



Smithsonian  
*Archives of American Art*

Oral history interview with Gene Kloss, 1964  
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# Transcript

## Interview

SL: Sylvia Loomis

GK: Gene Kloss

SL: The interviewer is Mrs. Sylvia Loomis of the Santa Fe office of the Archives of American Art and the particular phase of American Art to be discussed will be that of the federal art project of the 1930s and '40s. As you were one of the artists involved in at least one of these projects, Mrs. Kloss, we would like to ask you some questions about it and about yourself. First, would you tell us where you were born and where you received your art education?

GK: I was born in Oakland, California, in 1903. I went the local schools and to the University of California, graduating in 1924 with honors in art. The following year I went to the California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco. Aside from two or three short courses at the California School of Fine Arts, in the arts and craft school, I should say. That is all of my formal education.

SL: Who were your teachers in California?

GK: The teacher of anatomy and life class was Perham Nahl and in my high senior year, the last semester at the University, he gave a seminar in etching. I had seen in his back office this big old, hundred-year-old Star Wheel press and it fascinated me and the work I had seen him do. So, there were twelve of us in this class and I was the only one that went on. With the others, it didn't take. But he allowed me to do my first little print that I brought in. He described the technique very conversationally and when I got home I couldn't get the ground to stick on my plate, it just slipped around. So, I messed up my mother's kitchen from one end to the other and I thought I'd better get a little book, which I did the next day on the campus. Two dollars How to Make an Etching. So, I went home and I made an etching. This Mr. Nahl had me print it. He inked it and I turned the wheel of the press. He looked at me and said, "If this is your first etching, you are going to be an etcher." That's all I needed and that's all I got from him. It's been years of experience and working since.

SL: When was Mr. Boynton teaching you?

GK: Mr. Ray Boynton was there at the same time and he was the one who really taught so much in design, modern feeling, color. Professor Judson, Hope Gladding, some of the others that are not very well known.

SL: How did you proceed with your art career from that point, after you left school?

GK: When I left school I was married. My husband is a writer and poet and we have worked together in the intervening years. We started out on a trip to New Mexico that year.

SL: What year was this?

GK: 1925. And we came to Taos, camped up in Taos Canyon for two weeks and in that time I did innumerable paintings and drawings and etchings. I even took my little etching press with me. We bought a sack of concrete and set it up on a stump in the woods and I printed my plates there.

SL: Oh, really, while you were camping?

GK: Yes.

SL: Isn't that wonderful!

GK: We returned to California and I had an exhibition in San Francisco and others, and it has been just that ever since, working, studying and exhibiting. Enough sales through the years to continue work, buy materials and live on. Between us, my husband and I have not made a fortune but we've been able to continue the work we both wanted.

SL: Both being creative and do your creative work at home has made a nice combination, hasn't it?

GK: Yes.

SL: Well, did you go back and forth between California and Taos for a while?

GK: Yes. We each had elderly mothers there and on their account we went back and forth. But, it was also stimulating. I had an exhibition at Gumps once and they referred to me as the artist who commuted to Taos. It was about that.

SL: I see. And how long did this go on?

GK: Well, for many years. We bought the place here about 25 years ago, this house we built, and came here just summers. Twelve years ago we came to live altogether. We sold our property in California.

SL: I see. What was the art colony like in Taos when you first came? Do you remember?

GK: It was scattered. Each artist lived in different places working independently. The chief ones were Blumenshein, Sharp, Phillips, Couse, Dunton, - they all had their own studios and were here summers. They all went away in winter and exhibited somewhere, New York, Chicago. You'd come in the spring and everybody would be greeting the artists when they'd come back.

SL: Was there much rapport among the artists at that time?

GK: They had more than I shared with them because I was younger and a woman, and there was - the Taos Art Association was in existence. And they had casual meetings. The only place to exhibit was the Harwood Gallery. Mrs. Harwood had made this institution in memory of her husband. It was a library and exhibiting gallery and the studios. There was a summer show there and all the artists gathered for that.

SL: Was Emil Bisttram here at that time or did he come later?

GK: He came in the '30s sometime, I believe.

SL: I see, it was a little later.

GK: I was so interested in the country, the people, and I didn't know the artists too well. So, I don't remember any particular ones.

SL: Well, were you still doing etchings or did you work in any other media?

GK: From the beginning I worked in etching, oil, and watercolors.

SL: So that you were doing these three types of art work right along?

GK: Yes, yes.

SL: How did you get involved in this first federal art project. Do you remember?

GK: Just everybody was. I don't remember the announcement of it. There was a meeting at the La Fonda Hotel. All the artists came and someone told us about it and everyone was so enthusiastic that they all must be in it.

SL: Do you remember who the supervisor or who was in charge of that first meeting?

GK: No, I do not. I'm sorry.

SL: I think that was the one that Gus Baumann and John Gaw Meem - I think they were on that first committee because I have interviewed them and they said something about going out to LaFonda and inviting the artists to participate in this project, which was the Public Works of Art Project Region 13. Well, if you don't remember about Gus Baumann then you probably didn't have any very close supervision during that period.

GK: No. I think that was the idea, that the artist's enthusiasm and interest seemed to be adequate, and everybody worked very hard. I decided that I would do nine etchings with thirty five prints of each and they would be distributed to public places.

SL: Yes. Were you also involved in the WPA art project that came later under Vernon Hunter?

GK: Yes, yes, I was. I did three or four etchings with a larger edition of fifty each. Then I did paintings in oil and in watercolor. I don't remember how many.

SL: Do you know what happened to these prints and paintings that you did?

GK: Just some, but they went to galleries, museums. Lots of them went to Washington for the offices. Years later in visiting at Mesa Verde one summer or it was late in the fall, and they told us at the museum where we were supposed to register that the guide tours were over and you could just ride around and we couldn't go through

any of the ruins. Well, behind the man who was talking at the museum was one of my etchings that I had done on this project. So, I introduced myself, which I wouldn't have done ordinarily, and said I just wanted to draw and I wouldn't walk off with any parts of the ruins. So, he said it would be all right if I went under a rope, or over a fence. So, we went down to the ruins. They had a collection of them there, at Mesa Verde - Mr. Nusbaum, you see, was there for quite a while.

SL: Yes, I know he was in charge of that project and he also was of the Public Works of Art Project.

GK: But, the paintings went into hospitals, veterans hospitals, and public places of that nature, too.

SL: I remember you said something about one of your etchings I believe that went to the president of the United States. Do you remember what period that was?

GK: That was in '41.

SL: So that must have been under the WPA auspices. Then I suppose you had complete freedom of expression and a chance to experiment as much as you wanted to?

GK: Yes, entirely. I had just recently become interested in aquatint. I had Mr. Lumbston's book, an Englishman, on the art of etching and he describes various techniques in that and the aquatint sounded very interesting to me. It described that Dame Laura Knight had gotten ordinary deal box, stretched some muslin across the top, and put her plate in the bottom and put on an aquatint ground in rosin thereby. I thought if Dame Laura Knight could do it, I could do it. So I went to the local grocery store and got an apple box, went to Penney's and got some muslin, and stretched it over the top. I put in my polished copper plate in the bottom of this box, and I was down on my knees pounding the top of it to let the rosin sift through the muslin onto the plate, when there was a knock at the door. Opened it and there was our neighbor of the Indian Pueblo, Joe Sun Hawk and his six-year-old boy. He looked at this and he said, "This looks like a ceremony. We should have a song. Have you a tom-tom?" I said, "No, but we have a gourd rattle." "That's good!" So, he rattled the rattle and sang the Indian song while I pounded the aquatint. I daresay that was the only aquatint ground laid to the tune of an Indian song! I did a sketch from the window there showing the distance and the big mountain with the snowy ground and dark sky, a very simple subject and shortly after that, while we were in that same place, this project started. Well, I was given the opportunity to experiment with this medium and I had just acquired a new press so I could do large plates. I had heard of this press that had belonged to a company near Taos who did greeting cards of the Southwest. Ralph Pierson was there and he had this large etching press. They had gone off to Spain and left their place and were selling this press for one hundred dollars. So, I bought it. It was one of the original group made by the Sturges Company in Chicago.

SL: That's this one right here, isn't it?

GK: Yes. Which Joseph Pennell had one. There are six more.

SL: Oh my!

GK: In his books, he says that's the best press ever made. Better than anything you can get in Europe. It has printed many thousands of etchings since.

SL: Yes, I should imagine. Was your aquatint experiment successful?

GK: Yes. It turned out all right.

SL: So, you went on with that technique?

GK: Yes. Shortly after that I did other plates. There was this one, "Eve of the Green Corn Ceremony," that had won a prize in California, the Eyre medal in Philadelphia, was reproduced in Art News Print magazine, went into this exhibit in Paris called "Three Centuries of Art in the United States." They had Blumenschein, Howard Cook and myself from this area. They had a picture of our Ranchos (de Taos) Church in the architecture section.

SL: I see.

GK: Since then, I've been doing it in combination with drypoint and etching, sometimes all three mediums.

SL: Want to tell about getting the telegram when you won that watercolor award?

GK: Oh yes. It was typical Taos. We had no telephones and everyone was very friendly, so going to town one day, walking down by the grocery store the screen door opened and Mr. Boyer, the proprietor, called out, "A telegram for you, Mrs. Kloss!" So, here was a telegram from the Philadelphia Watercolor Society that this etching had received the Eyre gold medal.

SL: That was, as I remember, in 1936?

GK: Yes.

SL: This is just a little technical point, but during that period were you in Taos permanently, or were you still going back and forth?

GK: We were still going back and forth. We were here most of the time.

SL: That didn't interfere?

GK: When I went back to California, I went on working in my various mediums, with Taos subject matter.

SL: But you still belonged to this area project in New Mexico, rather than the California one?

GK: Oh, I was here most of the time during the project, yes.

SL: So, you were allowed to go to another state to do the work, as long as you came back?

GK: Yes, yes.

SL: I think this is the first time that I've known of anyone that did leave for any length of time.

GK: I see, yes. I went in space, but actually my work went right on with the Taos subject matter.

SL: I see that there would be plenty of it that you could work out.

GK: I had a press there. This one was so superior to the one I had there that I had another one purchased from the same company in Chicago delivered to Berkeley. So I still have it there. I had to have one at either end of the line.

SL: Yes, I see. So it wouldn't hold up your work at all.

GK: What was interesting about the project was the fact that they stressed the regional idea. That here was a country that was so different. It's changed since then but it had very decided characteristics in its three peoples, the Indian, the Spanish, and the Anglo. The Indian prevailing, and no where else in the country do you find these primitive people living as they had been for centuries. That's what was so interesting because they are much a part of nature...in their work, in their ceremonies, in their ideas...it was all a piece and it offered wonderful material to an artist because of that. Our ideas, our religion are things we talk about, but there is little to depict as subject matter in art. Whereas they have their ceremonies at dawn, at dusk, at dark, in firelight, outdoors, and it is very dramatic and very meaningful.

SL: They bring in animal forms, too, so much.

GK: Yes, they do.

SL: How do you feel about the other cultural group in this area, the Spanish Americans?

GK: They were most interesting then, too. They have changed also. Ever since the war, when all of them went to other parts of the world and came back, things have changed since then. They all have cars now and televisions and that is begetting a general quality and characteristic to people.

SL: What were they like before?

GK: They were isolated, you see. Their houses were ingeniously built of the materials of the country, the adobe bricks. The vegas were beams of the local wood, and a few door frames and window frames they could make themselves, buy the glass, and they had a house. They cultivated their fields. You'd see them threshing with goats going around and around in a circle. They had their own social affairs, dance halls, and they were always so happy and singing, guitars and singing of their Spanish songs. Wherever you went there was courtesy and good nature and simplicity of living. They had their - they were all Catholics of course - and their church was the center of each community. They built the church themselves. They kept it up themselves, the women plastered it and kept it neat and clean and attractive inside. Then many of them were Penitentes which were interesting, but they have almost disappeared. That was a brotherhood that came over from Old Spain and they believed in self-inflicted torture for the atonement of sins. They had rather gruesome rites, I guess. We never tried to see anything we shouldn't.

SL: I saw that you had one etching of a Penitente procession and I wondered if you had gotten close enough to

see one.

GK: I have used only things that everybody could see. I have one night scene that we saw when we lived right near a morada and we had seen once before a processional at night. We were awakened by this weird minor song accompanied by a little fife. It was a windy night. The trees were blowing. There was a moon going in and out of dark clouds and a group came up the road with a torch. Their voices grew louder and then they went into the morada, the little chapel, and were there awhile and then came out singing again and went down the road. It was an all-night service for someone who had just died.

SL: Oh! That wasn't the Good Friday ceremony then?

GK: But, later on Good Friday we saw the fires near us, and they sent one of their number down by our little house with a ratchet - the devil chaser that went clackety-clack around - to admonish us to stay put.

SL: Oh, is that right?

GK: Yes. So we didn't see anything but I could see these fires.

SL: I knew that they were very careful to keep any non-believers away or anyone that was not part of the parish during those ceremonies.

GK: Yes. But, they also had their simple natural side. During the Holy Week they would have their little processions to the Cross about half a mile from the church with a little procession and kneeling at the stations, singing, prayer, all in a minor key. The Indian is very virile. We used to hear them singing on horse back as they passed here.

SL: Did you do many studies of the Penitentes?

GK: No. Very few of them.

SL: I wondered if you ever did that night scene that you were speaking about.

GK: Yes, I did that. That was the one that was in the group that went to the President's office...in that Art Week show, it's called Penitente Fires. And then I have one called Taos Mountain and the Penitentes. It's of the major morada that we can see from here. It's just a rooftop.

SL: Is this the Taos Morada or is this the one at Talpa?

GK: This is Taos over here.

SL: You can see it from here?

GK: Yes.

SL: Well, I know your interpretations of this part of the country have gone all over the country.

GK: I respected their customs and their ways, and I didn't do anything that they didn't allow us to see. I didn't draw at the time, but I would remember it and at the pueblo or a morada I could go and draw on a non-ceremonial day to use the correct background for the ceremony that I remembered in essence.

SL: Then you'd put in the figures and the action later on?

GK: Yes.

SL: Well, it's fortunate that you were able to interpret these and to have your etchings spread around as much as they have been. I remember some of the first things I saw when I came here fifteen years ago were some of your etchings.

GK: Well, it's unique subject matter and it's meaningful and significant.

SL: As you say, it was part of the program of the regional art.

GK: Now times have changed and the people are becoming more like the people in other parts of the country and so is the art.

SL: Yes. I think it is unfortunate.

GK: The artists who come here now, most of them don't go out sketching and they don't even go to the Indian

ceremonies. They are interested in the current, international style of abstraction. And to me there is such a paucity there. It's a very integral part of all art, design, color. The special language of art, but without the subject matter you are denying yourself life, and here that it is fashionable all I can do now is to use what I can and remember the past. There is some interest in keeping it because it is a thing of the past. It's...gone.

SL: Would you like to make further comments on what you feel about the current phase of art versus the art of thirty years ago, during the art projects?

GK: Well, I think, as you say, it is on its way out because everything changes, and there is nowhere they can go. They've reached a blind alley.

SL: Do you think there will be a revival of the more regional type of art?

GK: Well, I hope so but they'll have to start training. The thing is that this has gone on so long that the young people have not had any training in drawing. They have been taught to express themselves in blurbs and blobs of color and a certain amount of design, of course, but without the training in art and drawing, they are lacking. But I'm sure many of them are having training in the National Academy school, for instance, and other places.

SL: You said something about the National Academy of Art, and what they are attempting to do at the present time to show more of the realistic type painting again. Or, at least to exhibit some of the current work of the Academicians. As a National Academician, would you like to tell us more about that?

GK: Well, they had a questionnaire sent out to the members. They wanted to know their opinion on what to do to become of more influence in current art world, and I suggested they have more exhibits. But I don't believe they are planning to. This exhibit, where we met in Santa Fe, was the work of the state members of the National Academy. There are eight of us. Mr. Van Soelen has just passed away. So there are seven.

SL: Did this group initiate that show or...I mean, did you suggest it?

GK: No. It was Mr. Forrest's idea.

SL: I see...at the Museum.

GK: They felt that it was time to honor their state members of the Academy with a special show.

SL: It was a wonderful idea, certainly.

GK: So, each one was asked to give five pictures. But it had, you see, subject matter, all of it in varying degrees of realism and the other elements of the language of art.

SL: Yes. I also was interested in what you said about the method of the - I don't know if it was the University of California, but one group in California - how they selected their jury.

GK: Oh, that was the open art gallery and they had nine members of the jury, three conservative, three progressive, and three modern. And the artists whose picture passed one of these juries was admitted to the show. It was an attempt to be broad and to take in all phases of art.

SL: How recently was this?

GK: Oh, this was many years ago.

SL: Oh! I think it might be a very good thing to follow these days.

GK: Yes. The jury system now has become so often a one-man jury and he had just one idea, or they'll have two, but there is so much work now. When the museum was started in Santa Fe, Edgar Hewett set the policy and it was to be open to all practicing artists in New Mexico, but it got to the point that they had to inaugurate a jury system because there were so many painters. When Mr. Hewett started that he took it for granted that all artists were trained for a lifetime of work. They had studied, they intended to study all their lives. Now, we have Sunday painters and people who...

SL: ...who think they are but aren't. There are plenty of those.

GK: Yes. So, I was on the last hanging committee before they had juries and John Sloan was the chairman. We came there and he said, "Listen folks, this isn't an art exhibit, this is a fair. Look at these hundreds of pictures. Everybody is showing. Let's have some fun out of it. Now, these abstraction boys, they've gotten used to coming and seeing all their work in the first two alcoves. They take a look at that and they go home." He said, "Supposing we hang it all over the building and make them hunt for it." So, we did and it was thought out as to

color and relation in hanging, but mixed as to style.

SL: Do you remember what year that was? I think he died in about 1950.

GK: Yes. It was just a little before that.

SL: Because I came in '49 and I remember meeting him when I first came. So it must have been just before that. I know I was appalled at the open door policy at the museum and...because of the...some of the...work.

GK: But it worked in the early days, which shows how things have changed.

SL: But, some of the work was just appallingly bad at that time. If anybody could get in then anybody could be hung. Well, there are one or two more questions as far as the federal art projects were concerned. Do you know what the reactions of your fellow artists were to these projects? Did you have enough association with them to know how they felt about it?

GK: I just have the recollection of very great enthusiasm, of gratitude to the...

SL: Do you think that carried through all the way? I mean, right from the beginning to the end?

GK: There were a few artists who didn't work, who didn't share in that conscientious return for good treatment, but that's true anywhere, and a few of them were a little stubborn about accepting the regional idea. I remember this courthouse here that did the murals. They drew straws and Victor Higgins got first place and he insisted on doing Moses the Lawgiver because it was a courthouse. They said that this wasn't regional and that was the only argument I remember that they had. Otherwise things seemed to be most harmonious. But he had his way. He did Moses the Lawgiver and the others did local subject matter.

SL: Oh, is that right? You said something about either a painting or this mural by Emil Bisttram that caused quite a bit of comment at the time, because he was more advanced than most of the other painters in the area.

GK: But he was not so much far advanced, except in method. That is, he was the first one to do abstraction, and he had an abstraction in the Harwood summer show. The only one, and people were very puzzled by it. It had no subject matter.

SL: I see. You said that the person who was in charge of the gallery said that she wished he'd take it down.

GK: Yes. She was tired of explaining it to people, what it was or what it wasn't.

SL: I see. Well, what would you say was the reaction of the public to the federal art projects?

GK: I think most people were very favorable towards it.

SL: Do you think it helped the general public to appreciate art?

GK: I think it stimulated interest in art, yes. Because people in outlying places who had never seen anything had murals in their post office and received some of these easel pictures or prints to hang in their schools and in public buildings. I think it is one thing that started the public interest in art.

SL: Do you think it stimulated the sales of the work of American artists?

GK: I think so. It would go together.

SL: Yes, and the fact that it sort of brought art to a level where they realized that it was possible to buy and you didn't have to be a wealthy person to have the work of some of the American artists.

GK: Yes, that's true.

SL: Well now, if the government would attempt another subsidy of the arts, what form do you think it should take?

GK: Possibly a similar form. The trend has been towards these large exhibits, national in scope. The artist has a right to submit. He has to send his work, pay an entry fee, they have a jury of one or two members, and they take a very small percentage of this large amount that has been sent in. It seems to me that if something could be arranged to have more exhibits with less complications, it would benefit the artists.

SL: Less competition, too, maybe?

GK: Yes. And it might take the form of competition. I hadn't thought about it but it might take the form of a



certain amount of competition because there is so much work being done. Now, those of us who were on the first project were all professionals, even though like myself, hadn't been working very long. I intended to work all my life at it and study hard and this was an impetus. But so many people just do a little. As one woman said, she was taking up painting the way other old ladies took up knitting, and she said so. So, that the field is just cluttered. There is a certain amount of needed weeding out.

SL: It would be kind of difficult now to establish a standard by which real art could be judged.

GK: One way that you could have that develop is to go back to the idea of regional work, is to have a government project for American, for American people, telling something of America itself and not the international style of abstract non-objective work. That alone would eliminate, wouldn't it, the ones who are not thinking about their country, nature or the people, or the future?

SL: Yes. And still there could be some things that are very original, such as Marin's work.

GK: Oh yes, and by all means it should be progressive! Fortunately today that's what abstraction has done for the artists, taught them to think in such terms. It is one element of all good works of art, always has been, and for a while they forgot that - they were too much engrossed in illustrating and giving the scene for the scene itself, the literary qualities rather than the special art qualities. So that has given the lesson, but it is not an end in itself, in my way of thinking.

SL: Yes. It's gone to the other extreme now, and I feel that the pendulum must swing back now, so that there will be more subject matter.

GK: It would seem natural if the government did it, to re-stress the idea of subject.

SL: With the regional quality...

GK: It's invigorating, it's right.

SL: Yes. Particularly when...

GK: Well now, here are these things you are accumulating and what is interesting is the art quality and the subject matter have become more or less historical, some of it. And after all, we are human beings and we are part of history so why not depict it? Whereas if you gathered the artwork without subject matter, some of it would be superior to others, interesting to artists and to others who enjoy color and design and pigment qualities, but no record!

SL: That's true.

GK: It is, as I say, limiting by itself.

SL: I think so too.

GK: But, I often work on my things...I have them sitting around upside down. My husband came through the studio not long ago and said, "Did you happen to know that picture you were working on was upside down?" (Laughter) You can see the quality of design better without the subject interfering.

SL: Yes, you were conscious of the design.

GK: In my etchings I like them to be viewable even across the room even if they are rather small in size. They should have good design so that they make an interesting patterns across the room. They can be looked at close, even with a magnifying glass, if you want to see the line work.

SL: Those are some of the standards by which art used to be judged. And lately, I don't know what standards they use, except just an immediate emotional reaction to a splash of color or...that's just about all. There is even very little sense of proportion of the relationship of one area to another, and even that is also often gone.

GK: Well, there are all these actual happenings of small children and other people getting work accepted.

SL: Well, it just shows how ridiculous it is, I think.

GK: Yes. Of course, nature is full of - through the microscope - of fascinating patterns that is all there, but what distinguishes a man from a pattern in nature or a plant or an animal? It's his brain, his mind and his soul, if you want to call it, that you can't define. And what makes a man should also make his art. The quality of his brain to understand his fellow man and relate events, and choose the significance of events and depict them with significance in his work. Personally I see more and more of the - my work can be more interpretive, less

representational because you can't help but grow with your times and this interest is the very interest of abstraction. And you change along with the times, but you aren't getting anywhere if you don't use that subject matter somewhere.

SL: I feel that too. I feel that it is a great loss - that a whole art era is dropped away.

GK: Yes. That's true. Yes.

SL: That when we look back on this particular period, I think all we'll see is chaos.

GK: Yes, yes.

SL: I don't believe that civilization has gone that far yet.

GK: The odd thing is that in reading art history, you'll hear about some artist who was out of his time. He was ahead of his time or he stood out because he was different from the average artist. Today that is not allowed. You are supposed to be one of that group. You are ostracized. You are not passing a jury if you are not like the crowd. They should remember that in the past it was the odd ones that stood out.

SL: What has been your reaction lately to current exhibitions and so forth? I mean, have you been accepted as readily as you were?

GK: No, I have not been. As a jury the people have changed and just as I was saying...unless it has the "new look," out you go. You can tell so easily the attitude of the jurors if you see a show because they have a certain look. Now, in etching, they are dripping acid around and making splotches of black and white, just as in color, and Dole Reed told me in jurying at the California Etchers Society show a few years ago that there were his and mine and about six other etchings - black and whites - with subject matter, the rest were non-objective in black and white or color. That they were all that type. So that the jury took one look and if you've got subject matter, out you go. They are so narrow. Now, the conservative artist likes good abstraction. They'll pass it if they are a juror. Whereas modern (so called) are much narrower.

SL: Less liberal than the people they are judging.

GK: They study each other. They say to the ones using subject matter that they copy nature. Well, they copy each other!

SL: I think that's worse. At least if you copy nature you go to the source.

GK: It's no particular personal feeling against one or any group that I have, but I feel with you that we are losing time, and it's the wrong trend, that the artists are denying themselves living and the portraying of life...and their own enjoyment and the public too.

SL: What was that that you said, that you quoted from John Canaday, the art critic for the Times, wasn't it?

GK: Yes, the New York Times. Canaday is the art editor and he reproduced an article from the Paris paper, apropos of the Paris Biennial in '58, I believe it was. They said that the public was ready to reject the whole movement of abstraction because they were tired of it. They had this international show and the work looked very much the same whether it was done there in Paris, in Toyko, in Buenos Aires, in San Francisco or New York. There was nothing different. And Mel Rowe, in opening this exhibit, said, "We must have a neo-figurative art. It is time to return to the figure in a new way." So it is a challenge to the artist. It would be nice if the government could, in some way, become impersonal enough to inaugurate something to have that regeneration of figurative art. Would have to have big people to do it.

SL: Yes. When you think that all of these things have to be administered by people.

GK: Yes. But there is no doubt that all this controversy, all these strange works, these huge things with one little dot or one all black, or a dish drainer tacked on a canvas for a picture - all these things have made people aware of art. They talk about it. They hear about it. So, that they have been stimulating, and you can say that is its contribution.

SL: It has been the subject of a great deal of controversy lately. But it is art? That's the main thing. That's a big question, and I do think it is a very serious one today.

GK: Yes, it is serious.

SL: And particularly when there are people who are disciplined artists that have spent their entire lives at it and have done a great deal of experimentation, and then just to have this all discarded. I think is just terrible.

GK: Yes. In looking over material by you, I say it made me feel rather nostalgic, seeing all these letters from the Carnegie Institute and the New York Public Library, the Metropolitan Museum, the Boston Museum and other places, that were buying these works, commenting on them, appreciating them, encouraging you and you were a part of the art movement. You held your place very well - any true artist is altogether modest, forevermore. I'm like Michelangelo who said, when he was dying at the tender age of 89, he regretted but two things; that he hadn't spent more time for the salvation of his soul, and that he was dying just when he was learning the A,B,C's of his art.

SL: Oh, really!

GK: So, the older you grow, if you're serious, why the less you think you know, because your idea keeps growing higher and higher, but you do want to be a part and to have your work accepted at least. But to have this...just a cutting off of everything that has subject matter by so many, is stupid.

SL: I know. When I was in New York last November, I went to the Museum of Modern Art and saw an exhibition of Hans Hofmann's work. I had had a few classes with him in Greenwich Village in New York years ago and I remember then what a strict disciplinarian he was. His work then had some subject matter and it was rather abstract, but terrific discipline in design, and here was this whole gallery just full of Hoffman's tremendous things with just two or three swipes of color on it, and it just made me sick. Here is a man who has spent his entire life at it and I just couldn't believe he was enjoying this, but that he had to go along with the rest of the crowd.

GK: New York has apparently become that way - they are really very provincial.

SL: I think so, too.

GK: They call us provincial out here, but here we have our galleries, and people come from all over the world. If I don't have any patronage from some of the large exhibits that turn down your subject matter material, at least the public takes etchings and paintings all over the world, and they have their ideas about them and they are very pronounced. There is that direct contact to meet the people directly here, and it is all very interesting and all types of people.

SL: We have some excellent galleries here in Taos, too. I was looking at some of them today.

GK: Yes. And all types of work.

SL: Yes, a great variety, but they are good, or were in at least the two galleries that I went into. I looked in the windows of some others that I didn't care for much, but there again you have all kinds of people who call themselves artists.

GK: Well, Taos has become known as an art center and so this is a free country, people can do anything they want. They come and rent space. They bring in artists from all over the country and start a gallery. It is really embarrassing there are so many of them now.

SL: Yes, there are. Are there any other comments that you would like to make on the days of the federal art project or since then? I see you have a few notes there - maybe there are some things that we've missed in going over that period. I know you were such a prolific producer of art...

GK: Well, no, I can't think of anything more. I don't produce so fast anymore. When you were young and energetic and not so critical you can turn things out more. (Laughter) I was noticing in my notes...you were speaking of school days, and I was thinking of the difference in this country. It is harder to do regional work now because things have changed and become more standardized, but around San Francisco Bay as a youngster nature was more predominant than now - the ferry boats, and they even had cannons on the Golden Gate to protect the city from the enemy.

SL: Is that right!

GK: When you think...now I can remember when they first allowed the automobiles on the ferryboats and they allowed four automobiles on each ferry and these ferries went every forty minutes and that took care of the automobile traffic. Now we have the bridge with these lanes of cars going day and night, and there was the ocean and the woods and things were very different. Now, it is the same just everywhere.

SL: Yes. I think that is a very interesting point that you've brought out about the regional character that was encouraged during the period of the federal art project. I knew that they did do this but I had thought of it...

GK: That was the first idea. They said, "You aren't required to" They were very broad in allowing the artist to express himself in his own way because, after all, that's what an artist is. They are very understanding that way, but they hoped that you would do regional work. As this paper of the New York Times tells about that, that the

artists, although they weren't producing masterpieces, perhaps they were discovering their country.

SL: Historically also that was important, because it was right after that the war started and since the war there has been this tremendous change.

GK: There was a big change, yes.

SL: And if it hadn't been caught at that period, it might have been lost always.

GK: In Taos you wound through the sage and came to the plaza and that was it. Now we have a drive-in, banners and all the automobiles and junk everywhere. It was certainly a paradise in the early days.

SL: Yes, I imagine so. I just wish I had come to New Mexico earlier - I regret the years that I missed.

GK: Of course, another government project would be to make people aware of their country a little more. On our cream bottle, milk bottles from the Albuquerque Creamland Dairy, it says, "Keep America Beautiful." If everybody would keep doing that it would help. What they mean is, don't throw this carton along the road.

SL: As I notice, there is quite a campaign now, not to litter and to try to keep the country beautiful.

GK: It seems to me that that goes together and if they could make the artists aware of it. Most artists are interested in their work and hanging it on walls somewhere and that is that. If a government project was to sponsor this idea of the regional, and make them look around them and see the subject matter.

SL: Well, this has been a very interesting interview and we are very grateful to you for these papers that you say that we can have and particularly these beautiful prints that you did while you were on the federal art project.

GK: Well, it seems to me that it is the ideal place for them to rest.

SL: Yes. It is a permanent repository, so you know that it will be appreciated, and that it will be available for research in later years and also at the present time, along with this survey that we are making right now on the impact of the federal art projects on America during that period.

GK: Well, personally I would repeat that it was a very pronounced help to me in my career because the government subsidy alone gave it dignity and importance, and their free attitudes towards the artist in their free expression, I should say, and pulling the most out of one to do your best technically, and the amount, and the result of speeding you on your way in your creative work.

SL: Yes. The more I talk with artists, the more I appreciate what was done during that period, too.

GK: Yes, yes. It is interesting to have it brought up this way because it goes into the past into the dim and dark ages, and the artist is always looking ahead. People say to me, "Oh, how can you bear to sell that, and part with it?" Well, it is always the next one that you are interested in.

SL: I think when they do pause and look back, sometimes it is also very helpful.

GK: Yes, yes, it is.

SL: Thank you again, Mrs. Kloss.

GK: Thank you for coming. I enjoyed having you and I give my best wishes to your organization.

SL: Thank you again.

END OF INTERVIEW