the south of France - it's a release actually." And I knew I would work out from there somehow. And I met a very charming French woman on the train; she said, "Why don't you go to San Paul Duval, where there are a few painters - just a few there." Of course that country is alive with them now, the museums and everything that's all around there.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Sure.

HOWARD GIBBS: And I thought that was a very good idea, and so I went on to Niece and took a bus up there and stayed there almost a year, working between Vance and Alverleria. It was a very interesting - just past the night good French painters. It was really Tahola Run - you knew there were writers there - people like David Lawrence. He died there while I was there.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Oh yes.

HOWARD GIBBS: I made several drawings of him; he used to come into the café in the afternoon - and for a short while sit around. And we'd all talk and this sort of thing. People like Frank Harris and you know all that crowd, you know, it seemed to really be going back, doesn't it? Well they were older than I was, but --

GEOFFREY SWIFT: It must have been an exciting --

HOWARD GIBBS: It was fascinating, reflecting on their glory I can say that. We'd discuss. In this country, it seems everything is so untouchable to me that just the idea sounds like Picasso - you think that he should be - well you would always see him in a glass case. But actually --

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Very, very much in demand in those days --

HOWARD GIBBS: --when you went to Paris you sat at a Café, why there would be Picasso sitting there with Derain, there would be Soutine - this person and that person having coffee just as anyone else was. (laughter) You know. So it was a little --

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Took a little getting used to I image.

HOWARD GIBBS: Well it's a humanizing, it's so hard to understand, because this country was so isolated in that period, penny-wise. There really hadn't been any really great shows since the Armory Show in New York.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: And that remained the case for some years after --

HOWARD GIBBS: And that remained the case for some years afterwards. So that there really was no push there and what few purchases there were, were very, very isolate and the Museum simply had nothing to offer, there were no galleries.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: No.

HOWARD GIBBS: I'm thinking of the Boston Area. I can't remember any gallery that was there - there was one

small one opened up and then they'd close, you know, you just couldn't exist. And if there'd be an exhibit over at Fogg, I don't know, who of us would walk over the bridge and walk for miles just to see an exhibit - it was so exciting you know. Just the thoughts of an exhibit - something from somewhere else, whether it was Mexican painting or whether it was French Paintings or Italian paintings, it didn't matter; but it was just wonderful to feel - to see something else and know what was going on somewhere else in the world.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: It's amazing to reflect on the fact that Stevens in New York - as early as 1910-1911 - the height of viewism was showing Picasso and yet 20 years thereafter, there was still no recourse to pass the School of Paris in the United States.

HOWARD GIBBS: No, no. There wasn't and a few Americans handling were Marin and like Duf, and people of that sort.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Ahem, sure.

HOWARD GIBBS: He was very courageous dealer in a way.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: This, this, not terribly much of this came to New England, at least in the way - they're brought to today's shows.

HOWARD GIBBS: No. No. They were very, very little of it, very little. But it was very hard to find.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: So if you want to see these people, the work of these people you'd been hearing about, you almost had to go to Europe. I would just as see their work as well.

HOWARD GIBBS: See their work as well. And you don't see lots of shows, lots of galleries in existence - like Bernard, German and so on - all showing various things like Rouault, Soutine, you know, just in the windows, as you walked down the street near the Ruhr, just a piece of merchandize (hahaha).

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Sure, sure. Well you were there how long all together?

HOWARD GIBBS: In the first year, I was there about a year and a half, but I went back again three or four years later, but when I came back here - let me see - let's see, the project started when?

GEOFFREY SWIFT: 1935.

HOWARD GIBBS: That was in '35.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: That is the actual Federal Arts Project - the mural project was two years earlier 1933.

HOWARD GIBBS: Well, I was in Paris in '32 and then I came on the project after that when I came back. I remember - not knowing too much about it, I started quite slowly and then next year was the Professional Arts Project that I was on. The original one.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: The Public Works of Art Project.

HOWARD GIBBS: The Public Works of Art Project. And that was a rather limited phase --

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Yes, it didn't last very long and it never really got under way in most New England States and many states in the country, it never got under way because it was succeeded by other projects, other programs, by 1934.

HOWARD GIBBS: That's right.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: There's a lot of confusion there in --

HOWARD GIBBS: Factional trouble and --

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Well did you do a mural or murals under the Public Works of Art Project?

HOWARD GIBBS: No, no, I didn't. I just did straight easel painting. But a good many of my friends did of course. I never can see things in a large scale, like that myself personally. I'm always much more interested in the intimate things.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Right.

HOWARD GIBBS: Of course now a days though thousands of murals anyway - so practically --

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Bigger and better every day --

HOWARD GIBBS: Bigger anyway. The bigger they are the better they're supposed to be... bigger, but I doubt it.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Well It all depends on the scale on which you work.

HOWARD GIBBS: Of course the measure of good small canvas carries in a big gallery with lots of canvases, which really is a great thing to see - stand out right across the room, not because it's small but by it's concept.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: So you began on the project pretty much as its inception.

HOWARD GIBBS: Yes. I think so.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Was this a question of economic survival for you, as it was for everybody else?

HOWARD GIBBS: Yes. Yeah. There was certain restrictions, I can't seem to remember exactly, we were supposed to create so many paintings a month --

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Right.

HOWARD GIBBS: What was that, do you remember?

GEOFFREY SWIFT: The exact number I don't know - varied, but the artist's work was turned in to - Boston.

HOWARD GIBBS: Yes.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: You were in Brewster most of the time?

HOWARD GIBBS: Yes, and then I transferred to Boston, so during that period I was up there in the Boston area.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: But the paintings were sent to Boston, and stored, catalogued in a way by the administrative people in the office in Boston, Cataloged and were there cataloged by subject matter, and I think some qualitatively as well.

HOWARD GIBBS: I think so.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: I heard that there were shelves over Thaddeus Clapp and others would look at them and kind of rate them, according to what they thought the overall quality was on the top shelf, and the middle shelf and the lower shelf. They were there in a storage room for interested public bodies to come, select, pick them out and then reimburse the project for supplies, is that correct?

HOWARD GIBBS: That's true. Invested in materials, wasn't it.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Ahem. Yeah.

HOWARD GIBBS: It was a good idea.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Did you get your materials from Boston?

HOWARD GIBBS: Yes, I did.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Because I was curious. I heard the other day to a man I was talking to - a man who was an administrator in Boston, that very few, or rather not a very large percentage of painters did take advantage of the fact that the project supplied canvases, stretchers, oils --

HOWARD GIBBS: But not brushes --

GEOFFREY SWIFT: But not brushes.

HOWARD GIBBS: Definitely not brushes, which is something we all wanted. But you could take advantage of that - I did at that time I was grinding out my own colors, so they'd send me - I have a number of them in my studio - jobs with dry color, you know - they'd send you the tubes and what not so you could mix your own, do what you wanted to. It was a good idea.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: As far as your existence, your daily life as a painter of the Cape Way, I know this I suppose was a kind of separate piece of Massachusetts and I guess a fairly large number of painters worked here - was Edwin Diggins in on the Cape at the time?

HOWARD GIBBS: I believe he was.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: He was?

HOWARD GIBBS: And he was doing the Province style, sure --

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Province style and a number of others, who did you say was in Brewster with you - Gasbulier?

HOWARD GIBBS: Gasbulier --

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Lous Salter - Latier --

HOWARD GIBBS: Living in Dennis, it's the next town, and Vernon Smith was also in Orleans.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: And of course in Orleans. And Harriet Orr, nearby?

HOWARD GIBBS: Eleanor Orr was on a New York project.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Oh, he was?

HOWARD GIBBS: I don't think he was over on the Massachusetts Project.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: No, he later came to it --

HOWARD GIBBS: Was it a close community of painters, did you all know pretty much on another or --?

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Oh yes. You know as much as painters can get to know one another - I mean they care - they're like actors, who try to be nice to each other which is just as bad - but they were a very interesting crowd, you know, of course we had the old Profs and House Association where those could show anyway --

HOWARD GIBBS: But that had been going a number of years. Just last year was it's 50th.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: That was quite an established art center for --

HOWARD GIBBS: Good painters all hang around - Kopnoss and Agnes Winehardt, his sister-in-law, who is a very good painter. And Ross Muffin, Catlin and Moof. Oh, on and on and on, you know. And those are the people who have houses there. Who live up there most the year round. Then of course in the summer time there is always the influx of the New York boys, you know - who came down.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: What kind of impact did they have on your people, or you on them?

HOWARD GIBBS: Oh, it's a pretty much of an all-togetherness. And there are very few galleries even in New York of American painting, contemporary American painting. The Daniels Gallery, which is one, that where I think - well Knott showed there I remember and I was at the Valentine Gallery at that time in New York, you know. But there were very few galleries showing American paintings, really. Of course you had your annual big New Jury Show at - you know, that free-for-all - every year.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Yes.

HOWARD GIBBS: They had one in Boston, too.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Yeah, the Boston's Art Festival.

HOWARD GIBBS: Where anybody could pay five dollars for a canvass, it was a free-for-all.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: This was in New York?

HOWARD GIBBS: This was both in New York and in Boston.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: And here in Boston.

HOWARD GIBBS: And as I know, this doesn't exist any more.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Then would the Prominent Art Association hold shows as well?

HOWARD GIBBS: Showed jury system --

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Jury system?

HOWARD GIBBS: And that was very dominated, of course, by conventional painters, such Hawthorne, Celston Hawthorne – national academicians – Richard Miller, Zau Zau McBrown – they held a tight reign on – well they were trustees and what they actually said, went, and they could put into office whomever they wanted to put in office, who would vote for them – so finally we protested against that – Knotts and a whole group of us so that we finally decided to give our own show, in other words they didn't want to show with us, and we didn't want to show with them.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: That sounds like the sounds of Salon de-Automne and the Salon de Independence all over again.

HOWARD GIBBS: Well that's what it was.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: It really does, it sounds precisely the same --

HOWARD GIBBS: It does?

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Yea, really. Well when did that happen?

HOWARD GIBBS: Well that happened, that must have happened around 1935.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: So just about the same time – the project began --

HOWARD GIBBS: Just about the same time.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: I don't image terrible that many of the academicians were on the project; they probably didn't need to, even in those days. Do they still find sufficient work -- ?

HOWARD GIBBS: No, I don't think they were actually. A good many academic painters were on the project.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Yeah, but I mean the older national academy --

HOWARD GIBBS: But the actual painters who had belonged to the National Academy – I don't think any of them were on it. That I know of.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: They probably never came into dire enough straits to have to go on it.

HOWARD GIBBS: I don't think they even approved of it.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: I would imagine that they would constitutionally – they disapproved of it --

HOWARD GIBBS: They felt it was too much of an up-lift – of giving some of us a chance and this breaking of a close circle.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: They were part of the establishment and --

HOWARD GIBBS: Yes.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Well I gather than that by and large the contact among artists as it usually is, is just a social contact I get it.

HOWARD GIBBS: Yes.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: A social contact among people who were all at least enraged in the same pursuit of the same profession, but as far as your approaches to art and your stylistic – the styles of your painting, they were quite disparate; -- it --

HOWARD GIBBS: Well, they were quite different.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Quite different, that's what I mean.

HOWARD GIBBS: Yes. You know people like, people like Zorach painting, for instance, Ronald Lehusa has a regular exhibit of the _____ Art Association; I don't remember seeing any sculpture of his at that time. And his wife who is also a painter and I remember people like --

GEOFFREY SWIFT: I wonder if Zorach was on the project?

HOWARD GIBBS: I have a feeling he was.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: I think he was, too.

HOWARD GIBBS: In fact, I know, I'm sure he was.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: So you were, all the young painters were all developing in your own ways, and as opposed to some of the other parts of the country for instance, the mid-west, the Chicago area which because known for its own kind of regional styles, which something of Thomas Hart Benton and his kind of lyrical primitivism and others and other things too to the Mexicans to Orozco and Riviera's and this is some minds over the years has come to characterize American paintings of the 30's as a regional school --

HOWARD GIBBS: A series of --

GEOFFREY SWIFT: --of styles arising regionally and that all quite independent of one another, but I've gathered from the people I've talked to this -- but it wasn't true of New England, Maine, of course, like every other part of backwater, at least it was separate from New York, it wasn't in the main stream as the whole U.S. was not in the main stream of the development of European painting in those days. And people tended to pursue their own ends; in other words as many different kinds of paintings as there were painters -- what I mean to say is that --

HOWARD GIBBS: That's true.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: --there never was no group here formed, like the -- oh the abstract expressionists in New York who, of course, came to fruition later on, and were all terribly friendly. Most of them were on the project -- Klien, De Kooning, Kafka and the rest.

HOWARD GIBBS: Kafka and the rest were here too, like Jack Lockoff and --

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Troitkoff was on the Cape, wasn't he?

HOWARD GIBBS: Jack was on the Cape, he was on the project.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: I knew he was on the Project, I didn't know --

HOWARD GIBBS: He lived on the Cape for a time, I guess when he was married and --

GEOFFREY SWIFT: So there was infusion of ideas from that element?

HOWARD GIBBS: Well yes, you see, it was also true, I think, that a good number of people bolted against the western idea of prairie school, shall we call it -- and they drifted into New York and also into the New England areas to a certain extent, because I can remember several kinds on our project who were from Texas -- you know here in Massachusetts -- California and several and so on. You know it was a case of riding the rails.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Right.

HOWARD GIBBS: And if your not such like we were, you just went somewhere else.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Well, the form of prairie school aside -- was there any feeling or general feeling on you people in Massachusetts or in the Cape of the necessity of social action to -- or social comment -- or artist social criticism -- art in service of politics, or what have you -- ?

HOWARD GIBBS: Oh, yes, I think there was. There was Jack McGrove --

GEOFFREY SWIFT: I know, but it doesn't reflect itself in the subject matter or I think even in the content of the work of many of the people. There was a notable glaring section, such as you had in Levine --

HOWARD GIBBS: I was thinking of Ben Shahn, for instance, you know the sackle and silly pride, you know -- well he also worked in Provincetown.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: He also worked in Provincetown --

HOWARD GIBBS: So you see you had quite an international -- if you can say international -- setup there --

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Yeah, yeah, I always heard just how important from the standpoint, but I never connected with all of the whole string of names of people who have actually worked there.

HOWARD GIBBS: Of course, they'd come, they'd go. Some would, more or less permanently, some are still there. Ben, of course, the younger crowd as now -- it's a different set-up all together.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: I wonder if there are as many of them there now -- I haven't been to Provincetown for years --

HOWARD GIBBS: You mean actually working?

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Actually working, actually serious painting – I don't mean – I don't mean the hangers-on who had grown up in the wake in the success of abstract expressionism --

HOWARD GIBBS: No, I know what you mean – about 10,000 shows there in a week – but of course there are a good many of those – but I think there are still some serious painters there. I mean – you know Hoffman had his school there --

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Sure, I didn't know that.

HOWARD GIBBS: And he produced certainly a number of Hoffman series, there's no question about that – the world's full of Hoffman's, but out of that there came some very good people, too, because he's a very good teacher.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Walter Chrysler's gallery wasn't going then, was it? That's been more recent?

HOWARD GIBBS: No. That was just the old church --

GEOFFREY SWIFT: That's right --

HOWARD GIBBS: Very recent – I guess it had been there about five-six-seven years --

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Sure.

HOWARD GIBBS: Something of that sort.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Is that still going as it was about six-seven years ago?

HOWARD GIBBS: Well, yes, it's opened the year round, and with various changes of exhibits which is always – well I think salvaged class – whatever you want, you know?

GEOFFREY SWIFT: His collection of contemporary paintings.

HOWARD GIBBS: Contemporary things, too. We had some very good things, some sculpture and what not.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: How did you find yourself developing as a painter during this period? Do you think – I know this is a difficult tax I am sure to say and perhaps it's a question that's not germane – Let me phrase it differently. I'm sure your people were probably – your feelings toward the project were mainly those of just simple gratitude, that you were given a stipend and enabled therefore to pursue what you wanted to do most – which was to paint. Well did you feel during this period any development in your work, which you could trace at all to the experience that you had? Specifically relating to the 30's.

HOWARD GIBBS: Well – you mean painting wise?

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Painting wise.

HOWARD GIBBS: Yeah. Oh yes, I think so. Well actual security was one thing, which is extremely important and I think that was abused tremendously by a great many people and there were many painters who turned in old canvases --

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Oh did they?

HOWARD GIBBS: Oh, they'd tickle them up a bit and then turn them in because they felt that their present work which they were doing was more important and therefore they wanted to keep it for themselves. Somehow they had the idea of sending the canvases off to the government board was like committing suicide --

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Well, in a way understandably considering that you didn't know where they were going and they were completely out of your control and they might well be lost --

HOWARD GIBBS: Well, it's like burning your children, you know?

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Sure.

HOWARD GIBBS: A street common (hahaha) It's really true because I remember one case of mine was – well particularly canvases I showed you here – that was in a museum art show – there was a fellow who tried to buy the canvas and he wanted to buy it and give to a school in Connecticut, but since the paintings of Massachusetts had to stay in Massachusetts --

GEOFFREY SWIFT: All these technicalities.

HOWARD GIBBS: So all these technicalities came about and --

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Was there any attempt to work that out between Connecticut and Massachusetts? After all they were all under the same --

HOWARD GIBBS: Oh yeah, we had various meeting with various people and --

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Because it was Morrison who had charge of all of New England.

HOWARD GIBBS: That's right. And the Superintendent of the school in Connecticut wanted it very much and this donor was willing to give the money and so the money and so the money could be given back to the project, which he felt would be the natural thing to do. They just used over-all - but since it came from Massachusetts, it was impossible to send it to Connecticut.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Never got there?

HOWARD GIBBS: Never got there. As a matter of fact I don't know where it is today. I don't know if it even exists.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: That's interesting, because I heard from most people that - certainly from the administrators who handled Massachusetts that they were given almost complete autonomy in the way they wanted to run their own project. That is reacting to the specific situations they found - needs, kinds of painting, that they had, kinds of painters they had in their states and could set up programs with a great deal of freedom without having to resort to all the usual bureaucratic red tape that we associate with the federal government. In other words the project grew up so fast and was created to meet a need, a pressing need, that it was years before the usual bureaucratic paraphernalia caught up with the project, and therefore mars him. Clapp, Hawley Perkins and all could do just about what they wanted to do. So I would have thought therefore that with that situation they could have arranged something.

HOWARD GIBBS: Well they tried to put pressure on, but at that time there were many small groups that - in a bureaucratic way - would seem to block everything along the way. That's so you wouldn't take advantage of them - the idea eventually --

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Possibly certain jealousies of the Connecticut project which, of course, was not as big as Massachusetts and perhaps - it certainly was not as active.

HOWARD GIBBS: No, no it was not very active, I don't think.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: It was more active than any of the other New England states - but of course New England - Massachusetts was far in the way the biggest - there were 400 and some odd so-called easel painters - fine artists working in Massachusetts at one point on the project - and so it was one of the bigger ones. Well what kinds of shows were organized on the Cape, any local shows, strictly of WPA work?

HOWARD GIBBS: Well, I can't remember actually --

GEOFFREY SWIFT: There was of course the New England Wide Show and various other shows in Boston.

HOWARD GIBBS: Yes.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: But that's kind of far removed from the people of the Cape.

HOWARD GIBBS: I think that most of the exhibits that were given were secondary in nature, they were mostly, you know, you said placed in school, auditoriums and whatnot without - but without any catalog, without any idea that this is an outstanding show that you should see.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Right, right.

HOWARD GIBBS: It was really secondary to that type of thing.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Was there any kind of strong or wide-spread feeling among you, the painters, in this area about trying to communicate through art with people - that is to awaken them to the possibilities of art.

HOWARD GIBBS: Oh, certainly yeah. I think that's every painter's idea, anyway.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: There is a very --

HOWARD GIBBS: Basic idea.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Sure.

HOWARD GIBBS: Should be.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: There were the tools at hand – that is a lot of people all work so to speak for the same organization and possibilities of shows. Was there any agitation – I don't know if that's too strong a word – agitation on the part of painters to have a local show – and they have community art centers and educate the public as it were to art?

HOWARD GIBBS: Most of it, I think, was actually done with children's classes. And evening classes where various kind – I don't know whether those fellows were actually easel project or not – there was possibly teaching parts to it. But I know that they did give them time teaching at schools and there were special evening classes for – well for adults who wanted to come – sculpture and things of that sort. So I don't – you see I don't to see – it's amazing to me because the world is so art conscious today.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Much more so than it was then?

HOWARD GIBBS: Oh heavens, you go to the 10 cent store and see Modigliani and Cezanne and Renoir reproductions _____, but they're still there and Van Gogh yellows are the fashion this year for women's hats and so its amazing that the interest of people in painting – I really think its true. I think the young students will naturally _____ is more _____ to art things and they're not so frightened perhaps of dealers. I think perhaps dealers are always rather frightening – the potential buyer – a young student at Harvard who wants to pay so much a week, or something of that sort may. Now those things can be done.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: The general educated public is now, of course, being made aware of art; its generally when you got to college – especially in the east – good eastern college you are apt to have some kind of exposure to a course in art history or art appreciation or what have you and the younger generation that has been coming along for the last 10 or 15 years has arrived at the scene and is sort of making money, and has money to spend on paintings and they know something about paintings – they're not walking blind – they can have a little confidence in their own taste. It is not to say that there is not as much patronage of younger painters or of American painters, as there should be.

HOWARD GIBBS: Well now, as you say --

GEOFFREY SWIFT: People who buy paintings, still by and large, I'm afraid play it safe; they believe, they buy Europeans; if they have a lot of money they buy old masters or the 600 thousand dollar Cezanne's we've seen sold.

HOWARD GIBBS: I think they have a tendency to buy names, if they can afford to and I believe it was some Churchill that's worth 50-60 thousand dollars.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Sure, sure.

HOWARD GIBBS: Self _____. A little painting I know he enjoyed doing, which is fine. That's – there isn't any reason you shouldn't, but I don't really think it belongs in that category of collector's items aside from his signature.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: No, no, ahem. He did do some good paintings.

HOWARD GIBBS: He did some very good things – he did some terrible ones too.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: He did some terrible ones; I was just yesterday looking at a calendar – a Winston Churchill calendar.

HOWARD GIBBS: It's a Horthorne?

GEOFFREY SWIFT: I don't know who puts it out. But on the cover is a splendid little thing. It's a great bread strokes of almost pure colors – it's a 1924 scene of Charte Well – his old country house and it was – there's a story that goes with it – it was donated – but put in a show of amateur paintings in London in 1925, I think, and the jurors looked at it and suspected that it wasn't an amateur at all – they thought it was a professional – but they awarded it first prize anyway. Then they looked, as the story goes, the painter here wasn't only an amateur, but a well-known amateur.

HOWARD GIBBS: Well-known amateur --

GEOFFREY SWIFT: And it's an impressive little thing. Some of the others a black-waters - you know?

HOWARD GIBBS: Yes.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Not right. But it would be interesting to speculate just how this - of today's interest in art on a wide-spread basis can be attributed to awakening to art of so much of the general public in the 30's. It's a difficult thing to measure quantitatively because different parts of the country there were - was varying degrees of public acceptance and even public interest in the Arts Projects in the various works of the artists of the 30's. In some areas, of course, there were art centers set up for the first time - community art centers - such as in Chicago - wonderful --

HOWARD GIBBS: Yes.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: The work of Peter Pollack in the Negro parts of Chicago, setting up art centers, actually training young painters, awakening youngsters to be the possibilities of the arts and the crafts associated with them, whereas not necessarily would they become professionals in those fields, but those sort of things that have perpetuated themselves in the classes of the Museum of Modern Art - children - and the thousands of other classes around the country. And before the 30's I suspect there wasn't much of this.

HOWARD GIBBS: I don't think so - very little of it - it was just the small arts groups, and you know - with the usual model and jug and that still art type of thing, but I know a friend of mine who was an advance man for, I guess it was Orson Wells at the time, he used to travel a lot through Chicago and his ideal he'd go from one town to another in the west, because he was two-three days ahead of the show, you know, and he always spent his time going to these classes which was a wonderful thing and he just drew, drew and drew, whether it was Chicago, Omaha or some other place, Kansas City - there was always an art center where he could go to draw and he always thought it was such an exciting thing, and I did too; I thought it was just remarkable.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Remarkable, yeah. And I wonder, were there many of them set up in New England?

HOWARD GIBBS: I don't know of any.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: No. I don't either. I'm glad to hear that specifically and definitely because, unless other people say "I'm not sure there were," but nobody seems to be able to remember any real art centers that were set up here.

HOWARD GIBBS: No.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: I suppose that New England, being what it is, an older center and more culturally oriented at the time, might well have had a few art centers at some time or another before the 30's. I'm not sure. I haven't done any research in the area, but --

HOWARD GIBBS: -- individual teachers probably teaching and so - and certainly the various art school, of which we have quite a number of - I suppose that took the place of it. I don't think it did take the place of it in any way --

GEOFFREY SWIFT: There was a certain amount, actually a good deal of art training set up, I think in Hartford.

HOWARD GIBBS: I think that's true.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: I think that was pretty much the result of the project; that's one area, one place in which the training was pretty active - the idea of training young people.

HOWARD GIBBS: Well producing experimental theater, you know, certain Gertrude Stein thing, and so forth - and they were doing a good deal of work down there at that time. I know - I'm not so sure of Sarasota, but I don't think that museum would enter into anything like that until later. But that's suppose to be fairly active and --

GEOFFREY SWIFT: But you see that wasn't the case in Boston.

HOWARD GIBBS: No. It wasn't as far as I was concerned; it was conscious of it.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: It seemed not to be the case as far as I was concerned. And it - the museum was just not a force - in fostering contemporary art.

HOWARD GIBBS: No. And most of the painters knew the painters in each others studio, you know - one opposed to the other and so on and so forth and you know, certainly makes it a weak program in which way I want to go. They all seemed to work very well together. Of course there was that Ashcan School of John Stone, you know. Of

course New York all seems to be so “school” conscious but this one thing I must say, without New England, this never would have been very school conscious. You know, such as the “Ashcan Schools,” such as this type of school.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Yeah. I think that is very true. I find myself just out of convenience sake, in order to try to pigeon hole people as you know I’m afraid we tend to do is to easily try to think in terms of “schools,” influences and that sort of thing, but it really defeats you when you try to do that, or the New England art seemed the last 30-40 years, because this don’t – this doesn’t seem to be a single valid school --

HOWARD GIBBS: No.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: I can’t think of very many – Oh even small groups of painters that I know of and I’m not that terribly familiar with contemporary art in New England, even in smaller groups of painters that all think alike or paint in relatively the same. It’s just – there aren’t any.

HOWARD GIBBS: There was a Boston school, but it was a pretty loose school. It consisted mostly of, you know, portraiture, and what not, as Philadelphia had been. Originally the seat of portrait painters and so forth – but that’s the nearest thing that I could think of – that really “school” conscious. I knew we had Boston Guild, but that was just another closed organization. Really a group – painters who did rock and sea, sailing ships and so forth.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: But there never has been, for instance, in Boston or just recently, a painter of the statue of Aikens – or the originality of Aikens to galvanize or to form or magnetize a school – there were the various New England impressionists or the late impressionists.

HOWARD GIBBS: No. The late ones, yes.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: -- whose names sort of escape me.

HOWARD GIBBS: Yeah. Will Torqueman and people of that sort of breed – I was trying to get the other fellow who out in Baltimore whose – Robinson, wasn’t it? They used to call him the period of Van Gogh --

GEOFFREY SWIFT: I gather there was a certain following of his, although --

HOWARD GIBBS: Oh, there was I think. Yes. But you never had – they never followed into Suerat or Signac or pointillism or anything of that sort – they were even suggestive of the Gogh School. You never had any of that, it was always the delicate touch, you know.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: How would you somehow describe the strengths and weaknesses of the Federal Art Project – at least as far as your experience went?

HOWARD GIBBS: As far as my experience went, I – I think it was a wonderful thing basically, and of course it was born in tried times and many programs were brought about through stress and strain, which really didn’t come out as well as they should have.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Like what, for instance?

HOWARD GIBBS: Well, I was thinking in the painting field, because eventually it became pretty loose in order – I knew a group that copied something out of the newspaper and applied for a job and they kept him. So it became pretty political, but I remember --

GEOFFREY SWIFT: I think that will always remain a problem – the problem of limits as to criteria. Who do you define as a fine artist, and also who does the defining?

HOWARD GIBBS: Just as there’s always somebody to complain everywhere. No one is ever going to be satisfied but such an overall pattern, I don’t know how many thousands were on it – eventually throughout the country --

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Many thousands, yes.

HOWARD GIBBS: It really sort of deteriorated in a lot of spots that way. And then, of course as the times became better, the better painters started dropping out and this was really quite, one of the soft points. I know right here in New England, because many artists wanted to leave the project and they were induced by people like Morrison, and Perkins and so on, “Please stay on because we need you.” I mean we haven’t got – if you leave – we haven’t got anything to support; we haven’t got anything to show. I mean these other things are so milk toast, you’ve got to stay with us and help us and so on, to keep the balance up.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: And they understandably thought it the best thing and the most effective way to justify

themselves was through paintings of the highest quality?

HOWARD GIBBS: Oh exactly, certainly --

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Whereas, it was conceived originally as a relief project with --

HOWARD GIBBS: Yes.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: -- quality not considered. It was to be considered in the other projects, the Public Works of Art Project - and the Section of Painting and Sculpture of the Treasury Department, which more or less took over from that later on in the handling of the decoration of public buildings.

HOWARD GIBBS: I think that's the thing that really became the great argument. It was the quality eventually. How it would sting - the good quality - to keep the good people.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: And then of course - I think this was reasonably a fertile area as far as ideas went --

HOWARD GIBBS: Well, I think it was a very rich area.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Ahem. There are good painters and other painters who have different ideas, and even these administrators here - put what was the Index - of course that was terribly active, and the woodcarvers and the laboratory in Boston. Actually the school run the Federal Arts Project in Boston trained young painters, which I think is in a way analogous to a community arts center, although I haven't been able to talk to anybody yet who could really fill me in on just how this school ran in Boston. As far as administrators and those in charge of the project, trying to justify themselves by thinking up ideas and projects for their fine artists to follow, it seems to me that this is in a way, an artificial thing.

HOWARD GIBBS: Yes.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: It put kind of - what kind of progress can you think up that will be meaningful for or satisfy when all the artists were mostly interested in pursuing their own work.

HOWARD GIBBS: And then personally we got to feel, well what do they want? What am I suppose to paint? Well that is dangerous the minute you stop to think, "Is there a type of canvas they want? What size do they want? Is this good? Is this canvas of the highest quality. Once it's on, it's on. It is or it isn't."

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Must I in some way alter the content of my painting just to satisfy - the art patrons I'm working for - is this what I'm working for - this great governmental colossus?

HOWARD GIBBS: Of course this was social consciousness - would it sell and also - and then there was, when they started to unionize the artist - the artists were dissatisfied.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: It would be initially important always that it remained with the artist --

HOWARD GIBBS: That's right.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: In that respect, sure. The ideas weren't sent down from above, they were - they came from --

HOWARD GIBBS: They were not god-given shots of light, I'll tell you that. I don't think any painter is. I think he destroys more canvases than he paints as he should have.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: There's an interesting story about Hyland Bloom - I can't remember just who told it - when he was on the project - and he was very dissatisfied with his work - of course he was very young - quite dissatisfied, refused to turn anything in, and they had to pry things away from him which they had to turn into the project and he refused to show anything. And Morrison, I gather brought someone from New York, and went into Bloom's studio one Sunday morning, cornered him in the studio, and literally tied him to his chair while the gallery person went through what he had there, before he destroyed - he had a habit of destroying his work I gather - what he had gathered there, carted it off to New York and took it away --

HOWARD GIBBS: Gave him a show.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Gave him a show. And from then on - I guess the show was a great success --

HOWARD GIBBS: It still is a success.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: I'm not sure what else was in it --

HOWARD GIBBS: The sculpture Cahill brought --

GEOFFREY SWIFT: And from then on, Hyland Bloom didn't destroy his paintings any more.

HOWARD GIBBS: Hahaha.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: But he was terribly young, I guess, in those days.

HOWARD GIBBS: Oh yes.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: He must have been still in his teens. I know that Jack Levine was still in his teens when he went on the Project.

HOWARD GIBBS: They were about the same age.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: And there was a certain amount of trouble because they were so young. They had to somehow cut red tape, you know, to get them on the project.

HOWARD GIBBS: They did, yes.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: There was a lower age limit to it.

HOWARD GIBBS: That was the result of this Denman Ross.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Right.

HOWARD GIBBS: That situation. Of course Ross also was a good influence around here.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Sure.

HOWARD GIBBS: In that period until '28 he died, I guess.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: I think an awful lot of the administrators who ran the project had all been in his museum of course. Larson had, Gordon Smith had, John Davis Hatch had - the three anyway - and there may have been more. Sammuell Green may have - Green was, of course, a graphic artist as well.

HOWARD GIBBS: Yes.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: I don't know if he painted particularly or --

HOWARD GIBBS: No.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: I've never seen any paintings.

HOWARD GIBBS: It was mostly graphics.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: Delicate little farms and landscapes, as I understand - he's now an art historian teaching at Wellesley.

HOWARD GIBBS: Oh, is he.

GEOFFREY SWIFT: He's head of the department at Wellesley.

HOWARD GIBBS: Good, that's wonderful. Should be pretty nice.

END OF INTERVIEW

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