



Smithsonian
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Oral history interview with Edward Biberman,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Edward Biberman on April 15, 1964. The interview took place at his home in Hollywood, CA, and was conducted by Betty Hoag as part of the New Deal and the Arts project for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

BETTY HOAG: Mr. Biberman, you were directly connected with the Federal Art Projects work. I know that you did three murals for the Treasury Department: one in Venice in 1941; two of them in the Los Angeles Federal Post Office Building in 1937 and 1940. Are those the correct dates?

EDWARD BIBERMAN: Yes, the dates are approximately correct. But I think we should correct one matter of terminology. I don't think that the Federal Art Projects, as they are usually referred to, encompass the work done under the Section of Fine Arts. At least it's my understanding that the Federal Art Projects had to do primarily with the work done under the WPA and that the Section of Fine Arts was a separate agency. I may be quite wrong and it may be that the term is correctly used. However, I simply want to establish the fact that my three murals were done for the Section of Fine Arts, not for the Federal Art Project. The dates, however, are correct. The murals in the Los Angeles Post Office were 1937 and 1940. There were two separate murals. The ceiling, however, was the last of the three commissions and was actually not done until 1940 or '41. Only the side wall was commissioned in 1937. And the Venice Post Office mural was completed either in 1940 or 1941-I'm not quite certain what the signing date on it was. Let me repeat, they were all done for the Section of Fine Arts, an agency, I believe, under the Treasury Department. And they were direct commissions.

MS. HOAG: Yes. And I understand that you also were on the jury in Washington, D.C. which had something to do with the Ben Shahn mural. Could you tell us about that?

MR. BIBERMAN: Yes. I had been invited by Edward Rowan, who was the second in command of the Section of Fine Arts, to come to Washington and serve as a member of the jury for the mural that was to be done in the Social Security Building. And that mural, I believe, was either the largest or the second largest commission ever awarded under the Section of Fine Arts program. I'm a little hesitant there. Incidentally, I competed for the St. Louis Post Office mural and I was the runner-up, which was why I was awarded several of the other contracts. If I may digress for a moment-

MS. HOAG: Please do.

MR. BIBERMAN: -they did not have separate competitions for each of the murals. This was decided, as I understand it, for two reasons. First of all, the mechanics of an open competition involved a great deal of work on the part of the competing artists; and second, they also required jurying and a great deal of paperwork. So, toward the end of the Section of Fine Arts program, a policy was adopted which worked something like this: when a very large competition was held, not only was there an award for the successful competitor, who, of course, got that particular commission, but the artists who were either runners-up or, in certain cases, honorable-mentions [or the nearest term to that] were awarded certain of the smaller commissions. I never actually competed for the three murals I did on the program because I-it's almost like that old-time gag of-what is it?-"six times a bridesmaid and never a bride?"-I never actually "won" any of the large competitions that I entered, but I was runner-up in several of them. On the basis of the fact that I was the runner-up in the St. Louis competition, the San Francisco competition and another in the East [as I recall it, it was for a courthouse in Newark], I was awarded the three commissions. However, to get back to your original question. The Social Security Building competition received tremendous publicity because, 1) it did involve a very important official building in Washington, and 2) it also involved a very substantial fee to the successful competitor. And for these reasons there was a big build-up. I had at that time already completed two murals for the government and was working on a third. I suppose that this was the reason why I was asked to be a member of the jury. The jury met in Washington and on it were Franklin Watkins of Philadelphia, the painter; Mrs. Marguerite Zorach, who is the painter-wife of Bill Zorach, the sculptor; a painter from Carnegie Tech, whose name at the moment escapes me; and myself. We had a very fascinating time going over the material submitted, which was excellent.

MS. HOAG: About how many submissions were there, do you remember?

MR. BIBERMAN: Offhand I don't know, but it would seem to me that there must have been at least a hundred.

MS. HOAG: From all over the country?

MR. BIBERMAN: From all over the country. And as always in these Section of Fine Arts competitions, the competitors had to enter anonymously-that is to say, no work was signed. The signature was covered over with a piece of tape. Theoretically at least, nobody knew whose work was being judged, the idea being that work was to be judged not on the basis of personalities, but on the basis of merit. Which was a wonderful idea! However, in many cases you cannot keep from knowing an artist's name if you're at all familiar with his work. The process was one of gradually winnowing down the submitted material, and as the jurying continued it became perfectly apparent that one of the competitors was way ahead. By the time we had reached, let us say, six potential winning solutions to the problem, it was obvious to everyone that one was the work of Ben Shahn. His work is very easily recognizable, and this was a very interesting sketch. We finally came to the point where we were down to two contestants, one of whom was, then, obviously Ben Shahn, even though the name was covered. The other was one that I was championing. I was in a minority position on the jury, but I argued, mustering every reason that I could think of, for the award to be made to this second unknown competitor. Finally, when it was obvious that I was the sole holdout, we did what is normal under these circumstances: I agreed to vote with the majority in order to make the decision unanimous. There would have been no point in doing otherwise-Shahn was going to win anyway. So it was no surprise when we ripped off the tape and found the winner to be Ben Shahn, because we all recognized his work. But I was terribly curious to see who the other artist was whose work I didn't recognize, but whose solution I was crazy about. When we uncovered the signature it turned out to be Phil Guston.

MS. HOAG: How interesting!

MR. BIBERMAN: Now this was very intriguing to me because when I first came as a visitor to California from New York, where I had been living for seven years, a number of friends were very eager to show me what they considered the greatest talents on the West Coast at that time. And one of the people whom everyone was touting as "one of the brilliant young painters out here" was named Phil Goldstein. Now this Phil Goldstein later changed his name to Philip Guston. I was taken out to Duarte to a tubercular rest home or hospital, I forget what it was called at that period, to see a mural done in fresco by this young chap. Incidentally, he had left for New York only a few days earlier, so that we never actually met. I was very impressed, for this was the work of someone who was a superb draftsman. He drew in a beautiful Florentine tradition. I saw a little more of his work while I was here. So of course the amusing thing was that in Washington several years later I held out for a solution by a man whose work apparently I didn't know at all. But it was signed Philip Guston.

MS. HOAG: He had won a Carnegie Award some time during those years, hadn't he?

MR. BIBERMAN: In New York, you mean?

MS. HOAG: I believe it was an international award for-

MR. BIBERMAN: Well, he began to win prizes very quickly. He had changed from working in a Florentine tradition, which was the work that I first knew, to a kind of-I don't know how to best describe the sketch of his in Washington-beautifully composed, very fine quality of draftsmanship, a very formal figurative solution. He subsequently began to treat the figure in a very romantic fashion. I've seen examples of this period of his work in various exhibitions. Of course, as you know, shortly after that his work became less and less figurative and much more abstract, and finally he arrived at a completely non-objective approach, the idiom for which actually he has received his greatest recognition. So, he made a very rapid change from beautiful, almost fifteenth century kind of Florentine drawing to a completely non-objective idiom and became, if you wish to use the term, an action painter. And I still have never met him. It is interesting that our paths have crossed in absentia.

MS. HOAG: That brings up a question I was going to ask later, but it's probably a good time for it. Do you feel that the work that he did on the Federal Art Projects at that time perhaps kept him from developing even faster toward this final abstract period he went into?

MR. BIBERMAN: Well, I feel that one should rephrase that question, because I think it was the Federal Art Projects which made it possible for him [as for many other people], to develop into a professional painter. There were a great many young artists who in the normal course of events probably would have fallen by the wayside. The project enabled him at a very early age to practice his profession. It is highly speculative whether the fact that he was working for a Federal agency might have prevented his moving into another formal idiom more quickly. I don't know whether or not one can say that he really didn't "express himself" until he was off the project. Perhaps later we can discuss the whole philosophic question of a "guaranteed sponsorship" and what this does to an artist's mode of painting and thinking. But certainly in the period that we're discussing now, I feel that the art projects placed no constraint or restriction or inhibition on later development.

MS. HOAG: Now before we go on I think it might be a good idea to review your life rather briefly.

MR. BIBERMAN: As long as we can do it briefly I don't mind. In my very early schooling I was not trained for the fine arts field. I grew up in Philadelphia as a member of a mercantile family and received my university degree

from the Wharton School of Finance and Commerce, from which I graduated at the tender age of nineteen.

MS. HOAG: As a Bachelor of Science, I believe?

MR. BIBERMAN: No. Bachelor of Science in Economics. Because the Wharton School of a Finance and Commerce was actually designed to train people for a business career, the assumption was that I would enter my father's business. I graduated at nineteen simply because at that time of my life I had a phenomenal memory which enabled me to skip several public and high school terms. I graduated from college at an age when most people are entering. As a matter of fact, I was offered a job teaching in the Economics Department at the University of Pennsylvania when I was nineteen years old!

MS. HOAG: That would have been very hard for the students, I think, to have anyone so young.

MR. BIBERMAN: Well, I think it would have been harder for me than it would have been for them. But the reason I didn't accept the offer was that a couple of years before that I had begun seriously to do the thing that I have always done before and since-to draw and paint. One summer when I was about sixteen, I guess it was, I was out horseback riding and was thrown. I broke my leg and was in a cast for about six weeks. Since I wasn't able to jump around the way a normal sixteen-year-old would have been doing, I spent most of the summer painting while I was confined to crutches. We had a family friend in Philadelphia, Robert Susan, who was a very well-known portrait painter. He saw some of things that I did and encouraged me and my family to nurture what he considered "budding talent." As a result, during the last two years that I was in college I attended an art school at night and during the summers. At the time it was not with the idea of painting professionally, but simply to develop what I thought would be an avocation. Finally, when I completed college, I said to my father that I felt that he "owed" me two years of schooling because, not only had I finished college at the age of nineteen, but also I had won a scholarship to the university so that he had had no tuition fees to pay for me. I said that I felt that, in all fairness, I should be staked to two more years of schooling which my due; and being a reasonable man he thought that was a fair enough proposition. So I went to the Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia and spent two years there. At the end of that time I decided that I would move heaven and earth to remain in this field rather than do anything else. One of the things which helped make this possible was the fact that I had an older brother who was also a very good student, an honor student at the University of Pennsylvania, who had entered my father's business, stayed there for two years and, although he was a good business man, became so unhappy with it that he finally left. He entered the Theatre Department at Yale to study with Professor Baker, who had been with the former "Forty Seven Workshop of Harvard." My father, having gone through a disappointment with one of his sons, was perfectly prepared when I pleaded my case, to say, "Well, maybe this was not what you were cut out for." And he agreed to permit me to pursue a career which was not the career I had gone to college to learn.

MS. HOAG: He must have been a very fine person to let you do that!

MR. BIBERMAN: He was! A wonderful and very remarkable man. So, in 1926, when I had finished two years at the Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia, I won a drawing prize there which was enough to pay for my passage to Europe. My father again agreed to see me through a couple of years there. So I spent three years, from 1926 to 1929, in Europe-mostly in Paris. I traveled a bit and spent some time in Spain. Before I left Europe in 1929 I had had two one-man shows: one in Paris at the Galerie Zak; one in Berlin at the Neue Kunsthandlung. I had first exhibited professionally in 1927 at the Autumn Salon in Paris and other large group shows-"The Independents" and one or two others. One of the critics for the French magazine *Cahiers d'Art* said that if I would stay in Paris and work he would guarantee me an international reputation in ten years. Though this was an intriguing prospect, and pleasant as life in Paris was, and enjoyable as this period had been, at the end of three years I felt that I just had no place there; that my place was back in the United States.

MS. HOAG: Were you just homesick?

MR. BIBERMAN: It wasn't a question of being homesick. I just felt that there was very little point in being an expatriate painter; that a short period was wonderful and stimulating and I had enjoyed it enormously; but I just could not see myself living in Paris as an American for an endless period of time. It seemed to me that I should get back where I felt I belonged. So I did that and returned.

MS. HOAG: To New York, didn't you?

MR. BIBERMAN: Yes, I returned to the States. I didn't want to live in Philadelphia, where artists have a great problem: they are ninety miles from New York! And I assume that this attitude still prevails because so many talented painters from the Philadelphia area feel that they cannot function there. The competition with New York is much too keen; there's always that feeling of a "pull." So I decided to live in New York, which I did starting in 1929. I lived there until 1936. I was very fortunate in that rather quickly I established connections with galleries which became interested in my work. My first dealer relationship was with a wonderful man named N.E. Montross of the Montross Galleries. N. E. Montross, quite an old man then, was a painter's delight because he

was very understanding and cooperative. He had shown in New York some of the earliest then modern paintings. He exhibited the French Post Impressionists as early as any of the galleries in the East, I believe. And also he was the champion of a number of the great American painters. For example, he was a very close friend of Albert Pinkham Ryder and had exhibited his work at a period when Ryder was known to only a handful of people. So I was very fortunate in having the sponsorship of Montross when I first returned to this country. I had two one-man exhibitions in his gallery, and when he died the fate of the gallery was in limbo. The next two shows I had in New York were with the Reinhart Galleries. And here again this was a very fortunate relationship for a young painter because the Reinhart Galleries had an excellent reputation. Also, in the early 1930's the Museum of Modern Art was founded in New York. It's first location was in the Heckscher Building, which was the same building, incidentally, that the Reinhart Galleries was in- 57th and Fifth Avenue. At that time I met Alfred Barr, who is still, as you probably know, connected with the Museum of Modern Art. And I was included in two group shows there. The first one was called "Forty-six under Thirty-Five," or some such catchy title. It was a group-show of painters with an age bracket of thirty-five top. I was also included in a second show at the Modern Museum-an exhibition of mural designs for the new Radio City. There was a big campaign under way to try to have Radio City filled with murals. Precisely how the Museum of Modern Art entered the picture I don't recall, but I know that there were exhibited at the Modern Museum a number of projected mural solutions with a Radio City orientation.

MS. HOAG: Do you know if any of these were used, the ones that were exhibited at-

MR. BIBERMAN: They weren't actually used because these were hypothetical solutions to theoretical problems. For example, mine was a self-designed architectural space to which I evolved a solution. The whole idea behind this effort was actually to move people into a favorable frame of mind, but they were not actual solutions to actual jobs.

MS. HOAG: Had you been interested in mural painting before that time, in Paris?

MR. BIBERMAN: Only in theory. I received a great deal of publicity for a series of studies of the figure that I had done, which the art critic of the overseas edition of *The Herald Tribune* felt showed a possible new approach to the use of the figure in mural painting. That was his idea, anyway. But it's true that my use of the figure had a certain architectural conception behind it, and I was very interested in the problems of art for contemporary architecture. As a matter of fact, one of my motives in coming back to the States was a desire to relate to the architecture of the 20th century. In theory I was interested in mural painting and I entered my first actual competition for a mural for some industrial firm-I don't remember its name. The solution at which I arrived was one that received a great deal of attention when the sketches were exhibited. I didn't get the job, but I got much publicity from it. More and more then, I became interested in the whole idea of mural painting. All of us at that period were terribly excited by the great Mexican mural movement. I didn't go to Mexico at that time, but I was a very devoted and partisan follower of the work of Siqueiros, Rivera Orozco and Charlot, and in theory I became an ardent muralist. I had never actually painted a mural. Then the Federal programs were instituted. I never tried to enter the Federal Art Projects because I was still in the very fortunate position of coming from a family which was able to see to it that I wasn't in want during this very difficult period. Under those circumstances, of course, I felt that I could not indicate a desire to be on the Federal Projects, which were predicated on "relief," although actually I would dearly have loved to have been.

MS. HOAG: Why?

MR. BIBERMAN: Because it was a very stimulating atmosphere. This was the most exciting work that was being done in the country at the time. So, when the Section of Fine Arts competitions were publicized, shortly thereafter, I immediately took this challenge very seriously and started to design murals in open competition with other artists. This was not a WPA "relief" project. As a matter of fact, I had the very peculiar experience during this period of getting a great deal of recognition for work that was never completed to the point where I was asked to be the guest critic of mural painting at the Beaux-Arts Institute in New York. I had never actually executed a mural, although I had designed quite a few at that point.

MS. HOAG: Interesting. Had you seen any of the Mexican muralists' work in New York? I believe Rivera had his controversial Rockefeller Center mural when you were there.

MR. BIBERMAN: Yes. I had met Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros, because from time to time all of them were in New York. I was a very good friend of Alma Reed, who owned the Delphic Studios and who was responsible for much of the work that Orozco was commissioned to do in the United States. As a matter of fact, I spent an instructive weekend at Dartmouth with Orozco when he was painting his murals there. And I even collaborated: there is one line that I painted on the Orozco mural at Dartmouth! He was doing a kind of architectural decoration over a doorway at one point and-do you remember the gag about, "I can't even draw a straight line"? Orozco, as you know, had very bad eyes, only one arm and I don't remember whether it was because the reach was too great for him with his one good arm or whether he was just bored with drawing a straight line, but anyway-

MS. HOAG: You were handy?

MR. BIBERMAN: -he handed me his brushes and he said, "Biberman, would you mind making that line for me?" I said, "I'd be delighted to make that line for you." So that I can claim collaboration on the Dartmouth murals with Orozco. But the fact is that I, as I say, did meet all of the "big three." I happened to be in Radio City watching Rivera work the night before his murals were destroyed-just one of those strange coincidences. He used to hold court. He was a great showman and he loved to paint with an audience. And one night I had decided-just by chance-to go to the foyer where he was painting this large fresco. I watched him work for a couple of hours, then it got late, I was tired and went home. I found out the next day that at some ungodly wee small a.m. hour the mural was covered and either destroyed then, or subsequently. But the point is that all of us in the East at that time were very excited by the phenomenon of a great Mexican mural movement and were delighted when our own government instituted, both through the WPA projects and the Section of Fine Arts, something that we felt represented a counterpart to what was being done in Mexico. So I was very, very happy indeed to find that it was at precisely this period that I was able to embark upon something which in theory I had been terribly interested in, namely, mural painting. Also, in New York at that time I was made a member of the National Society of Mural Painters, an honor I really didn't deserve because I still hadn't done enough to warrant it. But most of my credits had to do with my designs. And strange it was that, although I was entering Federal competitions in the middle 30's when I was living in New York, the resulting commissions were not awarded to me until after I had come to California.

MS. HOAG: They were the direct result of the work that you had done there? [in New York]. You came here in 1936, didn't you?

MR. BIBERMAN: Yes, but I had been here earlier. I had spent the summers of 1930 and 1931 painting in the Southwest-1930 in Taos and 1931 in Monument Valley.

MS. HOAG: In what state is that?

MR. BIBERMAN: Monument Valley lies in northern Arizona and southern Utah. They filmed Stage Coach there, and this fabulous scenic background of Monument Valley has become a great film location center.

MS. HOAG: Geologically it's probably very much like the Grand Canyon in formation.

MR. BIBERMAN: Well, it's like that on a small scale. But the point is that the Grand Canyon goes down and Monument Valley goes up. You see, the Grand Canyon is actually eroded down into the earth. The extraordinary thing about Monument Valley is that these great red sandstone cliffs go up.

MS. HOAG: Are they wind-carved?

MR. BIBERMAN: They're wind-carved and eroded, and they're utterly unbelievable.

MS. HOAG: Were you doing landscapes particularly?

MR. BIBERMAN: I painted few landscapes before that time, I had never been particularly interested in landscape painting in the East. I had come West primarily because I had heard so much about the strange beauty of the country and I wanted to see the Pueblo and Navajo Indians, and so forth. For a Philadelphian who spent three years in Paris and then became a New Yorker, the idea of the West with its great beauty of country and indigenous peoples was very exciting. I had gone out, not with the idea of painting landscapes particularly, because I had never been very interested in painting landscapes, but hoping to paint Indians. Which I did. But when I got there I also found that the landscape itself was so exciting that I did a great many paintings of the country, both in Taos and in Monument Valley. Incidentally, the first summer in Taos was fascinating because there was a wonderful group of people there. Georgia O'Keeffe had been going to Taos for some years, and John Marin also, and Paul Strand, the great photographer, was there, and Lady Brett and the whole backwash of the D. H. Lawrence tradition at that time. So I had a very exciting summer in 1930.

MS. HOAG: Did these people all get together at that time? They all knew each other?

MR. BIBERMAN: They all knew each other, yes. There was a certain amount of socializing, although we were all there to work. And we did. But we saw each other quite frequently. And the following summer I went to Monument Valley because of an incident which went back to the last of my stay in Taos. Some friends of mine who were coming through Taos told me that they were going to visit a fantastic place called Monument Valley. They wanted to know if I would be interested in joining them on this trip, and I said, "Great!" They had a good car to make the driving easy and we had a marvelous trip. I had to go back East at the end of it, but I decided that the next summer I was going directly to Monument Valley. This I did, and at the end of that summer I decided to go to California, which I had never seen. Some California friends invited me to come and stay with them for a little while before returning to New York.

MS. HOAG: The end of every summer oriented you for the next year, apparently, then.

MR. BIBERMAN: Yes, that's right. This was sort of the dessert of the work period. An amusing coincidence occurred which I've thought of so many times. The friends who invited me to stay with them were connected with the motion picture industry. They gave me their Hollywood address, which meant nothing to me. And when I got here and inquired where this particular street was, I was directed right down to the bottom of this hill [indicates it out the window]. Graciosa Drive. And the first night that I was with them my friends said, "There's one thing that we have to do—we have to take you up into the hills and show you the wonderful view of Los Angeles at night when all the lights come on." And they drove me up this very road [indicates the one his house faces] and I think on to this very piece of ground. If it wasn't this piece of ground, it was very near here: This was in 1931.

MS. HOAG: You fell in love with it?

MR. BIBERMAN: Well, obviously I had no idea that (a) I was going to live in California, and (b) that I would live in Los Angeles, and certainly (c) that I might be building a house on the very spot from which I had my first look at Los Angeles at night! Just one of these crazy things, you know. But the fact is that I became very enamored of which I saw of California. Although I went back to New York and stayed there, I thought of this area with quite a sense of nostalgia. But it was to be four years before I came back. In 1935 I spent the summer out here visiting my brother who was doing a directorial job in motion pictures. I had a very rewarding summer, with my first exhibition here at the Stendahl Galleries, which was then located on Wilshire Boulevard. I went back to New York after that summer, but this time I was determined that I was just going to wind up whatever had to be done and come back here. And I did, in 1936. So that's what brought me to California.

MS. HOAG: And you've been here ever since?

MR. BIBERMAN: I've been here ever since. That's a much longer story of my life than I had planned telling you; but anyway, that's how I became a Californian.

MS. HOAG: I have certainly enjoyed hearing it. So you came to Los Angeles permanently in 1936. And you must have built this house soon after that.

MR. BIBERMAN: No, actually, I came to California in 1936 with the idea of seeing what living here would be like, but with no sense of a permanent commitment on my part. I was not married at the time so I had no family ties that would have inhibited a free-wheeling kind of existence. I very soon found that I enjoyed living here a great deal, although there were certain things that I missed. The art activity in Los Angeles in the middle 1930's certainly was nothing like what it is now. It was quiet then. However, I rather enjoyed that because one of the things that I had become pretty well fed-up with in New York was what I considered to be a very introverted kind of art life. In those days "57th Street" really meant something on the art scene because most of the galleries were on 57th Street, unlike today when they are mostly on Madison Avenue. I lived for one year in a studio building on 58 West 57th Street. I may have been that the actual closeness to "57th Street" was a little unnerving; at any rate, I would find myself at lunch time going to the galleries, and late afternoons going to the galleries, and becoming involved, since I was a young painter in a very exciting time in the East; I was caught up in the agitated life of the art world.

MS. HOAG: With not enough time to paint, you mean?

MR. BIBERMAN: No, not that. I had plenty of time to paint. As a matter of fact, I turned out a great deal of work during that period. But I began to question the validity of this type of frenzied preoccupation. I felt that maybe there was too much emphasis on something which perhaps was not that important. And there was a kind of inbreeding that I seemed to feel in the art field. So I came to that much quieter atmosphere in Los Angeles with a great sense of relief. I was delighted that people really didn't care very much about art in California. It was very relaxing not to feel this frenetic preoccupation with the galleries, and the dealers, and the critics, and the art magazines, and the conversations. How long I would have been happy in that atmosphere I don't know, but in the late 30's we were moving close to a very important period in all of our lives—a war that was going to last five years. Of course, we didn't realize at the time the imminence of our being involved. But the point is that I became rooted here very quickly because shortly after I arrived I received my first mural commission—a mural commission for the Federal Post Office Building then being erected, so that within a period of less than a year after I arrived I had to strike roots: a fair-sized mural is a major undertaking and you have to stay put. Ed Rowan, who was second in command under Ned Bruce of the Section of Fine Arts program in Washington, D.C. came to California after my first mural was in place and was very pleased with what I had done. He indicated that the architect of the building was very happy with it, as were the people in Washington, and I suddenly found myself within less than two years with two more mural commissions. So, willy-nilly, I was "nailed down." And instead of the very relaxed atmosphere that I had enjoyed in the first few months that I came here, I found myself, not unpleasantly, deeply involved again, but with something which I had not done before. It was very exciting for me

to put a major emphasis on mural painting rather than easel painting, which had been my major occupation in the period until then.

MS. HOAG: You were also teaching after that, weren't you?

MR. BIBERMAN: Yes. One of the first people I met here, among the group of younger painters, was Fletcher Martin and we became very good friends. Fletcher was teaching part time at the Art Center school and he also was working on a number of mural commissions. He had a Saturday morning drawing class that he just physically couldn't cope with and wanted to know if I would be interested in taking it from him. We checked with the directors of the school, who were very pleased with the idea of my taking over this class, so I did. That was in 1938. Although it started with my taking only one class, my interest in teaching grew, and apparently the relationship that I was establishing with students seemed to be a good one because I was asked to take on more classes. So I found that what started out as simply taking one class from Fletcher Martin to help him out of a difficult time schedule, became a twelve-year association with the Art Center School.

MS. HOAG: Twelve years!

MR. BIBERMAN: I taught there part-time for the period 1938 to 1950-all through the war and during the war when I taught on a Government program called "Production illustrated", which was supervised by the California Institute of Technology and given at the Art Center School. In a sense, all I had to do was "change my cap." At one moment I would be teaching on the Government Training Program, then I would "change caps," go into the next room and teach my life drawing class for the Art Center School.

MS. HOAG: It was probably in the evening as well as the day time, too, because the Government's classes were at night, weren't they?

MR. BIBERMAN: Yes, some of them were at night and some of them were during the day.

MS. HOAG: What about lectures? I know that you were doing that also.

MR. BIBERMAN: Well, this is an interest which really goes back to the period when I was in New York. I did a couple of radio broadcasts for a station-I don't even remember its name [it may have been WOR, that seems to ring a bell]. Anyway, I did some programs and I enjoyed them. I suppose I should say that I have always enjoyed speaking. I used to be a debater when I was in school, and I was also interested in amateur theatricals. So the idea of speaking or talking or lecturing was always something that I very much enjoyed. For example, during my teaching I found that the period in which I lectured to the students, rather than the time I actually criticized their work or drew on the blackboard, was always a very pleasant and relaxing period for me. Also, I found myself slowing drifting into formal lecturing outside of the commitments that I had at the Art School. This has continued. As a matter of fact, after I stopped teaching at the Art Center I did quite a lot of lecturing, on matters connected with art. This is an interest that I continue. Interestingly enough, two weeks from last night I will be chairing a panel discussion, the topic being: "Should the Government Patronize the Arts?" I think this is a rather interesting coincidence in light of our interview here today.

MS. HOAG: It certainly is! We'll make a tape of that symposium. Mr. Horowitz showed me a very beautiful book which you wrote in 1954, a very interesting book with your own illustrations, called *The Best Untold*.

MR. BIBERMAN: I'd like to clarify that. They are not illustrations. This was something which happened in a completely unlooked-for fashion. About twelve years ago a good friend of mine, a very talented painter in this city, Ted Gilien, was approached by the Humanist Society and asked to collate a group of his paintings dealing with his war experiences. He had been in the Army and was a member of one of the first teams to go into Hiroshima after the dropping of the atomic bomb. The grisly quality of that experience so haunted him that for about ten years after he got out of the Army he could paint nothing except material related to devastation and all the horrible things he had seen. So, as I say, he put together a book; it actually was a collation of a series of his paintings having to do with his reactions to the horror and devastation. There was a little text that ran along with it, but primarily it was a book of pictures. He showed it to me and I was very excited by the idea of a book of paintings. Now these were not illustrations. Nobody came to him and said, "Would you do a series of illustrations for such and such a thing?" What he had done was to put together a series of paintings that he had already done for other purposes entirely and put them into a kind of emotional sequence. I became so intrigued with the idea of a book of paintings that I remember coming home and saying to my wife, "I've just seen something which is very exciting and I'll tell you what I would like to do. This evening after dinner I'm going to get out all the photographs that I have of my own work. We're going to lay them around on the living room floor and I'm going to see if they have any thread of continuity." And, oh, we must have laid out a hundred or so photographs of all kinds of things. Of course some of them we eliminated very quickly, but after looking at this material we found that there was a kind of sequence appearing in many of the paintings which was purely accidental, as there had been no preconceived attempt to achieve any thread of continuity, it had just happened. Apparently the interests were such that there was a flow. This was interesting and exciting because it

was not premeditated. Finally, I chose a group of paintings which I felt had a kind of narrative thread running through them. They were paintings done in a period of roughly fifteen years, 1937 to 1952. I wanted to send them to some friends who had connections with publishing houses in the East. And in order to indicate what I wished to have done, I wrote a kind of commentary tying the paintings together. I suggested they get a writer to develop the theme and establish continuity to allow these paintings to have some meaning when seen together. The photographs and text of the paintings reached a publisher who sent word back to me saying he would be pleased to publish this material, but also asking permission to use the narrative which I had written because he felt it was perfect as it was, and that it would be idiotic to ask anybody else to write it. I said, "Fine! If that's your intention, fine!" But I think it should be reiterated that these were not illustrations and that in a sense it's not a book, but a compilation of paintings done with no thought of ever being seen together in that sequence, much less appearing between the covers of a book. Since I've never thought of myself as a writer, I don't think of this as a book, but a fortuitous collection of paintings with a certain thread of continuity. The edition, incidentally, was not very large, but for an art book it was rather large-I think they published two thousand and it sold out very quickly, so it is now a collector's item.

MS. HOAG: Yes. The Blue Heron Press of New York published it?

MR. BIBERMAN: Yes.

MS. HOAG: That's very interesting. I would like to check my list of different museums having your paintings to be sure that it is correct for the record: I have Youngstown, Ohio, the Butler Institute of American Art; the Sacramento, California, State Library; Houston Museum of Fine Arts, Texas; Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia.

MR. BIBERMAN: Right.

MS. HOAG: The Public Library in Portland, Oregon. Is that a mural or a painting?

MR. BIBERMAN: It is a print that they have. Some of these are prints and some are paintings. None of them are murals.

MS. HOAG: I see. Stanford University-is that?

MR. BIBERMAN: Library also.

MS. HOAG: And Orlando, Florida, the Tupperware Gallery.

MR. BIBERMAN: Yes.

MS. HOAG: And presently the galleries which handle your paintings are the Heritage on La Cienega and the new George Gallery in Sherman Oaks.

MR. BIBERMAN: Yes, that's right.

MS. HOAG: I was interested in seeing the first murals that you did in the Los Angeles Post Office in 1937 and '38. I want to ask you some questions about them, if I may. I suppose the ones of Prehistoric and Spanish Colonial Los Angeles, and the Creative Man series were done about the same time?

MR. BIBERMAN: Yes. I was very unhappy, incidentally, with the first mural.

MS. HOAG: It's a very nice mural.

MR. BIBERMAN: Well, I was very unhappy with it and I'd like to indicate why. I had been given this commission, as I have said, on the basis of having been runner-up in a mural competition that I had executed in the East before I came to California. However, I was told that since this was to be in a new building, and since the wall given me would face a wall which had been given to Lucien Labaudt of San Francisco, our designs would have to have a certain compatibility, which I could understand because they faced each other across a rather large lobby. I was asked to check with Mr. Labaudt and, if possible, arrive at some modus vivendi. I had submitted a sketch for the mural which I thought was exciting, but I discovered that the design which Mr. Labaudt had already submitted was one that they liked very much. They expressed the opinion that although I did not dislike my solution, they felt that it would be incompatible with Mr. Labaudt's. In a situation of that sort someone has to "give." And since it was obvious that they liked Mr. Labaudt's sketch more than they liked mine, I was the one to give. Although I was a little unhappy about this prospect, I did feel that I wanted to do the mural. I thought it was an important commission; that it was an important building; so I agreed to try to work as closely as possible in the direction of Mr. Labaudt's general design concept. When I indicated to the Section of Fine Arts in Washington that I would be willing to undertake another approach to the problem, they asked me to incorporate into my design certain specific elements. In other words, I was given the subject of the mural. They asked me to

incorporate a map-a copy of the first map of the City of Los Angeles. They also asked me to incorporate an episode dealing with the prehistoric animal life in this area. And they also asked me to incorporate something indicating the actual founding of Los Angeles. I was really stumped because I couldn't for the life of me see how I could combine prehistoric animals, a map which was done in 1849 and the founding of the pueblo of Los Angeles, which was 1780 something [it was 1781]. However, I was determined that I was going to find a solution somehow, and I did what I felt was the best possible one under the circumstances. I must confess that I had never thought of myself as a map-maker, and the idea of centering a very large map, which had been drawn by somebody else in 1849, was not particularly appealing. However, I used it and tried to tie it in with a grouping of prehistoric animals on one side and a composition of city founders on the other. In substance that is the mural.

MS. HOAG: Compositionally, I think it's a beautiful success. That background of the map ties things together.

MR. BIBERMAN: Well, frankly, it was the only solution that I could visualize. The only thing that actually could tie these three elements together was geography. So I continued the line of hills from the map across the top, saying to myself, "Well, at least we have one common denominator-the hills. They were probably the same for the prehistoric animals as they were both for the group of soldiers who came with Felipe de Nevé and for Lieutenant Ord, who drew the first map." This was the solution that I finally arrived at.

MS. HOAG: You did the same with the grass in the foreground.

MR. BIBERMAN: That's right.

MS. HOAG: I think it's delightful the way it comes across. On the right side you have the wooden cross bound with rope and de Nevé holding a saber plus the muskets that the soldiers are aiming over the cross in lieu of a bell.

MR. BIBERMAN: I researched this material pretty carefully because, as you probably know, when one does an historic mural somebody always objects to one thing or another. So I checked the details of the soldiers and their costumes-

MS. HOAG: Like the pork-pie hats?

MR. BIBERMAN: -and everything very carefully with the History Department of the Los Angeles County Museum. But sure enough, when the mural was unveiled I was called by someone from the Post Office Department who reported that a very irate lady had either called or written in to say that the soldiers should have carried blunder-busses. I said, "Well, now look! This is something I have really checked. Blunder-busses were a hundred years earlier. They were carried by the Pilgrim Fathers. If the lady cares to pursue the point any farther I will direct her to the place in depict the County Museum where she can see costume plates, which depict not only the details of the soldiers' costumes, but also the firearms that they carried. I carefully studied the costume plates of the regiment of the Catalonian Volunteers which came with Felipe de Nevé and, believe me, these are the correct accoutrements."

MS. HOAG: Did you have to go down to the Los Angeles Museum of Science and Industry to check on the La Brea Tar Pits animals-the saber-tooth tigers, etc?

MR. BIBERMAN: Well, for that, you know, there's a very good museum in Hancock Park.

MS. HOAG: Yes, I know.

MR. BIBERMAN: I did my research there and also in the Fossil and Bone Department of the County Museum. This was relatively easy to check because it just involved documenting the characteristics of the three main extinct animal groupings that I wanted to use: the giant sloth; the pterodactyl, which was the prehistoric vulture; and the saber-tooth tiger. They had been numerous in this area. It was much harder to find out what kind of rifle the Catalonian Volunteers carried!

MS. HOAG: And what about Creative Man? Were you given the idea for that or was it your own?

MR. BIBERMAN: Fortunately, even though as I indicated I was very unhappy about the first mural, I had decided to do it despite the circumstances. That proved to be a good decision because after it was completed in the next two murals I was given carte blanche. I was very fond of Lucien Labaudt, so I don't wish to be misunderstood, but I felt that there was real retribution when the ceiling mural was awarded to me and it was Labaudt who this time had to tailor his design to my general approach. The whole compositional concept of the ceiling was a fascinating one to me because I was given the problem of painting a mural in a difficult area. The over-all shape was a perfect square; inside the square there is inscribed a circle; a lighting fixture hangs from the center of the circle, and each one of these elements is recessed on a different plane, so that actually there are three levels on which the mural is painted. With the circle inscribed in a square there are four corners left rather isolated,

basically triangular shapes which have an arc on the hypotenuse part of the triangle. This is the type of challenge that makes mural painting so exciting to me, the necessity of working with the architectural demands as presented. So, given this particular problem I felt that whatever went on the ceiling had to have the compositional element of four incorporated in it in some manner. There were four pieces that otherwise would simply have hung in limbo. Therefore, I began to think in terms of many series of fours-you know-the earth-air-fire-water concept came, and all kinds of philosophical ideas that could be visualized in terms of four. Then feeling that I wanted to be a little more specific, I got the idea of painting the races of mankind. Now actually, in terms of-is it ethnology or anthropology? -my solution is really not quite correct scientifically, because there are not four races. But it's commonly accepted, particularly in America, to present the Red Man as a separate race, although he is not. So although technically the solution of saying, "Here I am going to show the four races," is incorrect, yet in terms of our own country's history it seem logical because certainly the Orientals have made a great contribution; obviously the Red Man has made a great contribution; obviously the Black; and obviously the White. So this was the idea I finally arrived at in order to conceptualize the design. Then to the architectural problem posed by the three heights on which the mural occurs: there was a little ribbon, a circular ribbon, separating the corners from the center. And there was nothing to do with that ribbon except one of two things: either to paint a decorative design on it or to run a legend through it. I decided that it might be interesting because of the subject to try to find a pertinent legend. And whenever I have any problems of that nature I always go to Walt Whitman, who never fails me. So I took out my very thumbed copy of *Leaves of Grass* and went through it. Of course I found what I considered the perfect quotation to go with the mural, which is the one that is incorporated.

MS. HOAG: From *Salut au Monde*.

MR. BIBERMAN: From *Salut au Monde*, yes. It certainly expressed what I felt had to be said under the circumstances.

MS. HOAG: Well, it is very beautiful. For the symbols of each of these four, so-called races you had to do a great deal of research, didn't you? I thought it was most interesting. Few people know that the yellow man who holds a small iron figure of a pointing man was the first to know the use of a compass, for example.

MR. BIBERMAN: Yes, that's right.

MS. HOAG: And of course all of your symbols from Indian mythology, like the Rain Cloud-

MR. BIBERMAN: Well, you see, I had had two summers in the Southwest to help me with that area of knowledge.

MS. HOAG: In the corner spaces are representations of science and engineering, the arts, industry and agriculture, and folklore, philosophy and government. The only thing I wondered about is that one of them contains the San Francisco bridge. We had nothing comparable to that in engineering here. This was even before our freeways, wasn't it?

MR. BIBERMAN: Yes. I didn't feel that my concept had to be limited to Los Angeles. As far as Los Angeles is concerned, the Orientals made a very small contribution. The major contribution of the Oriental was in Northern California. But I didn't think of this mural in a narrow parochial sense. I wished to portray contributions to the culture of our country, specifically to the West Coast. From that point view, then, I had no compunction about using a bridge which happened to be 425 miles away; I felt it was part of our general culture. Even the dam is not indigenous-it was the Parker Dam. Again, I felt no hesitancy in using a dam which was a little farther away than-

MS. HOAG: I think it's interesting that you used the bridge in an artistic sense because this wasn't done very often at that time. And today in your recent work you often paint freeway pictures that are very beautiful.

MR. BIBERMAN: Well, I have always been attracted to problems of space engineering which I find arrive often at very beautiful forms. When I lived in New York, as a matter of fact, I painted the George Washington Bridge, which I think is one of the most beautiful engineering structures I have ever looked at. Since I loved that bridge so much it seemed very natural to me to paint another bridge which I found equally exciting and fulfilling visually.

MS. HOAG: The Los Angeles Post Office murals were frescoes, weren't they? They were painted directly on the wall?

MR. BIBERMAN: No. Neither of them was fresco. They were both painted on canvas and-

MS. HOAG: Where did you work? Where did you do those?

MR. BIBERMAN: In my studio. The Post Office was not yet completed when I was awarded the commission for the

first mural, the one with historic elements. You cannot paint a fresco on a newly completed wall because the color will be attacked by the damp and the possible saltpeter in the walls, so the government's specifications were that it be done on canvas and then mounted. Also, it was to be completed and in place in time for the dedication of the building. So I was working on the completion of my mural at the same time that the workmen were completing the building. It was placed and mounted on the wall by the technical process called "marouflage," just like glorified paper-hanging. The ceiling mural was done in twelve pieces which had to be mounted separately. The specification that the murals be done on canvas had another reason: not to disrupt the traffic. The Post Office had already been operation for a couple of years when the ceiling mural was commissioned and, since it's a very busy post office, you know, they didn't want to have the lobby encumbered with scaffolding for the period of several months-which might have been necessary had the work been done in fresco on the site. So both murals were painted in oil on canvas. However, the oil is mixed with a wax preparation which gives a better optical effect, it seems to me. One problem in painting a large mural in oils is that under certain light it tends to shine, and if you try to dull the shine by using a matte varnish it tends to reduce the clarity of the colors and make them rather milky. But I had a friend, the very capable artist and technician Hilarie Hiler, who has written a book on art techniques. For the WPA Project he did a very beautiful mural in the Marina-is it the Marina Park in San Francisco? I believe it's just called "The Marina." I'd seen it there and was intrigued with its beautiful eggshell surface quality, the "sheen" that it had, and asked him what he had used. He told me that he had made a preparation of oil of spike, which is a very wonderful aromatic vehicle, with wax and oil colors. And being a very gracious man he gave me the formula for this little stew and I used it for the three murals that I painted. It is a very fine solution to one of the problems of having to paint a mural in oil.

MS. HOAG: That's interesting. And in Venice, California, the Post Office mural you painted is also done in oil on canvas?

MR. BIBERMAN: Yes, it's the very same oil wax emulsion-technically, oil was emulsion on canvas. For this mural also I was given the commission and asked to submit a sketch. So I read all I could about California's Venice and it is a fabulous story which I hadn't known before. The story of the founding of Venice is quite unbelievable. It would take much too long now to go into it in detail. When Lion Feuchtwanger was still living I was at a dinner party with him one night. I don't know how it happened, but I began to tell him the story of the Founding of Venice and he was so fascinated by it that he expressed the desire to write a novel about this strange place. But to capsulize briefly the intriguing quality-I found first of all that the concept of a Venice in California was the brainchild of Abbot Kinney, the scion of a very wealthy tobacco family, who decided that he wanted to build the great cultural metropolis of the United States in this particular area. Having had his schooling in Europe, and as a young man becoming enamored of Venice, Italy, he decided that he would also call his dream city "Venice." He imported architects and engineers from Europe. For the city's opening he actually had gondolas and gondoliers imported from Venice and there was a performance of Sarah Bernhardt playing I don't remember what. Hers was, of course, greatest name in the international theatre world at that time. He also had the finest symphony orchestra of the day as the resident music component of this whole concept. And the many lovely bridges and canals were in use. He wanted this new Venice to be a place of culture and the enjoyment of things beautiful. Well, a great deal which was unforeseen happened, and in a few years the entire venture, for reasons which are very complex, did not turn out as he had envisaged.

MS. HOAG: Was this mainly because of oil being discovered in the area?

MR. BIBERMAN: No, that came later. When oil was discovered the city had already begun to take on a completely different character. The cultural orientation had been a financial failure so things went from one extreme to the other. Venice began to take on the quality of an amusement park. Very quickly the great dream of Abbot Kinney turned into, a) an oil field, and b) a honky-tonk amusement park. Of course from the painter's point of view all of this is a wonderful bit of material to use. So, my mural is designed around the man, a large portrait of Abbot Kinney, which I painted from photographs that I obtained from surviving members of his family who still live in that area. They furnished me with the photographs, described the quality of his skin and the color of his hair, his eyes, and so forth. I painted the over-life-size portrait of him against a background of his vision of what Venice would be, framed in an arch with the great Corinthian columns which were used in the decorations there. From the dream the design goes on to actuality: on the one side the oil wells, on the other side the amusement park. This is factually the story of Venice. A fascinating story. I sent the sketch to Washington expecting to be answered with a letter replete with expletives and four letter words. To my great amazement I got an answer saying they were crazy about the mural, to please proceed with it. There was only one thing that I was asked to do: in one place where I had depicted the amusement park with all the signs, billboards, and so forth, I had shown what was recognizably the lettering used in advertising Coca Cola. I was told that I could not do this because one could not advertise in a government building: So I agreed to strike out the Coca Cola strip and substitute some amorphous or non-existent piece of advertising, which from my point of view carried the same idea.

MS. HOAG: It's a delightful mural. I think you must enjoy knowing that when I was standing looking at it some old lady came up to me and watched me for a while, then said, "Do you know what this building used to be?" I said,

"I beg your pardon?" And she said, "Well, I was raised here and when I was a little girl this building where the Post Office is now was the boathouse. This is where we used to come to get the boats." I said, "Were they gondolas?" She said, "No, I don't remember ever seeing any real gondolas, but we all had our own boats down here."

MR. BIBERMAN: For goodness sake. Well, that is fascinating. This I didn't know.

MS. HOAG: She lives on one of the canals.

MR. BIBERMAN: But whether the lady remembers it or not, there were gondolas and there were gondoliers imported from Venice. That is historic fact. There are many fabulous and fantastic stories about the whole thing, but it would take too long to talk about now. Some day the story of Venice is going to be written and when it is, it will be unbelievable. Everything about the place is something which one would imagine to have been created from a figment of some very rosy imagination. But it happens to be fact. The way the land was acquired is in itself quite a tale.

MS. HOAG: Your portrait of Abbot Kinney is very beautiful. You certainly have that dreamy quality and a certain wistfulness with it, too.

MR. BIBERMAN: Well, he was no longer living at that time. As I said, I had to rely on the photographs which members of his family gave me, and their description of his qualities as a man, and his coloration. I don't know whether it looks like him or not, since I never knew the man, but I tried to stay as close to the documentary evidence which was supplied me as I could. Incidentally, I enjoyed painting that mural enormously. I found it a very exciting project. As I say, it's a painter's dream to run into that kind of rich material, which also happens to be true.

MS. HOAG: It's very colorful and very beautiful. The Post Office was recently repainted almost a creamy white. I imagine it was originally a vivid color, but the white is a good background for the mural.

MR. BIBERMAN: I haven't seen it in years.

MS. HOAG: It looks very fresh and well-preserved.

MR. BIBERMAN: Periodically I go down to look at the condition of my three murals because, by now, they are all pretty old, but I haven't been to Venice in some little time. The next time I'm at the beach I shall go by and have a look at it.

MS. HOAG: Well, while we're still on the subject of murals, you said you were going to tell me something about one for Dallas that you did not do.

MR. BIBERMAN: Yes. This is a rather amusing story. I hope that the man who is the butt of my story, if he is still living, will not mind my using it, because it's told in good faith on my part. After I had completed the first mural in Los Angeles I received a letter from Washington saying that I had been commissioned to paint a mural in the very large new Post Office in Dallas. They enclosed photographs and blueprints of the building and, as usual, asked me to submit preliminary sketches for approval. Being a very conscientious person I decided that I just had to see the building, that the blueprints wouldn't do. It was in the middle of summer, as I recall it-in August-and before people ordinarily flew wherever they had to go. So in the middle of August I took the train and went to Dallas. I arrived there late in the afternoon, a very, very hot day, and spent a humid and uncomfortable night. Bright and early the next morning I went to the Post Office and asked to see the Postmaster. Of course they wanted to know my name, and then I was ushered into the Postmaster's office. He came out to greet me and I said, "How do you do, sir, I'm Edward Biberman." And he looked at me with a very blank look and said, "Well, sir, I'm very happy to meet you. And what can I do for you?" I said, "I'm the painter, I'm the artist." He looked more puzzled than ever and said, "Well, that's very interesting, very interesting. I'm very happy to meet an artist." I said, "I have just come here from Los Angeles on a special trip." And he said, "Well, we're very flattered. Is there anything that I can do for you while you're here?" It was perfectly obvious that the man didn't know my name at all, had no intimation of who I was, or why I was there. So I said, "Well, sir, I want to explain that I am the artist who has been commissioned to paint a mural in your Post Office." And at that he bristled, and he said, "I don't want any 'muriels' in my Post Office." I was taken aback. I thought he was kidding. As you know, with people who are not too familiar with terms in the art field there is often a mispronunciation, and a mural is sometimes referred to as a "muriel." I had heard it laughingly called that, but I had never heard anyone really use that term. Of course I was non-plussed at this turn of events and I said, "Well, sir, I have come here to look at the wall which I am supposed to paint. I did not solicit this commission, nor do I presume you own this building. I think that our relationship at the moment is that I have been commissioned by the Government of the United States to paint a mural on a wall in a building in which you are a Postmaster. I certainly don't own the building, but as I understand it, it is not your property either. I think we'll both have to make the best of an awkward situation." By that time he calmed down a little and, I suppose, began to feel that it was true that he didn't own the building

and that, whether he wanted a "muriel" there or not, maybe there would be one. So I went on about my business, which was why I had come to Dallas. I went over the building very carefully, did some research in the library on the history of that particular place, and the history of Dallas, spent several days there. I must say that the Postmaster became a little more gracious toward the end of my stay and had me meet, I believe it was, a nephew or a cousin of his, a young painter. And as a result I met some other artists and I had a little social life there. Then I went back to California, to Los Angeles, and started work on my preliminary drawings and sketches. About two months later I received a letter from Washington saying that a very awkward situation was developing and they wanted my cooperation if possible. The "awkward situation" was that when news got around that the Post Office, which was one of the biggest new buildings in Dallas, was to have a mural, and that the mural was to be painted by someone who was not a Texan, well the roof blew off. Apparently Washington was bombarded with indignant letters-none of this I knew-and in the period that elapsed from the time of my departure from Dallas until I got this first communication from Washington there were Congressmen being badgered and the incident was on the way to becoming a minor national scandal. Meanwhile, I was going ahead minding my own business here and working on the drawings. When I got the letter I said, "Well, what do we do now. I have no particular desire to go back into enemy territory. My visit there was certainly not the most cordial visit that I have ever paid to a new city. What do you propose?" They wrote back saying they were very happy that I wasn't adamant because if I had been they would have had to override all opposition and just become adamant themselves and say, "This man has been awarded this commission and that's that." But they proposed that in lieu of painting the mural in Dallas I do another mural in Los Angeles. The minute I got that answer I said, "Great! I'll be the happiest man in the world. As far as I'm concerned I don't care if I never see Dallas again."

MS. HOAG: No heat, no travel, no troubles!

MR. BIBERMAN: No heat, no travel, and the upshot of it was that I accepted an alternative proposal. I don't know who finally painted the Texas mural. There is a mural there now which apparently satisfied the Texans, because whoever painted it was a bonafide Texan. So no feathers were ruffled and I was much happier because I remained in California. And that was the incident which I look back upon with much amusement, even though it had rather strange overtones.

MS. HOAG: I'm glad you told it to us. I'd like to talk a little more about your opinion of the contribution to the art of California made by work done under the Federal Art Projects, or any of the Federal art work of this period-whether you felt that it helped it or retarded it. For instance, perhaps some of the younger artists were influenced by men like you who were expert painters at the time. Do you feel this? Did you see any place where it was beneficial to them?

MR. BIBERMAN: Well, of course I have a very partisan attitude to this whole matter. I am unequivocally in favor of it. I think it was one of the brightest spots in the history of American art, and I hope that we will see a revival of a government program. I fervently hope it will not be necessitated by another depression, which of course is what started the WPA project. That was a relief measure primarily, not a cultural measure. But irrespective of what brought it into being, and irrespective of the arguments against any government art program, and I think I'm familiar with all of the "anti" arguments, I find that this was an enormously productive period in American art. I think it actually brought into being and furthered the careers of many painters. The names of these artists are legion. I think there is a show of work done on the Federal projects still on in Pasadena. Is that show still on?

MS. HOAG: The show is gone now.

MR. BIBERMAN: It's gone?

MS. HOAG: It was from the Museum of Modern Art.

MR. BIBERMAN: Of the painters who matured, or at least started their careers in this period?

MS. HOAG: Yes.

MR. BIBERMAN: I'm sorry that it's over because I wanted to see it, but I just don't get to Pasadena as often as I would like to. I think that all one would have to do is to go over the roster of the painters who were allowed to continue being painters in that period to be convinced of its value. Even if it were approached on the most crass, materialistic basis and one were to say, "Look, a number of impoverished people were helped." That would be the lowest common denominator for appreciating the quality of this program, it seems to me. However, over and beyond that, I think that it had a psychological effect on the artists which for me is much more important than the fact that Painters and sculptors who otherwise might have starved did not starve, or that people who otherwise could not have painted were enabled to paint. But there is yet another aspect to this which I have talked about publicly many times, and I am delighted to have another opportunity to talk to you about it because as I've said, I am very partisan about the subject. And I'd like to illustrate it with a tale which for me is a very graphic example of what happens, philosophically, when there is an avowed expression of public interest in a cultural phenomenon. I'd like to tell you a true story, which is the best example that I know of-an experience in

Mexico. Diego Rivera, as many people know [but as a great many people do not know] lived in Paris and worked there during the heyday of the Cubist movement. He was a very good friend of Picasso, a very good friend of Braque, of Marcoussis, of the whole group of talented people who brought into being the Cubist movement in Paris. And he, Rivera, was an extremely gifted and competent Cubist painter at that time. You've probably seen examples of the work that he produced during that period. Had he remained in Paris I think that he would very soon have become one of the most important members of the so-called Ecole de Paris. He was certainly one of the most talented people. And I have the feeling that his art would have followed the path that the entire School of Paris took from the break-up of form to the synthetic relocation of form, finally, to a complete disregard for the figurative and into the non-representational. This is the cycle which developed with a pre-determined logic. Then a very fascinating thing happened. When the new government in Mexico instituted its whole cultural program following the overthrow of Diaz, the art section became very important. Rivera in Paris got wind of this new art idea developing in his homeland and decided that he wanted to return. And when he did go back and was told in so many words, "The walls of Mexico are yours to paint, and the people of Mexico are your audience, all you have to do is to paint," a very fascinating thing happened. He stopped painting Cubist pictures! It never occurred to him under these new conditions, and it couldn't possibly have occurred to him to use the esoteric idiom which was great for the Left Bank of Paris. In Paris he was with his cronies in a synthetic artistic atmosphere and he arrived at a certain attitude about what he wished to do and how he wished to do it. But transplant the same man into an area where he is given vast walls to paint with guaranteed subsistence, an eager audience, a social motivation, and his reaction will be different. Even though the subsistence probably was even more modest than the \$90 a month that the WPA artists were paid. But Rivera saw that the entire people of his country were now his audience, and this made a qualitative change in his thinking.

MS. HOAG: Well, Mr. Biberman, do you think it was because he felt his Mexican audience never could have understood the Cubist painting? He had to speak their language, was that it?

MR. BIBERMAN: I think it was partially the fact that he thought that they couldn't understand him if he were to speak in the idiom of Cubism. But I don't think that that in itself was the major determining factor. The fact is that he wanted to speak on a totally new level of communication. You see, I think that one has to understand that there is a duality at work here. There is the act of creation and there is the social circumstance in which the act of creation takes place. And both elements here, I think, precluded the possibility of the esoteric idiom. Let's stand the thing on its head. For example, the artists who were his friends and the audience for whom he produced were all very special. He worked in an atmosphere in which his audience was either fellow painters or a tight group of art lovers, or a rather esoteric grouping of people on the periphery. This whole milieu made him move, esthetically, in certain directions. Transpose the same man into a situation in which not only is his audience different, being composed of his own countrymen, but he himself is in essence suddenly told, "You're not going to have your work reproduced in art periodicals and the art critics' of other countries may not be writing learned dissertations on what you're doing, but you're going to have an opportunity to do and say whatever it is you please to say." The point is that the things that he wanted to say and the manner of saying them became different, you see. This is the interesting dualism which one has to understand. And it seems to me that this same kind of dualism was also at work in this country during the period of WPA. I know the criticism leveled at people like Grant Wood and John Steuart Curry, for example, and-

MS. HOAG: The Regionalists?

MR. BIBERMAN: Yes. I know these charges both of "provincialism" and "waste." And it's perfectly true that a great deal of very mediocre work was not only produced, but subsidized-at a very modest sum, to be sure. But the point is that aesthetically, psychologically and philosophically a very fascinating mood developed. Bear in mind the fact that this entire phenomenon lasted-what? a bare ten years?

MS. HOAG: Yes.

MR. BIBERMAN: It seems to me that a metamorphosis began to develop-that one's entire stance as a creative person changed. This is inevitable when one feels very honestly and sincerely that there is the opportunity to, a) produce without worrying about whether the work is going to be saleable or not, and b) to know that there is an audience. Even though we might have felt that this audience might include some ignorant people with a low IQ and that we shouldn't be unduly swayed by their opinion. I'm familiar with this problem. But I do feel that if we examine certain great periods of art history, whether in the East or the West, we will find that in many such periods, even when there might have been little understanding of the nature of creation and of the place that the artist occupied in it, that there none the less also existed an atmosphere in which the greatest kind of creativity was in evidence.

MS. HOAG: Such as the Renaissance in Italy when the Medici were able to support artists and free them?

MR. BIBERMAN: Yes. Free as the artists were, in one sense, yet they were actually very restricted by the social mores of the time. I think we have to be careful with words because absolute freedom for the artist never exists.

It seems to me that it just depends on what the areas of freedom are and what areas you're restricted in, and to whose conformity.

MS. HOAG: There seems a little confusion in my mind. Often the people who worked on these projects criticized the existing social situation, which was the one feeding them and helping them to get through this period. That was always very hard for me to understand.

MR. BIBERMAN: Yes, but I suppose that this was also a very real part of the quality of the period. This was a period of great social dislocation, so I think that it is necessary to understand the fact that naturally this quality of dislocation often was reflected in the work being done by some artists. Trying to place the onus on some particular persons is not the important thing. At least I don't think it's what we're discussing at the moment. And the question as to whether there was, or was not, gratitude on the part of the recipients of the very modest-what was it?-\$90 a month which was paid is open to question on both sides, I suppose. But the thing that so impressed and interested me at that time was the fact that it was possible for a painter to be a painter. This is the paramount fact. I'm sure that I don't have to tell you that today even the most successful painters-and there have been many surveys made in this field-either teach, or they write, or they lecture, or they do one or another group of things to make it possible for them to pursue their careers. Now some people think that this is a very good discipline. I don't happen to subscribe to this theory. I think that the business of a painter is to paint and of a musician to make music, and an architect to make architecture, and so forth. And I think that if it were possible for this happy stage to be reached it would be fine. I think that I'm familiar with all of the counter arguments. I know the dangers of bureaucracy. I know of the dangers inherent in "official" art. I know of the horrible results that can come out of all of the official academies all over the world. But from my point of view, I think that we always have to be careful about certain basic problems in all democratic philosophies. And unless one is of a mind to despair of the entire concept of a democratic culture, I don't think one should be too frightened of the possibility that some unastute Congressman might try to tell Painter X what or how he has to paint. In that case, I think the problem would be not to eliminate the painting program but to eliminate that particular Congressman. I look at that period in rather an objective fashion because I was not actually on the WPA, although I knew most of the painters who were. And I'm aware of what happened to them during that period and I'm familiar with what happened to them subsequently. And my only hope is that we will become mature enough in a period of prosperity to be able to do the things that we were able to do, and I think so magnificently, in a period of austerity. It is a topsy-turvy situation when you have to have people hungry before you are willing to subsidize an art program.

MS. HOAG: One criticism which has been made against it is that it enable many very poor artists to be paid for a period of time, thus getting them started into the field of art when they never should have been there-that that accounts for a great many artists working today who shouldn't be. What do you think about that criticism?

MR. BIBERMAN: Well, I think that there is no question but that a great many completely incompetent people were helped through this period. But people who want to paint are a very peculiar breed. And if they hadn't been subsidized very modestly by the government I think that [in the absence of such a program] they probably would have somehow or other remained very poor Sunday painters anyway. I think that we should not be nearly as worried about the incompetents of that period as we should be proud of the fact that a great deal of first rate competence came out of it. I'm sure that in the period of Rembrandt there were a great many hack painters who eked out a meager or modest existence, whom we never will hear of again and who were probably never further heard of within the period of their own lifetimes. The fact that incompetence always exists is an unfortunate fact. But I think it is incumbent upon us to nurture a soil out of which, along with the ever-present weeds of incompetence, there can come the flowering of competence. And I certainly think that this particular soil did further a tremendous growth of talent in this country. One might say that this is coincidence; that is possible, but from my knowledge of that time, it was not mere coincidence. I see not only that first generation of artists who were thus made able to continue their professional careers, but other people who, as teachers in turn influenced the second generation of artists, who also have produced very, very interesting work. So, to repeat, I'm very partisan. I look upon this as an experience about which I am happy to have some knowledge. And I hope, let me say again, that we will not have to wait until our country is in another unfortunate financial crisis to see it recur.

MS. HOAG: Southern California was certainly one of the most active of all federal art groups at that time, so it's interesting that today it and New York, I believe, are the two great art centers in this country. They're generally given such credit and undoubtedly the WPA partly accounted for this to a great extent.

MR. BIBERMAN: Yes. At that time I think Chicago probably had as active a program as Los Angeles. I don't know the figures, but that was probably true. Of course at the present time Los Angeles has far out-stripped both Chicago and the northern part of the state; but I have an idea that in the 30's there were probably almost as many people on art projects here as in Chicago. I know there was a very active, strong group in the Middle West. Going East as I did in 1940 to serve on the art jury in Washington, I stopped off in Chicago to see some of the painters there. I had a short visit with them and I was amazed and very happy at the enormous activity. There

was a very gifted art group in Chicago at the time that the projects were beginning to taper off.

MS. HOAG: I have one tapering-off question I don't want to forget to ask you. Did you ever have any easel painting commissioned by the Federal Government, or did they do that?

MR. BIBERMAN: No. The Section of Fine Arts was solely concerned with murals exclusively for governmental buildings and did not commission easel paintings. The counterpart of the commissioned single work did happen in the field of sculpture. There were portrait busts, I believe, actually commissioned as part of the decor for buildings. But as far as I know, the Section of Fine Arts did not commission anything other than murals; the Art Projects did subsidize easel painting.

MS. HOAG: I think that's the end of the questions I have for this afternoon. I certainly appreciate your letting me talk to you and I'm sure I'll have more questions, and I hope you'll let me come back.

MR. BIBERMAN: I would like you to because I find that the Survey on which you are engaged is very fascinating. Having read some of the material that you sent me, I think and hope that it will be possible to build up a definitive archive for this period. It is important to do so before the participants themselves may no longer be able to furnish first-hand information. I would be most happy to contribute any further fact, or anecdotes, or impressions or observations from this whole period. I think yours is an extremely interesting project and I'm very happy to be able to participate.

MS. HOAG: That's very kind of you. Thank you so much, Mr. Biberman.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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