



Smithsonian
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Oral history interview with Irving Block, 1965
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Irving Block on April 16, 1965. The interview was conducted at Irving Block's home in Los Angeles, California by Betty Lochrie Hoag for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

BH: BETTY HOAG

IB: IRVING BLOCK

BH: Do you use a middle initial?

IB: No longer. My middle name is Alexander.

BH: Fine. Thank you.

IB: I used to use it as an artist in commercial...

BH: Mr. Block, before we start talking about the Project and that area at all, I would like to ask you about your life. Would you tell me when and where you were born?

IB: Sure. I was born in New York City, December 2, 1910. I was educated in the Public Schools of New York. I just discovered recently that I lived in the same area as Henry Miller and we chatted--there were a lot of nostalgic thoughts about accidents in Brooklyn, Elementary Schools. Well, anyway, I went to the University, New York University for my Bachelor's Degree and also studied at the National Academy of Design in night classes principally. I would say that the extent of a major was formally and the rest was picked up in 42nd Street Library, the Metropolitan Museum and many of the local museums.

BH: Were there any painters or any of the teachers you had who especially influenced you in your training?

IB: No, the thing was that who I studied with was disappointing (laughter) not that they were not good painters, they seemed at that time very academic. There was.... It was Arthur Losinski who was very skilled, national kind of mission at the Academy. But I think the major influences from education really comes from us as painters, or from scholars. I studied with Marshall Schapiero....

BH: Oh, did you!

IB: Yes, and there were several others--Philip McMann and there were some German scholars coming in at that time at the Art School, were coming in from Germany during that period when they were being driven out.

BH: Art historians...?

IB: Art historians.

BH: Esther Piechen...?

IB: Yes, I know that Penofsky did come over, and people of that caliber.

BH: Did you know him?

IB: No, I sat in on some of his lectures.

BH: Was it interesting...?

IB: He was a tremendous man. And there were several others. Some of my colleagues who later went on to become artists_____ at that time came to see if school...Jack Palero, he was a painter, too. He became more involved in art history and became Chairman of the Art Department--of the Brooklyn College. He wrote the penetrative work on the Army Omnibus Show--on a commercial foundation. Some of these fellows began as artists and ended up as cautious fellows and I had an appetite for the art history too, and kept that up; found it too dry and too analytical and blunt, so I ended up as an Expressionist artist.

[BREAK IN TAPING]

BH: We had a Welsh Terrier, so this is nothing how we would look at this Don Juan example. Do you remember

the *Welsh Terrier*?

IB: Hogarth does one--Jeffrey Hogarth--and Rembrandt did something like that. [Laughter] I'm sure that _____ must have had a greyhound. [Laughter]

[INAUDIBLE]

BH: Excuse me, we got you inspired, or you were telling me about Milton Brown.

IB: Oh yes, I was just rambling on now. A few of the others--colleagues of mine--Vacteria--I would say that these were the real teachers, I think--the colleagues--rather than the formal art teachers, painters....

BH: In the form of both Expressionism and....?

IB: Yes, really, and we were...tried to set up projects of our own and I was very much involved in modern art--the 57th Street and visit [inaudible]

BH: What years were these that you were...?

IB: Those were in the early Thirties. Just before the Project. I don't know exactly when the Project began, but I was in pretty early. I was out of school and unemployed.

BH: I see.

IB: There was no comparable local work at the time.

BH: No use for artists really.

IB: Well, I had taken courses to be an art teacher, but there is no comparison. And I got my credentials but there were no jobs. As far as commercial art, it never intended to be one to paint.... I did try to wait in line down the streets of Fifth Avenue in *New York Times* for an artist and you'd see an array of arts ranging from fresh out of school to old men with beards....

BH: Just for one little....

IB: Any kind of a job. So there was no hope actually, there was no...in case of Milton Brown, he solved the problem by getting a civil service job, which consisted of sitting around all night in the Health Department, waiting for police to report suicides. In fact he is writing this nasty _____. Ha ha.

BH: Ha ha. How's that for a study of beauty in art?

IB: It's nice to go primitive sometimes.

[BREAK IN TAPING]

BH: I was talking and hoping that we weren't covering another artist.

IB: I hope that this isn't too much trivia?

BH: No. This is exactly what this was for, otherwise we could go look in *Who's Who in American Art* and this kind of....

IB: It was a pretty looking back to this time, it's kind of colorful. I remember how--I can't give you exact dates--when we heard about the Project.

BH: Probably '33-'34.

IB: Was that '33 or '34? I think it was '34, I guess. I was out of school; I had no place to go and we streamed around Washington Square, chew the fat and arguing and so on. And in walks some of the students who also were pretty bored, and said, "The government is giving out jobs to artists."

BH: Laughter.

IB: I couldn't believe such a thing and, before this, there had been some picketing in front of the old Whitney Museum, which was on Eighth Street. The Whitney Museum instituted some kind of program for artists, but it was a very, very small, select group, those who were already pretty well established.

BH: Oh, Mr. Block, was that the thing where they were going to have a proposed building, which was never

done? It had murals in it and thousands of integrated, integration of arts and architecture, and a lot of artists were asked to do a cartoon for a mural and then a section for...?

IB: Yes, yes.

BH: Zimmerman, for instance, was one of those artists?

IB: Yes. There were all sorts of plans and also there were plans to put mosaics in suburbs of New York.

BH: Yes, yes.

IB: Well, anyway, there was a very small group of artists, who were employed--of course most were left out--so there used to be some walking up and down in front of the Whitney Building--they were complaining at that time too. Miss--I can't remember her name--she was a really lovely wonderful woman--we nearly got her angry about this thing. I can't remember her name.

BH: That's because it was commissioned and they had to give a chance at open competition....

IB: Then they said, "The news flashed then from Washington, hurry up and go to a place called the College Art Association." Well, I knew about the College Art Association, it was backed by Mrs. MacMaer, who was in charge of it, which was involved with the College Art Association, her husband, Philips, and he was an art historian, he was one of the professors.... Well, we got over to the College Art Association and there gathered together in a collection of people of various ability, ages and shapes, forms and colors....

BH: About how many, do you think?

IB: Well, it would be hard to say--there seemed to be several hundred and it's a question of how many were taken on.

BH: That was just by word of mouth?

IB: Word of mouth, yes. We heard, and hurried up to go to the College Art Association, and showed your credentials. They weren't not too fussy, as they added us on Project and we begin on the city and in fact Mrs. MacMaer recognized me, and she talked to some of these men taking down names and she said even mural painting [laughter]. Well, I knew I wasn't a mural painter, although I had big ambitions. It was a time when there were art shows with big names...

BH: Yeah.

IB: ...in art....

BH: Were they very hep in New York, or...?

IB: Diego Rivera had some murals there...

BH: In Rockefeller Center?

IB: ...in Rockefeller Center, which was later, as you know, destroyed because there was a conflict about it and at that time, me and _____, I was a little young at that time to participate and it seemed to work on the.... And Ben Shahn was his assistant and I believe Lou Bloch was the painter's assistant there.

BH: Ruth [Lou] Locke, I don't know her?

IB: Well, I'll tell you a little bit about Lou Locke, because I think she is an important name and it is a shame that she is not remembered. Ruth Bloch and Ben Shahn worked together, collaborated even on the WPA Project, on the murals, and their styles were very, very much alike so that they could work together, and for some reason or another Ruth (Lou) Bloch became famous--I don't know what happened to him. I think he went west someplace.

BH: Was he a less colorful figure or what?

IB: Yes.

BH: Or he did not teach anything or...?

IB: Yes. No, he was not. Ben Shahn was a theatrical man, and of course the whole Project was full of theatrical people and I think to some degree, the most theatrical ones moved to the top--I don't mean in the majority sense--I think they were very live people and made an impact on their fellow workers. A couple of them worked until the end of the Project, was working on stained glass windows. I'll tell you about that, that was before I

worked on the mosaics art federation since the last Project, the last work on the Project. But to go back to the earlier days, the artists were all lined up and we were told we would receive a reward of a salary, I think about \$22-23 dollars of change. Well, per week we....

BH: I have one question here. Did you have to bring your work in?

IB: Yes. We had to bring things in.

BH: I didn't know credentials--whether you meant your schooling or what.

IB: Well, credential schooling, and yes, I remember that, we had to bring in our paintings, other examples of our work and we were lined up and that was it. And if people _____ or so, they were throwing everybody out. If your work was poor, they put you on. I shouldn't tell you this because they weren't supposed to put these people on Projects--they were sent to settlement houses and, you know, in depressed areas which were nearly everywhere. It seems to me that the need for the Project was mural painters and easel painters, and then there were of course photographers and a lot of _____. Lee Jacobson, the film-maker, was on the photography project. If I'm not mistaken Margaret Berg White.

BH: If Lou Jacobs' wife, Jane Jacobs, whose made this big splash about photography development lately?

IB: I don't know. Lou Jacobs has written on the cinema--very explicit, very white-wash, irritation--in fact the name, there were so many names involved, these people who had made a mark in one field or another, go on and on. Like I look across the room and I see the book by Ralph Mayer, of *Booktails Art Handbook*. Well, now Mayer was in charge of supplies for the Project. Faber Smith was the sculptor...

BH: Yes!

IB: ...was in charge of handing out the supplies. (Laughter]

BH: Was that part-time, or just twice a week or something?

IB: No. No. But in the earlier stages...later on he became interested in technical affairs, and people became very excited about techniques; they were writing about fresco paintings, the first one being the old fortel _____, the triurlamp. People-...painting through the art Project, but not part of the art Project, were people like Siqueiros, Heting Temour, I didn't know him, except by sight. I would see him, but he had a place on 14th which was a workshop, and many people worked in his place and he had these theories that 20th century artists should use 20th century material. So he was in Spright Gardens all dressed up so that it almost looked like a Ford Factory, and not an artist's studio. And as I recall people like Phil Guston....

BH: Yes, they weren't...I interviewed Davis Rosen the other day down at Lagoona Beach.

IB: Yes, I know Dave.

BH: Do you?

IB: Sure.

BH: Wonderful person.

IB: I knew Dave very, very well.

BH: Well he told me quite a bit about....

IB: I think he made a _____ that plague, but I don't want to sound like a...but I guess I am a....

BH: Like what?

IB: A columnist--a gossip.

BH: Oh, no.

IB: But I remember when Siqueiros was at the place that...first I met Phil Guston, was an organization camp that the artists knew of. This artist used a very undisciplined kind of organization, innovation, buying art of an earlier organization called the "Unemployed Artist Union."

BH: I never knew that.

IB: Well, they had to run up the WPA; they changed the name.

BH: No longer unemployed.

IB: And this was...it had its roots in left wing movement called the John Reed Club.

BH: Called what?

IB: J O H N R E E D CLUB. John Reed was an association of painters who were mostly associated with a left wing--politically--cartoonists like Blocher, and men like that. So the...I don't know, the John Reed group disappeared, lost its reason for being. And then I've always painted things for _____ which was a much broader organization and was not essentially political, but of course there was a great deal of political ferment in the time. Anyone who would deny it, would be obscuring the truth, of course, and it ought to be recorded for what it is. We'll let the historians decide the judgment of the thing.

BH: Yes.

IB: The big meetings at the Artists Union which were held in a place called Germania Hall, on Third Avenue, that's an old parlor and beer hall, and they had a big meeting hall in the back, and they would have these meetings and they would go on interminably. They would begin by talking about the needs of the art project, about the artist role in society, and then they would just end up by general argument that the brushes were no damned good [laughter] and the paints were no good, and if we're going to protest, let's get some decent canvass and all that sort of thing. And I remember one stormy session, now this comes out the back of my hat because I don't know where it happened. There was a big meeting in which everyone was going in to file complaints of some sort; there were genuine complaints. We never knew from day to day when the Project would be over. In fact....

BH: Oh, really?

IB: In fact, when we got this job, I said, "My God, thirty some odd dollars a week, this is a big ransom, tremendous." Remember the first thing I did was run into a Conference cafeteria, I didn't work yet, and I ordered myself an extra special luncheon with pie at the end. We really, really, were awfully broke, everybody. Well, the word got passed that this Project would last six weeks, which seemed wonderful, you know, you would be happy to have....

BH: You didn't know it...?

IB: You would be happy to have one week of work, but six weeks--well, as it happened, every time the Project was about to close out, because there weren't any funds, the fact that this Project was going to cost a million dollars would ruin the country, and there was a great deal of protest.

BH: Really?

IB: In newspapers, as you know, the word "boondoggle" was applied to it, the artists, photographers and so forth people. The fact is that many of them became very important people from this whole _____. But the Projects would seem to collapse, and then there would be picket lines, and arguments and matters and they would extend it a little longer.

BH: Do you remember if they actually cut off?

IB: Well, they certainly never did; they used to fire people all the time, because I have a document here which I will pull out going through the old notebooks about.... You see they insisted that you be a pauper to be on the Project. Now, as it happened that some of the artists may have had an old mother who was working in a factory some place, and this would make him not eligible. So there were that sort of thing going on. And during one of the crises, early crises--I don't think you've been told this before, it's never been told, there was a picket line in front of the College Arts Association. Subsequently the Project moved away from that big warehouse, but the _____ a small operation. The College Art Association administered for the government. And...then there was this picket line, of course publishing that this Project should not be disdained. There were other projects, but they were not yet combined, they were writers, and music projects going on in different parts of the city.

BH: Because of the different of all the artists.

IB: Yes. But the artists painter...

BH: Yes. Muralists....

IB: ...were associated with the College Art Association. Well, we were walking up and down, probably making so much noise, so large a bunch of kids, and couldn't.... The Black Mariah was there and, to my chagrin, if I could...brought up a proper young man--I found myself in the wagon together with a whole lot of others. And we

were brought on 57th Street, 57th Street where there was a convenience police station, a block or two away from the heart of the arts center of New York and I, myself, was very naive and a young man. And they said, "What's your name?" And I gave my name; I didn't know that they could use this...

BH: That was certainly....

IB: ...as one more sophisticated artist did. So they gave names and shooed them in and the very next day we were released, and I think the following day we had to appear in the police station and a judge presided--a very wonderful woman--I was impressed with the affairs which were conducted so--Judge had a cross, I didn't know her name....

BH: Abbot Cross?

IB: I guess I was traumatized by the whole experience. But then we were all packed into this courthouse.

BH: About how many artists were there? 20 or 30?

IB: Well, I think there must have been 60 at that time. In fact, when they called out the case, I was very impressed. The case of Block 59, or whatever the number was, simply because No. 1, it was alphabetical, and then they began calling out these names. In fact a sense of the work day, the timekeeper came to the courthouse and he made us sign the sheet so we wouldn't lose that day.

BH: Oh. Wasn't that nice.

IB: There was Mr. Five--I never forgot that name--Mr. Five [Laughter]

BH: Strange....

IB: Well, then they began calling out the names and a policeman couldn't pronounce them because he never saw names like--Texo, and a Picasso [laughter]. Somebody gave the name Sybilis, Sybilis and Sibelius.

BH: And Sibelius....

IB: And there was such a confusion and some gavel-pounding, because every time another name was to be called out and the person would be present, the artists would laugh, you know, and Roscoe was the head and they would be laughing in the court. And at one point that I'll never forget, someone called out the name Brown, which was a good easy name, in fact I think it was the second name, he called out....

BH: Asher Durand?

IB: No, it was an artist called Byron Brown, an abstract painter, he died recently. He made a good place for himself in the abstract art here--Byron Brown, but he had not given his name as Byron Brown, he had given some other name, but he forgot and he responded reflectively--the name that had been given, I believe by Malcolm Green....

BH: Oh, it would be an enemy of Brown's?

IB: No. No. He just--I think that Green did....

BH: Made it up?

IB: He may not have even known...

BH: Oh, you mean from green to brown...?

IB: So he gave another color about his name--green--and he said, "No, no, I'm not him." Green came forward and there was a whole confusion. And then this went on for quite some time, and then they asked witnesses to make a complaint, and there was some man, I think the real estate man who ran the building the College Art Association was in, and the judge said that you couldn't accuse these people of violating any law or causing any trouble, but you could specifically that person there--not by name, then by identification. So....

BH: They couldn't pin anyone?

IB: No. So, so, he said I saw he was there, he was there--he noticed the ones who looked impressive--he kept saying he was there, that was because he was a model....

BH: There were a lot of people that he wanted...?

IB: There was one big man; he was a model, and old car model. He had gone into the car, he had no place, he should not have been there [laughter], he wasn't even arrested and he hadn't said, "I was not even there." While naturally the case is a big mess and she threw it out. She said it was a very interesting case and so would it be possible...? She had the lawyers write at least whether a whole group of people could be found guilty of something when individuals could not be identified. Anyway it was, now in looking at it, I laugh, the trial wasn't funny, it really wasn't funny. We were kind of worried about it and when my family didn't know about it.... But of course they didn't know about.... So, many...that was the story of....

BH: Thank you for telling it to the tape.

IB: Anyway, the Project continued on and on and on and somehow it got rooted in the system and the.... Finally, when the War came, I think it just petered out.

BH: Yes, that happened all over the country.

IB: Yes. That was the end of it, but there was a lot of great interesting stuff going on and, as I said, I met this young man from California, and there were two of them--gold panning....

BH: _____

IB: And there was another fellow with him, so we had a cup of coffee in...when this fellow named Goldstien or Goldstein--his name was Lehman--and he was quite a talented artist. The....

BH: And he came from California?

IB: I think they both studied at Otis, if I'm not mistaken.

BH: Yes. I have this name and I haven't been able to find a thing about him. Do you know what his first name was, or anything?

IB: Yep. I'm trying to remember. It will have to come back to me--because I haven't talked to him in a long, long time. There were two Lehmans.... There's another Lehman--don't confuse it with the Irving Leyman--he was a New Yorker. And then there was this other Lehman, and I'll try to remember his name if I can. I'll go through the whole alphabet, I'm sure. And anyway, these two fellows seemed--I was quite impressed with their work--it was at the Artists Union so it was a show I think and Guston's style at that time was very hard, dry, draftsman-like. He did some fantastic camel drawings in pencil in the style of Comedie Del Arte....

BH: May I interrupt you for just one minute to tell you that part of this was because of the feature he had acquired in his art at Lagoon Beach...?

IB: Is that right?

BH: That one, too, I'll have to tell you later. It's a little long, but--little light bulbs--and he was a collegiate of Jackson Pollack's teacher at the same time and must have...can't....

IB: Been influenced?

BH: Remember if he had these _____ in his lines, while they are gone. I had them at school at the same time.

IB: Is that right?

BH: I must have had him. He was a beautiful academic draftsman.

IB: Well, these things, I remember, I remember very clearly, the drawings, several drawings--on of those large things that Pollack had tried to figure--figure thrust way back into space and the one projecting forward and the other way backward. Very different--the flat style of Raymond, you know. But he was influenced by many of the arts the artists loved and thereby, I guess I felt a certain liking for him myself. I can say is--and that was the Italian painters. They were, you know, both painters. Anyway, our little baby grows piano, Franchesco. Anyway, Gus Goldstein later came to be known as Galston, and you know that Catherine Deitrich for a short period of time name was Galston?

BH: No, I didn't.

IB: GULSTON.

BH: Gol**?

IB: No. Gulston. He called me a charlatan, and he knew that I said that....

BH: He retained the thought--spelling of the thought?

IB: That may be, I don't know.

BH: The first way....

IB: The other way might--all I knew him was as Phil. I always knew him as Phil. And then it was Gulston and then it became Guston. It was a long, long time, you know.

BH: Well, that is very interesting, because some paintings might turn up where you might wonder who the painter was.

IB: Yeah, that's right, that's right. That's why I made reference to Galston, because that's who it is.

BH: Well, isn't that interesting.

IB: Well, just the same, it was Gorky, Gorky--of course that was not his name. Everyone knows that. Oh, it's been...a long time and....

BH: It was a long name anyway.

IB: It was an Armenian name. He wasn't a Russian. He paraded as a Russian because it seemed very colorful, but he was an Armenian and he had a wonderful, warm personality. He used to sometimes.... I got to know Gorky fairly well, in fact I have a brief on his name; I'll let you see if I can show it.

BH: A what?

IB: A leaf of his grave--I'll tell you how I happened to acquire it. I also....

BH: In the first place, before you tell me about the leaf, how...where did you first know Gorky?

IB: On the Project.

BH: Oh, really?

IB: That's where I knew him. He was one of the most colorful men of the whole group. He...his bearing, his manner, his actions, his big mustache--he was a kind of a John Barrymore, seen through the eyes of Doestoevski. It was kind of a tragic quality--and very poetically _____.

BH: Was he older than you?

IB: Yes, he was. Well, it's hard to...I've reached the stage in my life where numbers don't have anything to do with it.

BH: I know, but what I mean....

IB: Yes, he was somewhat--yes he was an older man. He probably was a few years older, you know, but when you're young everyone is....

BH: I met someone who was middle-aged who was old enough to be someone's mother.

IB: I was, I was--I thought he was a senior member and I always--when I did his things--with respect--just because he was an older man. I happened to have gotten to know him fairly well. Oh, I'd known him for a long period of time, but I got to know him fairly well on the end of the Project. When he was during a mural--no, wait a minute, it wasn't a mural, it was a project for wartime, which was another one of these--it was the present.

BH: That was WARD.

IB: Yes, that was WARD at the time. It was of the present and the Project was set up by Bergoyne Giller--do you know that name?

BH: No, I don't.

IB: Giller is a very important _____ in New York right now. He was a _____ stacker, he was a Mondrian, a Mondrianize--one of the few.... Do you know where...?

BH: No, I don't know where he started, but I don't know where he was but he was--he held an official position on the Project--he was a handsome young man--very articulate and I think he began as an artist and then they put him in an official position on a desk and he was a good administrator. I haven't seen him in many, many years, I think some day I will see him again--he took a liking to my work and he gave me an assignment. This was the last assignment that I did on the Project with the murals there. There were several chapels, a Catholic chapel which was assigned to me; I was to do a mosaic. I have a photograph of the cartoon. Finally, a cartoon was completed in color--it's an enormous thing. I should be recalling it, because my memory must have been....about 40 x 30 ft.

BH: You mean a cartoon?

IB: A cartoon. Cartoon was made full size and I painted in all the tesories so that it would then be copied.

BH: With numbers or something?

IB: Well, by the end of the Project--I think the War was about to begin, or was on...I think it was on and there were no more materials available. The cartoon was on exhibition--won--in the Museum of National History in New York--and that was the end of the Project. Whatever happened to the cartoon.... I spent many, many months of hard labor--and all I had for it is a photograph I took of the picture. Well, while I was working on that Gorky was doing the--I think the Protestant Chapel--and there were some windows in that chapel and he was working in some stained glass, and had a great big line--it was an abstract tree [The dog barked into the mike at this point--very loudly]....

BH: Gorky had done the cartoons for a stained glass window...?

IB: Stained glass windows, yes.

BH: And his was also never completed?

IB: Never completed, no. And there was another artist working on the Project, his name was Xceron, he was a Greek.

BH: What a strange name.

IB: He's an old man now. I think he is still living and I believe I read somewhere that he was having an important retrospective in New York. So these were the three projects as I recall them. It was at that time that we worked rather closely together because we wanted to have a unified point of view.

BH: Do you realize how many fascinating artists you have already mentioned who were on the Project? People, I mean it's just unbelievable....

IB: The numbers are....

BH: Almost even until today, to have...

IB: That's right.

BH: ...a group in San Francisco.

IB: Yes. I don't know. I couldn't, I couldn't really tell you how many talented men there were, but I'm sure there's no need for my mentioning these names because they must all be in New York.

BH: They are probably being interviewed there.

IB: But I do want to straighten one thing out for the record, if no one has done so. A couple of years ago I read in *Art News* that a lot of Art Project work had suddenly turned up. It seems at the end of the Project, you know, someone had bought up the whole warehouse full of stuff.

BH: Yes.

IB: And sold a lot of it and got rid of it and somehow, some pieces were saved and they were put on exhibition. I didn't know Franz Kline at any time--I don't know if he was on the Project, but I think he was included, he may have been an easel painter, I don't know that. But I think the article showed an example--it showed Franz Kline, it showed Jackson Pollack, it showed Rocko art whose name is Rockowicz--Roscoe--and then it said there were other artists who had credible work here, Barlums here, we don't know anything about them, and one, I think it particularly pointed out, was spelled MITZENOFF and I think I was kind of bad because I knew the man and he's a wonderful artist and he painted one his pictures and it was MISSENHOF--I believe it was Minnssehoff....

BH: And the magazine had it MIS--?

IB: Missenoff, or something--it was totally incorrect spelling and it was such a fragile thing.

BH: What ever happened to him?

IB: I don't know what ever happened to Minnessenoff, but I thought he was a wonderful painter. And I think there were many--men of talent, but somehow fate and.... I think they ought to take another look.

BH: Maybe the wrong people who bought the paintings came in...?

IB: Yes, but...or they were discouraged and they didn't have what some of these other men had--the heart to.... I myself became very, very discouraged about the whole problem of painting.

BH: You did?

IB: Yes. And I turned away some paintings....

BH: During the course of the Project?

IB: No, no. Not during the course of the Project, but after the Project. I had the feeling that painting--there was no place--that was my feeling. I felt that the whole technique was antiquated and I turned to film making. I still have problems in film making; I still believe that it one great contemporary forms....

BH: As an art expression?

IB: As a form of art expression. Because, as the graphics you see first, and so I became a film maker--I'm professor _____.

BH: Maybe this would be a good place to jump from the end of the Project and bring you up to date, after the Project.

IB: Well, after the Project...the next thing I find myself I was going to the War.... I worked in Washington, with the Corps of Engineers and a map maker.

BH: A topographer?

IB: Not a topographer, which was part of the graphics sections. No, I was in Geodemic, you know the geodemic....

BH: Survey?

IB: Yes, but it was with the Office of the Chief of Engineers. Geography, not so much map making. I found myself at the end of the War in California and I continued to paint....

BH: You didn't _____?

IB: Oh yes, it was a private thing. It was kind of like an old habit which you couldn't give up and I continued then ever since, but I became involved in film making--an expression that you could make a million. But in recent years again, I've been reawakening and I believe I can make a valid painting. Some of the ones I painted in the Union, that existed in my mind, I could not accept all the experimental work. Let me go on as being valid for me, it was not for others, but it was for me. Since that time I suppose--I also experimented--I hate the word experimented because it has coloration of science....

BH: Are you talking about form or technique?

IB: About form and technique. And in recent years I have returned to making up the rest of the development. I don't know, but since I began...very forceful and it's because I feel that I must go my own course and the same is not important. I wouldn't turn down a Nobel Prize for Painting, if there were such a thing. I might, I might, but it isn't the sort of thing I am searching for.

BH: I think that is a very mature thing.

IB: Well, you have to grow mature when your hair turns grey. You've got to have developed into maturity. If not, there's no hope.

BH: Everybody does mature.

IB: I know. I am aging and maturing, and maturation is not the same process, but I turned now to figurative art. I

don't know why I continue that way. Maybe yes, maybe not, but I loved Zurburan as a boy, and I still love him and whether he is fashionable or not, it doesn't matter. I notice that the magazines have been talking to him quite a lot, but I would select just one on account of the master, because....

BH: You show your painting at the Ankrum Gallery?

IB: At the Ankrum Gallery....

BH: She has a beautiful stable.

IB: Yes, she has some pretty good people, and I wouldn't know how to place myself within the hierarchy of things, regard myself in terms of one of those _____, but it is asking for it _____.

BH: I was going to say that time would decide for it.

IB: I think it is amazing about art history that it knows that this is a possibility, no reason in the world or why a Roscoe canvas came to this high place, but it will be interesting to find out whether it does or not.

BH: I think it is present, too, to himself--that has been trained as a good technician in his field whatever it is that what he puts out is going to be good. Whether it is the spirit of his time or not, it should be true to him.

IB: Well, I have a particular notion about art and I'm not lended to scrutinize it too carefully in terms of the philosophical analysis of art, but I'm not concerned either where in art--modern art or old-fashioned art, conventional, I mention symposium--I wasn't concerned what the art was, even good or bad. I'm only interested in whether it is the art or an account of this, that when....

BH: [Asks a question which is inaudible]

IB: Well, I think that essentially that is what it boils down to--whether it is art, whether it might be a minor thing like--nothing more than a carving at the end of a spoon, or the last judgment of Michelangelo, but there is a difference between an authentic outpouring of feelings, expression of art and a kind which limits greatness and I think too often we are so careless to become--it's difficult to tell the difference between genuine and poor art.

BH: Sometimes [Inaudible]

IB: Yeah, and even so there are sometimes errors in judgment.

Let's go on to painting dishes, there's nothing there anyway. [Laughter]

BH: Mr. Block, are you teaching today?

IB: Yes, I'm teaching at the Sacramento Valley State College. I give an art survey course, on which is combined with some labrador experiences so that it isn't all together a verbal operation, but also an operational one. And I also give a course on film making.

BH: On film making? And you are now teaching painting?

IB: No. I'm not teaching painting. I have my doubts whether it is possible to teach painting at all. I think you can teach the craft of painting, you can show how many drops of the varnish mixed with a certain amount of linseed oil would have a certain effect, but to teach poetic basis of art, that maybe inspired, this is what a teacher no longer teaches, but a kind of--maybe a lover who does something to excite feeling and produce--arise creativity. I don't know. I really don't know. I think we must off, teachers always have been, always will be, but it isn't the same thing as painting--as teaching how to build a bridge. Painting is a very mystical process and maybe it's something for priests, you know, who are teaching essentials.

[BREAK IN TAPING]

BH: You were telling me something about this mosaic.

IB: Here's a photograph of this mosaic. I think, considering the way it was done very original work. You can look at it and hold it in your hands as I talk about it. I would add something about it. The figure cost was--it would be 14 ft. high, all the figures on the side, Mary is at the tomb and the Roman soldiers at the feet....

BH: The traditional.

IB: Yes. I used the traditional forms again of the early Italians, for it didn't seem worth--but worth modern feeling, recurs, if not recurs if not in a statutory sense. It would show--well, these are the ideas that the modern

artists wouldn't have to express--the one technology....

BH: Yes.

IB: But somehow it's still traditional.

BH: It retains a feeling of the traditional.

IB: Well, yes. I felt...I think it was a run-trial of this thing and I'm very sorry that I didn't know where the real cartoon really is, because it was a gigantic thing.

BH: I understand that the government is trying to find these now. This new feeling, I think, is Johnson's....

IB: I'll tell you exactly what they paid me. [Laughter]

BH: It always takes the government 99 years, you know, You'll have to wait awhile before you buy it back. [Laughter]

IB: Let me tell you about the 99...this business of buying these....

BH: Before you tell me the story, all right.

IB: Well, I was referring to Ben Shahn earlier. When the Project was on its last legs, I went up to the office--located on Kings Street in New York. It was a big warehouse on the West Side of town and scattered all over the floor, and against the walls were these paintings--things of no real value, but I.... On the floor was this little drawing--a cartoon, rather it was a sketch and it was not a cartoon--a water color tempera drawing, printwork they would call it, by Ben Shahn. It was my design and present and I wanted it so! It was so lovely, I wanted to have it for myself.

BH: Even in a cartoon form?

IB: Yes. It was a beautiful thing, it was a lovely thing, it was a very worked-out thing. So if I would not have gone there tomorrow, I would have just rolled it up and slipped it in my coat.

BH: Yes.

IB: And walked off of the Project, but you don't do things like that. So I went to the officials and I said, I had very little with me at the time, "Could I buy it? Anything you want, I would pay!" They said, "Oh, no, this is government property; you can't buy government property. That drawing belongs to the government." And that was the end of that, so it was probably thrown into a junk pile and then cast out. I was very sorry about that. I know I wanted to have it. I guess I must have some government property in my notebook, because some fellow who worked on the project--he was showing off for one, a printmaker, who I believe he went to Hawaii. Well, Shahn was on the Project and--was his assistant....Why don't we talk a little bit about some of the jobs I worked on?

BH: Yes. Let's be chronological. First, why don't you finish telling...and I wish you would....

IB: Oh, about this, about this? We did talk about the fact that Ciero, Gorky and myself who were going off on a general work project. This was to be done in mosaic and it wasn't completed because the materials were not available.

BH: This was for Ward's Island?

IB: This was for Ward's Island, yes. But there were problems in connection with these things. I remember the Art Commission in the city at that time--I think it was Dean Caldwell.

BH: Was he a Dean?

IB: No, no. Dean Caldwell is--I think he is a mural painter when I was out there.

BH: Oh, yes.

IB: Dean Caldwell was a commercial artist in New York and he sort of worked with a brain with his English murals.

BH: Yes, I thought--quite traditional.

IB: It was a tradition that we forward again--so he was the artist--he was a very fine gentleman. He just didn't

understand a few.... He looked at it and said, "Couldn't I make the feet a little less clumsy, in the lower limb?" He said, "You make arms like a workman." So I was surprised because I had never been told that. That didn't hurt me, so I said, 'Oh, all right, I'll make him a little more graceful.'" So that was the end of that; we had no more problem. Then he approved the mural. Then he said he liked it, but we were working to complete it so that was all we wanted.

BH: It looks so beautiful. Tell us about the colors.

IB: Well, the colors of the style--were grey for the rabble _____, the field was mostly in deep blue, the figure of Christ was in green--the halo, of course, was gold and the only things that were red were the feet, and the hands and in the chest--it was an imitation of the wounds; the general overall quality was cool blues and greys, interspersed with bits of gold, and the....

BH: Your greens for the Christ were almost symbolic?

IB: Yes. The green would also bring out the contrast--the red--so that is made that much more significant, and the fact that the soldiers watching the face with their spears, and the angels somehow heightened the whole _____. The Christ involved was practically the theology at the time and I suppose it is like they must have find the halo anyway--because I'm sure we forgot the greatness of the cathedral--I didn't know. Every time I walked in....

BH: I find this very interesting. We were at a seminary a couple of years ago, and we tried to--there were some orthodox

[TELEPHONE RINGS]

IB: You would like a chronological record?

BH: I wish you would. I didn't know before that you had done some of the Treasury projects murals. Would you want to talk about those, too?

IB: All right.

BH: And I don't know where they fit in chronologically, so would you tell me...?

IB: I will try to get them in. First--Welfare was the first project where actually I was put on the mural paintings--I showed them some pretty marked paintings. Most of them impressed them, that's how much--I had no idea that they would....

BH: You had not done any murals?

IB: No, no. I was put on as an assistant to--so we were all set for--look at it together and--and we were in such a different place and each came to the group there, and we had broken up into teams [Inaudibly low]

BH: Who was this man named Woodman?

IB: _____ but we worked there and in the Children's Hospital....

[END OF PART 1, TAPE NO. 43]

[PART 2, TAPE NO. 42]

BH: This is Betty Lochrie Hoag on April 16, 1965 interviewing Irving Block, Part 2. We were just starting to give a rundown on your Project work before we go into it and we have discussed the one on Ward's Island.

IB: Yes.

BH: And you were telling me that you had been put on at the beginning on the mural project and were put in a group under Elizabeth Terrill. Do you remember how to spell her name?

IB: I think it was T E R R I L L.

BH: And these groups of--approximately how many were sent to different places to work on different murals?

IB: Yes, we were sent to Welfare Island, which is the location of a City hospital, children's hospital, and we were assigned to decorate the wards and the playrooms. It was a very decrepit Civil War kind of building, terrible conditions, we had no paint, we used house paint, material supplied. The very first day they were so poorly organized but little by little they began setting up technical facilities for the artists. As I mentioned, David Nif,

the sculptor, one of his jobs....

BH: These were to be direct frescoes?

IB: No, no, no, this was just ordinary oil paint right on the plaster wall; we didn't use canvas. This didn't last very long, it was an emergency situation. People simply had to be given work and the quality of the artist was not of any importance. Well-known established artists were just as much in need as people who had just come out of art school and it didn't matter, nobody took it seriously as works of art. The press was very unsympathetic.

BH: Who did the design for them?

IB: Well, in those days we were each given a wall to design and we decided that that particular project would be scenes from American history, you know, the Puritans....

BH: It was the press and the school too.

IB: Yes. So, as far as giving authority to go ahead, I don't know, we just went ahead, no one took it seriously. Later on it became much more successfully organized as a working project and after that particular period where I was working as an assistant for a short period of time, I was sent to a place called the Straubennuller Textile High School....

BH: How do you spell that name?

IB: Well, I don't know if I can, I think it's S T R A U B E N N U L L E R Textile High School, which is in Manhattan. And there were many rooms available to us for decoration. I was assigned to the auditorium to work under a man named Jeffrey Norman, an Englishman....

BH: What was an Englishman doing on the Project?

IB: I have no idea but I think he was made the supervisor of that particular project because of the fact that he was a very poor painter, but he made a fine appearance. And so we worked on these murals in the auditorium; I don't know if they are in existence any more. They were not very good.

BH: Were they American history again?

IB: No, this had to do with great men of history, cultural leaders, from Johann Sebastian Bach to Beethoven, Wagner, architects... There were masses, mounds of portraits all done in monochrome. The effect was not too bad considering that the basic design by Mr. Norman was rather feeble. It was at this time that I worked with John Madox, a sculptor--he's now not only a sculptor I believe but a San Francisco artist, and he was quite interested in Surrealism at that time even in those days.

BH: Oh, that's interesting. You were too at that time, weren't you?

IB: I was, I had such omnivorous taste that I wanted to know about everything, every movement. I was interested in Cubism, and Surrealism, and....

BH: And Futurism?

IB: Oh yes, Futurism. Of course Futurism was looked down upon a little bit; it didn't have quite the same authority as the French Cubism. Well, the other artists--I can't remember their names-- but it was at this period that I met several other men and I became quite lifelong friends of some of them. One was an artist still working, but I don't know--he is an abstract painter now--his name is Lishinsky--Abraham Lishinsky. Lishinsky was then the assistant to Jean Charlot who was doing the lobby of the High School. This was a rather superior attempt and I admired Charlot very much because he was a very, very scholarly man. He turned out to be quite friendly and eventually I became his assistant. I asked to be transferred to Charlot's project.

BH: Mr. Block, wasn't Charlot a Frenchman who lived in Mexico and worked with Rivera and Orozco and then came to this country?

IB: Something like that. As far as I can tell. I know he was born in 1898. I knew that date. He was of French extraction, I think on one side of his family there was some Mexican ancestry. He was an artillery officer in the War, World War I, and then as a young man he went to Mexico and I think he was involved with some digs in Yucatan. He then became interested in Mexican archeology and was one of the important forces in the rebirth of Mexican art and particularly mural painting, and I think he is sometimes lost in the shuffle, but he was a kind of theoretician of the movement. He then came to the United States. He never became as famous as Rivera or Orozco but he worked...he taught at the Art Students League I understand. And he worked on the Project. I don't know how he qualified because I was under the impression that he must have been...but anyway he worked on

the Project and in a certain way I still look upon him as a teacher.

BH: He had an endearing quality.

IB: A wonderful person, a very extremely intelligent man, and very literary turn of mind, a writer, lecturer and....

BH: He is probably friend of Covarubbias too if he was interested in archeology.

IB: Yes, they were--obviously he was a friend of Covarubbias and there were some other Mexican artists whose names I can't remember but they were well known at that time--worked on the Project too. I can't recall offhand....

BH: Did you ask to be transferred to him because you admired his work so much?

IB: Yes, and he seemed to like me. I thought he did anyway; he used to write on the sketches in my notebooks which is always some kind of mark of commendation in art. I have some notebooks with some Charlot drawings in them. So I worked with him then for a while. Then he left the Project; I think he began teaching full time. Well, at that time Lishinsky...and we had demonstrated sufficient skill on the Project so that they gave us a project supervisors a large mural project in Samuel Tilden High School in Brooklyn; it covered thousands of square feet being a very simply one the first civilization of man. We had quite a few assistants, about six assistants over a period of time.

BH: About how long did it take?

IB: That took a couple of years because it was a very big project.

BH: Was it many different mural panels?

IB: Well, there were panels all over the auditorium, I think I have some photographs; I did have one photograph of it here some place. I'll look for it if you'd like to have it.

BH: We'd like to very much; we'll wait till we're through taping to get it.

IB: So what we did, we divided the auditorium into two halves; he took one half, I took the other. We made sketches, we worked at that time very much in similar styles, very much--this was not unusual, as I mentioned before. Shahn and Lou Block worked together, and there were others who were working as teams together and we did this mural at Tilden High School, finished it. I don't know whatever happened to it, whether it was.... There was one amusing sidelight; it was not so amusing when it happened. Some group of people was opposed to the Project and attacked it from many directions, said that the artists were lazy and why should the government support artists and who needs art and frequently quoted former President Coolidge's saying that if we need art we can import it from France and....

BH: I didn't know that he said that.

IB: Yes, that was one of his famous statements and it was constantly under attack. The most effective attack came from the political right, which said the artists were trying to put in propaganda against the government. I don't believe this is ever true; I think the artists were very happy to say good things about our society but they were critical....

BH: They were human basically.

IB: They had to be. But they began to find all sorts of hidden symbolism. Gorky, whose work was destroyed I believe, one of his murals which he did at the airport that time in New York because someone saw a red star in it which proved that he was saying something about Russia. Well, he said this red star is abstracted from a Texaco Oil truck because Texaco needed that spot in that form....

BH: Like Stuart Davis incorporation of signs in his work.

IB: Yes, the same thing. Of course, Stuart Davis was on the Project, and his brother was on the Project. His brother was a photographer--Wyatt Davis--yes, he was a photographer.

BH: And they destroyed the whole Gorky mural?

IB: The whole mural, I believe, it was destroyed, yes. They began finding all sorts of things and one day, after we had finished this mural at the Tilden High School and the scaffold was taken down, the next thing I knew they were putting up the scaffolds again and a carpenter who was doing it was there and I said, 'What's going on?' He said, 'I'm not supposed to tell you but you know they're going to take down your mural.' I said, 'What! Why?'

"Because it has certain things in it which are very bad; it's against the government." I said, 'Well, what, where?' I wanted to hear. In fact it was the panel which he referred to which proclaimed the beauties of the Democratic system, showed a group of people voting and there were things of that sort in it. So he said up in a top panel, in one of the panels was a painting in grisaille--just gray tones--a big large panel about four feet by six feet were still life objects which had to do with the symbolic representation of industrial society and in it was a model of a dynamo, the governor of a steam engine, and a pitchfork which represented the notion of agriculture--I don't remember precisely--but it was a beautiful-looking work. I thought the pitchfork leaning against...see, it was a kind of trompe l'oeil effect in which you looked at a box in which these objects were, that is the offending thing. I couldn't understand that it was. So he said, "I don't know myself; you'd better find out." So I went up to the Project and I said, "What's going on here? Why are you going to take down the mural?" They said, "Well, they're not taking it down yet; they're still debating it. Somebody found something in it that was not proper." I said, "Well why can't I be told what it is; I would like to know." They said, "Well, there's a certain shadow from the pitchfork..." See, the three prongs of the pitchfork as they leaned against the wall cast a shadow that looks like three L's. I said, "Yes, I understood, but I don't know what the three L's are." They said, "We don't know either but someone said that it's something very bad." Then the next thing I know they forgot the whole thing and that was the end of it. Years later, many years later, as I talked about this to someone who was politically very erudite, he had made a study of all these movements and in fashions and all that, and I said, "I have never known what three L's represented; I wonder what" He said, "Three L's--don't you know?" I said, "No, what is three L's?" Well, it was the sign of an abortive Bolshevik revolution in Germany after World War I and represented Leeknet, Luxembourg and Lenin, yes, these were the three L's.

BH: Leeknet?

IB: Yes.

BH: Lenin and...?

IB: Luxembourg who was a wounded revolutionary. I looked it up later to find out, I think he was I'm not sure about that though.

BH: Well, in the first place, this would have been when you were a baby; you wouldn't have....

IB: I never heard of...in fact I didn't know who these people were--Lenin I knew, but the other names were--sounded like a museum to me or a cheese.

BH: This is real McCarthyism.

IB: Yes. It was, exactly. This was going on; this finally stymied a great deal of work on the Project. Oswald Frey They didn't want to lose that job, and many became disgusted and quit. But that was a very peculiar period and that was my brush with the thing, but nothing...whether the mural still exists I don't know. After that mural I worked on my own--no, we were given another project; Lishinsky and I were given another project. The World's Fair was coming to New York, that was the big World's Fair.

BH: 1939?

IB: Must have been '39, yes. Well, of course we began earlier than that; it opened in '39, didn't it?

BH: I think it was '38.

IB: I have a photograph here.

BH: We think this next one was '38 or '39, probably '38.

IB: I believe it was '38 because it took--there was a big rush to get it done but, even so, it was an enormous job turned over to us. This is what happened. The New York World's Fair was going to use a lot of murals and for the American Medical Association Building the WPA supplied the artists to do several murals. Lishinsky and I, having completed the big high school job, were now given this job and we again divided it up into more or less two equal portions. I think it was about eighty feet long on each wall and there were two such long walls and about ten feet high and then on the opposite sides of this quadrangle there were two more murals. Anyway, I had two walls and Lishinsky had two walls and there was a piece of mine--this is about half of one of the long walls having to do with the history of medicine from man exorcising sickness evil and the Egyptians through the Greeks and the Romans, the medieval church, the Renaissance and then continuing on down through modern times. It was done on canvas but not on the wall; they gave us the old Beaux Arts Building, that was the old Ecole des Beaux Arts on the East side of Manhattan which was not in use any longer. This is where we did the mural, it was then transferred and pasted to the walls.

BH: You must have had many helpers.

IB: Quite a few, but not too many, considering all the work we had; really fell on our shoulders to complete the job. At that time I'd like to mention that one of the helpers was Abraham Lerner (L E R N E R) who was a very good friend and a very good artist. He was not a mural painter essentially; he was an easel painter and he still is, and he is now the curator of the Hirshhorn Collection.

BH: Oh, someone told me about him for someone to go and talk to him, yes.

IB: Oh, he would be very good; he would be very good.

BH: They may have already. I've written the Archives and told them about him.

IB: He would be very excellent. I don't know whether he would want to talk too much about it. He didn't stay on the Project too long. He assisted on the Tilden High School mural too, as a matter of fact but he worked on this for a while. I can't think of any of the other people. They'd come and go. But for the World's Fair among the other artists that contributed work was Phil Guston, a beautiful exterior mural; and de Kooning--Bill de Kooning did one; Refregier did one--Anton Refregier.

BH: He did one in San Francisco.

IB: Yes, but that was later; he did San Francisco later. There are a few more I do want to mention who became quite well known. Jimmy Brooks--James Brooks, the abstract painter. And that's all I can remember but I know there were several others, but these were different building and I think it was areal contribution all down the line.

BH: Were those temporary buildings?

IB: They were temporary buildings, the mural were put...I know our murals--I don't know what happened to the others--they were probably since they were exterior and right on the wall, they were probably destroyed, But this particular history of medicine mural which we did was taken off the wall and put in a warehouse. The plan was that the city was going to build a health museum and they were going to be used for this new museum, but it was never built and I don't know what happened to the murals. I have no idea what happened to them. When that was finished I was assigned...Mischa Ginn left the project--I believe he had left the project. He got a job, a real job. I think he began selling zippers, and I went on to this thing at Ward's Island. By that time, though, the Project, the spirit had gone out of it; it just faded away, that was the end of it.

BH: Now where did the Treasury Department...?

IB: The Treasury Department, that was something else. They were running these competitions and I believe they were going simultaneously, because I think some of the fellows quit the Project because they got some of these Treasury assignments, but I got mine.... I participated in three of them: one for the War Department Building, that was in Washington, D.C. but I was chagrined at having worked very hard on the sketches, I went down to learn that I didn't win anything. I went down to Washington to find my sketches to bring them back again because I wanted them. They said they had never gotten them. Then they found them hidden away someplace so they never really were in competition.

BH: Well, how strange.

IB: Well, that's the way things happen. The other two that I entered....

BH: Excuse me, what happened to them? Do you think somebody purposely didn't put them in?

IB: I don't think so. I think it was just--there were so many things shown, in boxes in hallways, and they never got....

BH: Did they give them back to you?

IB: Yes, I got them back. I found them, I had to find them myself. I was going through the warehouse I finally found the sketches, but it was never seen. I raised a fuss. I said I would have won, at least give me a runner up. But anyway, I did participate in two others. I was very lucky; I didn't win but I got runner-up awards. One was for the St. Louis Post Office, I believe it was won by Mitchell Siporin. It was a very large project and as a result I got to do a mural in Batesburg, South Carolina, (B A T E S B U R G). And I participated again for the San Francisco Post Office Rincon Street Annex, which was won by Refregier. There was a lot of trouble later on about this thing. I know that Philip Guston was a judge.

BH: Of course on all of these projects the names were blanked out and they would have no idea...?

IB: That's right. They were run in a very fair way.

BH: Did you get a runner up?

IB: Yes, I got a runner up on that one and I did a mural for Wakefield Station Post Office, Bronx, New York. I've never seen either one of these in places.

BH: I wish you'd tell me about them: first the Batesburg, South Carolina one.

IB: Well, the Batesburg, South Carolina one was an interesting one. I went down to Batesburg; it was my first trip to the South, and it was very interesting. I found out that the main industry there was peach-growing. So that was the theme of the mural; it was kind of Rivera-esque mural, I don't think that....

BH: Is that all Deep South with Negroes...?

IB: Yes, the Deep South, yes, yes.

BH: Were the peach pickers the Negro people?

IB: Yes. There's one anecdote about that. I went around sketching; I wanted the authentic flavor and I sketched some of the little children picking. I saw some very little ones picking peaches, and the Postmaster said, "No, he didn't want to have them in there." I thought he meant that it would show child labor. He said, "No, they wouldn't use such little children; they couldn't reach the fruit." So he said, "You can have one of those pickaninnies sitting on the ground," which I did. I had a little Negro child sitting on the ground. It was a very interesting eye-opener for me; it was a different world. I didn't meet with any hostility at all.

BH: What size was the mural?

IB: I have to tell you one other story. When I got down there, there was a group of ladies called the Batesburg Art Society to greet me. They had a luncheon and I wanted to make polite conversation at lunch. I said, "Do you ladies paint?" They said, "Oh, no, no, we don't paint." I said, "Do you have exhibitions?" They said, "Oh, no, no, we don't have any exhibitions." I said, "Well, why do you call it the Art Society?" They said, "Well, we thought it would be a pretty name."

BH: Well, at least the community accepted them if they had them greeting you.

IB: Yes, they were very nice. Some day I'm going to make a pilgrimage to see my mural in Batesburg, South Carolina.

BH: Well, you certainly should. Do you have photographs of it that we could have microfilmed?

IB: I have one photograph but I don't know where it is; I was looking for it and it may be around here. I'll try to find it if I can.

BH: Good. Do you remember the size of it?

IB: It wasn't very large. It was rather small; I would say about twenty feet by seven feet which seemed tiny after doing some of these big giant things.

BH: And this was oil on canvas?

IB: Again, oil on canvas. Both were oil on canvas.

BH: And of course you did them in New York and mailed them down?

IB: Did them in New York, and I was sick at that particular time. Someone took them down; that's how that period of my life.

BH: Do you remember the year of that, Mr. Block? It isn't too important...?

IB: Well, it must have been...when did we get into the War? Because it was just about that time... '40?

BH: '41 I think...see, December '40...

IB: I was already working in Washington for the War Department and I started to finish the Bronx mural. That's why I never got to see it; I was living in Washington and I had to finish this mural so I used to go up on weekends to New York where I had a studio and finish it. So I never did see it--it was approved and that was the end of it. So we were already at war and that was the end of all these things as far as I was concerned and as far as most

the artists were concerned. And after a while I came out to California...

BH: Pardon me just a moment, can we talk about this one in Wakefield first before we get...?

IB: Sure, the subject matter? Sure.

BH: Yes, the subject matter.

IB: The subject matter of the Wakefield Station...well, what could you find in a place called Wakefield Station, the Bronx? We didn't want to have any more of these social things, you know. There was enough Ben Shahn's in the world; we didn't need any more. I went up to the Library and I studied and studied and I found out that George Washington, he hadn't slept there but he had pulled a cannon through there during the Revolutionary War in the middle of winter. So, taking that as my starting point, I did a kind of Breughel-like winter scene. I love Breughel; I didn't crib but I got my inspiration...

BH: You had many figures then on a white snowy background...?

IB: Yes. With trees and snow and pulling up some... I don't remember...

BH: Who pulled the cannon? Horses or men?

IB: Men and horses, I don't have a memory of it too well; I don't even have a photograph of it. It was reproduced, or it was referred to in some of the art magazines at that time and I threw them out because I never cared much for it.

BH: I'll look that up; I think I'll find it in the *Periodical Index*...

IB: I was in *Who's Who in American Art* many years ago and I think there's a reference to it there.

BH: I think the *Periodical Index of Art* will help because I'm sure I've seen it.

IB: Yes, *Wakefield Station*, I think it was reproduced in *The Arts* or one of the magazines of that period. Let's see, that's about the end of my public activity. Since that time I've been painting smaller and smaller and smaller, moving from place to place, working on a small format, not that I don't like to paint large...

BH: Now you're living in your home though and you're settled where you can work big again if you want to, can't you?

IB: Yes, I'm working big again. My present studio is not much of a studio at this point; we haven't lived here too long in this house...

BH: It's so comfortable and homelike, I thought you'd been here a long time.

IB: Well, Jill has that talent; she's a wonderful person my wife. Just for the record for all posterity she's just about the greatest--not "about," the greatest...

BH: She's a lovely person and also for the record she's a poetess and I think that's interesting...

IB: Yes, she's a very fine, beautiful writer.

IB: The Blocks have a lovely son and daughter too.

IB: So that's about the story since that time. Of course some of the colleagues and friends I knew in those days have disappeared totally from the scene, others I run into...I met Joe Vogel out here again...

BH: Oh, do you know Joe?

IB: Yes!

BH: Did you know him in New York?

IB: Yes, sure, he was on the Project.

BH: I taped him and some of these things...

IB: Yes, I know, he told me about it. Joe Vogel and then I always associate another name with Joe Vogel...

BH: Ted Gillian?

IB: I didn't know Ted Gillian. Was he in New York?

BH: Oh yes.

IB: I didn't know Ted Gillian. But there was a Seymour Fogel who was a pretty good artist.

BH: Isn't he here now?

IB: He might be.

BH: I think so, and I can't find him.

IB: If he is, I'd like to know him.

BH: I'll let you know because he's one of the names I'm trying to find.

IB: He was a very skilled artist too. I think he did something also for the Fair, I'm not sure.

BH: I have a feeling he teaches maybe...

IB: He might. Then of course there were other men like Prestopino, Gregorio Prestopino.

BH: How do you spell Prestopino?

IB: P R E S T I P I N O. I don't think there is any point in my just listing names; there were so many. And I'm sure most New Yorkers never leave New York. I remember I was telling some friends just the other evening.... I went to New York a couple of years ago, not having been there for a long, long time and I saw Moses Soyer walking along the street, and I didn't know Moses Soyer very well. We recognized each other and, after being away from New York many years, I saw this little man coming forward, looking kind of old and tired. And he looked at me and he said in his Yiddish accent, "Hello, Block, I didn't see you for a few months." You know, it was years...New Yorkers, you see, are really quite provincial; they can't imagine people going away from that city. He was on the Project too, Moses Soyer. I'd like to just mention a little bit about Jackson Pollock since he's such an important figure in American art. I had some contact with him; I knew his girlfriend at the time...his wife later, Lee Krasner.

BH: This is the first wife? Wasn't he married twice?

IB: Well I only knew Lee Krasner. I am sure he was married many times unofficially because there was a little...can I tell you a little inside info...it isn't only parroted....

BH: That artists are Bohemian, you mean?

IB: Yes. But there was a whole little nucleus of social life among the artists that I was never part of. I was on the periphery, but we would hear the reverberations, get a sense of reverberation. There was the Baroness Rebay...

BH: Do you know how to spell it?

IB: R E B A Y. Does that name mean anything?

BH: No, it doesn't.

IB: The Baroness Rebay was a friend of Peggy Guggenheim....

BH: Oh, she was a real baroness then?

IB: Yes, she was a real baroness, and she was a painter too, of sorts. Very wealthy. And she and Peggy Guggenheim used to throw these parties and they used to be in a gallery of non-objective art....

BH: Is that Peggy's Gallery?

IB: I think it was her gallery.

BH: The one where she turned the lights out and turned them on again?

IB: Oh, then you know all about it.

BH: No, I just know the story of the gallery.

IB: Well, there were all kinds of things going on. They used to throw parties and there was Jackson Pollock who

apparently made a big impression on these ladies, and they helped his career considerably. With all due respect to Abstract Expressionism, the history of it isn't as noble as one might think. There are a lot of mixed up things of a social nature that are involved.

BH: You mean that made some of them accepted and some not, or...?

IB: Well I think so, I think so. That again was a personality thing. I never heard too much about the goings on with de Kooning. He seemed to be pretty much of a quiet painter.

BH: Oh, was he?

IB: Well, he never posed as a Bohemian or intellectual. Now he is...I notice *Time Magazine* makes him appear as a real Don Juan.

BH: You were going to say something about Jackson Pollock and you didn't say it.

IB: Oh yes, Jackson Pollock, oh yes. Lee Krasner was a big wheel in the Artists Union. In fact, whenever there would be committees formed for functions, the artists would make these great speeches--Gorky, for example, would say, "What are we waiting for? There's an armory on 14th Street. Man the barricades." You know, all this silly, crazy talk would go on and then when they would have to form a committee to go to the home of whatever it was so that we weren't onto the streets, it always fell on poor Lee Krasner's shoulders. After they'd made these impassioned addresses, someone would say, "And I decline the honor of being on this committee in favor of Lee Krasner." Lee Krasner always somehow became...she became quite political, I don't mean in a narrow sense--in a broader sense....

BH: Sort of a campaign manager.

IB: A real campaign manager, yes. And she'd hear these words and I think she was partly instrumental in pushing forward Pollock.

BH: Well, don't you think most wives are?

IB: Yes, I think so.

BH: It's part of the function of the wife of a creative man.

IB: I think so. I think so.

BH: If they're really creative, they haven't time to do it themselves.

IB: So that was Pollock. He was a mural painter. I want to mention one or two colleagues of mine who I still keep in contact with who were on the Project, who I think are wonderful painters. I don't know, I may be indulging in a little subjective. One is Herman Rose (R O S E), a realist painter; he's in the Museum of Modern Art. By the way. He's a splendid artist. And another one is Joe Solmon (S O L M O N), a fine painter who has for years...since he quit the Project I believe has worked in a parimutuel as a ticket-seller. He seems to make a good living at it and manages to paint too....

BH: Is he a good painter? Does he show?

IB: Yes, he shows at many of the better galleries. I don't know who handles him...he was with ACA in New York for a while. But Joe Solmon is a splendid artist. Oh, there...you know, I could go on and on and on for hours and hours and.... Otto Bardol....

BH: Otto Bardol. What a funny name.

IB: It is a very funny name. I picked up Art International just the other day and I see he's with a big gallery. For the record I find that his name is Benz. (B E N Z), Otto Benz. How it came to be Otto Bardol I don't know.

BH: Well it certainly sounds a little more....

IB: There are so many of them--gosh I don't.... Suddenly like a filming run rapidly across my mind I can see these people and much of it is in the nature of anecdote, I don't know if it has any historical value....

BH: Well, I think they have great historical value because when we put all these things together it begins to make a picture....

IB: There was one funny scene; it was right out of a Jacques Tati film. We used to get our paychecks in this

Straubennuller Textile High School, I worked there so I didn't have to travel, but all the artists from various studios wherever they worked would gather there on a certain morning--probably Saturday morning--to pick up their paychecks and then they would go back to their studios. Theoretically they were supposed to go right back but they would go for coffee or cigarettes. They would have to theorize, do a little shopping and then get back to their work. Well, one day, after we all got our paychecks, someone passed the word on that there was great sale--the artists, most of them were dressed in a rather bedraggled way--they made quite an impressive picture. I remember Gorky with his big coat thrown across his shoulders like a prince, and his big beaten-up hat, and mustache hanging down. They all had some elegance but they were kind of aristocrats who had come to evil days. Well, this is the last anecdote....

BH: I'm sorry it is but go ahead.

IB: Well, we got word that Herne's Department Store, which is a very, very poor man's department store, was having a big sale on Panama suits--remember these white Panama....

BH: Ice cream looking....

IB: Ice cream, sort of vanilla color--I think they were selling suits for something like \$2.50, the whole suit. The only trouble was that all these suits were one size. And they had just gotten their checks and cashed them--I think one of the reasons they went to Herne's was that if you had a WPA check they would cash it for you if you bought something, so this was killing two birds with one stone. They all went there and then the following week when we came to pick up our checks there was such an assortment of artists in these Panama suits, baggy pants, long jackets, sleeves below the fingers, tall ones with suits too small, small ones with suits too big. And all these suits, it looked like a convention of some kind. Well it didn't end there, but each week you would begin to see the suits in various...paint spots, torn, and then little by little just the baggy trousers, or the jacket, or the jacket, you know, with some other trousers, and little by little you could just see the general deterioration of these Panama suits. I was talking to a friend of mine about it; he remembered it. Joe Vogel remembered the story about the Panama suits. So those were the days, they were full of promise and they did yield much when I think that these \$23 a week artists, many of them have become the important figures in world art today, it's exciting.

BH: They're the ones who caused the basis of all American art that we have.

IB: I think so, and those American Artists...how long that will remain remains to be seen, but we cannot dismiss this tremendous outburst of creative force that came, I think, directly from the Project.

BH: You shed so much light on it and I appreciate it so much, Mr. Block. I want to tell the tape that when I came this morning you had a very bad cold and you've been such a good sport; I'm sure you haven't any voice left by this time.

IB: Well, I don't know what it sounds like on the tape, but it was a joy to participate, and I have some other documents here you might be interested in looking at and if you want stats of it I'll get them for you. But we'll talk about that later.

BH: Thank you very much. I'm so grateful to you for the visit and for the material too.

IB: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

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