



Smithsonian  
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**Oral history interview with Charles Mattox,  
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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Charles Mattox on April 9, 1964. The interview was conducted at Cahles Mattox's Studio at 1207 Stevenson Street, San Francisco, California by Lewis Ferbrache for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

## Interview

LEWIS FERBRACHE: Lewis Ferbrache interviewing Charles Mattox at his studio. Charles, if you would begin with your birthday, place of birth, and early art training...

CHARLES MATTOX: All right, I was born in Bronson, Kansas, that's a small town about a hundred miles south of Kansas City, and grew up in Kansas. My mother was a painter and I started painting when I was probably ten or twelve years old, did copies of things, did a bit of painting. Then I went to college for a couple of years in central Kansas, went to Bethany College, and studied painting with Burr Sanzan. When I was about nineteen I left for Kansas City and went to the Kansas City Art Institute for a year and a half. Then I went to Chicago for a short time and tried to get into the Chicago Art Institute. It was during the Depression, I couldn't get a job, and couldn't make it there, so I came back and worked in Kansas City for a while to get some money. Then I went to New York. I worked for about six months for an interior decorator and during that period met a lot of the artists, who had come on to New York from Kansas, that I had known at the Institute, and through them got acquainted with some of the people. When the Project first started, it wasn't the WPA Project, it was under a different administration. Juliana Force was the --

LEWIS FERBRACHE: The Public Works Administration?

CHARLES MATTOX: Yes, the Public Works Administration. And I first got on that project, and very shortly after that, before I began to get involved, the Project expanded and they hired lots of people. They started in teaching, and the first project I got involved on was a mural at the technical high school. There were groups of us worked on murals together. The group that I worked with, the artist who was in charge was Geoffrey Norman, an Englishman. Painting in the same building at that time were several other groups, Jean Charlot was painting a mural in the lobby at that time.

LEWIS FERBRACHE: Was he under the Project, too?

CHARLES MATTOX: Yes. All these people were Project people and there were about six groups painting in the Textile High School at that time.

LEWIS FERBRACHE: This was about what year?

CHARLES MATTOX: Well it was when the Project first started so it must have been around 1933...

LEWIS FERBRACHE: '33, '34.

CHARLES MATTOX: Right then. And the offices of the Project at that time were at the College Art Association on 57th Street. And during that period, I became acquainted with David Smith who was technical director of the Project. And he was running an office, he was working out of the office, and he found out that I had had some experience in paint chemistry and knew something of the

technical aspects of murals, so he asked me to come to work in the office in the technical part of the Project. And I worked with him in the technical department, and we went out and surveyed walls, decided what condition they were in, how they should be handled and we did all the buying of materials for the Project. And at that time we did a lot of research on paint labeling, and we finally got manufacturers to begin to publish on tubes of paint what was in them, and I think this was a direct result of the Project's work, so that we had some way of knowing what we were buying. And then...

LEWIS FERBRACHE: If I may go back to the mural, the first work that you were working on – the subject matter, size, and the details...?

CHARLES MATTOX: Well it was in an auditorium and there were two panels at the front end of the auditorium were probably 20 x 20 square panels and then there were long panels between the windows going back, there were three on each side and they were four feet wide and about eighteen feet high. And it was a history of Man. And it had everything in it. One side were the scientists starting from Greek times up to the present. There were lots of portraits in the two main panels of all these people. And then the six panels going back were themes that showed the major fields from different parts of the different cultures. It was a pretty bad mural. But a lot of people had no experience in murals and this was sort of a beginning. There just really weren't people who had the training to do good murals. Some of the murals done later on the Project were much better.

LEWIS FERBRACHE: This was in a technical high school in Manhattan?

CHARLES MATTOX: Yes, it was a Textile High School. It's on 18th Street, I believe, near Ninth Avenue, and it's quite a good high school. Mostly working-class kids who wanted to work in the garment industry. It was near the garment industry. Harold Rosenberg, who I remember, was on our Project, worked on that mural for a little while. Then he switched to work with somebody else. There was a lot of shifting around at that time, which the Project first started people trying to find groups that they could fit with and work with. Once I got into the office and started working with David on the technical end of it, I spent a lot of time going around to the various places where people were painting murals, and this way I got acquainted with more of the artists than I would have otherwise. I remember there was a project going on then at the hospital at Green Point, and Refregier was the artist who was in charge of that project...

LEWIS FERBRACHE: Was that Anton Refregier?

CHARLES MATTOX: Anton Refregier. And this was his first big mural on the project. And that was quite a good mural, it was done in the children's ward in the Green Point hospital. And James Penney was one of the boys I had known from Kansas who was working on that mural with him, and gee, I don't remember some of the other names, several well-known painters came from that group. Then I also at that time met Diller who was doing a mural in high school up in the Bronx, I don't remember the name of the high school, but it was a very good mural and I was very much interested in his work. It was a much more abstract mural, his way of working appealed to me much more, and later I became friends with Diller when he became head of the easel project, and it was through associations with him I developed into hard-edge painting, what we now call hard-edge painting. In those days it was geometric abstractions.

LEWIS FERBRACHE: Jean Charlot was doing what mural?

CHARLES MATTOX: He was doing a mural in the foyer of this high school. And that was a rather interesting mural, very characteristic of his work, and a bunch of younger painters working with him.

What happened in the early days of the Project was that someone would come along who knew something or who had some reputation, and then the artists would vie to get assigned to work with him, because in those days of the project it was really a learning process and it was a great development field for the artist. Other murals I remember of that period were murals at the Brooklyn Museum. Guy Foys was working on a mural there and his wife, Gina Pettit. I don't remember who some of the others were. But there were murals in the court houses, in high schools, hospitals all over Manhattan.

LEWIS FERBRACHE: How long did you work on these murals before you went to the technical department?

CHARLES MATTOX: I worked about a year. The mural was finished, and when that mural finished that group broke up. I left that group and at that time I went to the office and started working with David Smith. Then David left the Project finally, and went to Europe, I believe, and I took over that department. And I was head of the technical department then for another two years. During that period we moved from 57th Street to a big building on East 39th Street right off Fifth Avenue where there was an art gallery and a frame shop and I managed the frame shop and did all the technical direction of the projects, set up the gallery, hired, and ran the framing department and...

LEWIS FERBRACHE: Was this also an exhibition gallery?

CHARLES MATTOX: Yes, and they had very good shows there. At that time there were a lot of painters on the easel project. It was very big. Diller managed the easel project. He was director for a long time and...

LEWIS FERBRACHE: What was the name of the gallery? For the record.

CHARLES MATTOX: The WPA Art Gallery.

LEWIS FERBRACHE: That was the title, in other words?

CHARLES MATTOX: Yes. And I remember several times, certainly at the dedication I remember Mayor La Guardia came to the opening. At that time we had a lot of big name artists on the program: Stuart Davis, and awhile Gorky and all the artists from the Woodstock area who were on the project, not all of them but a great number of them, so that there were some very good shows put on in this gallery. Also in that building there was a print project, I don't remember too many of the people who were working on it, but some of them were very well known, I remember George Constant was on the print project. And then Another floor of the building was the administrative offices of the teaching project. So that all the people who were teaching on the art project – I guess there were several hundred of them at the time – came there too. They were teaching at settlement houses and schools throughout the city.

LEWIS FERBRACHE: Did you also do some work of your own at this time, or mainly managing the gallery frame shop and these other duties?

CHARLES MATTOX: Well at that time, the work I did was for myself. The work I did for the project was primarily supervisory at that period. And I painted a lot. At that time I was very interested in what Gorky was doing and studied with him. He had a small group who worked in his studio. And I met all these artists and was very much stimulated and got involved in projects at that time. Leger had come to New York...

LEWIS FERBRACHE: Fernand Leger?

CHARLES MATTOX: Fernand Leger. And was very interested in what the project was doing. He was a very good friend of Diller's. And a group of us got together, Diller organized a group that designed things for a mural, but as an independent job, and we worked on this when we weren't working on our project...

LEWIS FERBRACHE: The French Line Steamship company?

CHARLES MATTOX: Yes. And it was an interesting idea we were going to do. It was a long pier, the inside of a pier which was corrugated sheet metal, and we were going to do large forms, "Leger-like" form, of undersea life and these were to be done in baked enamel bolted to the surface to make a very gay, colorful carnival effect inside the steamship loading pier. However, the French Line would never come through with the money and the project was never completed. It was a very interesting period for me because I came in contact with these people who later had a great deal of influence on my own work. There was a photographer on the project at that time, Stuart Davis's brother, Wyatt, who became a very close friend of mine, and I spent a lot of time with him. He worked as a photographer on the project. He was also a very good friend of Gorky's.

LEWIS FERBRACHE: Do you remember anything unusual? Sometimes there were WPA strikes, for example, or project strikes?

CHARLES MATTOX: Oh yes. There were some...

LEWIS FERBRACHE: More so in New York.

CHARLES MATTOX: I remember a very interesting one, when we were in the 57th Street offices, I don't remember now the occasion for the strike but it had something to do with – well what would happen would be that the top administration would make some ruling about artists had to qualify for some kind of relief requirement or something, so they'd announce this, and there'd suddenly be a great furor in the project that they were going to immediately throw us all off or something and the artists would get outraged. I remember at the 57th Street offices in, it must have been late 1934, maybe '35, there was a big picket line at the office on 57th Street, and they finally arrested about a hundred and fifty artists and took them off to the station house jail over on the west side near Times Square, I forget the name of the place. But it was very amusing. In the newspaper stories there were something like thirty Pablo Picassos on the book and twenty Matisse's...

LEWIS FERBRACHE: These were the names the artists gave to the booking sergeant, no doubt?

CHARLES MATTOX: They were all released the next day. Another time we had a big protest march to City Hall, which was organized by the Artists Union, to which I belonged, as most all the artists on the project belonged. They had a union hall on 16th Street at that time. First it was on 18th Street, then it was on 16th Street... I'm not sure, maybe it was 15th Street, it was just off of Sixth Avenue. And this was quite a social place. We had a dance every Saturday night, and I can remember some pretty wild parties at this Artists Union Hall. But we had this big march on City Hall protesting some ruling about the project and Gorky built a tremendous piece of sculpture to be carried in this project. It was a wild abstract thing that he built, it had no signs on it, nothing, just an object to be carried through the streets. And I can remember how outraged some of the artists were, the more conservative ones or the ones who didn't understand the surrealist kind of mystical ideas Gorky had. But this didn't have anything to do with the protest march. But he inveigled people into carrying it. It was about twelve feet high and took four men to carry it, so it took a lot of selling to get it carried to the City Hall. I remember Pollock very well...

LEWIS FERBRACHE: Jackson Pollock?

CHARLES MATTOX: Jackson Pollock was on the project at that time. His brothers, there were two other Pollocks; Jackson, I didn't know him as well as one of his brothers, I think his name was – I don't remember. He later left the project. Ben Shahn was on the project at that time, as well as Lou Blond, who I first met when they were working with Diego Rivera on some murals in New York. And Shahn left the project to go on the Farm Resettlement Administration job as a photographer, and at that time Jackson Pollock's brother left too and went on that same project with Shahn.

LEWIS FERBRACHE: You mentioned to me, earlier, Zero Mostel...

CHARLES MATTOX: He was on the teaching project at that time and was a "cut-up," came to the parties and gave entertainment for parties. I always thought he was just an amateur. I didn't realize that he was a professional comedian and apparently in those days he did appear at some other affairs where he got small fees, but mostly it was an act he put on for free for various organizations.

LEWIS FERBRACHE: But he was a serious artist?

CHARLES MATTOX: He was a painter who had come on the project and chose to teach rather than do a mural or something, or do easel painting.

LEWIS FERBRACHE: Where were you living in New York, down in Greenwich Village?

CHARLES MATTOX: When I first came on the project I was living on Manetta Street, in a small place, and then I – and this is interesting probably in terms of what happens in New York today – I don't remember – I think I paid eighteen dollars a month for the place I had on Manetta Street. But then I took a studio with Art Gunn who was on the project as an art teacher. We shared a studio on Third Avenue – no, I'm sorry, it was on – I don't remember – it was a block south of Washington Square within a block of Washington Square – and we had a studio which we shared, quite a large studio for which we paid six dollars a month, which made it three dollars each for the studio...

LEWIS FERBRACHE: That's a marvelously low rent.

CHARLES MATTOX: Yes. Then I met my wife, the girl I married, and we moved to 16th Street, and I had a flat on 16th Street.

LEWIS FERBRACHE: Was your wife also on the project?

CHARLES MATTOX: No. She was not on the project. She was just a painter.

LEWIS FERBRACHE: How long did you stay in New York altogether?

CHARLES MATTOX: I don't remember exactly. I came in '33 and left in '35, late '35. I left New York, I finally got very tired of the administrative end of the project and wanted to do more on my own, so I left and took a teaching job in Arkansas, and we only stayed in Arkansas about six months. Then Wyatt Davis came through on his way to Santa Fe, New Mexico, and visited me where my wife and I were living and convinced me we should come to New Mexico, so as soon as I finished my stint there where I was teaching I went to New Mexico. My wife and I hitchhiked to New Mexico. I worked for a while at various jobs in Santa Fe and then I finally got on the project there. The project there was much smaller. I think there were about thirty artists on the project at Santa Fe.

LEWIS FERBRACHE: This was about what year, do you remember?

CHARLES MATTOX: This would have been 1936. We only stayed in Santa Fe about six months. And I was on the project probably four and a half, five months of that time. Nowadays, this is kind of – in those days there were requirements about residence in these places where you came to get on the project. But artists had a way of getting around this, the administration would very often help you circumvent this, so that it was possible to shift from one project to the other. I guess it was illegal but we did it. The project there was doing a lot of work for the American Index of Design, making color plates of icons and Early American art objects, and I worked on that while I was there...

LEWIS FERBRACHE: Doing watercolors of these objects?

CHARLES MATTOX: Yes. They were using it for book illustrations. And it was interesting work but there were no murals being painted there at that time. There were a few painters doing easel painting. But most of the work on the Santa Fe project was for the American Index of Design, historical work. In the early days in New York there had been a part of the project which was called the "Fossil Factory," and when the project first started a group of artists went in for drawing fossils, which, as I understand, were used by the big oil companies for locating oil sands. I never worked on that but I knew a number of artists who did.

LEWIS FERBRACHE: This sounds like something they were doing at the Museum of Natural History in New York, no doubt.

CHARLES MATTOX: Well, the project was located at the City College on Washington Square and they used – they made the drawings through microscopes and this material was all of some use to somebody. But there were thirty or forty artists working on that project at one time.

LEWIS FERBRACHE: Who were some of the artists you knew in Santa Fe on the project, do you recall any?

CHARLES MATTOX: No, I really don't.

LEWIS FERBRACHE: Do you remember the supervisor, for example?

CHARLES MATTOX: Hunter was his name. And I don't remember – the artists in Santa Fe didn't get together on the project. I knew other artists there who were not on the project, like Shuster, and Sloan who was there at that time. There were a lot of writers and some musicians that I got acquainted with there and had later connections with. Berace was there doing some composing at that time...

LEWIS FERBRACHE: Where were you working, in some building there in Santa Fe?

CHARLES MATTOX: No. And this is one reason we didn't get acquainted with the other artists. We went into the office and were given a photograph and color notes – somebody had already done this on some object they wanted prints, colored things made of – and we took them back home and we worked on them till we finished them, then we'd take them in and turn them in and get a new assignment. We worked at home and didn't come in contact with anybody else during the period of my stay. It was a home project. I was living on Canyon Road at that time and I met a number of writers: Harvey Bright, Kenneth Patchen was in Santa Fe at that time who I got to know very well. As a matter of fact I started working with Kenneth on some books. I was doing some illustrating for him, and then we left the project in Santa Fe and went to Los Angeles on a basis of a contact that we had gotten for to do a comic strip together. We went to Los Angeles with Kenneth Patchen and

his wife Miriam, and we lived together in Los Angeles or rather in Hollywood when we got there, for about six months. The outfit that bought the comic strip folded, and we never got anything except our initial payment out of it, which had enabled us to get to Los Angeles.

LEWIS FERBRACHE: This was about what year?

CHARLES MATTOX: This was in 1937. I think we arrived in Los Angeles two days before Christmas 1936, and we didn't sell any more work, Kenneth and I were doing quite a bit of work together and submitting it to publishers and we sold very few pieces, but it was very difficult, and we finally got more and more broke. He was on the Guggenheim fellowships at the time so he had some income. I didn't have any, so I finally left. We split up and I went out and got a job in a sign shop and then six months later...

(Interruption)

LEWIS FERBRACHE: Where we left off you had come to Los Angeles, you were about to get on another of the art projects.

CHARLES MATTOX: Yes, I guess it was six months after we came to Los Angeles, I got on the project there. At that time the project was on Temple Street in a building and Stanton Macdonald-Wright was the director, Lorser Feitelson was his assistant. I came on to the project, and at first I worked in Lorser's studio which was down on Western Avenue with a group of other painters. We were doing easel painting. The project up until that time had done a lot of mosaics. Wright was very interested in mosaic and there was a large director of that and they had done a mosaic for the Municipal Civic Auditorium in Long Beach, which was an enormous mural in mosaic, an exterior mural which was about twenty feet wide by sixty feet high or long, probably the largest ever done in America. There were quite a lot of popular medium, King and Wright had trained a lot of people to do this work. And a lot of those, of course, are still extant down there. You can see them around the various schools and libraries. Some of them quite nice. Lorser had done a mural which I saw in one of the high schools there, I forget the name of that high school. I didn't work on any murals on the project there. As a matter of fact I don't think many were going on at that time. The project had been going for a long time and they had sort of run out of wall, I think. So it was mostly easel painting. We moved then to a building over on Seventh Street right near where Chounaird is now...

LEWIS FERBRACHE: Chounaird School of Art?

CHARLES MATTOX: Chounaird School of Art. As a matter of fact it was just up on the corner from where they are now. And there was a gallery in that building that showed project work. I worked on the easel project for a long time, one of the people I remember very well from that time, who I thought was a very great painter, was Ben Burlin who was on and off the project. I think a very important painter who was very much neglected. He's dead now. He was an alcoholic and had a hard time getting to the project when he was supposed to. He had a lot of influence on a lot of the painters and I think was a very important man in Southern California painting. Fletcher Martin was on the project at that time, and Herman Cherry, and Denning Withers I remember. Then there was a photography project that was run by Leroy Robbins, was the director, and they made several films of the project. I finally got involved with that and helped him on films, I did titles and worked in film. I was very interested in film. I had been doing some experimental films of my own...

LEWIS FERBRACHE: Was this sound film, or ...?

CHARLES MATTOX: Yes. It was shot silent and then sound tracks put to it.



LEWIS FERBRACHE: 16 millimeter?

CHARLES MATTOX: 16 millimeter in color and we did films. And this was very interesting because we traveled around through the whole area doing the footage for these films. We went to San Diego and did a film on Donald Hord and carried then a project there, which was a large fountain in front of the City Hall which had a large stone figure I think about twenty feet high. It was carved in granite...

LEWIS FERBRACHE: Showing the artist at work?

CHARLES MATTOX: Showing the artist, showing a block of granite from the Quarry to the yard, the cutting of it, the models, carrying it through to installation. Then there was a mosaic pool with designs on the sides of the pool. It was quite a large project that went on for about a year and a half. We shot footage of that showing it all the way through. There was a big stone yard at that time out in Alhambra where there were a number of big pieces being done for the project. One of the pieces I remember that was done at that time was the figure that stands just off the Freeway as you enter Bakersfield, a figure of Father – who was the great?

LEWIS FERBRACHE: Father Serra?

CHARLES MATTOX: Yes. And it was done, I believe, by Paolo Congas – I'm pretty sure he was the artist – it was a warm limestone figure, it was a large, it was eighteen feet high, it was carved at this yard in Alhambra. So we went out there many times to shoot the work in progress and also we went to Victorville to the quarry where the stone came from while they were taking up pieces of stone for project work. I don't remember names of other artists, there were a lot of artists on the project at that time that are well known but I've forgotten...

LEWIS FERBRACHE: We may go back to your easel work. Were you doing oils or watercolors or...?

CHARLES MATTOX: These were oils.

LEWIS FERBRACHE: And the subject matter?

CHARLES MATTOX: Well they were mostly landscapes. I did one, which I think was the best painting I did for the project, was of a flood in Southern California, a picture of some houses being washed away in a flood. They had a couple of bad floods I think in '37, '38, and then...

LEWIS FERBRACHE: Did you have to work to the standard size canvas?

CHARLES MATTOX: No. We were given pretty much freedom to do what we wanted to do. We couldn't get too big. Of course the big problem was that all these paintings they wanted to allocate to school buildings and things, and if they were too big they had trouble placing them. I don't know what happened to any of the work I did for the project.

LEWIS FERBRACHE: Would you work out in a field doing sketches first or were they done from photographs?

CHARLES MATTOX: They were done from sketches in the field. Then of course I did quite a bit of figure work in the project at that time. We would sometimes have models who would come and pose for a group of artists and we would work that way. There was a big painting studio in a building on Seventh Street where there would be from twelve to fifteen artists working at a time in the Studio. Ben worked a great deal there in the studio. Ben worked a great deal there in the

studio...

LEWIS FERBRACHE: Ben Burlin?

CHARLES MATTOX: Ben Burlin. I think primarily they had him work there because they thought if they let him get away they wouldn't find him again.

LEWIS FERBRACHE: Who was your supervisor?

CHARLES MATTOX: Lorser Feitelson was the supervisor of that project. Oh, another job I remember we did which was sort of fun, we painted, executed a mural in the Santa Monica High School on the asbestos fire curtain. And it was a design of Macdonald-Wright's. I was supervisor of that and I was assigned, I think, ten or twelve artists and we went out there, and simply from his cartoons and color sketches, reproduced this big theatre screen in the high school. It was a semi-abstract design very much in Wright's style, Wagnerian themes of opera. I had a very interesting time on the project, because of my past record on the project as a technician in New York, I was sent out as sort of a trouble-shooter and asked to do all sorts of odd things on the project. I remember I went to a home for wayward girls out in Almonte where a mural had been done on the project very early in Los Angeles. I don't even remember who the artists were, but they had done a mural in this patio several years before, in fresco, certain pieces of it had gotten damaged, were falling out through leakage through a wall from behind, and also through bangs and things. I went out there and repaired this, restored it. There were some painters I remember working at the tubercular sanitarium too at that time – I don't remember just where this was, it was out near Almonte and there were quite a few murals at this place in the library, and I went out there several times, helping on the scaffolding and technique and helping them work out technical problems due to wall surfaces where lime was coming through and problems had to be solved and how you got the mural to stay on the wall. I also went to San Diego to hang a mural I remember with this crew at one time, a large mural there which didn't solve it too well but we did get it up.

LEWIS FERBRACHE: Did some interesting things happen while you were on these projects?

CHARLES MATTOX: Yes. I think it was a very stimulating period because it was a period in which artists were coming I contact, exchanging ideas. This was not true in New Mexico, but in New York and Los Angeles too, the artists really had a community while these projects were going on. It was very stimulating to the artists, and I think the younger artists who were associated with the project learned a lot about painting, and created an atmosphere in which it was possible for the young painters to grow and develop and feed back material from these other people they were working with.

LEWIS FERBRACHE: Were some of your works exhibited? They did have some exhibitions there; I believe Stendhal Galleries was one place...

CHARLES MATTOX: Yes. I was not in a show at Stendhal, that was before my time. But I was in exhibitions that were put on by the project several times.

LEWIS FERBRACHE: We may go back again to the motion picture project. How large was the crew that was on that, what was their duties?

CHARLES MATTOX: Well there were just two of us. Leroy Robbins was the cameraman – well we did have an electrician who would work with us on some occasions and I don't remember his name now but he was the – the project had an electrician who did electrical work in the building – he

would sometimes come out and work with us if we had trick dolly shots and lots of lights to set up. But ordinarily it was just Leroy and I, and I was responsible for titling, programming, it was sort of like an assistant director's job...

LEWIS FERBRACHE: Editing perhaps?

CHARLES MATTOX: Some editing, but primarily I coordinated all the activities. I saw that the work was – when we were supposed to be to a certain place to shoot and had it scheduled according to the right sort of light and things of this kind. And I found this very interesting. And I think the films that were made were quite good.

LEWIS FERBRACHE: Leroy formerly had worked in Hollywood studios?

CHARLES MATTOX: Yes, he had worked in the studios and then he later went back to the studios. At the present time he is working in the studios.

LEWIS FERBRACHE: No doubt there were quite a few unemployed from motion picture studios?

CHARLES MATTOX: Oh yes, yes. As a matter of fact there were a lot of people on the project who had been prop makers and worked in the studios, and the art department and so on. Another artist that was on the project briefly that has since become a big name in the east is Edmundson, Leonard Edmundson. I don't remember some of the other people. There were a lot of good painters on the project in those days.

LEWIS FERBRACHE: The films that were made, were they shown around the schools and other places?

CHARLES MATTOX: Yes. They were shown to anyone who was interested. They were shown at schools and also to various organizations who were interested in what was going on. And I think prints of them were sent back to East to the head offices of the Works Progress Administration. Joe Danysh, I believe, was the West Coast director of the project during that period. He used to come to Los Angeles once in a while and I met – and I understand he was originally from San Francisco.

LEWIS FERBRACHE: Beatrice Judd Ryan was state and later regional director of exhibitions, she would set up some exhibitions probably down there in your area?

CHARLES MATTOX: I never met her but I met Joe Danysh several times.

LEWIS FERBRACHE: How was Stanton Macdonald-Wright to get along with?

CHARLES MATTOX: Oh, he was very difficult, I think, generally. The artists found him very difficult and didn't like him particularly. I think that was generally true. I found – I know I didn't – I found him difficult. Another thing was that he was politically very reactionary. He was a Republican and he didn't really believe in the project. He thought the whole idea of the project was not a good one. There was an attitude on the project that was pretty much his doing, which the artists resented. There was always a great struggle on the Los Angeles Project between the Artists Union, which was not as strong – in New York the artists union was a very strong factor in the project and had a lot of power – and it was very weak in Southern California. They did have some members and they did try to do things around project policy but were fought always by Wright who was very anti-union, and of course Los Angeles was an anti-union town in those days and it made quite a difference.

LEWIS FERBRACHE: Hollywood studio unions though were fairly strong, weren't they?

CHARLES MATTOX: Oh yes.

LEWIS FERBRACHE: Did they give you any support at all?

CHARLES MATTOX: No, no, not – certainly not for the art project. The art project was sort of in limbo, you know. It was not – the studio unions were even in those days were very conservative unions – this would be A.E.T.C. which --

LEWIS FERBRACHE: Some of them were run by racketeer like Willie Bioff, Brown ...

CHARLES MATTOX: As a matter of fact it was during that period that Brown and Bioff were in control of the Hollywood unions, and later they were thrown out – Bioff was sent to jail and Brown was thrown out. But Zanuck in later testimony said that during those years, right during that period, the unions, Bioff and Brown had been paid a million dollars in kickbacks, and this came out in a Senate investigation of the unions later.

LEWIS FERBRACHE: Did Hollywood people who were working in the studios help support the WPA idea and all...?

CHARLES MATTOX: Yes. Some very much.

LEWIS FERBRACHE: The stars were progressive types?

CHARLES MATTOX: That's right, and there was a lot of interest in the project. There was a lot of work done by, for instance, of Hollywood Bowl. There was a lot of work done at that period around the Bowl, the statuary, and some of the people were interested in opera and things of that kind in the area. I can't remember their names now, but the people that were – the heads of the cultural community were very aware of what the project was doing. They came and looked at the work that we were doing, and there was a good deal of interest from people like that. Generally the project was supported by most people. There was always a group of people who felt that the project was boondoggling, you know, these people should go out dig ditches, and things like that. But I think that was not – certainly that was more prevalent in Los Angeles than it was in New York. I think due to the kind of a community it was.

LEWIS FERBRACHE: Theatre and music, no doubt, in New York and Los Angeles had good projects. Do you recall those?

CHARLES MATTOX: Yes. Well when I was in New York I was not too aware of the theatre project. I think I went to one production of theirs when I was in New York. They had just begun to get started. This was in the early days of the project. I knew that there were a lot of actors on the project because very often, when we would go to get our pay, we would go to the same place where there would be actors lining up getting their pay. But by the time I got to Los Angeles, the theatre project there was doing great things. They had a great theatre project. They had an old school building that had been given to them out on Western Avenue and a woman by the name of Farmer was director of the project at that time...

LEWIS FERBRACHE: It wasn't Frances Farmer?

CHARLES MATTOX: No. Virginia Farmer, I believe. She runs – she's the director now of a small theatre in Southern California, but there were a lot of people on the project, too, and they were

doing some great plays, they were very active and I went to a lot of their productions in those days. Cary Smith who is now manager of Banducci's "Hungry I" in San Francisco, and also the other place on Broadway, was on the actors project in Southern California at that time.

LEWIS FERBRACHE: You must have had some good times both in New York and Los Angeles, particularly Los Angeles because it was inexpensive to live there also.

CHARLES MATTOX: Yes, that's true, although it was still inexpensive to live in New York. In those days New York was not like it is now. New York was – Los Angeles was a much easier place to live and I got married and had a child during the time I was on the project in Los Angeles.

LEWIS FERBRACHE: Could I ask what pay you received in New York and Los Angeles and Santa Fe?

CHARLES MATTOX: Well in New York when I came on the project, like all the other artists, I was getting basic pay, and it started out – maybe a hundred and four dollars a month, which was very adequate, you could live very well on it then. Then it was reduced to eighty-four for a period, and finally came back up to ninety-four. But then I became a supervisor when I went in to work in the technical department and I got \$136, I think, this was a month. Then when I was on the project in New Mexico, again I was just as an artist, so I got \$94, and during all the time I was on the project in Los Angeles I got \$94.

LEWIS FERBRACHE: Did you have to qualify for relief in Los Angeles?

CHARLES MATTOX: Yes. You did. You had to qualify for relief.

LEWIS FERBRACHE: You had a case worker?

CHARLES MATTOX: Yes, but it wasn't too difficult in those days. They were understanding case workers and in most cases I think the people on the project really needed a job. I don't think there was any question that they needed jobs. Sometimes they faked their residence a little or something of this kind, but it was pretty much on the up and up.

LEWIS FERBRACHE: Who were some of the leaders in the Artists Union you mentioned?

CHARLES MATTOX: Well in the Artists Union in New York, I remember Murray Hampman was president at one time. Gee, I can't think of the names of people. Most of the artists were very active in the union.

LEWIS FERBRACHE: Was this a kind of branch of the WPA union or was it something separate?

CHARLES MATTOX: Well it originally had started out as a straight WPA union, it was a union of artists working on WPA. Later it became affiliated with the workers Alliance, which was a broad union, which covered all people who worked on government projects, but it still retained the title "Artists Union." When I went to Los Angeles, however, the organization there worked directly under the Workers Alliance. I don't remember the names of the leaders...

LEWIS FERBRACHE: We had something similar here, one project I worked on had a local union that was part of the Workers Alliance. I was secretary of our project unit. Then you came to San Francisco?

CHARLES MATTOX: Well not for a long time – till a long time later. After I left the project in Los

Angeles I went to work in the studios, I worked in the studios for a number of years...

LEWIS FERBRACHE: Motion picture studios?

CHARLES MATTOX: Motion picture studios, and came to San Francisco in 1950.

LEWIS FERBRACHE: I see. Perhaps you'd like to make a statement about what you thought of the PWA-WPA setup.

CHARLES MATTOX: Well, I was all for it. I think that the WPA projects, the art projects were a very good influence on American culture, I think the period was a very rich one in our cultural life, and made a tremendous impact on American culture. I think the things that have developed since then are the direct result of that period. I've just been talking to some of the people, art historians and critics who are beginning to realize more and more that the project was a very rich one for American culture and has had a tremendous influence on American painting. Many of these people that became the leading figures in painting after this last war were people who came from the project. And they have their roots and their development in the project.

LEWIS FERBRACHE: They were given an opportunity to practice their work, otherwise perhaps some of them might have been discouraged and given up art.

CHARLES MATTOX: Oh, very probably would. And people like Pollock were definite products of the project, and Pollock has had – you know, whether you like him or not – a profound influence on American painting and on world painting. And most of these people, you know, who produced in this period are not the young painters, you know, probably they think they're young painters, but most of them are people who have come from that period who grew up in the project days, got their first impetus during that period. Also I think that it was good because it brought people together, artists together. I think a great problem in our society is that everything is so fragmented culturally, and the project had a way of coalescing these things, and the artists became more aware of other groups, so that there was more interest in what the theatre project was doing, the writers project was doing, the dance project was doing, and all sort of tying together. I think that was good also.

LEWIS FERBRACHE: Is there anything else that you can think of that you want to put on tape, anything personal, or sudden thoughts of things that happened? I've been asking specific questions about little details here as they occurred to me, and I thought maybe reminiscing would bring back something that perhaps you would like to add.

CHARLES MATTOX: Well, I think there were a lot of things, simple things, all amusing, and kinds of people you came in contact with, which I've always found sort of interesting. For instance, in New York we had a man who was timekeeper on the project. His name was McCord and Irish to the core. A Tammany Ward politician who got a job on the project because of his past record and he was assigned to the art project as head timekeeper. And he had absolutely no idea of art or anything about art, he thought this whole thing was utter nonsense. And I got to be very fond of this guy over the years on the project. He learned a lot on the project, and he changed a great deal during the project. The artists just about drove him frantic because they were so unorganized from his point of view. And then we had artists on the project who would refuse to sign a time-sheet, and one of the great battles on the project was over some artist who was obviously a pretty sad – you know, a psychiatric case – but he simply – we could not sign his name on a sheet. He felt this was a violation of his personal freedom. So McCord would say, "well, if he won't sign the time-sheet, he won't get his check," and eventually he got his check. McCord lost that battle. But it was hard for him to learn to live with artists. And there were a lot of funny things that happened on the projects.

It was an interesting period. It was a very vital period.

LEWIS FERBRACHE: How did the two projects compare – New York and Los Angeles? Was there quite a wide difference between them?

CHARLES MATTOX: Oh yes, I think so. New York was a much bigger project and lots of different artists. New York was much more the center of the art movement. So the project was very diversified in New York. There were people doing all sorts of different kinds of work. Whereas in Southern California the project was smaller and dominated by the directors Wright and Feitelson, so it was very much influenced by them. And I think this made a tremendous difference. The New York project was much freer and I think that the work it did was much better generally, than in Southern California.

LEWIS FERBRACHE: Is there anything else you would like to say or statement you would like to make?

CHARLES MATTOX: No. That's it.

LEWIS FERBRACHE: Thank you, Charles.

END OF INTERVIEW

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