



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with John Britton
Matthew, 1964 Oct. 25

Contact Information

Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/services/questions
www.aaa.si.edu/

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with John Britton Matthew on October 25, 1964. The interview took place in Sacramento, California, and was conducted by Mary Fuller McChesney and Robert McChesney for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Mrs. Matthew was also at the interview. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's New Deal and the Arts project.

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. The original transcript was edited. In 2022 the Archives retranscribed the original audio and attempted to create a verbatim transcript.

Interview

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: This is Mary Fuller McChesney interviewing Mr. John B. Matthew, spelled M-A-T-T-H-E-W, who lives at 1550 12th Avenue in Sacramento, California. The date is October 25, 1964. Present, also, this afternoon is Robert McChesney and Mrs. Matthew. Mr. Matthew was the director of the Sacramento Arts Center.

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: Not director. I was the executive secretary of the Citizens Committee that provided the facilities for the arts center. In other words, the Sacramento Arts Center was directed first by the distinguished young artist, Beckford Young, when it opened in May 1938, assisted by Molly Dennett, as assistant director. And we were required to provide, locally, the building and all the expenses for the gas, light, and power and so forth. In other words, the facilities were in our big responsibility. Then, of course, our contact with the community, and advertising, and the raising of funds for additional activities. So, you might say I was just simply a member of the executive committee. [Inaudible.]

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Pardon me, I—[inaudible].

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: And to go back to the time when we actually started the center here, in Sacramento, Dan Defenbacher, the regional advisor to the Federal Art Project, came with Joseph Allen, who was the director of the Federal Art Project in Northern California. And they contacted me in November of 1937 and said, We feel that Sacramento is a very likely place to start a Federal Art Project and an arts center. And they said, We have noticed the newspapers and been aware of the fact that you people here in the art fields were trying to have in addition to the Crocker Art Gallery. And in 1937, we had finally put on a tremendous drive to raise \$400,000 and to build in addition to the Crocker Art Gallery—a modern addition. And we were turned down by the voting public. So they said, We feel that you need some help in Sacramento, that you have some very worthy ideas in development of art there and that you are ripe, as Dan said, to start something. And so, we are going to give you assistance in the further activities."

So, I said that I didn't feel that I personally should head this. I said, We ought to get somebody who is well known in the community. And I had in mind Judge Puller [ph], who was a very distinguished judge here and everybody had a great affection for him. And we finally decided that we'd get a group together and form an executive group which would plan the actual raising of the funds and to start the center as it had been planned. So, this was a series of meetings which we had from November on through. And we finally raised enough money to get the thing started by many, many contributions. There was \$500 from the schoolchildren and the teachers, which gave us a big boost. And then we contacted every available person in the community to make a contribution, those who were interested at all. So finally we were able to get the necessary \$1,200 to get the thing started. We were required to raise [\$]2,300 the first year, which was very difficult in those days. It seems like nothing now, but that was the days of Depression. So, we were very happy to be able to open in May 1938. And Beckford Young, who was a very distinguished young artist from San Francisco, and Miss Molly Dennett were the two selected to start the pioneer effort here.

[00:05:05]

We had a very successful first year. The people came in large numbers. We actually had as many as 14,000 that came and visited our building there on Eighth—Ninth Street. 1422 Ninth Street. It was not an adequate building, but it gave us a good start. And then after a year we went to a large home called the Drescher Home, which was down on H Street—1423 H. And this great home was actually five levels and so we were able to expand all our activities the second and third year.

The average type of work which we gave was anything from figure drawing, sculpture—this is a few of the things—life class, lettering, layout, bookbinding, murals, flower arrangements, weaving, art appreciation lectures, and one of the very brightest things was our class, which was established for the weekends, for children. And the work in that class was attracting a tremendous amount of attention. Some of the artists who came from San Francisco as instructors and lecturers included very well-known names: George Post, the watercolorist. Dong Kingman spent a considerable amount of time here giving lectures. And Glenn Wessels who had worked with Hans Hofmann. Hilaire Hiler came several times. Benny Bufano, Joseph Danysh, Carlton Ball, who was one of our local products here. Otis Oldfield. Don David and Elmer Bischoff were actually connected with our activities here. Among some of the famous people that we brought to give talks, one Elsa Maxwell, as sponsored by the Kingsley Club [ph].

And so, it was a great source of inspiration to the people in the community. Some people thought that it was going to cut in on the schools and their activities. And we proved to them that it was something which could be worth giving the community in an addition to the school activities. As a matter of fact, the schools had a rather limited art program at that time anyway. And this was an eye-opener as to what could be done and the art teachers themselves came to the classes received much advice and inspiration on how to teach art.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Were the local artists of Sacramento involved in the art center project as teachers?

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: A few of them, such as Don David and Elmer Bischoff, who were teaching in the high school at the time. And Carlton Ball, of course, had had some teaching experience down at Arts and Crafts already, but he was formerly a teacher here in schools and so he took an active part. We had some of our former students from the junior college—which is now Sacramento City College, where I was teaching—that came and gave assistance in teaching. And we had a quite extensive series of lectures given not only in the community but also in the outlying districts, and even some extension courses, which were provided for people over in the town of Davis. So, it really included not only, you might say, just Sacramento, but the whole area. I was looking through some of the things which we more or less promised for the people of Sacramento, and it was rather interesting because we felt that we were giving them a free art school here.

[00:10:04]

And one of our little notations, which we submitted to the public was this: "Did you know that 18,000 people had visited the Sacramento Arts Center in the past 10 months?" That's the first 10 months, we had 18,000. And in the month of March there were 3,000. And they said that they didn't realize that it was the first and only arts center at that time sponsored by the Federal Art Project in California. Up till that time, in the first 10 months, there were 40 lectures by well-known artists, which were given free at the center. And that included the artists that I mentioned, and also Emmanuel Benson, who came from Washington, D.C., Dr. Stephen Pepper, from the University of California, and David Slivka, the famous sculptor who had designed the monumental piece of sculpture at the fair at Treasure Island. There's no charge to students, young or old, and then there are classes during the day and in the evening, and at that time there were 750 students enrolled, which made it one of the large art schools in the West, because very few art schools had more than 500 enrolled—

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: —at that time. They had 36 exhibitions by that time, both national and local. Many of these came from New York and from Washington, from Chicago. And we got cooperation from the community groups such as the Community Players and the Light Opera Guild gave performances. Many of the local organizations, such as our Arts Students League, which I had the pleasure of starting off with City College, alumni association of the students, the Sierra Camera Club, the Movie Club, the Gamma Kappa Rho

Art Group, the Beaux-Arts, and Monday Fine Arts. And at that time, during the days of the Depression, it was really quite a boon to people in the art field here because there were many positions for the people locally, too. And along with the directors of the center, there were 11 families which had been provided support by the federal government at that time. And of course, you could see that it was a great help locally. They even had classes—special classes for additional things such as hard of hearing. The Boy Scouts had some meetings there. And the YMCA boys had programs. And, of course, they had the extension courses that I was telling you about from around this area.

The first-year budget was \$13,000 for the federal side, and ours was—of that [\$]13,000 which was estimated we had to raise, as I see here, \$3,000. The arts center was endorsed by both papers—both *the Sacramento Bee* and *the Sacramento Union*. They gave us some very, very fine publicity. And we have a good many papers here, which showed plenty of space with good photographs, as you've noticed here. There was no charge for any of the exhibitions. And, of course, the public were given a great opportunity, here.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Did you hold classes every day at the arts center?

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: Every day except Sunday. They had Sunday afternoon from two [p.m.] to five [p.m.] the galleries were open.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: But actually, six days a week is just a tremendous amount of activity.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: It's amazing.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: The arts center here was much more extensive than it was in San Francisco, certainly. All they had there was just classes—painting, life class.

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: Well, of course—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Art courses.

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: —along with Beckford Young and Molly Dennett both giving courses, we had Milo Anderson, who gave—of course, he was here regularly. Actually lived here, and helped us out with our murals locally. We designed a mural for the Oak Park Library.

[00:14:58]

My students at the City College learned the history—the early history of Sacramento. We were the first ones to provide an actual work of art dedicated to the name of the founder of Sacramento, General Sutter—John A. Sutter. And when we came to paint this on the wall of the library at Oak Park, they came to us and said, "We'll give you assistance. And perhaps you'd like to have a new technique in egg tempera." So, Milo Anderson from the center assisted as he did in a good many other things in the community. And we feel that we really were able to get a very creditable mural there, with their assistance.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Did any of the WPA people paint on the mural too, or just your students were doing that?

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: Just the students. Just the students. It was a project that we had planned beforehand, and by getting assistance from a man who had done a great many murals, it was a tremendous help.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Carlton Lehman was up here for a while, wasn't he?

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: Carlton Lehman came along as the third director. As I was looking up here again, refreshing my mind, I find out that they only employed them only for 18 months at a time.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: And then, if they wished to be back on the rolls, there was a month in which they would provide additional information, which would qualify them for

going back. And so, Beckford Young was through after 18 months, along with Molly Dennett, and he qualified to come back as an instructor. And Beverly Wright [ph] took over in July and served until February 1940. Then she resigned because of other opportunities and Carlton Lehman was recommended by the University of California. And we accepted him as a board, because we passed on those things, in March 1940. And he served for, as I remember, 18 months. No wonder these people—he was a very distinguished person.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Beckford Young was—wasn't he also a supervisor of Northern California of some kind?

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: He may have been in San Francisco, but here he was very busy.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yeah, well, that's what I mean. I think he was—he had some other position on the Federal Art Project.

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: I see here that we had some of our former students—Jean Zelley [ph] taught crafts and special—a special class for the hard of hearing—and Lou Keller [ph] was one of my students who taught classes in drawing. He has been with MGM for the last 25 years, down south, made quite a reputation for himself there.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Designer? Or—

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: Pardon? A designer of the actual set designs. The initial design.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: The conceptions. He works with the director. And Don David, also, as I say, who is now exhibiting one-man shows in New York, was one of our assistant instructors. So we made use of a good many of them.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: How many people were employed at the arts center?

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: As I remember, there was a director, assistant director, and in this case, there was Milo Anderson. He was really, you might say, second assistant. And then they employed three others part-time. But outside of that, I think that it was really quite a limited staff. Of course, bringing up every day from San Francisco—it was quite a job to bring them, too, because a lot of the artists didn't like the idea of traveling and of course they didn't want to come up here and live here. It cost 'em \$10 a day to bring them up and—a round-trip I guess it was—and they had an additional \$4 to spend on the food and so forth. So, it was really quite a limited deal compared to the way they pad it today on this traveling. And so, it was difficult to get them to come up and stay up here, but it was a continual bringing up of very fine artists. Every day of the week we had somebody coming up here.

[00:20:15]

[Cross talk.]

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: [Inaudible.]

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: [Inaudible.]

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: It was just—you could just see what it'd do, because the group would get together—one of the girls was telling me last night, she said the thing that she remembered particularly was when these artists would meet after dinner, perhaps we'd go in and have a cup of coffee or a sandwich or something and discuss art. She said that was the thing that she remembered as one of the great outstanding things, the meeting of these artists personally and the close association we finally had with a great many of them. We really got to know and have great affection for several of them.

And you know, another thing that I've overlooked is this: that, of course, we would take all of our art classes down there, time and time again, for each one of these lectures, and so on, for schools to go in there and make use of this. It was just such a tremendous source of material. And, actually, the other marvelous thing was that you could buy these works of art, you know, of WPA artists. And we bought five original drawings by Dong Kingman, that were framed, for five dollars apiece. We have them over there at the City College.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: You bought this directly from the government?

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: WPA. Yes. And I wish we had bought a great many more, because just think of the value of those today. And of course, the fact was that we would bring these people—a good many of these people out to our homes and have them for a dinner party, and it was just tremendous stimulation of all kinds of art discussion right straight through this whole period. It's never been like it in Sacramento since.

MRS. MATTHEW: Did [Arthur] Bud Painter do anything?

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: Bud Painter. I wanted to—that's good. I'm glad you remembered Bud because—

[Cross talk.]

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: [Laughs.] I'm sure he did something.

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: —he was—he was on publicity.

MRS. MATTHEW: He told stories to our children. Oh, how they loved him.

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: We had him a good many times, out here.

MRS. MATTHEW: Oh [inaudible].

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: He used to love to come out to visit. I think he liked my wife's cooking.

MRS. MATTHEW: [Laughs.] [Inaudible.] Well, he might too.

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: Well, he might too. Yes. Bud Arthur C. Painter. Director of Information. I used to write him at 49 Fourth Street, San Francisco. And along with that, he was under the administration of William R. Lawson [ph]. He helped us out in our radio programs. And, of course, there wasn't television at that time. But we gave a tremendous number of radio programs. And we had a lot of personal interviews with these various artists. Then, of course, Joseph Allen was the director. He was here regularly, practically every week. Dan Defenbacher, the regional advisor, resigned after coming here a good many times. As I remember, he resigned in July 1939 to go back to establish the Walker Art Center there in Minneapolis. And he still kept in touch with us for a good many years afterwards.

But the activity was great. And I really feel without question that it came at a very, very important time, because we were discouraged and beaten after we had lost out this campaign. It was only \$40,000 we had asked for for this director—for this addition to the gallery—\$400,000, rather. If we had had that \$400,000 at that time, we figured now that it would cost about five times that, what we could have gotten in the property and actual in the building at that time. And so, we were so discouraged and the art groups were more or less feeling like there was no hope here. And when this came along, for three years—and three-and-a-half years of stimulating activities, there were several organizations that popped up just like that. For instance, one of them was—the one that we established was the Sacramento Art—Sacramento Fine Arts Association, which was the sponsoring group. We gave them a very nice little brochure, which was in '39. But this was, of course, so closely associated with the Federal Art Project, and realizing that the thing would not go on forever.

[00:25:07]

MRS. MATTHEW: Right. You wanted—

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: These other organizations began to develop. Northern California Arts, for example, was a group that were directly associated with the arts center. And that is one of the big producing groups for the artists that were producing here in Sacramento.

MRS. MATTHEW: But the art there when you lectured—I mean, when you auctioned off paintings by the local artists [inaudible], what was that project?

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: Well, it was shortly after this—I guess it was in 1940—that they had the National Art Week. I think it was the first National Art Week and I was a chairman. Grace Morley in San Francisco appointed me chairman here after I had been active in this other—and so they came in and gave us assistance from the arts center at that time on this

National Art Week. They provided speakers, and they helped us hang the show and so forth, and then we had a great sale of artwork there, which was auctioned off, which was very stimulating.

And you can see, all of this, in a community that was really, you might say, almost an overgrown country town with hardly any real art activities. The only art organization of any note was the women's organization of Kingsley. Now, since then—I would say, since the arts center, that in very short order there have been at least 10 or 12 art organizations that have just sprung up one right after another. And now, I think we have, probably, the most active city of this size in art in the West in the production of art at this time.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: What's the leading organization in that?

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: Well, the fact is that they have another new organization now, which is called the Crocker Art Gallery Association, CAGA, which is sponsored—was sponsored originally by our directors. I happen to be on the board of directors of the Crocker Art Gallery, and we felt we ought to have an organization which would help to sponsor the activities of the Crocker Art Gallery, and we have—that group also are producing some fine acquisitions for us. And one of the first ones was a Mestrovic [ph], which I feel was worth around a \$30,000 acquisition, which is, at least we could have sold it for more than that already. And so, we're very proud of that.

And the other groups—there's the Co-op Gallery, a group of young artists that have their own gallery. And the Belmonte [ph] Group, another group of young artists that have their own gallery and provide their own shows. The fact is that all of these groups, too, come to the Crocker Art Gallery for shows. One of them is the Crafts League, which—the Creative Arts Group producing crafts. They have a great show here. Very, very fine. And one of the things that shocks the whole world is how we're doing on our rental gallery, at the Crocker Art Gallery. Even *Life* magazine planned to come in here to take pictures and to give us an article. And that thing has been stimulated over the last eight or 10 years, and now we have an average rental of paintings at the Crocker Art Gallery, every month, of 3,000 to 3,500 pictures rented every month.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: That's incredible.

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: That's like no place in the world.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Much higher than San Francisco.

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: We've looked it up, and there's no place in the world where they have anything comparable to that. And wherever I mentioned it, as we went across the country—back to the World's Fair this year—every art gallery I dropped in on, none of them would possibly believe it. But it is a fact. And actually, that has been a great stimulation because many of the concerns here, take 10 to 20 paintings, and every three months they go change these and put them in their offices. It's a great stimulant to discussion of art, whenever they put it up in the doctor's office or a lawyer's office, they argue about it.

They say, Well, I see you have something modern this time, and then they begin arguing about art, talking about art. So, it's been a great stimulant here. And of course, the artist gets the large proportion.

[00:30:13]

MRS. MATTHEW: One artist had 100 pictures in—on rental.

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: He gets between [\$]2[00] and \$300 a month every month. Just the rental.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Wow.

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: There are at least three of them that are making over that every month. So, that's been a great thing. But you know, all these things—lots of these artists—you know prints—one fellow was telling me that the first and only—as a matter fact the only art training that he ever received was at the Crocker Art Gallery. I mean at the Arts Center—for the three years there. And he is very successful [inaudible] and doing very substantial work. He gives credit. Now there's one [inaudible] that I would say—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Did you have any instructors from the East?

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: No. I would say that—of course Beverly Wright was trained in the East, and also in Paris. And she assisted in the Pasadena Playhouse in the designing and also in directing there, besides her experiences in the East. And she was a very well-trained person, particularly in the dramatic arts.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: The reason I ask is they did have a program on WPA where they—I don't know whether it was an exchange program or not, but there were a lot of artists that came out of New York, for instance, in Oregon, was it?

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Salem. It was the arts center in Salem. Instructors that came from New York to teach there at Salem.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Sculptors and painters.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Yes. Well, this was probably because they didn't have a large town like San Francisco close by to call on, for artists to come. And they had to get people from the East to come and live there. It was quite a problem for them to get artists to come out to Salem, Oregon from New York City and try to live there.

MRS. MATTHEWS: During the Depression?

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Yes.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Considering how hard it was to get artists up here from San Francisco even then, it would have been like getting artists from New York. But actually, once they'd done and came out here, they enjoyed it very much. It was a great experience for them.

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: It would be a great opportunity. But there were many, many artists that were having a pretty tough time around the Bay region at that time. And you'd say in 1937, '38, they were very happy to get \$125 a month.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Oh, yeah.

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: That was a lot of money in those days, too.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Is that what they paid instructors?

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: [\$]130, [\$]125, up to [\$]150 was about all they received as far as I understand, except the director, I think of the arts center received pretty good. .

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: That was a lot better than they paid the artists.

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: I think if you can contact Molly Dennett—now Mrs. Pendergast—she'd give you more of that information because she was right in it at the start. I have some good photographs. I'll have to see if I can't dig them up because—of the big opening which we had, it was fantastic the way people crowded in that first night. at our first grand opening.

But I want to say this, that I have to say that we probably have to give probably the most credit for this thing to the Citizens Committee that provided the funds and really planned this thing and worked so hard on it. Because in those days, everybody was working so hard to try to get back financially. Everybody was really in a bad depression. And to get anybody to give their time, and sometimes even a good half of their time, to work on this thing was a very difficult thing. Judge Puller [ph], I know, was such a distinguished gentleman, that that added tremendously to the acceptance of the public. And then we had Mr. Vandenburg [ph] who was the treasurer the first—of the Bank of America here, who was our treasurer. And we had about 15 very distinguished local people who were on our board right from the start. And so, they realized it was not a small thing. And I can't say too much about the Ronald Scofield [ph] of *the Bee*, who gave us big spreads time after time after time and gave us all this encouragement.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: And kept on saying that it was such a wonderful thing for the community and that it may not go on for many years, but at least let's enjoy it and get the

inspiration from it, the value from it as long as it's here. So, all those things helped to make it a success.

[00:35:09]

And I really feel that since it was an experiment, it was a great success. Carrying as far as it has, it could to something that had never been done before. Of course, now they have arts centers all over, everywhere. Even down at Richmond I saw not long ago. I was surprised a little town like that has a good little arts center with all its activities going on. And this idea, I think, of the Federal Art Project getting behind these things gave them the idea of starting arts centers all over and saw what could be done. And they visualized this thing. And now we hope to have a big arts center down here connected with the gallery. And we're going to put on another big drive in the near future, but it's going to probably have to be a million and a half instead of 400,000. We're thinking of that because we're changing the whole west part of town, 40, 50 town—40 or 50 of the blocks have been just wiped out and rebuilt back [inaudible].

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Will this include a school?

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: This will include Saturday classes, for children, particularly. And we'll have a small theater, and we'll have an auditorium where we'll have an opportunity to really bring in these speakers and to have excellent programs in art. Then of course, we have to have a real honest-to-goodness fireproof building for our great works of art. Of course, we'll keep the old historic building because that's one of the greatest of this particular period. But that's—

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: It's a beautiful building. Have you seen it?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yes.

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: We have a 400,000 already started for that project and we hope to be able to have a bond election in the near future for that. And then, of course, when you think about all the decorations which they did for all the different buildings throughout the country, including the California post offices and so forth, where they had murals—what a fine contribution that was.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Were any of those done in Sacramento? Were there any WPA mural projects up here?

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: No. No.

UNDISTINGUISHABLE SPEAKER: There weren't? Not at all?

[Cross talk.]

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: There wasn't a single one.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Isn't that amazing. You've got the capital and all the buildings [inaudible] particularly—

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: There wasn't a single project here.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: That's peculiar. You would think that there'd be—through the arts center that there might be something developed along that line.

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: There was the only one there in Oak Park, which was largely done by my students. And these artists were all busy at such things around the Bay and along the coast, you know. And so, they, evidently all of them had about as much as they could handle without doing anything here. But the activities themselves were sufficient, you might say.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well, actually, it wasn't an easy thing to set up these murals. Dorothy Collins, she was Allen's secretary—

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: Oh, yes.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: —and she sort of handled this sort of thing. She'd go over the area, you know, attempting to sell murals and paintings and prints and [inaudible] and different—well, particularly federal buildings and government buildings. And she said it was really difficult. She had a terrible time convincing people that they should buy the paintings or have a mural, et cetera.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: There wasn't an easel project here in Sacramento for the artists, was there?

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: What was that?

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: An easel project like they had in San Francisco, where artists were painting in their studios but they were on the WPA.

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: I want to bring out one more name, and that is one of our very fine local artists, Kathryn Uhl Ball, formerly Mrs. Carlton Ball, and she was employed by the Federal Art Project to do historical drawings and lithographs of the Sacramento area.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Oh.

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: I would like to have you contact her because she also worked very hard at the arts center here. I've been trying to get her on the phone, and I haven't contacted her yet. She is one of those who is a very excellent craftsman and provides art in action at the state fair, has done that several years.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: She a ceramist?

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: Yes. Kathryn Uhl Ball. Graduated from Mills College. And I don't know of any others, locally. Of course, Otis Oldfield had originally come from Sacramento. He's one of our famous sons of Sacramento, you know. I guess he was on WPA and he came up here now. Then we had his things on exhibition.

[00:40:09]

But there were very few artists here. Actually, you could just almost name the artists that could even exhibit in a show of any kind, even at the level of say, the state fair, on one hand at the time that the Federal Art Project was here. It's really almost amazing when you think about how little activity. And now, of course we have many wonderful schools and we have a great center of art activity and art, two junior colleges. And the state college out here has a very fine center of art and series of courses in art there in the department. And then of course the School of Davis is getting to be well known all over the world for its very fine group of instructors there.

And so, it's now just a beehive of activity, here. We've had many of our young artists have been winning awards down in San Francisco regularly. I know there's one show down there where seven different young artists from Sacramento had had their paintings in one of these big shows in the Legion of Honor. And three of them had awards. So, you can see that now the picture is entirely different. Very difficult to scrape up enough to even discuss art [laughs] back in those days.

So, that's what I feel about the arts center. I feel that it was a shot in the arm. It was a tremendous effort. As I say, we were all of us absolutely worn out. And it was so difficult to know whether or not we could even get the money to keep it going from month to month. And it seems ridiculous, but that's the exact case. And actually, many of the group were exhausted by the work that they put into the thing.

MRS. MATTHEW: And hours on the telephone. Oh, my, my how [inaudible].

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: Yes. I was just counting up the one—at the end of 17 months I finally made evaluations of all the different calls and letters and times I had appeared before different groups, and the radio appearances and so on. It's just amazing the number of hours—it averaged at three hours a day, for 17 months. And of course, there was—we had—

MRS. MATTHEW: Started teaching [inaudible]—

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: There was nothing for us on the executive committee. We received a dollar a year. We didn't get our dollar a year. I think they still owe us that dollar a

year. [They laugh.] But it was—when I think back on it, it was a very stimulating period.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Were there any other arts centers around in this area or was Sacramento the only one in the Valley? Did they have one at Stockton, do you know?

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: No, there was nothing. Nothing as far as I know.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: And nothing further north or inland?

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: This was the only one. And actually, there was very little activity. Of course, the College of the Pacific had a good art department, but limited, that is, at that time.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: That's in Stockton.

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: In Stockton. But actually, this was the only one.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: We were just talking about some of the people who were instructors at the arts center here in Sacramento. Mr. Matthew was mentioning a few of them. Who did you say worked with Hans Hofmann in Munich?

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: Well, Beckford Young, who was the director—our first director, here, and opened the arts center, studied at Manchester Institute of Arts. Had private instruction from Burbank in New Hampshire, Allison [ph] in the University of California. Actually, it was right there in Munich, took work from Hans Hofmann. And [inaudible], at Positano [ph], Italy, exhibited in Naples, New York, San Francisco. Received the San Francisco Museum Purchase [ph] prize, and executed the mural and the fresco on the Government Island, Oakland with the Federal Art Project. And he was one of those could see the mural—conceptualist. The Mural Conceptualist School of Art which gave a great exhibit in San Francisco at one time, where they put all these different materials together. It was more or less the idea of getting textures of all kinds into the home and the public building.

[00:45:05]

Now, when you think that this was in '36 and '37, that he was really one of the pioneers on the idea of bringing textures into art. And particularly going into cement forms. John Moxom was a—had a three-year scholarship to the University—California School of Fine Arts. And he was represented by 12 mural panels in fresco at Brick Hall [ph], San Francisco State College, mural in oils in the Hillsborough District School, and several paintings in such collections as Albert Bender's and the San Francisco Art Museum Collection. And of course, David Slivka, who taught sculpture here, had two monumental statues, *Fertility* and *Abundance* at the San Francisco World's Fair, Treasure Island, back then in—was it 1940? When was that [inaudible]—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: 1939.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: '39.

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: '39. That's right. He studied sculpture at the California School of Fine Arts and in the Chicago Art Institute and he made extensive research in primitive Indian sculpture in Mexico. Milo Anderson was very fine on murals, and he had assisted in murals at the Modesto post office, the Oakland post office, the auditorium at the Castle Mount High School, the University of California Art Museum mosaic. I don't remember that—I'd like to see that. And the Government Island Murals. The Federal Art Project painter from Oakland and San Francisco. And of course, Beverly Wright—did I give you that about Beverly?

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: No, you didn't.

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: Studied at the California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco, then the Arts Students' League, then the School of the Louvre and Sorbonne in Paris, Academie Moderne in Paris, Kunstapotheke Kunstschule Wien [ph] in Vienna, the Max Reinhardt School of the Theater in Vienna. She was the Art, Drama, Music critic of four newspapers, directed and designed for the theater at Salzburg, Austria. Also, the theater in Pasadena. And Carmel, Palo Alto. And taught at the Pasadena Playhouse. Besides that, she was one year director of the Federal Theatre in San Francisco. So, you see, we had certainly people who had a very distinguished background.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: How many classes did you have going then?

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: Well, there was the average of about three or four classes every day of the week.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: This is painting and drawing, and I suppose they had a life class?

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Well, here's the schedule of classes, here. Beginning Drawing and Painting, on Monday. Mural, Flower Arrangement, Life Class, Sculpture, Bookbinding, Home Decoration, Advanced Watercolor, Beginning Drawing, Still Life, Life Class, Lettering and Layout, Weaving, Art Appreciation. Did you have a pottery department too?

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: Yes.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: You did. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: Very fine ceramics department and the sculpture was just excellent. But the children's work, I think—if you're going to say one thing was a great contribution, the children's work was one of the very finest. And Molly Dennett should tell you about that because she has a good many of the examples she's saved all these years, and some of them certainly ought to go into that exhibit in the Overton [ph] Gallery Museum.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Oh, fine.

MRS. MATTHEW: She's near here too.

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: Yes. She's available. And then, of course, we even went into music and dance.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Oh, you did?

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: Yes. We had very fine instruction in dance. We had the ballroom on the top floor of the Drescher Home and—

MRS. MATTHEW: [Inaudible.]

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: Yes. So there were regular classes in—as a matter of fact I even have a picture there of the group. Jack Payne [ph]—maybe it's the one at the bottom. Jack Payne [ph], a local dancer who had had very fine training—you can see this [inaudible] group there.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Oh, yes. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: Dance group growing. Flower arrangements and interior decoration. One of the things that was amazing was the bringing back of some of the lost arts.

[00:50:03]

We had courses in stained glass and making stained glass windows, which hadn't been given anywhere in the West until that time, for many, many years. We had courses in lithography. We brought the top man from the School of Fine Arts in San Francisco.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Was it Ray Bertrand?

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: What's the name?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Ray Bertrand.

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: Ray Bertrand. Yes. And he taught lithography here. Imagine that actually we had a press and we produced lithography, which was unheard of in '38, '39, most any place. Etching. There was the first bit of mosaic, which was being taught, which was pretty early, in those days. So, you see, just opened up the whole world of art. Everything. Arts and crafts and music. And we even had discussions of philosophy. Of course, Dr. Pepper—Stephen Pepper—coming from the head of the philosophy department. Of course, eventually, he was the head of the art department, too, you know, at the University

of California. He came up here several times and gave us lectures on philosophy.

So, how in the world can you provide a program like that without people getting a tremendous lot from it and really appreciating it tremendously? If it hadn't been, as I say, in a period when it was so closely tied up with the Depression, and also with all the WPA other activities, perhaps it might have had a little more glamour. I mean, let's face it, because of overworked projects, many of them, and some of the times, the public would say, well is this just another WPA project? Whereas instead it was really a great inspiration to fine art, the actual creative arts.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: You mentioned the music program. What did that consist of?

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: They had instrumental music and they had actually some singing—some singing groups, small chorus groups. And then they would play records and discuss them.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: They had instruction in instrumental playing?

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: Yes.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: And did you have a theater group there?

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: Yes. We had several little productions. Of course, when Mrs. Wright came with all her ability, one of the nicest of the productions was the *Night Must Fall*, which was given November 22, 1938 right out in our Sacramento Junior College auditorium. And it had a very fine cast and was very well received.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Were these all local people who were on the—

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: Local people.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. But they didn't have a separate theater project at the WPA here.

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: No.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: It was done through the arts center?

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: That's right.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: And this was put on at the—at the junior college, not at the arts center itself?

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: No.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: We had to have a good-sized auditorium. And as I remember, we did.

MRS. MATTHEW: Did we charge for that, I wonder?

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: Yes. Oh, yes. They were trying raise some additional funds for the art center. Fact is, I think when they bought Elsa Maxwell, she came to the Crocker Art Gallery under the direction of Kingsley [ph]—Kingsley [ph] Art Group—because they wanted to have a good-sized meeting place, which we didn't have provided of course down there at our center.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: What did she talk on? The artists throwing parties? [Mary Fuller McChesney laughs.]

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: Oh, that's right. She was fascinating. Just fascinating.

MRS. MATTHEW: [Inaudible.]

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: Very, very funny. Sadly, I think we didn't make much money because it took quite a bit just to bring her here. [They laugh.] So, it was worth—I think we ended up with about five dollars a head, at the time it was all over. But that's worthwhile,

anyway.

I remember writing and giving a report at the end of a year. First year, I wrote Mr. Defenbacher, and told him about all our problems and how we had some battles on the board and some battles of the board and the directors of the arts center, because you know this thing doesn't go too smoothly. It's just—any time you do something in a pioneering field, there's always going to be an argument or two here or there. [Mary Fuller McChesney laughs.]

And we were a little bit down in the mouth at times. But at the end of the year, we can say we were still going strong and look forward to a few more years, which we did, of course.

[00:55:14]

But when you get approximately—in the first eight months get 800 people to contribute, you don't get that many from practically any art organization that you can get that many people to contribute.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: They had a terrible time in San Francisco. The "cultural center of the West," so-called, you know. And they had—you know, they were fighting all the time to keep any of them going, the opera, or the ballet, or the museum.

MRS. MATTHEW: We're all living a life of such pressure with something going on all the time. Even though we're retired, there's just hardly a quiet [laughs] moment in our lives.

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: This is one kind of interesting thing as I look back. Along about the first of the year, 1939, it was a question whether the Federal Art Project would be continued, back in Washington.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: This is in '39?

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: Yes.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: So, we all wrote at that time—and this is a copy of three letters which I sent personally as the secretary—executive secretary—one to Honorable Frank H. Buck in the United States Congress, Washington. Another one to Sheridan Downey, our senator. And Senator Hiram Johnson, U.S. Senate. And we put up a very special plea, respectfully urging that they give earnest support to the measures which aid the work of the Federal Art Project.

And I wrote [reads from text], "We are convinced that this department is doing a splendid job both with the rehabilitation and in providing great stimulant and development of a national art consciousness." Of course, one of the things was that they were saying was, Well, at least it's art to the masses, that they're providing these arts centers, you know. [Reads from text] "California's first federal arts center, co-sponsored by local art groups here was established in Sacramento a little over six months ago and had great success with 12,500 visitors to the gallery, 750 registered students in the art classes, and many splendid exhibits both in fine arts and crafts. So, the arts center is answering a real need for more cultural advantages in our community. The Federal Art Project is beautifying many cities with sculpture, mosaics, mural paintings, tapestries, and objects of art. The value of these is incalculable. The development of art in America is even greater value. Thus it is evident that the Federal Art Project is supplying a three-fold service: to the artist, the community, and in the production of objects of art of permanent value. Undoubtedly one of the most worthy of the government projects."

And of course, we put the pressure on and said [reads from text], "It should be continued under the same capable direction of trained artists like Mr. Cahill, rather than placed under general WPA supervision," which they had planned to do. [Reads from text] "We greatly appreciate your giving this such earnest consideration." And it was signed by Judge Puller [ph] and myself. And then we also had letters which we sent at the end of the first year to the various—to the two newspapers and reported how we had been able to gain great success, too, in the class work and in the programs. So, I have those here, which give an

outline—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well, it was during this period, too, that the artists demonstrated in San Francisco. [Inaudible.]

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: They marched?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Oh, because the funds—there was some talk about Congress cutting off the funds. I think it was, too, about the same time that the Theatre Project was closed down in San Francisco.

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: Oh, I remember that.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: And I talked to a man the other day, Ralph Chessé, who was in the marionette group, in the Theatre Project. And he was transferred, then, from that to the Recreation Department. So, it was about that time, I guess they were closing down all over.

MRS. MATTHEW: [Inaudible.]

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Yeah.

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: I guess that as far as I remember, it went on almost into 1941. From '38 to '41.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well, I think it was even later than that. Some of the artists we interviewed were transferred directly from the Federal Art Project into the [inaudible] went directly over from the Project into the shipyards as draftsman. So this must have been around '42, then, because it was after the war, as the shipyards opened up.

[00:59:54]

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: Well, with Carlton Lehman, if he started in the—in March 1940, that would have carried him into 1941. We moved from this big building which we got, incidentally, from the community chest. We were very fortunate to get it because we were able to get it for \$75 a month. And that community chest was, I think, gave us a pretty good break on that because it was under their control. In fact, they had their own offices there. So, then we went finally out to the fairgrounds. And we had a small building there which was provided by the state fair. Carlton Lehman actually had some of his direction from the fairgrounds. And they even planned the possibility of having the art center continued at the state fair, so it would be a going concern the year-round, and the state fairgrounds, of course, would be available.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Oh.

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: Except for the time of the state fair. But, of course, about that time things began to pick up and there was more activity in the schools and in the art gallery. And the young group got their organizations going strong. We had the Arts Students' League, and the City College putting on art balls, and raising a bunch for scholarships and gave us the auditorium here, and finally gave us a total of 22 years. We had an average—

[Crosstalk.]

MRS. MATTHEW: [Inaudible] almost every year. Gave a half a year's of time on that, too.

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: We had—to show you the interest in that in the community, during the war days and all we kept going at the auditorium and we almost had overflow of crowds of 3,500 up to 4,500. We averaged—the last few years we averaged a clearing of \$3,500 each time we gave this art ball, for which the art students designed all the sets. There would be a 50-foot huge stage. All papier mâché. All the costumes were designed and made. And they had a 70-piece orchestra. And the music usually was written by the music students, provided by our own orchestra. At the last we had to have a stand-in orchestra, because of the way labor was going at that time—labor unions. But that showed, again that it was a stimulant, you might say, that went into this big art ball and other activities. And all these different groups were having their meetings and their exhibitions and so forth, so there really wasn't a need for a continuation of the arts center after that time. After it once

got going, and it gave them a good stimulant, a good push. It then became a success locally in all the fields of art.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Do you think this rebirth of interest was really due to the WPA arts center?

JOHN BRITTON MATTHEW: Without question, it was a tremendous impetus that was provided by the Federal Art Project.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Thank you very much for giving us the time for the interview.

[END OF TRACK AAA_matthe64_262_m.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]