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**Oral history interview with Theodore C. Polos,
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Transcript

Interview

MM: MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY

TP: THEODORE POLOS

MM: First, I would like to ask you, Ted, where were you born?

TP: I was born in Greece in one of the islands of the Aegean Sea, Mytelene.

MM: How do you spell Mytelene?

TP: M-Y-T-E-L-E-N-E, otherwise known as Lesbos.

MM: Oh.

TP: Where Sappho was born.

MM: What year were you born?

TP: 1902. I left home when I was fourteen years old in 1916. I was 14 when I came over here to Boston. I went to the high school for about a year, and in 1922 I came here to California to visit my brother who was at the University of California. I have been here since 1922, so I must be a native Californian by now, then.

MM: Where did you go to art school?

TP: My art training has been very limited. I went to the College of Arts and Crafts [in Oakland] for a semester and to the California School of Fine Arts which at that time was at the old Mark Hopkins School [in San Francisco].

MM: Oh, yes, in the old Mark Hopkins Mansion

TP: I went there for almost another semester, I guess, and then I attended some evening classes at the school which moved to Chestnut Street. And I went there for close to 15 months for night classes and that was the end of that.

MM: Umhmm, umhmm.

TP: And then I went back downtown.

MM: How did you first make any contact with the government-sponsored art projects?

TP: I was a member of a small gallery that was called the Art Center. It was run by a group of artists.

MM: Was that here in Oakland?

TP: No, San Francisco. Do you remember the Black Cat? [An artists bar in S.F.]

MM: Oh, yes.

TP: Right about two doors further down, on the second floor, there was small gallery, which was run by a group of about 12-14 artists. They were Ben Cunningham, Dorothy Puccinelli, Victor Arnautoff, William Hesthal and several others. Those who were there helped me to have an exhibit and so forth, and through that, it was Bill Hesthal who suggested that I go see about getting on the Project, the Art Project.

MM: Who did you see?

TP: I saw somebody; I don't know who I saw. Mr. Gaskin. He saw my paintings and he was very interested, so I was signed up. But, first of all, I had to go through charity, you know. You had to declare that you were a charity case. That was the most unpleasant thing that any human being could go through. We were standing in line and all that sort of thing. Then I was on it and I got on it.

MM: Do you know what year that was?

TP: 193----7. So they assigned me to Easel Painting . . . and what happened over there -- at that time, I had a studio across the street from the old Montgomery Block -- the Montgomery Street Building. That was the old Montgomery Building that was so famous that they tore down.

MM: Umhmm. Umhmm.

TP: Right across the street was the Prosperity Corner. That's also torn down by now. And in the year 1937, I participated in the Annual. The San Francisco Museum of Art had opened up. I think it was that year, it was two years old. I sent in two paintings: this one and another one. I received a \$300 prize for the first Purchase Prize that they had there and I received this amount of money, and I was automatically out of the Project because I was not a charity case any more. So I had to spend all the money I had won, that \$300, and go back again the Project. I had to go through the charity business all over again, and I was there in '38, '39. To my misfortune -- or fortune -- I won another prize which was then the Anne Bremer prize, which also was another \$300. So out of the Project for three months until the money was gone. And then in the years from 1937 to after 1940, through the help of the Federal Art Project, I was helped by the government's pay and given an opportunity to be able to paint and to have material enough to do so. The Art Project was a wonderful, wonderful period of years that helped me to develop into the artist that I was supposed to be. The recognition that I received has been through the Art Project. Of course, that period 1937-1940, the recognition that I had was, say, about 10 prizes. It seemed that everything I touched, from watercolor to paints, in any medium, won prizes . . . The graphics show, two prizes in all, a Rosenberg Fellowship, a national Prize in Richmond, Virginia. Then I travelled through the Rosenberg Fellowship and went to Mexico and when I came back -- there was quite a bit of money in it, in the fellowship -- I was off the Project because that was, again, too much money. By that time, that was '41-42-43, something like that -- the Project was falling out at that time. So I was out and with the help of the recognition that I had, I received an offer to teach at the Academy of Advertising Art, and I taught there for several -- oh, for about a year and a half. And I was teaching at the College of Arts and Crafts for several years in '46, '47; they held classes over at the Art Institute, that used to be the California School of Fine Arts. I was there for about . . . Oh, we had a night class and we had a day class with special students. Now, I am more or less retired and just do

as I please.

MM: Oh. When you were on the WPA Art Project, who was your supervisor?

TP: Gaskin, I think it was.

MM: Bill Gaskin?

TP: Yes, but nobody seemed to -- they left me completely alone. As a matter of fact, they were so glad they had me because, through the recognition I was receiving, you know, the prizes that I was winning, it more or less helped the Project along, you see.

MM: Yes.

TP: So, at that moment, I was looking like a fair-haired boy. I was doing as I pleased. The only unpleasant thing, it was on my part, I was very embarrassed to go and ask for materials. Of course, you had to turn in the paintings and I used to turn in two or three every month, in water color or graphics, whatever I had. But I always used to run out and never could I go to ask for the material so most of the time I had to buy my own. Then, there was one show in 1939 in which I received a big prize for a painting which was a portrait, a self-portrait, the canvas was 30 x 40 -- a fairly large canvas. But, for the title, instead of saying self-portrait, I was fascinated by the signs you see in restaurants, you see: "Tables for Ladies," maybe "Sundays or Holidays," "Something Extra, -- I put the title of the painting as "Sundays and Holidays." It never dawned on me that somebody might misrepresent it as something else, which happened when the prize was awarded. Some critic, I don't know who it was, Frankenstein or Fried, wrote about it and said, "We understand that Polos is on the Art Project, and therefore the title of 'Sundays and Holidays' is an indication that he did it on his own. He did it on his Sundays and holidays, not on the Federal Art Project." [Laughter] I never thought about it, I never thought about it, I never thought about it. That was very funny, very funny.

MM: Then you worked in your own studio?

TP: I had a studio [in San Francisco]. Do you know where Matthew Barnes, Matt Barnes, was? He was across the street, about a block away.

MM: I didn't know him, but I remember his work.

TP: Yes, I was across the street from him. He was a wonderful man, wonderful, a very strong Scotchman, strong his beliefs, in what he was doing. He was the most individual creator in the Bay Area. He used to paint those dark, woody street scenes. Did you ever see them?

MM: Yes. He was on the Project as a plasterer.

TP: He was a plasterer. He used to prepare the walls for their mural painters -- the fresco painters, for Rivera. He used to get the walls ready for them. I don't think he was on the Easel Painting Project. He didn't do very much painting then.

MM: Did the WPA have any rules about entering shows with paintings you did on Federal time? They didn't mind that?

TP: No! No! They did not mind, because there were some lithographs I did for the Art Project I sold. Of course, at that time they had a ruling that the artist could keep three of his own. They used to run about 20. The Project would take 17 and the artist would take about three for his own use and

he could sell them or enter them into exhibits. One of them won that prize in the Graphics show at the San Francisco Art Association Annual, and the other two, I think they were sold. I remember one Christmas time. Those years were very bad, very bad and very dark, very dreadful, but also happy years. It was Christmas, and I was very, very broke. But everybody was broke, as usual, and I had only about 39 cents -- it was the day before Christmas -- and Dorothy Puccinelli 'phoned me. She said, "Polos, I have some good news for you. You know that lithograph you did -- it was called 'Storm Over Potrero?'" She said, "I have sold one of them. Somebody saw it and wanted to buy it badly and so I sold it to her for \$25." And \$25, I thought at that time, was an awful lot of money.

MM: Mmhmm.

TP: I was the richest man on Montgomery Street -- the rest of the artists found out about it and everybody wanted to be treated, you know. The whole money was gone in two days. [Laughter] Saroyan was there at that time -- Bill Saroyan.

MM: Oh, he was?

TP: Yes.

MM: What was he doing?

TP: I think he was in the Writers Project. He was writing or doing something or other. He used to hang around over there. Did you know Hilaire Hiler?

MM: I never met him, but I know who he is.

TP: Yeah, he was over there.

MM: They all lived in the same area, while you were there in San Francisco?

TP: I worked alone in Chinatown. I had a studio for which I paid \$6/month rent -- two rooms. I had one room for \$3 a month so I took the room next to it and I paid \$6 a month and it was very drafty, very dirty. I had my own furniture, couch, my own linen and so I kept it pretty well -- no real activity. Whatever happened to those paintings? What happened to them?

MM: To the paintings that you'd done on the Project?

TP: Yes.

MM: Nobody seems to know. Quite a few of them, of course, were allocated to different public buildings.

TP: I know that. I used to receive letters from various parts of the country where the paintings were and where they were allocated from the State of California -- various public schools, public buildings and so forth.

MM: You must have been doing an awful lot of painting though, if you were turning in one, two or three a month.

TP: About two a month. And then Gaskin told me to slow it down, you know. He said, "No one's compelling you to turn out work. Just whenever you feel like you have a worthwhile painting and you would like us to have it, bring it over. So he said, "Get off the easel painting and come do some

lithographs." So I said, "I've never done a lithograph before." So I got my stone and started to work at it and there were some commercial lithographers that were working with me at that time. You know what commercial lithography is? You know how the commercial lithographers can be so very careful with a stone. You can't touch it. You gotta treat it like that, just so. You cannot take advantage of it and, of course, with me not knowing anything about it, I remember the head of the lithography department told me, "Go right ahead and do as you please."

MM: Who was that, Ray Bertrand?

TP: Ray Bertrand. So he gave me a razor blade. He gave me some tools, and something else, and said, "Go right to it." So I was experimenting with it, but every time one of the commercial lithographers that were working with me saw what I was doing to the stone, they would just tear their hair out. They'd say, "You can't do that. You'll get grease on it. You can't put your hand down. This is grease over here. This will ruin the stone." [Laughter] So I was taking it off, putting it on, wiping it off, washing it off, and so, and did some beautiful textures on the stone, you know. I took liberties with it, and so, if it prints, all right; if it doesn't, all right. At least Ray Bertrand knew enough about it to take care of all this, you know. It printed very dark, very, very moody, so they came over to me and said he was very happy with them. This was for about three-four months on the Lithography Project.

MM: How many did you do?

TP: Oh, a series of about 10 or 12 stones, I guess. I kept, oh, a half dozen stones. There were five or six which were a success. The rest were destroyed. I had to destroy and try again, you know. Then I did some water colors for a while. Then, when the Rosenberg Fellowship came along, I was out. I didn't know whether to take it or not take it. I went to parts of Arizona and New Mexico, Texas for about three-four months. I went to Mexico City, stayed there for about another three-four months. Then the money was gone, so I came back, broke again and started all over again. [Laughter]

MM: Back in the Project?

TP: No! No! Not back on the Project.

MM: Oh, it was over then?

TP: No, the Project wasn't over. They wouldn't take me in unless I could prove I was a charity case, and the only way to prove it was by going to live at Sharp's Park. You know where that is? Where they have all those alcoholics, you know, and all the poor destitute people . . .

MM: Oh, I didn't know about this.

TP: Yes. The only way that you could prove that you were a charity case was to go over there, and stay there for about a month or two months. They had barracks -- and they had a regular kitchen for those people and they gave you board also. Allen told me, "You go over there, stay for the three-four months, and I will bring you back over here. They don't want to accommodate another head right now. Go there, then I can get you back on the Art Project." I said, "I don't think I have the stomach for it. No, I don't want to go over there." And I would have to take a particular bus with all those drunks and all those other people. Oh, they were good people, but it was very unpleasant to live that way. I thought a little about it and then I went off the Project.

MM: Did you have to do that before when you first went on the Project?

TP: No, not before, no. But you had to go to stand in line. They asked you a lot of questions and so forth, but it was very unpleasant and I did not wish to go through with it. But, once you were on the Project, it got to be quite all right. Well, you might say, we were making about \$86 a month with all the materials which you can use.

MM: Who were some of the other painters you knew who were on the Easel Project?

TP: Well, Bill Hesthal, George Harris, Ben Cunningham, Earl Daniels.

MM: Muriel Daniels?

TP: Earl.

MM: Earl Daniels.

TP: I don't know what happened to him. Herman Volz.

MM: What sort of painting were these people doing? What style were they working in?

TP: Most of us, you will find, were in the cubist period at that time, cubistic. Everybody was more or less leaning towards that trend of painting, and then they all turned into what we used to call the "Backyard" paintings.

MM: You mean American Scene painting?

TP: The American Scene. But everybody would more or less find relief and find something that was closer to him by painting -- not from the front part of the house, but the back part of the houses -- the garages, and the garbage cans, and so forth. They seemed to have more personality and more individualities. There were an awful lot of paintings of back yards. Most of the paintings that I did with the Project were painted out at Potrero Hill. Do you remember that?

MM: Oh yes. Umhmm, umhmm. We have several friends who live there now.

TP: What happened to the building anyway?

MM: Oh, you mean the Art Project building? I thought you meant Potrero Hill. No, I don't know about the building.

TP: It was a hospital for girls [before the Art Project took it over]. I used to work there whenever I was doing lithographs, but the rest of the time I was working in my studio most of the time. What were you doing on the Project at this time?

MM: I wasn't on the Project. I was on NYA.

TP: NYA? National Youth Administration?

MM: No, I was at the University here, and so I missed it. Well, you said that the paintings you were doing were of Potrero Hill? You mean, landscapes of that area?

TP: Oh landscapes, mostly. And of -- the sand dunes -- I used to love the sand dunes where I would go out and get all the sky I wanted to see -- out in the open.

MM: Umhmm, umhmm.

TP: And mostly about the neighborhood -- of course, I never got the chance to go out to the country to see the hills and the trees, and some of the soil, so what was available was around us. And mostly the streets of San Francisco, the streets where they set them up as socialism. I was talking to some young artists again, about some of the things that were happening, not just to the artists, but to the whole generation of poverty and so on and so on. They were very dreadful days, but now as I look back, they were very wonderful, adventurous days. It is not like it is today; not the same thing, you see.

MM: Very different?

TP: Yes. As an artist, of course, you had to paint. That was that, and if another artist came along and was very sympathetic towards the things that you were doing -- well, it was a payment in itself. That was all it amounted to. As soon as . . . until Bill Hesthal came into the studio and he said, "Let me see what you are doing." So I showed him the painting. He said, "It looks very good, that's a very good painting." That was it! That was the payment for the painting. There were no galleries, the only museums that existed were the de Young Museum and the Legion [of Honor] and even before the San Francisco Museum of Art opened up, there were no reproductions to be seen anyplace. There was no gallery to be seen anyplace, there were not even any magazines, any periodicals that you could see what was going on into -- in the rest of the world, see. It was isolated. And if you wanted to grow up, you just grew up. You just painted, you know. You were left alone. You didn't know what was going on, unless someone was rich enough, well off enough, to buy some of the books that were being published in France, and if you got a chance to see it, that was one of the most wonderful, the most pleasant things that you could have. We had Diego Rivera, but he painted like Diego Rivera, you know, very illustrative of the things that he was doing and then we got a chance to see some of the Mexican artists -- Orozco, a few Tamayos, and so forth -- that was it. So you were left quite alone. You were left alone to shift for yourself. I had some students over here from the College of Arts and Crafts that come over here to visit with me. They talk and they discuss like this: "Do you know Jason Sheldon?" They are talking about one of the members of their faculty. "He is a \$10,000 year man." And the other students say, "That's nothing, you know what Diebenkorn is worth -- a \$20,000 a year man." [Laughter] He said, "Diebenkorn sells his for \$2,000, \$3,000, \$4,000 a painting." And that's what they're interested in.

MM: Money.

TP: Money! Even now my wife is very much against my attitude towards my painting, because I feel really guilty. If someone comes along and offers \$300, I think it is an awful lot of money. I feel humility and embarrassment that anybody should be willing to give \$300 for this painting. Well, \$300, whatever the price, but when they do offer, I just take it and then it takes about two or three days before I can get over it and get back to work again. [Laughter]

MM: Why is this?

TP: I don't know; I don't understand it. Always do. Every time I sell, I have a headache and with a little bit of success, I'm no good for three or four days. I don't know what happens to me. [Laughter]

MM: Were you always like that?

TP: I think so.

MM: Oh, maybe you don't want the paintings to leave -- go away.

TP: No! I would rather get the paintings out of my hair, because they are problems as long as I have them around my studio. I always have these problems, you know. What to do! So if somebody is willing to take them out of my hair -- and out of my studio, give them a home -- that's a wonderful thing. I remember I had a show at the Legion of Honor -- no, at the de Young Museum in 1958, and David Park Do you remember David Park who was exhibited? He had one of the big rooms, David, and I had another room. But it wasn't a two-man show. It was a one-man show. We just happened both to be there. It was scheduled all at the same time. Of course, his things were very strong and very powerful. You know how he painted! Very dynamic, very big. My things are the other way around, very subtle, very romantic Whatever, not timid, but -- well, I'll say romantic. I got sick when I saw the exhibit

MM: What did you say?

TP: I was rather sick when I saw the exhibit.

MM: Oh, oh.

TP: David Park had no problems, so assured, so self- assured. But it appeared that people were most attracted to my things, more sympathetic than they were towards David Park. Of course, David Park didn't sell anything at that show, and I had 15 canvases and there were nine of them sold at that time -- and there were two more sold after the exhibit.

MM: It was very successful.

TP: I just couldn't understand it. Fried bought one, you know, the "Examiner" critic

MM: The critic?

TP: Alexander Fried, the critic, bought one and -- Mrs. Head, she was at the de Young Museum, one of the supervisors or something. She bought another one, and somebody came in from Los Angeles and bought two canvases. Well, anyway, regardless of the success of it, you know, I didn't work for almost a year. [Laughter]

MM: You didn't work for another year?

TP: No. I was very happy, but then . . . but it was so confusing, you know. My paintings are something very personal -- really something very personal. They are something else -- something beyond me, still relating to me but, in trying to deal with them, they become part of me -- in a very special way. So if anyone wants to live with the painting, they'll have to live with me. [Laughter]

MM: We saw one of your WPA paintings at Arthur Painter's house? Do you remember him?

TP: Who?

MM: Arthur Painter; he was the publicity director for the WPA Art Project here.

TP: Oh, does he have a little painting?

MM: Umhmm, Umhmm. Of trees in a wood

TP: Does he have one of mine?

MM: Yes.

TP: Well, at that time, I think it was right after the Art Project -- or was it during the Art Project, that I had a job working in a soda fountain from 8:30 in the evening to 12 at night -- four hours? That used to give me \$2, at 50 cents an hour, plus the . . . I would also have something to eat. So, I think it was Painter, or somebody, who wrote to the daily newspaper. Of course, they came out to the studio and they wanted to interview me. And, of course, I had won a prize of some sort that year. I think it was something like the Purchase Prize. And then the newspaper reporters came and I really think it was Painter that told them about it. And they came up to the studio to interview me. They wrote the article and they took pictures of the restaurant and wrote "San Francisco Dishwasher Wins Top Award." And another was "From Hamburger to Art." [Laughter] And I was stupid enough to actually pose washing some dishes. I didn't really wash dishes. I was making milkshakes or something, and so forth, you know, and they took a picture of me washing dishes and the photograph was published in the paper with this big article about "burgers to art." A humor story, you know, of course. And then, two months after that, some reporter came from the Time magazine and had an interview. They also wanted to write this because it was something rather phenomenal at that time, you know. I just came into my fame, and I was invited to exhibit in the Carnegie International Convention, two years in a row. The third time I didn't have any paintings to send. Anyway, the Time reporters came and wanted to go through the same thing again. But, I'd had enough of it, you know. [POUNDING NOISE IN BACKGROUND] I had enough of it. I'm no "Hamburger Painter."

MM: We were just talking about your Time magazine experience and how they wanted to picture you as the "Hamburger Painter." [Laughter]

TP: Some things artists don't do for publicity.

MM: You mentioned that Diego Rivera was in San Francisco and he lived right in your area. Didn't he have a studio in Montgomery Street?

TP: He had a studio there at the time when he was doing the murals for the California School of Fine Arts. And, he must have had about six or seven other people that were helping him. They were also on the Art Project, out of hundreds that were on the Art Project. Do you remember Victor Arnautoff? He was one. He's in Russia now.

MM: Yes. I knew that.

TP: And there was a very beautiful girl, a very beautiful tall girl, I had a crush on her, she had a crush on me. She was six feet tall and I was five feet tall. [Laughter]

MM: Not Shirley Staschen?

TP: Shirley. Oh, do you know her?

MM: She lives near us.

TP: Huh?

MM: She lives near us.

TP: Will you give her my love?

MM: I certainly will.

TP: Huh? Does she have any children?

MM: Yes, she has, I think. Three.

TP: How is she? A beautiful girl?

MM: I saw photographs of her from that time. She really was beautiful.

TP: Yes, she had hair like that, huh. She was very funny. We had lots of fun together.

MM: She worked on the Coit Tower project. She was an assistant there.

TP: For Bernard Zakheim.

MM: Umhmm. She did interesting paintings, lithographs.

TP: Lithographs.

MM: Rather surrealistic.

TP: Yes, surrealistic. She was rather sympathetic towards the pictures I used to do. We were really very, very good friends. I think she was helping Rivera when she was there, wasn't she? No?

MM: Did you know Rivera personally?

TP: I never met him.

MM: You never met him. He didn't have much influence on the Easel Painters compared to that he had on the mural work?

TP: No. I kept to myself most of the time. I was a real conscientious, hard worker. The few friends that I had were mostly Bill Hesthal, Ed Haggard. I saw once in a while . . . Earl Daniel used to work there and Matt Barnes. Most of the time I kept to myself and just kept working at it.

MM: What kind of painting was William Hesthal doing then?

TP: Oh . . . street scenes of San Francisco. We used to pick the City Parks, you know, the parks that are in San Francisco. You know, the little parks up in San Francisco -- you know, the neighborhood parks: a little grass, a few benches in a few places. They were happy hours which you spent in the sun, doing drawing and sketching, whatever came along, then taking them over to the WPA office. I would like to see those [William Hesthal's] paintings again.

MM: It would be nice to see them again.

TP: Yes, because we have become so involved in something else. That time had a different character. It was something wonderful, something that was exciting. I was so deeply in love with painting itself. It was a love of painting, you know. There was no question of that. I . . . we were going to get paid, it was not important. We just had a question of doing a lot of painting. If you were an artist, you had to paint and you didn't question it too much. Which is happening now. You are quizzing the painting so that it goes to something else. It is not painting any more. It becomes trickery. There's the boys and the artists are always so clever -- so clever that they are almost as clever as the window displayers, you know. They can take this, can take that -- put it over there, put it here -- never content, conscious. It becomes beautiful to see, very beautiful textures, and so

forth -- it was not that sort of thing at that time. But the human element played a big part, you know. We used to question. I don't know if they question today or not, ask whether this painting will last. That's the question we asked -- will it last 30 years, will it last 20 years, will it last a 100 years? Will it be forever a good painting? Lot of us didn't know what we were looking for. I don't hear anyone discussing this now-a-days. Well, take the material they're using. They'll be using gesso, oil paint, and something else on top of that -- if it does come out, all right, but use some sand, wash it off, or put something else on. Who is going to look at those things? It's not just taking the material alone, but the subject matter also. That, too, is just for the moment. The youngsters of today, who come out of art schools, while they go to art school, they also exhibit. They have one-man shows. It didn't exist like that in our time. The difficult part of educating is finding your own self. We could never show for four-five-six years -- and what was ahead of you you didn't know -- just darkness was ahead of you. It was just completely dark. You didn't have any way for you to look forward to Well, if I do enough painting, I can have it shown in New York like they're doing now -- and somebody will discover me if I sell enough -- most everybody sells now-a-days. There were no sales then. There was nothing, absolutely nothing. Do you understand what I mean? You just dedicated yourself to building with what was there. Then -- like I said, you had a wonderful time, your happiness was with your friends. Your fellow artists gave you enthusiasm, praise. That was a very good thing. It is better. I remember a lady bought a painting, you know of Mrs. Salz?

MM: How do you spell her last name?

TP: S-A-L-Z. (Helen)

MM: She and her husband were quite big collectors during that time.

TP: A very big one, they were very wonderful to me. Unexpectedly, but they came over with the romantic painter, who used to wear a cape, and a bow tie.

MM: Oh, an older man?

TP: An older man.

MM: Piazzoni?

TP: Gottardo Piazzoni.

MM: Oh. I didn't know him, but that description reminds me of what I had heard before.

TP: They had seen Mr. Piazzoni at the studio and wanted to see some more paintings. Mr. Salz was very sympathetic and he bought a painting. The selling price at that time was \$100, \$150. He said, "How much do you want?" I said, "I don't know." [Laughter] I was depending on my luck. I didn't want to sell. If I had to sell, because I had to do it, that's okay. So around a \$100, you see. Still, he said, "You are stupid. You shouldn't sell these things for less than \$200. As a matter of fact, I am going to give you \$300, for that's what the painting is worth." I was shocked. I cried and was very hysterical and was just up in the air. [Laughter] So . . . but they took the painting. They held the painting in their house for about 2 weeks. And he telephoned me and said he wanted another painting, because it was impossible to live with that one. He said he would send it to the museum. [CHILDREN'S VOICES IN BACKGROUND] He said that he would take it and dedicate it to us, which was something else again. I remember it had the face of a woman with long, blonde hair that came down like this, and big eyes. They were very able to give her I proposed to call it "Vorcolax" which is a Greek word meaning "the ghost." That was what I proposed to call it.

MM: Oh, how do you spell that Greek word?

TP: V-O-R-C-O-L-A-X, Vorcolax.

MM: That means "a ghost?"

TP: It is a ghost. They decided to give the painting to the San Francisco Museum of Art. They have the painting there, the painting is there. The other, the National Prize, that was awarded me, was in the Richmond, Virginia -- is it biennial? They have it very two years or every three years -- it was initiated by Kuniyoshi, Thomas Benton and the particular group of painters that was around at that time

MM: Who was the first one you mentioned?

TP: Kuniyoshi. I had a painting I wanted to send in, and I had to pay \$12 and I didn't have \$12 for freight so I didn't have any chance and I wasn't about to take an awful chance to participate with those "bigshots," you know, because what do I have to do with them? So Gottardo, he says, "Send the painting and I will pay the fare." I said, "Man, it is going to cost you \$24." I said, "You can't afford those \$24," and neither could I. He said, "I'll tell you, if you send that painting, if you win a prize or win any money," he said, "I will go half with you." So I said, "So, do you know who is exhibiting? All those leading boys?" I said, "I'm just a local boy out here." I said, "I've had just a little success over here, just locally, you know." I said, "I'll send it anyway." I said, "I'll pay that fare." So I got a crate to put it in, shipped it out. I'm not the richest of the painters, but I have enough money to take care of myself. Then, two weeks after, I received a letter and I won the prize. Hello, Kathy. This is my oldest daughter; This is Mrs. McChesney.

Kathy: Oh, you're not alone?

TP: Do you know who this is?

TP: Have you seen this painting? [He shows painting]

MM: Oh, done in 1938.

TP: Yes. I would have sold this for a miserable \$35. [Laughter]

MM: I'll be darned. Who is it? [It is a portrait]

TP: This is called "Toots." [Laughter] The girl. This was exhibited at the San Francisco Art Association . . . And there was a woman who used to play the piano at Jacopetti's, downstairs from where I had the studio.

MM: Did she work down there?

TP: Sure, worked down there as a piano player. She used to play the piano; she had hair like that [long blonde hair].

MM: Where? At the Bar? Was that where she played?

TP: Yeah, they had a bar, but they also sold wonderful sandwiches, turkey sandwiches, for 15 cents.

MM: What's the name of the place, again?

TP: Jacopetti's.

MM: Jacopetti's.

TP: This was exhibited there, at the time when Toots was there, I think, and Shirley was responsible for it.

MM: For the title?

TP: For the title. She said, "Why she looks enough or a little like a 'Toots,'" so I said, "Well, there's your 'Toots.'" But a day that it was exhibited, we went to a lecture -- I think it was John Humphreys [a curator at the San Francisco Museum of Art] who was lecturing on this painting and he had some wonderful things to say, but, after he left, there was a young couple who came along and were looking at the painting. And the young man said to the girl, "Why the title of 'Toots?'" So he was saying -- are you interested?

MM: Yes, go ahead with it.

TP: He was saying, "I still wonder why he called it 'Toots?'" Well, it is just a girlfriend of a sailor." He said, "See this little boat here? The sailor has gone away; she has discovered she is going to be an angel while he is gone away, the little boat over here is going toot, toot." [Laughter] That's wonderful, [Laughter] Tell Shirley, she gave me this angel. I think she bought it from the 5 and 10 cent store. At Christmas time, you could buy these little angels like that. I think she bought it for me. She gave it to me. I'm sure she gave me this material, the black material, velvet. I think that it was for a Christmas present. It was something like that. I think I gave her a bone. I had found a perfect, white bone in a field and I gave that to her for Christmas. Those were the kinds of presents we gave then. She's near you?

MM: Yes, she's on Sebastopol.

TP: This lady has remained, that painting has remained.

MM: From the 1930's?

TP: From the 1937 period. The others, the Museum has them. The San Francisco Museum of Art has the "Mexican Village," that won the San Francisco Museum purchase prize, and another painting called "Stormy Evening" and the "Vorcolax" and another, "City Children." They have them. Once in a while I get a chance to see them when the Museum puts them up again. Anyway . . .

MM: Do you think it was a good idea for the government of the United States to sponsor the artists like they did on the WPA?

TP: If it wasn't for the government . . . I would say this, the tastes, the renaissance in art now have been created through the efforts of the Federal Art Project. We were responsible more or less for the activity that has happened to art now, has been because the WPA existed. It woke up people, people became conscious of the artists, you see. People became conscious. For the first time in their lives they had a chance to see, well, real paintings, original paintings through murals in public buildings, easel paintings shown in Public Schools, in the Federal Buildings and so forth and so on. Then the business people became conscious that the artists also had to exist, you see. And they became a more sympathetic . . . And then they would accept them -- not personally -- but they would accept them at the Museum when the Museum opened up, when the San Francisco Museum opened up. You know, so Dr. Morley, she was responsible. You remember Grace [McCann]

Morley?

MM: Yes.

TP: It seemed to me that she opened up the road for the young people to come in. I guess there were some at that time. Nothing existed before; there wasn't anything. People asked me, what do you do for a living? What is there better to do than be an artist? But I was embarrassed. I never said it! There were others who said they were artists. They were very clever with their art, again. They say, "Are you one of those boys," you know? So, you just put your head down, say, "Well -- I'm a dishwasher." -- huh? Or the few friends I had in business, they couldn't understand why I was doing painting and not doing something else. My brother was making money, and he found I was painting, doing this. He said, "What for? Why are you doing it?" He said, "Why don't you become a commercial artist. You know, the people making up signs, posters, and so forth." It was difficult. You couldn't even find a person who was sympathetic enough to, at last, give you a little pat on the shoulder and . . . let alone buy your things. But that was a wonderful thing, you know. Even the museums didn't exist. Nobody knew what a museum was. I went there to the San Francisco Museum a couple of Saturdays ago. It was just like a supermarket. I had never seen anything like it. Are Saturdays different than Sundays?

MM: I heard the attendance is up to 1500 a day at the Museum.

TP: Oh-h-h-h. I never saw anything like it. People will buy cards, they will buy books, they were coming in the elevator, going up and down, and we went to the "Image of Man." Did you see that exhibit that they held? I took my youngest daughter to show her the exhibit. Well, anyway, then . . . I used to go through the Museum myself, and I used to meet John Saccaro. Do you know him?

MM: Yes.

TP: And there were just the two of us. We had the whole museum to ourselves.

MM: John was on the Easel Project, too.

TP: He was on the Easel Project. He was on. When I was on the Easel Project, I was out doing some sketches down in South [San Francisco]. I still recall that day. I really was not responsible, just a friend. He said I met him one time when I was doing sketches, sitting on a rock and there were just the two of us who came to South San Francisco, and he said he was watching in the back. It was John. I didn't know he was there. He said, "It is a very good what you are doing. I also paint. I also enjoy painting." I said, "That's good." He said, "What are you doing?" "I'm actually employed," I said, "I am on the Art Project." He said, "Oh, hell, I wish I could get on the Art Project." And I thought I would let it go like that and 3-4 months after that I saw him on the Art Project and he had made it. Now-a-days, he is a very successful painter. I think he is a rather successful painter, don't you?

MM: I think so, yes.

TP: He has changed completely. He went to the San Francisco Art Institute for four years. He was a GI and, of course, they helped him go to school, the government. He was in the armed forces four years and, of course, he is a very successful painter right now.

MM: What sort of thing was he doing on the WPA? Do you remember?

TP: Water colors mostly, and a few oils. Everybody was supposed to say something in their painting and so he did. Hard, stead work, you know. Very moody, dark, nothing but ashcans, unhappy, and

everything. Poverty. Very well educated, he was from Harvard in carpentry. [Laughter]

MM: Did you know Luke Gibney?

TP: Yes, I did. Knew him quite well. He lived across the street from me. He used to do some beautiful portraits.

MM: Was he doing portraits when he was on the Project?

TP: He was helping the muralists, wasn't he? He was putting up a scaffold Wasn't he putting up the scaffolds? Doing the plastering?

MM: I think that was what it was.

TP: He was helping Matt Barnes, I think. Yes, the old Scotchman.

MM: Do you think it would be a good idea for the United States to sponsor the arts again?

TP: The Federal Government There is no reason why they should interfere with the artists. The way things are now, there are enough openings for the artist. He goes to art school and he makes enough sales to get by financially; he doesn't have to worry about it. It was difficult at that time. We were not as rich. We got \$5 for the materials and they now spend \$50. We just squeezed it out. But the youngsters of today, they have money for things with which to paint. They have paint, canvas, which they can just immediately order. They can use a little more; they can forget the cost. They are free not just in the subject matter, but also with the materials and everything else that goes with it, you see. I don't know if they need any help on this. They have a lot of things open for them: museums, the galleries. There are hundreds of galleries in San Francisco. Nothing existed at that time, you see. Nothing. Now artists get educated, have an art exhibit, and just make one or two sales -- make about 3, 4, 5 hundred dollars, maybe. Not then. Now, the only reason that the youngsters of today that you see wear beards, are very dirty, look very hungry, is that it is just a show that they are putting on. They're not hungry. Neither do they want anything, and all the sympathy that they are given, they don't even need. Do you agree with me?

MM: I think you're right.

TP: Yes. This letting themselves go like this, that is to copy the artists in Paris who were like that. But it was a necessity for them. They didn't have money to buy soap. They didn't have enough money to buy clothing. They didn't have enough money to pay the rent, so they were hungry and destitute. But there is no reason why the American painter should be like this. They can do anything they wish to do, you see. They can get the material from their father or mother or there's fellowships, there's grants, there's scholarships. Anybody can take any of their paintings, if you want to make a sale, you take it down to Montgomery Street. And go into any office. Not to the executive, but just the girl at the office. You say, "Look, I am an artist. I need some money. Will you give me \$10-\$15 for this drawing?" And then I make a sale. Huh? Something like that, huh. If you got the guts, you've got to do it. Always had to then. I know about Albert Bender. He telephoned at the studio, he wanted to see me. So I went over. He said, "I wanted to see you, Mr. Polos, because of Lester Michel." Lester Michel of the Superior Court? He used to be a patron who helped some artists. Bender asked me to go see him. "It is better that you go see him, he might have something for you." "So what will he have for me? Does he want to buy something?" He said, "I don't know, go see him." So, as I was going out, Bender said to his secretary, he said, "Write a check for \$50 to" He said, "What is your name again?" So I told him and the girl said, "What is the initial?" So I told

her. The name was Theodore Polos. She said, "Mr. Bender wanted this check written out." I said, "Why?" She said, "Can't you use it?" I said, "Yes, I can use it, but why am I being given \$50?" She said, "If I were you, I wouldn't ask any questions." [Laughter] "This \$50, you better take it and use it on a good thing."

MM: Did he do that for many artists?

TP: He did it for several of the artists. He was a very wonderful man. And he used to put up the prizes for the Annual they used to have [at the San Francisco Museum] in memory of Anne Bremer. I think she was his sister, something And a little later she died and he immediately proceeded to put up the money, \$300 or \$400 for the Anne Bremer prize. That's the only thing that existed then. It's amazing what is happening now. I met a businessman, a man who has come over from Sidney. He retired about 1948. He had a heart attack, so he took up painting. Well, when I was asked out to his house, to see his paintings, and when I thought of it, I was going to give him some criticism and, stupidly, I was going to give him some constructive criticism, to pull his sticks, you know. Because I had a class at the Art Institute, about 20 students, and most of them were in the age of 40 up to 60. They were Sunday painters, but they all wanted to know why they were not being accepted at the Museum; why they were not being accepted at the Annual. They were satisfied with what they did, but they also wanted to participate in the Annual. So it was my job to tell them -- why they don't get in there, and so and so, and so this man was the same thing. So, when I started to give criticism, Mrs. Polos kicked me. He doesn't want to hear that, he must be praised. He was just not talented. So I said, All right. So, I sat over here, and there were two young people over here and two young girls over here, he was over here and his wife was over there. Well, one question after another, and stupidly I answered one after another and finally I said, "Look, I'm not getting paid for this." [Laughter] I thought it was Channel 9, you know. [An educational TV station.] But he sells.

MM: He sold his paintings? TP; He's sold for three years.

MM: I'll be darned.

TP: He sold a painting the other day. A very bad one. I didn't like it. Landscapes and flowers and all those cliches. You get the greens, hills; the browns, earth; the blue sky Well, anyway, he was very happy. The best thing is that he doesn't know any better, that there is any higher order, what good paintings are, you see. He's got it made. He's got it made; he's a lot safer. He gets up in the morning and works until 8:00 at night.

MM: Oh, he does?

TP: He just paints. He said that painting that was sold, he sold it for \$500. He got quite a good price for it. It's moving along for him. He's the happiest man. I said, "I wish I were like you. More than anything, I wish I were like you, to be able to paint and to succeed and to be happy about it." "But you've been painting for about 30 or 40 years," he said. I said, "Do you know what I do when I make a painting? Do you know how I suffer? How I do my best, and it just squeezes me dry, you know. So when I get done with a painting, either the painting will cry or I will cry." He says, "I don't understand. What do you mean by that?" I said, "Oh, you make mistakes, but if I am still I sit down and just make a painting." I said, [THIS PART OF THE TAPE TO THE END OF THE TAPE IS VERY SCREECHY AND DIFFICULT TO LISTEN TO] "That's not for me." But he said, "Why do you paint then?" I said, "I paint because I want to paint and also I must have something to say. If it is significant enough and important enough and profound enough, [GREAT DEAL OF BACKGROUND NOISE] I try to put it into a painting. Then it becomes something else." He said, "I don't understand it." I said, "Well, it is a wonderful thing that you don't understand; I don't understand it either." So

after that he was very happy, got a studio and just painted away as before. That's what it is. You just paint. You paint a surface and let it go. If it is a good painting, or you think it's good, pick it up, put it in the living room and decorate the house, you know. If I do painting now, it's just because I do it. They don't have to work as hard as we do. But if I am going to make a living from my palettes, then that's what I do, I paint houses.

MM: Are you still doing it now? House painting?

TP: I'm still doing it now. I've been working at it for 15 years. And I get enough to support a family, to send the girls to school, to college and so forth. I can afford to do all of this, but I get the feeling of a dream. I get the feeling that it is somebody else. Somebody will say, "Why don't you paint like him? Paint about 20 or 30 canvases, show in New York. Get a dealer." They don't know how tired I get after work like that. If I was a young man of 40 years old, I would do it, but I have never been able to accumulate that many canvases. This painting I did years before. I have exhibited it at the Carnegie International. I had exhibited it out there, you know. It came back to me again, back in the studio. It was a problem. What will I do with it? I'll keep it. Well, necessity compelled me to paint over it, because I had no other canvas, you know. What could I do? Well, we have this painting, but what will I get out of it? Now I need canvases. So I give it a wash, try another technique. I painted it out and painted over it. Many paintings on one canvas.

MM: Oh, there were?

TP: Anyway, I would do the same thing I did.

MM: You would do the same thing?

TP: I don't know. . . . It is very confusing. Like a dream. What made me take up art I don't understand. What made me take up art? I never saw a painting until I was 26-27 years old. I never did see a museum. I used to draw a lot just to . . . pass my time. You know, for pleasure, to enjoy what you were able to do. And, it paid a little bit too in that I could be content about myself. In fact, it is a lonely art. I came from a large family, nine of us in the family. I came here as a boy It was very difficult for me to live in a hotel by myself when I came to the U.S., you see. In Greece, there were my father and my mother, brothers, a donkey, goats; there were cows; there were the fields of Greece, hills more wide open with pine trees all over, vineyards, sky and ocean. And I was compelled to live in Boston, it was the awfulest city in the United States. Do you know how Boston is? The streets are narrow, dark and moody and the buildings are filthy. Not knowing anybody, what could a young boy do? Go into a hotel room? To stay there, nothing to do until you have to get up and go to work. So I passed the time . . . in drawing. I decided to copy the Saturday Evening Post covers, especially the illustrations of James Montgomery Flagg.

MM: I remember him.

TP: Yes, I used to like his work. Well, when I came to California, my brother asked if I wanted to go out there to school. What was I going to do in America? I said, "I don't know." "What do you like?" I said, "I don't know." "You like to draw," he said, "why not go to art school?" You know, I still can recall I walked up and down that hill for about a week, every day. I would go outside and walk up and down that hill, in front of the School, trying to get up the courage to register. So I became an artist.

MM: Thanks very much for giving us your time for the interview this afternoon.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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