



Smithsonian  
*Archives of American Art*

Oral history interview with Arnold  
Blanch, 1964 November 4

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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Arnold Blanch on November 4, 1964. The interview took place in Woodstock, New York, and was conducted by Joseph S. Trovato for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's New Deal and the Arts project.

The original transcript was edited. In 2021 the Archives created a more verbatim transcript. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

## Interview

JOSEPH TROVATO: One, two, three. I'm just testing this. Mr. Blanch, it is a pleasure to be visiting with you here at your home, and in this wonderful environment. It is always a pleasure to be surrounded by works of art, and this is just wonderful. I hope that I can keep my attention on our interview, as I'm afraid that I'll be tempted to look around at some of the wonderful things you have, including some of your own things here on your walls. I would like to start out by asking you, first of all—of course, most artists teach for a living. Do you teach, Mr. Blanch?

ARNOLD BLANCH: I teach, but I no longer teach for a living. I—the only teaching I do now is in the Art Students' League summer school, and this is a kind of a luxury, because you know the Art Students' League is a poor school. They don't pay much. And so, I'm 68 years old now and I've had to limit the things I do if I want to continue painting. But I do go out and give lectures now and then, and sometimes I conduct workshops at various colleges and I just came back last spring from a month on the Ford Foundation grant from the Joslyn Museum in Omaha, Nebraska, where I delivered 18 lectures in 30 days. Pretty strain—

JOSEPH TROVATO: It must've been.

ARNOLD BLANCH: To women's clubs and schools and colleges and children, and it was a very interesting experience.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Tell me, Mr. Blanch, where were you born? And then you might tell us a little bit about your training.

ARNOLD BLANCH: Yes. I was born in a very small town in Minnesota, southern Minnesota, near Rochester. My mother and aunt sort of made copies of paintings, and somehow, in looking at these paintings, I think I learned to transfer my fantasies to images. And I think this was the beginning of my interest in painting, and then I—say, when I was about 10 or 12, I started copying Harrison Fisher and Charles Dana Gibson. I could do them perfectly, you see. And I was sort of a failure—I was not interested in my school—public school. I was sort of kicked out of high school very—in the second year, and I didn't know what to do. I was working, and I happened to be upstairs in the library of the Minneapolis library, and I saw these people drawing casts. And right away, I knew that this was what I was going to do. So, that's—shortly after that, I started into art school.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see.

ARNOLD BLANCH: And I continued there for about three years, then I had a scholarship that took me to the Art Students' League in New York.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see.

ARNOLD BLANCH: Excuse me, can we just stop it for a minute?

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

JOSEPH TROVATO: Mr. Blanch, according to my information, there are three post office murals that are credited to you. There is one at Columbus, Wisconsin post office, Norwalk, Connecticut, and Fredonia, New York post office. Now, I have not seen these, I'm sorry to

say. Can you recall what they are about, as to subject and style?

ARNOLD BLANCH: Yes. Well, I think they were awarded to me—you see, the way that it was done, you competed, usually, for rather a large mural, and those who didn't win but were sort of runners-up were given lesser places.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see.

ARNOLD BLANCH: Lesser price. I don't remember which one was done first, but the one in Norwalk had to do with the early settlers building a house and planting and so forth. I only saw it once after it was up. We usually had somebody else put them up, but there was some repair to do on it. It was injured slightly, and I had to go and repaint a little part of it, and a very pleasant thing happened. The janitor said, Are you the man that did this? And I said, Yes. And he said, Well, you know, my life has been much happier since that mural was up there. [Laughs.]

JOSEPH TROVATO: [Inaudible.]

[00:05:19]

ARNOLD BLANCH: Then, the one in Wisconsin was in the cheese and dairy country, and it had—the subject was farmland, cows, and so forth and so on. I never saw that in place. The one in Fredonia, as I remembered it, I didn't like it very well, but I happened to be going up to Chautauqua to give some lectures, and I stopped in Fredonia, and I was very pleased with it. It was done sort of in the manner of Piero della Francesca. [Laughs.]

JOSEPH TROVATO: Oh, wonderful. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ARNOLD BLANCH: And it looked very nice in Fredonia, and again, it had to do with the fruits of New York state. Somehow, I think all my—in my whole painting career, sort of the fruits of the earth, the hills and the fields and so forth, have been—I've had a basic interest in them.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yes.

ARNOLD BLANCH: I think that is all the murals that I did, and these were under the Treasury Department, of course.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yes, yes. Can you tell us whether you took part in any of the easel projects? That is to say, doing the painters—

ARNOLD BLANCH: Yes, I'm not sure. I think there was a—I was on non-relief. There was a percentage that were not on relief that they took on the project, the easel—the WPA, to sort of boost the quality of it. I don't remember what that percentage was, but I happened to be one of them, and the reason I was one of them was because I had a job teaching at the Art Students' League at that time.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see.

ARNOLD BLANCH: So, I couldn't be on relief. It was—to me, it was the first time—and I think it's had a permanent affect upon the artist and his relationship to the public—to the American public. Somehow, we gained a respect for ourselves. We were considered as people. We were considered as a profession, which was about the first time that had really happened. Otherwise, artists were sort of individual people who, sort of, grew up here and there in our culture. But at this time, the Roosevelt administration recognized us as a profession and as people who should be supported, as well as a carpenter or any other profession. And I feel it had a very lasting effect upon the artist and his relationship to society [inaudible].

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yes, in other words, you feel that it gave the artist himself a feeling of importance.

ARNOLD BLANCH: That's right, and a certain dignity.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yes.

ARNOLD BLANCH: I think the project was run with great intelligence. There were a few things—now, for example, we were on in New York. The timekeeper was supposed to come

every day and check on us in our studios. Well, we made an arrangement with him. We gave him an etching every so often, and he just didn't come. [They laugh.] It wasn't that we didn't turn in the work, but it was just a nuisance having to always be there at a certain time. And you know artists, time to them is something they use, it's something that's free, and they do what they want with it, and this was a convenience that—and I often wondered about that timekeeper. He must have a great collection of prints.

JOSEPH TROVATO: [Laughs.] Yeah, we must look him up.

ARNOLD BLANCH: [Laughs.] And then, also, many of us who were on the project in New York lived up here, and we would all go down together on pay day to collect our pay, and that was usually quite an event.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yes.

ARNOLD BLANCH: You always had to go down every week.

JOSEPH TROVATO: And how much was your pay? Do you recall? [Laughs.]

ARNOLD BLANCH: I don't recall what it was. It was something—maybe it was—I forget what we were—what we got.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yeah.

ARNOLD BLANCH: But we always had to stand in line for it. I remember that. I remember Milton Avery and Stuart Davis and Gorky and all of these people who were in line. We always got into conversations and arguments and so forth. Of course, there were several protests, sit downs and so forth, which I don't quite remember what they were all about.

[00:09:59]

I don't remember what the protests were. I know I was quite happy with the—with my participation in it, and I did some prints, and I did mostly easel paintings. But I think, also, that the galleries—little WPA gallery. This is going a little ahead of what I was going to talk—but in Key West, Florida, for example, where I went—or I spent many winters, and after I was off the project the WPA gallery still existed there, and it was a sort of a wonderful meeting place. Every Wednesday night, John Dewey and sometimes John Dos Passos, and oh, there were a lot of writers and artists down there. Peter Blume came down. We'd all meet in the WPA gallery and have rum and coffee. And I forget who the man's name was that was running it, but he did it—he was an artist and did a very good job. And it was a beautiful little gallery, and I—down there, for the first time in my life, I had the experience of seeing one of my paintings and not knowing it was mine. I walked into an exhibition, and I saw a painting, and I walked up to it, and I said, That's rather nice. [JOSEPH TROVATO laughs.] And Doris, who was with me, looked at me sort of funny. She says, It's yours. [They laugh.]

But it was a wonderful experience, because I don't think ever in my life, before or since have I ever seen a painting, you know, without identifying myself with it. But the project in New York was so big, you know, and then there was a local project here in Woodstock that had—that got into quite a bit of trouble from time to time, because they were those up here who claimed to be artists. I don't know—who were on the project, and there was always this feeling of—that there was some boondoggling because they were—I think there were some on the project who really had no right to be on the project. They were carpenters before and they were carpenters afterwards.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yes.

ARNOLD BLANCH: And they may have been, sort of, amateur painters, or something like that, and they had some difficulty here. There were anonymous letters written and all sorts of things. And one painter, I remember, refused to turn in anything, because he claimed his work was not finished.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ARNOLD BLANCH: And month and month went past, so Mrs.—what was her name? McMahan.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Oh, yes.

ARNOLD BLANCH: —appointed myself, Eugene Speicher, and I think it was Henry Mattson, as a jury, to see whether we considered his work finished or not.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Mm-hmm [affirmative]

ARNOLD BLANCH: Well, we did consider it finished, but he still refused to turn it in.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Who was the artist, by the way? Do you recall?

ARNOLD BLANCH: I'll think of his name later. He's still around here. He's a painter that never seems to paint, you know. He goes on and on and on. I'll think of his name.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, it's not of that much importance.

ARNOLD BLANCH: Yeah, he's still here. And he—at one time, when this baroness—I think it was Rebay, ran the Guggenheim Museum, she got interested in him—

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yes, the non-objective museum.

ARNOLD BLANCH: Yeah, she bought a few of his paintings, and he's been living on that reputation ever since, but nobody ever sees a painting. I can't think of his name. But the project here was headed by Eugene Ludins, who was a very capable guy and did it very well and very humanly.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Now, when you say the project here, you mean here in—

ARNOLD BLANCH: Local, local.

JOSEPH TROVATO: In Woodstock?

ARNOLD BLANCH: In Woodstock.

JOSEPH TROVATO: In Woodstock.

ARNOLD BLANCH: In Woodstock. And he's now teaching out in Iowa, but he did have trouble. He did have trouble with people and we—those of us who knew him always came to his defense. There were anonymous letters written, anti-Semitic letters and all sorts of things, because he was Jewish. The name-calling—communist. He was a communist, and so forth and so on. Simply because—I don't know why it was. He—well, he did an honest job, and he demanded that the people turn in their work. Not excessively, but there were a few who, really, were using the project.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yes, well, this was bound to happen.

ARNOLD BLANCH: It's bound to happen. It happened with—

JOSEPH TROVATO: It was a tremendous project.

ARNOLD BLANCH: Yes, and it happens in private employment. It happens in every industry. There are those who use their job rather than doing the job, and this is not unusual. It was to be expected, but I think the whole thing, as I said before, was extremely healthy.

[00:15:08]

Another place where I gave a lecture, they had a fine little museum, WPA museum, was in Sioux City, Iowa. And I think that that continued afterward. It continued into a—it was sort of a municipal art center. I know that they were looking for somebody to run it a few years ago, and—but it was a very lively little place at the time.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Do you feel, Mr. Blanch, that your experience on the projects, as you look back upon, you know, that experience, that it was beneficial to you as an artist, in relation to your own development, right down until the present time?

ARNOLD BLANCH: It most assuredly was. And, of course, I believe in the responsibility of the artist. I don't believe that the artist is a person who has no responsibility, and I believe that this consideration, doing work for a government, for a society, gave me something that is—that I still possess. And a certain respect for—and I think, in a sense, it was a superior thing.

It was a thing that I value more than I do the present machinery that an artist must go through, that is, the commercial gallery. The commercial gallery is—they're all—their whole idea is to sell at any cost. Some of them have appreciation. Some of them don't. But I feel that the project—there was nothing ever commercial in it. The artist—an artist like Gorky, for example. I remember going up and visiting him, and he was doing this—he was doing a mural for an airport. I can't think which one. It may have been Newark or someplace. And talking with him about it, talking—saying, Well, you abstract artists work very rapidly. And he said, Yes. And so did Tintoretto work rapidly. He said, When we're in tune with our times, we do things with a greater ease than when we're not in tune with our times.

And this exchange, this being a part of something that other artists were a part of was very valuable to me. It gave me a sense of my profession, which I've never lost, and a certain respect for it, which, maybe now, it seems a little old-fashioned, almost, because we find the instant artists, you see, coming into prominence, and the non-belief in the profession, that it isn't the profession. It's something else. So—but it contributed a great deal to my belief, and it was, in a sense, a political education also, because we were—we suddenly became conscious of a kind of government that was for us, that could affect us, and before this time, a government was something that was in Washington, you see.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yes.

ARNOLD BLANCH: And, I think for all of us, it gave us a certain political consciousness. Of course, we were accused of being radicals, and at that time, most of us were radicals. I mean, there was a reason for it. There was—there were communists and non-communists and socialists and all sorts of people, all mixed up together. Catholics, I remember, great arguments with Catholic artists and, at that time, the word communism didn't have quite the framework around it—the kind of framework around it that it has now. And, although I was never a member of the communist party, I was surely accused of being a member, simply—for example, on one occasion, I happened to be on a jury that gave Anton Refregier the mural in San Francisco, where there was a great controversy. Now, there was a man with a Russian name, I can't think of his name, that was on the jury. He was the head of the art department of Stanford, Phillip Guston, and myself, and the architect. We, almost from the beginning, we decided upon Refregier's things were far superior to other things, except at the end, Guston changed his vote to another artist.

[00:20:03]

But the architect, myself, and the man from Stanford voted for Refregier. Now, the mural—it had something about Mooney and it had events that happened—important in San Francisco. The Jesuits, things about the Jesuits, the history of San Francisco. We thought it was a very excellent mural. And then when the controversy came up, there were articles printed in certain things in—out in California, which said that Arnold Blanch, a self-admitted communist—then it gave the Russian's name from Stanford, "a Russian artist by the name of so-and-so," and just left out the architect. The architect was a respectable man. And we were accused of sort of manipulating this thing. Well, it was a very fair jury. There was no manipulation. There was nothing about politics in it. It was merely on the quality of the mural that we gave it the first award, and I think he did an excellent job. He got into trouble with all sorts of things. He'll tell you about it. The laurel happened to be over the head of the American, and the American Legion said there were horns on the American. And all sorts of things came up.

Anyway, they—because of this—because of all the controversy, I understand that they had a dossier on me, to see whether I was a communist, and in Washington, they found out that I—somebody told me that I was not a communist. [JOSEPH TROVATO laughs.] I was glad to hear it, because that was the truth.

But the value of this thing, as I said, again, was we suddenly realized we had a government, and we could be close to it, and it could do things for us, and we could do things for it. I want to tell you one more incident. Later, I think right towards the end of the Project, I was selected because I was a member of an organization called the American Artists' Congress, which was also accused of being a front organization, to be an artist's representative in a hearing in Washington. Helen Hayes was the actress. There was a writer who—I can't think of his name—a very well-known writer. There was a musician, again, a very well-known composer, and two or three others. They represented the arts in general. This was a hearing about the continuation of a federal art department. I—my name beginning with B, I was

called up first, and there was a man who—I don't know who he was—said, Do you think the American painter would be capable of making a painting that would be worthy to put in our capital? And I said, I surely do. And he said, Do you think that they would be capable of making a great religious painting? And I had to think for a minute, and I said, Well, you know, when you say religious, there are many religions in the world. There are all kinds of religions, and I would hesitate in answering that because individual artists have different religions and different beliefs. I think the artist is a religious person, if that is what you mean. He said, I don't mean that. I mean the religion of Jesus Christ, and that is the only religion that exists in this world. So, then another senator says, Just a minute, Senator. The Christians are a minority in our world. [JOSEPH TROVATO laughs.] The whole morning was spent in a debate upon religion, and I was the only one that was called, and that was the end of the hearing. [They laugh.]

JOSEPH TROVATO: That's wonderful. Well, apparently that man had an extremely narrow view of so-called religion.

ARNOLD BLANCH: He was a Southerner. [Laughs.] I remember that.

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

JOSEPH TROVATO: Would you tell us, Mr. Blanch, how you would evaluate the Federal Art Projects of the '30s in relation to the development of American art?

[00:24:51]

I know that some artists that I have discussed this subject with feel that, in the '30s, that there was altogether too much attention given to a reportorial kind of painting, both in easel and mural painting, as well as print-making, that there was too much attention given to the—well, you know, to the so-called regionalism and regional art. A more—that it was too illustrative—I mean, that the art was of an illustrative nature, and that all of this was done at the expense of the—and at a sacrifice of the more formal aspects of art, and according to some people, to them it was, you know, the art was held back, and that it wasn't until after World War II that the American artist really got going. And of course, that was a time when they're developed in our country—the more abstract tendencies in art.

ARNOLD BLANCH: Well, I think that we were going through a period, then, of regional art. The Grant Wood, the John Steuart Curry, Thomas Benton was a very well-known teacher, and I think that that would've happened regardless of the WPA. I think that, out of it, some of that—as—I mean, there's been art of the past that has also been—had literary incentives that—or regional incentives or religious incentives that were story to a storytelling art, that some of it was art and some of it wasn't. I think, out of some of this, that there were some very fine things made, and some that were—was purely had to do with incidents. I think that—but still, I think that there was such great freedom, painters like Paul Berlin were doing more or less abstractions, although he was—I mean, they were not surely regional painting, nor Gorky wasn't doing regional painting, nor Stuart Davis wasn't doing regional painting, nor Milton Avery wasn't doing regional painting, and I don't think that I was doing regional painting. I—although I did paintings of sort of the Oakies, "take me to the promised land," but I think of it as a painting more than anything else. I—belongs in a collection now, and I look at the photograph of it and think, Well, that's a pretty good painting.

I did things of the negroes in the south, but I think of them as painting. They were much more objective than my painting is now, but painting was more objective at that time, and I think as objective—some of the objective painting was very excellent painting. For example, Marsden Hartley. I think one of the unfortunate things is what happened to these things afterwards, you know. Nobody seemed to know where they went, and some of them were auctioned off down the east side of New York, and you buy a Marsden—somebody bought a whole lot of Marsden Hartleys for five dollars apiece. This was the unfortunate thing about the project, that these works were not taken care of. They were not placed where they should have been placed. I don't know whatever—what happened to the things that I did on the project. I haven't the slightest idea. Somebody told me there was one in the Cleveland Museum. I don't know whether it's there or not. I never—but I think that—

JOSEPH TROVATO: Of course, we do know that many pictures were placed in various public buildings, schools and so on.

ARNOLD BLANCH: Yes, and what happened to them after that? You know, I mean what if a

school got a Marsden Hartley and the supervisor of the school didn't like it? He probably stuck it away someplace, you see. But I think that—I don't think the Project had anything to do with the regionalism. I think regionalism was a thing that took place, that would've taken place regardless of the Project. I don't think there was any attempt of anybody to give pressure to this.

[00:30:02]

I think that, in the murals, of course, you did something that you felt appropriate for a locality, but this has always been done in mural painting. I mean, that's never—that hasn't anything to do with the period at all, and I think, in many cases, it really saved a lot of painters' lives. They would—otherwise, they'd have had to have gone out and got a job. There were no jobs to have.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yeah, they were able to continue—

ARNOLD BLANCH: They were able to continue.

JOSEPH TROVATO: —with their art.

ARNOLD BLANCH: And I think that's the most important thing for an artist in any period of his life, is to continue to work. This is the—there's a saying, you know, An artist works so he can continue to work. The layman works so he can retire. But the artist—I feel the only reason I want money is to continue to work.

JOSEPH TROVATO: That's very good.

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

You've given us a wonderful bit of information for the record, Mr. Blanch, and I want to thank you very much, on behalf of the Archives of American Art, for doing this for us. I'm still fascinated by the things on your walls. I think I see—well, there's lots of pre-Columbian sculpture here that I think is wonderful. Some African Negro sculpture. I think I spot, there, a Milton Avery, and there seems to be an early American primitive, possibly. What else do you have here that I am missing?

ARNOLD BLANCH: That's a Sidney Laufman lithograph up there.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Oh, yes.

ARNOLD BLANCH: That's a Bushman—I mean a—from Australia, you know, one of those Bushman paintings. A drawing of mine, a painting of Doris Lee's, a painting of mine, a painting of Doris Lee's. The reason that we happened to get interested in pre-Columbian art was that my first teaching job was in San Francisco, 1930, '31. And I had a studio next to Diego Rivera, who was there at that time doing murals in the stock exchange and in the California School of Fine Arts. And he didn't speak very good English, and I had the phone, and I sort of became his social secretary. And so, later, we went to see him, and he gave us some pieces. And that started us out, and we then bought—we bought from Stendhal in Los Angeles, and I went on various trips to Mexico and smuggled things out. Miguel Covarrubias was here once, and he looked around and he spotted that piece over there, that Goddess of Flowers, and he said, That should never have left Mexico.

JOSEPH TROVATO: It's a beautiful piece [laughs].

ARNOLD BLANCH: Yeah, and so I've been buying ever since. Now, some of the things are Southwest Pacific. That bird's head up there is a Southwest Pacific, and this bird here is Southwest Pacific, and there are a few Colonial pieces, a Chinese head, and a little Greek thing in there. But we don't buy for any reason except to please the eye. That's the—and these things out here are done by a negro—oh, by the way, this is a very interesting thing on the WPA.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, please tell us.

ARNOLD BLANCH: About five years after the WPA was over, we heard of a negro sculptor in Nashville, Tennessee, by the name of Edmondson. In fact, somebody had given me a piece.

JOSEPH TROVATO: What was the name?



ARNOLD BLANCH: Edmondson.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Edmondson.

ARNOLD BLANCH: Yes. And this was five years after the Project, and so we didn't know—we came into Nashville and we knew of a man who knew something about it. We only know his name was Porter, so I looked up all the Porters in the book, and I called the first one, and it happened to be the man. So, he sent his chauffeur—he was a banker—over there with us, and here was a big lot like a parking lot, as big as a parking lot, filled with sculpture, and a great, big, freshly painted sign: WPA Project. [Laughs.]

JOSEPH TROVATO: That's marvelous.

ARNOLD BLANCH: And there was this colored man, a beautiful man. He was a man, I guess, at that time, perhaps in his 70s. And I gave him a hundred dollars and I said I wanted the lion. He said, If you have the lion you must have the lamb. And he kept bringing things to—he says, The first hundred dollars I've seen since the WPA.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Isn't this wonderful.

ARNOLD BLANCH: And he kept bringing things to our car. We ended up with 14 pieces, and there was—Cahill, you know who—

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yes, Hogar Cahill.

[00:35:06]

ARNOLD BLANCH: —gave range for an exhibition of his in the Modern Museum, in the early days of the Modern Museum.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Oh, yes.

ARNOLD BLANCH: And also, let's see, one of those—Weston had done a photographic story of him.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see.

ARNOLD BLANCH: In a magazine. And there was—I'm sorry I couldn't get the large things. The large things were so beautiful, fish with women's heads on them. They were shapes like spears and squares and things piled on top of each other. They were wonderful things, and this man—I think he'd been a tombstone carver, but the WPA took him over, and I guess that enabled him to do many, many, many things. And his things I have seen in various museums. Evidently the museums did pick them up from the WPA.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see.

ARNOLD BLANCH: Especially the birds, the groups of birds.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, I must be on the lookout for him, or for it—for the work, I mean.

ARNOLD BLANCH: He's dead now.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yes, of course. Well, this is just wonderful, Mr. Blanch, and thank you very much again. This interview has taken place in Mr. Blanch's studio, here at Woodstock, New York, November 4, 1964.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]