



Smithsonian  
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Oral history interview with Sidney  
Laufman, 1965 Jan. 29

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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Sidney Laufman on January 29, 1965. The interview took place in Woodstock, New York, and was conducted by Joseph S. Trovato for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's New Deal and the Arts project.

The original transcript was edited. In 2022 the Archives created a more verbatim transcript. Additional information from the original transcript that seemed relevant was added in brackets and given an -Ed. attribution. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

## Interview

JOSEPH TROVATO: This interview with Mr. Sidney Laufman is taking place at his house, Woodstock, New York, January 29, 1965. [Recorder stops, restarts.]

Mr. Laufman, it was awfully good of you to reschedule our interview. But I'm glad that we have finally come together as we are anxious to get on this tape your recollections of the—of your involvement in the—on the projects of the '30s—the Federal Art Projects of the '30s. Let me say, off the bat, that several months ago when I interviewed Arnold Blanch that he said to me, You must go as soon as you can to interview Mr. Laufman because he did a most interesting project down in Florida, I think he said. And so, of course, I'm anxious to have us get at this. But before we do I want first of all to ask you, Mr. Laufman, where were you born?

SIDNEY LAUFMAN: I was born in Cleveland, Ohio.

JOSEPH TROVATO: And where were you educated?

SIDNEY LAUFMAN: I went to the Cleveland public schools, and the high school. I went to the Cleveland School of Art for a short time. And then I went to Chicago Art Institute and to the New York Art Students League.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see. Can you tell us what it was that sparked your interest in painting and in the arts? Was there some particular thing that you can remember that, you know—that got you started?

SIDNEY LAUFMAN: There was nothing whatever. All I can remember is that I always wanted to draw from the time I was big enough to hold a pencil. And as a matter of fact, in Cleveland, Ohio when I was a boy there wasn't—there was no museum there. There was no place to see any works of art. And there wasn't—I never went—I think there was an art gallery, but I was never inside of it. I mean, a commercial art gallery. One. So, that I never really saw any art until I went to Chicago when I was 20 years old.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see. [Recorder stops, restarts.] Mr. Laufman, is there anything else you wish to add in regards to your art training?

SIDNEY LAUFMAN: Well, when I left the Art Students League after one year that I studied with Robert Henri, I felt as though I didn't want to go on studying with anybody else. And my wife and I went abroad, and we lived in Paris for 13 years.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Oh, for 13 years? That's—

SIDNEY LAUFMAN: Yes, we didn't—we came back two or three times for when I had exhibitions here. But outside of that we lived regularly abroad. And I really didn't feel as though I could work in this country. But we finally came back, and I started working here. I never had any inclination to go back.

[00:05:02]

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see. Well now, you say that at the time that you felt that you couldn't work in this country. Now, first of all tell us, what was the time, and can you also tell us—if

you can give us anything as to the reason why you felt that you could not work in this country?

SIDNEY LAUFMAN: Well, my—it was in September of 1920 that we went abroad. And we went to Paris. And there, through a very fortunate circumstance, I became acquainted with a Mexican artist by the name of Angel Zarraga—that's Z-A-double R-A-G-A—who was very encouraging, and suggested that winter that I go down to the South of France and do some landscapes. Down there I met a group of French artists, and we became very friendly. And when I came back to Paris and showed my paintings to Zarraga, he was very enthusiastic about them and wanted to show them to a critic friend of his, Louis Vauxcelles, who was the editor of *L'Amour de l'Art*. And Louis Vauxcelles immediately suggested I ought to have an exhibition and he would introduce me to one of the French dealers. Which he did. And I had my first exhibition in Paris in that way, through very good sponsorship.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yes.

SIDNEY LAUFMAN: And it was—I felt so much that my career was being built in France.

JOSEPH TROVATO: It was launched there at any rate.

SIDNEY LAUFMAN: Yes, and that I was working there, and I was very happy in my work there.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see, I see.

SIDNEY LAUFMAN: So that I didn't feel as though—and I knew nothing very much about working in the United States because I'd only been going to art classes over here. I had never been on my own in this country. And that's the reason that I didn't feel as though I wanted to come back.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well that answers my question. Before we get onto our main topic, I would like to ask you—well, I want to ask you whether you have devoted yourself entirely to painting most of your life? Or whether you have had to turn to other means for earning a livelihood?

SIDNEY LAUFMAN: No, I never did anything but paint from the time I started to work as an artist. And the only time I did some teaching, I was an instructor of painting at the Art Students League, and also, for a little while, at Brandeis University. But I never did any other work outside of straight fine arts painting.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Very good. Now, I know you're—I was going to say, I know you chiefly as a landscape painter. Now, would I be right in this? I have seen some of your work and what I recall is landscape painting. Do you call yourself chiefly a landscape painter?

SIDNEY LAUFMAN: Well, I would be called a landscape painter, but I have done a great deal of still life and portraits. But chiefly, I'm known as a landscape artist.

[00:09:57]

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yes, mm-hmm [affirmative]. A little earlier when we were discussing your art training, you mentioned Robert Henri. I would be interested in getting your opinion as to Henri as a teacher. Of course, he was a most—as we all know, a very influential teacher, and you would know this more than I. Let me ask you, what do you think of Henri as a teacher?

SIDNEY LAUFMAN: Oh, I thought he was magnificent. He was—mainly, I would say, inspiring. You'd work in his class, and you'd be in a sweat all the time because he would key you up to such a pitch that you felt as though you just had to do something that was good. And if you didn't, you were in terrible depths of despair. Or if you got a pat on the back from him, why you were just walking on air. But he was, I think, a wonderful teacher. That's the reason I felt that after that year in New York I never wanted to do any more studying. I felt as though I had to go out and be on my own. Which is the thing that he, I think, encouraged in his students.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see. Would you say that Henri was your main teacher? Was there anybody else who exerted some influence on you? In your beginnings, of course.

SIDNEY LAUFMAN: As a teacher I don't think there was anybody else that had any real

influence.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well now, Mr. Laufman, I would like to have us get back to the original question as to your part in relation to the Federal Art Projects and in particular, I'd like to have you tell us about the one that Arnold Blanch had mentioned to me. If we could begin with it?

SIDNEY LAUFMAN: Well, before I answer your question, let me tell you about how I first heard about the Federal Art Project. It was in 1934, just after I got back from living abroad. And I was talking to Mr. Barr—Alfred Barr, of the Museum of Modern Art. And he had been looking at my paintings and he asked me if I would be interested in working with the government. That is, if the government paid me a certain amount every month, would I be willing to turn over my work to the government? I said, I would be delighted. And that was my first inkling that there was such a thing as a government art project developing.

But I didn't get into a project until 1935 when Mr. Bruce invited me to go down to Florida on a government project that was called the FERA. That, I think, was the Florida Emergency Relief Agency or something of that kind. Or Emergency Rehabilitation, I don't remember just what FERA was supposed to mean. But that was the title of it, the FERA. Florida was in a very bad way in 1935. They were in terrible depression. And Key West, where I was supposed to go, was even worse than any other part of Florida.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see.

[00:15:00]

SIDNEY LAUFMAN: There was a special administration in Key West, and they—it was an art project. I think that the artists were sent down there with the idea that it might encourage tourists to go to Key West. Half of Key West at that time was on relief, or more than half. Everybody was on some kind of a government project. The navy yard that had been active at one time down there had closed down. The cigar factories had left Key West. There was no work for people.

And the group of painters that were sent down there, we were about seven or eight painters. That was—it had already been going for a certain time when I got down there in May of 1935. And some of the men who had been there, had been there for several months, and had left. But they did murals in some of the public buildings in Key West, even in some of the bars. Any place that a wall was offered I think they would do a mural. But what I did is just paint my regular kind of easel paintings. But I didn't do any—didn't try to do any big oil paintings because this was in summer and Key West was terribly hot and it was a matter of working outdoors, so I just did oils on paper. And they had a little art gallery that was established in Key West, and we would bring in what we did, and they were exhibited at the art gallery. And of course, there were quite a group of artists there, eight or ten. And it was a hardworking and enjoyable experience. I enjoyed it very much.

We—I stayed there until September when that terrible 1935 hurricane hit Matecumbe Key, which was just a little ways up the Keys from Key West. And a group of the Bonus Marchers had been settled by the government on Matecumbe Key to help build a road there, and several hundred of them were killed in that hurricane. But that was the end of the project as far as I was concerned.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Will you tell us, Mr. Laufman, whether there were other projects going on, in addition to—at Key West—in addition to the mural projects that you mentioned and the easel projects that you also mentioned in which you yourself took part?

SIDNEY LAUFMAN: Yes, there was an effort to get as many people as possible in Key West to work because, as I said, practically half of the people in Key West were on relief. There was one man down there who had charge of landscape decoration—or architecture, or landscape design.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yes.

SIDNEY LAUFMAN: He would lay out gardens, plant trees, and give the people of Key West that kind of work.

[00:20:00]

There was also a kind of a music project that one of my friends, George White, had charge of. That was really just a recreational project. But there were other government projects down there. The man who had charge of that—we called him Gilly [ph], I can't remember his name now [the administrator, Mr. Gilford -Ed.]. But he became almost the czar of Key West. He had practically everybody on his payroll.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see.

SIDNEY LAUFMAN: And he had complete charge of all the government projects in Key West. The man in charge of the Florida project was a man by the name of Julius Stone. Well, I don't know just exactly what other projects there were around Florida, but my understanding was that there were a great many.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see. Do you recall any other projects?

SIDNEY LAUFMAN: I should add that there was also some writers. There was some kind of a writer's project down there because I remember Elmer Davis having been down there, and I think he was on one of the projects. And a friend of mine, who was a novelist, by the name of Ed Fisher, who was also on one of the government projects.

[The prostitutes in Key West were having a hard time. Business was terrible for them, too. So, they were put on the payroll as entertainers. But that might have been a story made up by disgruntled Republicans. -Ed.]

JOSEPH TROVATO: Can you tell us what happened to some of the pictures that you turned over to the government and those that were turned over by some of your associates down there?

SIDNEY LAUFMAN: Well, that's one of the unfortunate things about the government project is that we had no idea what became of the work after it was out of our hands. It was exhibited for a short time in the museum building in Key West and then disappeared, I have no idea where.

JOSEPH TROVATO: And when you speak of the museum building, now was this a WPA sponsored gallery, was it?

SIDNEY LAUFMAN: It was an FERA sponsored gallery.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see. Now, I think you said, Mr. Laufman, that you are also on the WPA in New York. Will you tell us about that experience?

SIDNEY LAUFMAN: Well, that was the following year, I think, in 1936, that I went on the WPA in New York City. That was also a very welcome project because sales at that time were very, very rare. And this paycheck—regular paycheck from the government was very welcome. Also, we had models sent to us, government models, that we were allowed to have and that was also a wonderful thing to have.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Now, you say models. Does this mean that it was for class purposes?

SIDNEY LAUFMAN: No, no, no, no. The model would be sent to my studio, and I would do whatever I wanted in the way of a painting.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Oh, I see. So, the government actually paid for models?

SIDNEY LAUFMAN: The government employed models because--

JOSEPH TROVATO: Employed models for artists.

SIDNEY LAUFMAN: Yes. And the models were just as anxious to get onto the WPA because work for them at that time was very scarce, too. So, I was on that Project from until sometime during the summer of 1937 when I won a very important prize, and the Metropolitan Museum bought my painting. So, they kicked me off the Project.

[00:25:13]

JOSEPH TROVATO: Oh. [Laughs.] I guess you were no longer eligible then. Well, I don't think that I had heard about the government supplying models. But that's pretty logical. But it

does go to prove—it goes to prove that they saw to just about everything. They took care of things pretty well. Can you recall, Mr. Laufman, what the amount of your paycheck was? This was a weekly paycheck that you received. How much was it?

SIDNEY LAUFMAN: As I remember I got \$40 a week in Key West. In New York, I think it was a little bit less. I'm a little hazy about just exactly how much it was, it might have been [\$]36.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see. Now, as I understand it, Mr. Laufman, you were on the New York City WPA easel project about a year. And during that time, you worked entirely on your own, in your own studio, and you were supplied a model by the government, a model who was on the relief rows. Is that right? Now, did the government supply you any materials?

SIDNEY LAUFMAN: No, I can't remember that we ever got any material, although they did supply material in Key West.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see.

SIDNEY LAUFMAN: But the New York Project was—they only supplied the model. And that's all.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see. And do I understand that you were expected to turn over to the government a painting a month was it? Did you say?

SIDNEY LAUFMAN: I think that they expected to get at least one painting a month. It might have been more. But you were supposed to turn in whatever you had done or finished during that period.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Was the work looked over and appraised by someone before it was turned over? Who judged whether or not the work was completed?

SIDNEY LAUFMAN: Well, I judged whether the work was completed or not. But when it was turned into the office of the project director, he would look at it, but there's—I can't remember that he ever made any comment as far as I was concerned.

JOSEPH TROVATO: So, in other words, there were no refusals on—of your work.

SIDNEY LAUFMAN: No, they didn't refuse anything. But one of the rather frustrating things about the Project was that you felt that when you handed in the painting that it just disappeared into some kind of office or warehouse and would never be seen again. You had no feeling that this was a work that was going to be seen or exhibited or appreciated or have any value after it was once handed into the office. It was one of the, I think, frustrating things about the Project.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, I can tell you, Mr. Laufman, that you are not alone in this criticism regarding the distribution of the work. Because ever so many artists that I have interviewed have said practically the same thing.

Mr. Laufman, as you look back upon this experience, both your Key West experience and that on the WPA, do you look upon it with feelings of your having learned a great deal yourself?

Benefited a great deal yourself, in relation to your own work as an artist or not?

[00:30:14]

SIDNEY LAUFMAN: Well, I was—appreciated being able to be on a Project of that kind because it was a wonderful feeling to be able to do what you wanted to do in the way of painting and at the same time have the regular paycheck come in for it. There was never any feeling that I was being controlled in any way or being told what to do or how to do it. I was left completely on my own to paint in my own way. And that was a wonderful thing.

However, as I said before, there was always that rankling feeling that once the painting was completed, it was finished and done with and would never be seen again. And that was so frustrating that when I was finally thrown off the Project, I was glad because then I could—knew that my paintings, instead of going to the government, was going to my dealer, where they would be at least exhibited and seen. However, I don't want to criticize the government for that reason because that might have been inevitable. But it would be a good idea if

anything like that ever happened again, to arrange some kind of exhibitions or exhibition space at the same time, so that the artist felt that whatever he's done is not just done in a vacuum.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Lost, yes. Well, that would be a fine thing of course. Well, Mr. Laufman, today there is tremendous art activity in America. Would you attribute some of this to this period that we are talking about? Do you think that it helped in any way to stimulate an interest in this wonderful general interest that we now have?

SIDNEY LAUFMAN: Oh, absolutely. I think that what they speak about as the culture explosion was triggered by the government arts projects and that they have been almost entirely responsible for the tremendous interest in art that developed in the '40s and '50s. I think it's too bad that the government isn't given more credit for having been responsible for what has happened in the art world since that time. Just now, I have been reading a book called *The Culture Consumers* by Alvin Toffler. Which is a very thorough account of the— what is spoken of as the culture explosion in the '50s and '60s.

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And I was surprised and disappointed that no mention whatever was made of the wonderful contribution that the government made during the WPA days when the government sponsored not only painting and sculpture projects, but projects in the theater, in music, and writing, and the dance. Where they started classes and art centers all over the country and people who had never thought of getting involved in any kind of art activity did become involved. And I'm quite sure that that is what has been the unforeseen development that we are having today.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, Mr. Laufman, perhaps the government will get the credit that you just mentioned when this study, that is now being done by the Archives of American Art— when this study and the findings are made public.

Well, unless you can think of anything further, Mr. Laufman, and as far as I'm concerned, I'm completely satisfied with the wonderful material you have given us. So, I want to thank you on behalf of the Archives of American Art for giving us your recollections for the record. And during this interview I've been eyeing some of your pictures that are on the walls, and I hope that I may have a chance to take a better look before I leave. But for now, thank you very much, Mr. Laufman.

SIDNEY LAUFMAN: Thank you.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]