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Oral history interview with Anton Refregier,
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Transcript

Interview

JT: - Joseph Trovato

AR: - Anton Refregier

JT: This interview is taking place in the studio of Anton Refregier at Woodstock, New York, November 5, 1964. I'm so happy to see you again, Ref. I often recall the wonderful job that you did for us up at Utica, New York at Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, oh, about five years or so ago when you came to judge our Mural and Sculpture Competition that we put on there and you were ever so helpful in so many ways, and it's just wonderful to see you again. It's such a pleasure to see your studio for the first time, you have a wonderful spot here, your home is beautifully situated, and I envy you.

AR: Joe, it is good to see you again, o tell you that I always remember the project you did there at the Munson Institute. I think it was a very important project. As a matter of fact, it's the first thing that has happened of this kind since the government program. I think you would like to know that I spoke of your project on many occasions in lectures here and also I spoke of it abroad, pointing out how a community can be stimulated to bring art forms in to the environment of the people, and your program enlisting the merchants, the bankers and educators was a very fine attempt. Regardless of the outcome, I feel it should have been publicized much more, so that more communities throughout the country could at least have gotten jealous of your project and perhaps attempted something like that for themselves. Joe, we have to keep on pushing, we have to keep on pushing people who are in a position to turn to painters, sculptors and craftsmen, This is a kind of a poverty situation where the richest country in the world spiritually and culturally is so poor, when you consider the tremendous building program, the billions of dollars that are used today in reconstruction of our cities, But I'm critical of some of the architecture, I think it's rather anti-human, clinical, It's done by an engineer rather than by an architect. I think it's done with very little regard for the people who function in it. They are afraid of the artist. They don't know how to use artists. I would love to see a kind of rebirth of the thing we had in the 1930s where art was brought to the people in all the forms. Joe, before I get too far in all this I would like to refer to my pamphlet. I call it "Government Sponsorship of the Arts" I read badly. I even read badly my own stuff and some people my think I didn' t even write it. So I'm going to ask my wife, Ills, to read this first passage which I think will give me a very good starting point to discuss the entire question of government sponsorship of the arts.

JT: Very good, why don't you go right ahead. Please do. (Mrs. Refregier reading:) "In this middle period of the 20th century, we are faced with the dilemma of reconciling the profit motive and the cultural needs of the American people. There is no denying that the capitalist system has provided material abundance unknown in previous history. It has been less successful, how ever, in implicating the spiritual values which would make that abundance meaningful in terms of human satisfaction. In consequence, we find ourselves in an anomalous position. The richer we get in possessions, the poorer we become in their enjoyment. The leisure we have earned by mass production is a source of worry and unease, We are not quite sure we know what to do with its In short, the profit system is not capable of providing the fullest cultural development of the people."

AR: Joe, this is the first page of the pamphlet I refer to. Thank you, Lila, for reading this for me. Working on this pamphlet I spent three months thinking back on what I consider was one of the most wonderful periods of our lives, the 30s, in spite of the fact that it was wonderful in a peculiar way. After the Wall Street crash, with the great suffering of the people, the people had to be provided for. By the wisdom of one of the greatest Presidents we ever had, Roosevelt, it's common knowledge the WPA, a relief program, was established, for, as Roosevelt, said, it was necessary to protect the skills of the American people. With that point of view, it was soon found that the first people who were starving at that time, of course, were the artists and the people in the arts. So quickly, we were all put to work. The best people came to Washington at that time. Roosevelt was a kind of a magnet that attracted the best minds, which, of course, I cannot say for Washington in postwar period, although I think that Kennedy was that kind of a person, too. He could, if he had lived, probably done a little bit more for the spiritual and cultural life of our people. The wonderful thing about that period, Joe to me-was the human quality, the humanist attitude that we had, and I think it was very definitely the result of discovering that the artist was not apart from the people. First of all, we were all in the same boat. We all had to go thru a relief program. We all had to be investigated. In order that the investigator would come to your house, open the icebox and make sure there was nothing inside. Then you were all right. The program started with great vision and quickly we had the wonderful experience of seeing some of our best artists devoting part of their time, I mean to say, for instance, like taking a year off from their painting or sculpture and becoming administrators. I remember my dear friend, Philip Evergood, doing that kind of thing, Lucille Blanch did it here in New York; and from here to San Francisco the same thing was happening. In other words, artists were willing to give up even painting for a while

to help to plan for his fellow painters in order to make the greatest possible contribution. The one thing in that period and this I would like to speak of time and time again, to give a lie to reactionaries who are always tearing down the things which are in the interests of the people is that there was complete freedom on the projects. It is important to remember I am talking about 1936, '37, '38 when there was very little interest in the more abstract form of expression. There were very few galleries exhibiting abstract art. Of course, the Museum of Modern Art was beginning to show abstract painting but it is important to remember that men like Stuart Davis, Gorky, and other artists who were interested in the abstract school were able to work side by side with the majority of artists who were realists. This is very important to know. It is very important to know for the younger artists of our country today who are scared of government sponsorship of the art because they think that politicians will immediately curtail their so-called freedom. Not at all. As a matter of fact, I think the lesson of our period of the WPA art program and the Section of Fine Arts, which I would like to talk to you about later, is something that I talk time and time again everywhere I go. I spoke of it in England and Sweden and France, I spoke of it in Moscow, and Budapest, and Berlin. I feel it is something we should be very proud of, and certainly it is a pattern to remember I would like to see our government returning to this responsibility. You see, I don't go along with all this business of states rights and all this. I think that the Federal government today must represent the needs and wishes of the people more and not less, and I believe it is important on every level, municipal, state and federal to establish a vast cultural art program, because, Joe, our profit system is not capable, as I said to cope with it. The artist is the least needed person in our society because no big business can exploit him and make money. Bobby Dylan, who lives here in Woodstock, can make a record and it may sell probably a million copies. Well, this is great for Dylan but it's even greater for the American people. They can have his songs in their home. But the important thing is it's only possible because the big manufacturers can make great profit out of their original investment. This does not apply to painting and sculpture; it does not apply to graphic arts; it does not apply to a dance; it does not apply to the majority of composers; it certainly does not apply to poets. Therefore in order that the artist can serve the cultural needs of the people, and I like to use this sentence, I like to use that kind of phrase, I believe it is necessary and essential not to lose the great talent and that is why I say it is necessary for a government program. And I'm not worried about waste because let's remember that, while we have the great wealth of the Renaissance in some of our museums and throughout the world, remember that for every great name we have today there must have been hundreds of other artists who were working, probably not with the same kind of talent, but helped to lift the whole school to a higher level of performance. I'm not worried about the reactionaries who say that the WPA was boondoggling and there were some bad artists on the project. We need everyone who commits himself to the position of being an artist and give him a chance and make sure that we don't waste a single possible talent, Who in official circles could have told whether Van Gogh was an artist or not at the time when he first started painting. Well, Joe, I said lots of things off the cuff, maybe now you can pinpoint some of the things I have opened up, and we can discuss it more.

JT: Well, Ref, what you have already said only confirms what a number of artists have said to me that "you must go and interview Refregier because he was a big name at that time". We're only getting started in this and I can't tell you how wonderful it is to have this opportunity to put down your ideas on this tape.

AR: Joe, I'm glad to hear what you say. Everyone of us has to have some kind of approval of our fellow artists. But I wasn't a big nab at that time. No one really was a "big" name, there were so many of us and this is what I would like to remember, In New York we had an Artists Union, and I guess at the height of the project there were about 3,500 people in the graphic and painting and mural-painting and sculpture and teaching projects, and craft, and Community Art Centers were all working together. This is another important thing, which was so different from the time we're living in now, The time we're living in we see an individual against society. In the 30's it was the very opposite position because of the social situation, the economic situation we found ourselves in. Of course there was a great excitement. As a matter of fact, last night we had a memorial in BPI (Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute), in Troy for Eddie Milman, whom we lost just a few months ago. There was a great exhibition of his work there, and after seeing it we all went down to the lecture hall and Fletcher Martin and George Rickey and I had a chance to say a few words about Edie Milman, And I recall at that time the excitement of knowing that while we were here working in New York and doing some pretty damned good stuff, there was a swell group of artists in Chicago and in St. Louis and in San Francisco and in Los Angeles, and every month or two a new work would come up which would challenge everybody, would excite everybody. I remember when I first met Philip Guston, who had just arrived from Los Angeles. We did not know his work, but when I saw Phil's photographs, especially the mural he did with Kadish for a worker's school in Los Angeles, I was excited. Every time you see good work something happens to you, you are on a spot. You are never jealous. It's not the competition that we experience today. That, I think, is a very negative and destructive kind of competition for some puny little prize in some museum or for a Ford Foundation grant, which is great, and I'm happy for every artist that has it. But I question all that in the affluent society we are in today, where the artist should be able to serve a majority of people and doesn't have to resort to being in a crap game or horse race to win one prize. It was a great time to be constantly nourished by the new ideas. But they were not new things in the form of the sensationalism we experience today. The wonderful, young guys coming up with powerful art forms, with powerful ideas, and so there was a kind of a competition. Like in Renaissance Italy where suddenly

somebody was doing something in Rome that challenged the Italian artists in some other community or city. This was the important thing. Of course out of all this we do have now a collection of so-called big names, and it is important to remember, to recall to all the Congressmen and Senators who fought us, that the two or three hundred dollars that was spent on de Kooning, or Philip Guston, or Ben Shahn, or you can name any name you like, was just peanuts considering the fact that today Philip Guston sells his canvases for \$10,000. And museums buy them. After all it's the people's money in the last analysis. I think that in every way, we can look back and say, "This was a terrific period." It was great wealth and it made us a kind of wonderful people. Forgive the expression, but I think we were. We were less conceited, less egoist and we were closer to what I think the artist's function is. Artists are part of society. You know, Joe, today we have to be so careful when we say things like that. If we speak of love or humanity or world peace it's not very fashionable. We are so far away from real powerful human values. I think that every time I see my friend Evergood, and hear him. He is the kind of guy that uses those words and he is not afraid of them. In some ways, it's difficult to evaluate that period because our yardstick is so different. But I think that humanism, serving the people, love, are good words and I hope they will come back into the language of our people.

JT: Well, all of this is just fine. It's just wonderful. As I said before. For a moment I should like to have us change our pace and go on to a little bit about yourself. Would you tell us where you were born? And where did you study art?

AR: Sure. I was born in Moscow, Russia in 1905. I went to Paris at the age of 15 and there I had the great fortune of being taken on as an apprentice by a very great man by the name of Vassilief. This was a remarkable man who, I think in a way, conditioned my whole life. He was a man of the Renaissance. I remember his studio. I wish the hell I could remember the street. A few years ago I was back in Paris and I tried to trace it but I couldn't find it. The job was being an apprentice. I had to sweep the floor, keep the clay wet. I remember doing a papier mache throne for Boris Godunov. I remember casting sections of the human body for Paris Hospitals. I remember ushering in and out his mistresses, it was the kind of thing that every so often when I teach and I just told you just before we started taping that I have just finished two years at Bard right across the River here. I taught in quite a few places in the states. But I tell my students that actually the greatest education and we don't have it, and there's no way of doing it now -- is to be apprenticed to a professional artist.

JT: This was the old system, wasn't it?

AR: Oh hell. That was a great system, Joe. In the Renaissance, you know, there were no art schools, There were ateliers where you went to work, and I think that I did follow the great tradition of being a worker. My master did give me lessons in art. He would put up a paper on the wall and say, draw straight lines up and down, then, draw horizontal lines. This is inconceivable. Of course, this would probably appeal to avant garde boys right now, but actually it had nothing to do with that. It simply was training your right arm the way a musician would be practicing with his bow and violin. I was greatly influenced by my grandfather who was a great musician, a friend of Leopold Auer, Joachim, Ysaye, Vonyovski and Liszt, He thrived at the Imperial Court of Russia, and of course you know I'm not interested in imperial courts, but this was part of the richness of my life. Being in his home in St. Petersburg, (which is now Leningrad) hearing music, and seeing the famous personalities coming in and out, and Grandfather playing cards until four o'clock in the morning, those are strong memories of my childhood, Oh, the reason for silence, my wife just whispered in my ear, she wanted me to mention the gypsy story. Well, it's not a secret, because in an interview for the Art News about 15 years ago I did mention that. Joe, I like to recollect this, because I think it's so delicious. My grandfather no, it was my great-grandfather, bought my great-grandmother from a gypsy tribe for a hundred rubles. Now I believe at that time the exchange was two to one, so I think for fifty bucks he bought a perfectly beautiful girl. He sent her to Paris to be educated and she did come back as a remarkable hostess in Moscow. A kind of Carmen, we all have moments like that back in our history and I think that probably appealed to me very much and gave me kind of romantic ideas. I really did not try to live accordingly. I hope not. But still, it's something to remember.

JT: This is out of this world! Please go on.

AR: When I worked with Professor Vasilieff in Paris, I had an uncle who was in the United States. You know foreigners always had uncles. And Joe, you have an Italian name, I suppose your grandfather or father came here with an uncle.

JT: I was born in Italy!

AR: Ahh. Italy. God, I love Italy. I love the Italians. I love Italian food, and I always promised myself to learn Italian. It's such a beautiful language. Well, I had an uncle, Joe, I came here. He invited us here, My first job was a strikebreaker in a little factory in the early 20's, which was a rather interesting experience. Of course now I know better. I got a scholarship to go to the Rhode Island School of Design. I was there for four years working my way through, washing dishes, cleaning barbershops on Saturdays, baby-sitting, doing practically everything you can think of, as we all did in those days. And then I felt that I really wanted to get out of this rather small

community and I went to New York, and of course, this is 1925 when there was little to do for the artist, I really wanted to be a mural painter. I wanted to do big monumental painting. The best I could have done at that time was to work for an interior decorator doing fake Bouchers and Fragonards, especially Fragonards, which was done by either copying something that was available in the Metropolitan, or doing a painting from a photograph. And then the interior decorator expected you to shellac the painting and then take a little bit of oil and raw number smear all over the thing.

JT: And antique it!

AR: Joe, you're right! Antique it! Now you know damn well when you look at that beautiful Boucher in the Metropolitan Museum it's not antiques. But in those days it was expected. I used to get \$75 apiece for those things at that time. God knows what the interior decorator got. But of course when he put it in a West End Avenue apartment this was probably considered an original. And as you said, we did antique it. I remember answering an ad in the New York Times- probably in 1926, for a "modern artist", unheard of word in New York at that time. And I appeared and secured a job at \$25 a week for the firm of Eastman Brothers. When I was hired, it was explained that one of my functions was to go up to a place on 49th Street and Sixth Avenue, a rooming house, and wake up an artist who was the artist of the studio at that time and was quite essential to the project. I did not particularly like this part of my job. I went there and knocked at the door and a rather gruff voice with a heavy Dutch accent answered, and I said, "Mr. de Kooning, it's time to get up." It's funny as hell because Bill and I became good friends and of course now Bill is one of our really distinguished artists. After a few days I said, "Bill, for Christ's sake, don't put me in this position. Can't you possibly get up by yourself?" Looking back those were wonderful days. We did many speakeasies for this unique firm. And I remember Bill and I, and Tully Filmus and Lou Jacobs, who is now a distinguished film critic and filmmaker, and, oh God, everybody, practically every artist of any reputation at one time or another worked in that studio. There was a speakeasy on 56th Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues run by a very famous gangster, Larry Fay, and, Joe, believe it or not, he did walk around in a camel hair coat with two guys in derbies in back of him, just the way Hollywood --

JT: It's a Hollywood image.

AR: He got bumped off by his manager right in front of my mural! And then the depression came. We were having one hell of a time. All of us. And now I am just right back where I started off on this tape with you. We were picked up by the projects. And, incidentally, being serious for a moment, mural painting was impossible prior to 1934 because of the concept of the cheap interior decorations and the very wealthy upper class society who was looking at the Renaissance, Medieval, or Tudor without really knowing what in hell it was. At that time, we begin to see a little bit of what was happening in Mexico- We were very much interested. But we would have remained in that same condition, Joe, unless it was something happened that shook up our country. The depression reevaluated the human values, put us to work and we were able to take mural painting to its proper place. The reason I'm talking about mural painting is because primarily I am a mural painter. I was able to survive as a mural painter right up to this point, in spite of the fact that architects resist it. Very few will give you a wall. Until 1936 and the government sponsorship of art, mural painting consisted of palm trees, nude girls, gold fish, etcetera. It was with the government projects that we had a chance to look at people's lives, connect up with the great tradition of Giotto, Orozco, Rivera, Piero della Francesca. And this is where the whole thing started. That's why I think that is so important. But while I reminisce I would like to mention just one more name that shaped my life, that is a great American, Norman Bel Geddes, a guy who made a tremendous name for himself in the theater. Probably the only other name we can mention in our time outside of Craig of England. He is the man - but of course you know -- who did "The Miracle," "The Dead End." He was the first industrial designer of America. But being a very honest man and an impossible man, a most impractical man, he let other men like Raymond Loewy take over. But Norman was a great shaper of our time, and I had the great fortune of serving him in the same way that I served Vasilieff. On a different level I was older. He was a perfectionist -- constant demands on me. And I think, Norman, because he had two daughters, and didn't have a son, developed a kind of attention to me which I appreciated and I returned the friendship. I was fortunate to work with him on many, many projects. Well, Joe, that's really reminiscing.

JT: Well, Ref, I'm afraid that I'm not going to be able to correct the typed transcription when we get to the name of "Vasilief," your teacher that you mentioned a number of times. How do you spell his name?

AR: Do you want the spelling? I would say -- you know I'm a lousy speller you know, Joe, I had a great complex about spelling. I used to hide the fact that I didn't know how to spell and I think that it was when I first met some artists I respected, like Arnold Blanch, and when I discovered Arnold Blanch couldn't spell then I felt much better. So now I really don't . . . but anyhow I know how to spell his name, it's V A S I L I E F.

JT: Now was he a sculptor, did I understand you to say?

AR: He was a sculptor primarily, but also a painter, & doctor of medicine, an architect. I would say that he could have been an industrial designer of his time,

JT: All right, now that we have this cleared up, I want to go back to your mural painting and I want to have you tell us how many murals did you actually execute on the WPA?

AR: Yes, First of all, I would like to recollect the very procedure of getting on the WPA, You had to be on relief. In other words, you had to be in a position not to be able to pay your rent, not to be able to buy a loaf of bread, and of course that already takes for granted that you don't have 15 cents to go to a movie, I was called in by Audrey McMahan, who was a wonderful girl, a New York WPA administrator, I was already certified for relief, you see. Then the procedure was to take you off relief and put you on the WPA rolls, which paid \$23.86 a week. I came in, The headquarters at that time was at College Art Association because Audrey McMahan was with the College Art Association until she was asked by the Federal government to assume responsibility for the N. Y. project. I waited there with two or three other guys. Finally my turn came, I walked into the room, and very quickly they said to men "Now, you've had some experience doing some murals before," I guess they knew about those gold fish I was doing, that we were talking about."Now we have several projects we would like to assign you to, Would you like to do a courthouse or a hospital?" I wish I could remember the third choice, Well I was not prepared to do a courthouse because you know this was the 30's where we were very sharp in evaluating our whole social system. To do a courthouse at that time, Joe, would have meant a pretty revolutionary statement. I wasn't chickening out, it was just that I was not ready for its Later on I wish I had done a courthouse. But I took probably the easiest thing which I think I was correct - first job, trying to feel your way around -- I took the assignment of the Green Point Hospital in Brooklyn. Next I was told that there were five artists waiting to meet me because they had already been assigned as my assistants- And presently they all walked in. One man who I will always remember for the rest of my life became my dearest friend, a great artist in his own right, Eugene Morley. There was Brv baker, Chodoroff, Ryan, I think there were a couple of others I might have forgot. You know, Joe, first of all we're all the same age, and I think I felt embarrassment at suddenly being the master artist with this group of other fellows, whose work I didn't know at that time. I took it for granted we were all in the same soup. So I said, "Let's go to a bar and talk this thing over." Once we got to the bar a- ordered a beer I said: "Boj~, let's make this cooperative." Well, this was not strange if you remember that at that time we also had a strong revolutionary movement. We had John Reed clubs, we had Ne~i b~ses~ The Left was very powerful at that time the really moving force. The idea of cooperative concepts was in the air. In New York City there was a cooperative orchestra, an attempt to have an orchestra without a conductor, where the first violin was the one who gave the signal to begin. This is the important atmosphere to remember, The Left was moving and I think we were all on the Left. So the concept of a cooperative was very important and I think I was right to project that. And we did it. It was of course easy because this was a children's ward, a large wall divided with a number of windows so we were able to take the comparatively easy way out by assigning each one to a particular space between two windows. The only unifying force was the element above the windows and the color scheme and general pattern, which I decided, because I was in charge of the project, and responsible to the government for its The way we worked, was very interesting. I suggested we all solve the design individually and we all agreed we would take two weeks each, and each one of us would design the wall. Then we would have a conference and, collectively, we would select the best passages, incorporate them in one overall design which I would pull together with respect for everybody's contribution. And it worked out very well. It didn't infringe on the liberty of any one individual. It was a good job. I think it took us about a year or so to do it. This was just before the beginning of the World's Fair. I was fortunately chosen by the Federal administration in Washington to be one of the artists to contribute to the World's Fair Federal Works Building. It was called at that time Works Progress Administration. It was a great moment in my life. The artist chosen unfortunately had to be from the New York region because of expediency. I say "unfortunately" because there certainly were artists in other parts of the country working who could have made a great contribution. In the group there was Philip Guston, Ryah Ludens, Eric Mose, Seymour Vogel, and myself. And, Joe, we delivered the goods. All the murals and art forms had to be done outside, to be moved in, except for Guston, who worked directly on the exterior wall. We had an old church which actually was just a shell in Brooklyn somewhere. Temporary walls were put up for us and we started doing our cartoons. I had a very difficult problem to solve. This was the lobby of a Federal theater which was to function during the World's Fair. Unfortunately, Congress killed the theatre project and the place was used for something else. It was a round room of 15 panels. I took half of those panels and decided to portray the contribution of the Federal Art Program. Philip Guston did a magnificent human statement in the exterior of the building. Ryah Ludens, who died a few years ago, did a very exciting piece of three-dimensional collage in one of the areas. We had terrific spirit at that time because we were going to show up the commercial mural painters who were doing the tried and tired mural painting of Justice wearing a Grecian nightgown holding the scale and all that kind of nonsense- which did not have, certainly the American form or American content. And we were working to show off what the government projects stood for. And we came through. There was one day when the National Society of Mural Painters organized a ballot for voting on the best murals. Thousands of people who came through the gates that particular day were given a ballot. Enough people voted on their choice of all the murals, and believe me, there were, of course, many so-called distinguished artists people who were doing the commercial-type mural. But the first and second prizes won: for outdoor mural, by Philip Guston; and for indoor mural, by Anton Refregier. It was a very exciting time. After that in 1941 I competed and won a competition conducted by the Section of Fine Arts. Now I did not mention the Section of Fine Arts. It is very important to talk about that. You see, along with at about the same time as the WPA was functioning, as a purely

relief program, Roosevelt with the encouragement of George Biddle, whose brother was Attorney General, with encouragement of Eleanor Roosevelt, who was a wonderful woman, very aware of the issues, (a former social worker) a person of great human values; and many other people who are under Roosevelt at that time, including Edward Bruce, suggested that here were all the federal buildings going up new Post Offices, Federal money was being spent. The discovery was made, one day, that there was a procedure of allocating one percent of the total cost of the building for fancy door handles, Renaissance ceilings the kind of ceiling you can see in our 34th Street Post Office in New York City. Why not take that money and give it to artists in national open competitions? This, Joe, was a great idea! It worked like magic. Now this was a different setup from WPA. And again I want to make a difference. It was the Section of Fine Arts of the Public Building Administration inside of the Treasury Department directed by Morgenthau. And again, you see, this name rings a bell because Morgenthau is as a highly cultured man, a man who collected, a man who knew the importance of art. They proceeded rather cautiously. And this is a lesson I want to bring for the record, while on WPA we had complete democracy, no name stood out, every man had an equal chance, At the beginning, not to take any chances, they did give many big jobs out- right to name artists, While some of it was quite good, for the most part it was not really anything until they began to draw on the artists who came through the WPA. The administration was very interesting. Each job, I mean at the beginning as I said, was just handed out as a plum and they began to see that when they gave a commission to a well-known name artist at that time, he did not experience any particular challenge. He performed on the best level that he could. Quickly they began to see the vitality that was coming out of the WPA program. And quickly the artists on WPA began to compete in the Section of Fine Arts program. IMch were either regional, state, local, or Federal, depending upon the size of the job. For instance, the one in St. Louis a national competition won by Siporin and Millman was a collaborative job. They divided the walls between themselves. If it was a national competition the juries came out of the winners of previous competitions. This of course was very democratic, very good. So the standards grew. But I remember in the early period of the Project having lunch one day with Bruce and Rowan who were administrators of the Section of Fine Arts in Washington and they asked me, and I was rather flattered, who the artists I thought at that particular time should have been considered for ccmmissions. Well I said- "Ben Shahn." "Oh, no," they said, "No, he's too modern!" But the important thing is that Ben Shahn did enter competition and won the Washington Social Security Building, did a very distinguished mural. Every time this happened it did, of course, raise the level of the performers of the Section. I, myself, as you know, competed for the San Francisco Post Office. This was a national competition with 81 artists competing. I was declared the winner, the jury consisted of the previous winners of the previous jobs, Arnold Blanch, Victor Arnautoff, and so on. And of course I spent two and a half years of the happiest part of my life working on that great Federal program, Section of Fine Arts. It is there for everyone to see, and this is the way mural painting should function.

JT: Well, Ref, this has been just wonderful, this is a most useful contribution to this record and I can't tell you how appreciative we are for your doing this and I want to thank you on behalf of the Archives of American Art.

AR: Joe, I want to thank you for giving me the opportunity to make this record. As I mentioned earlier, on my recent trip in Europe where I went to socialist countries I made quite a point of speaking of this great achievement of ours, and this was beautifully received; there was great interest in what we were able to achieve at that particular time. I'm glad to be able to record this because I think it's very important and I want this to be broadcast, not only what I say, but what my other fellow artists say. I want this to be a lesson because the great lesson is that the achievements were great. The artists had complete freedom and that we were only starting when we left off. If we were able to continue the great renaissance in culture in America, it would have been comparable certainly to Mexico and perhaps even beyond. Joe, it was great that you came with this machine of yours. I've known you. I like what you're doing. You're a guy who is committed to the very kind of thing I am. You've made me very comfortable. Ed Chavez has just walked in. Dinner is on the table, so let's go over there and have a drink and something to eat.

JT: This is just swell, thanks a lot again. END OF INTERVIEW