



Smithsonian  
*Archives of American Art*

Oral history interview with Charles H.  
Sawyer, 1964

**Contact Information**

Reference Department  
Archives of American Art  
Smithsonian Institution  
Washington, D.C. 20560  
[www.aaa.si.edu/askus](http://www.aaa.si.edu/askus)

# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Charles H. Sawyer on 1964. The interview took place in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and was conducted by Heyward Ehrlich for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose. This transcript is not verbatim.

## Interview

HEYWARD EHRLICH: What I'd like to do is go all the way back to the beginning, before the project, the things that happened to you in a New England kind of context of growing up in the Twenties.

CHARLES SAWYER: Well, I might explain that when the project started I was director of the Addison Gallery of American Art which was associated with Phillips Academy.

MR. EHRLICH: How did you first become interested in art?

MR. SAYWER: Well, I majored in college in history and government and international relations and then went to the Harvard Law school for a year and then I sort of pulled myself into art in the year '29-'30, this being the first year of the Depression because it was advisable to have a job at the time and I was offered a job teaching art and operating this museum that Andover had just then been given.

MR. EHRLICH: Had you been in Andover before?

MR. SAYWER: I'd been interested in art at college. I had spent the previous summer in Europe and one previous year in Europe, so I had some identity with art but never any professional interest up to that point.

MR. EHRLICH: Did you do any painting or sculpture?

MR. SAYWER: No, I had really...I had done some writing. I had done a fair amount of writing including some art criticism. I had some interest and experience in a very amateur basis in art and more in looking than in doing.

MR. EHRLICH: How did this job come to be offered?

MR. SAYWER: Well, it was one of those personal things. The man who gave the gallery to Andover happened to be a classmate and close friend to my father who was treasurer of the school at the time and, for no particularly good or logical reason, this donor decided he wanted me to leave law and go into art. I decided I would try it here and I've been at it ever since. I didn't finish the law school. I transferred to graduate school the following year.

MR. EHRLICH: Since you had kind of a half century in New England and here we are in Ann Arbor, is there kind of a New England sense, New England background, New England mentality, that's important to you?

MR. SAYWER: Yes, I think it is in that way. I am a New Hampshire and Massachusetts Yankee from some distance back and this is very much part of my point of reference. I don't regard this as the Midwest. I think of this as the Middle East, really. But I should say that this New England identity is very much part of me and my early life and experience is dependent on the Atlantic seacoast. My present association is the first experience west of the Alleghenies.

MR. EHRLICH: Can you describe the background, the experience?

MR. SAYWER: Well, I was...well I should say brought up in New England town with the town meeting atmosphere and a [?] to the local public schools and with that sort of sense of continuity and responsibility which is part of the small town in New England and this is the kind of place where you even know everybody. You know who everybody is and it's a kind of environment which I think is almost unique in New England in this sense. More people stay there and don't move around than there are in other sections of the country probably.

MR. EHRLICH: How did you first come to be involved with the federal art project?

MR. SAYWER: Well, Francis Taylor, who was then director of the Worcester Art Museum and who was later director of the Metropolitan Museum in New York, was a good personal friend. We started out our professional careers in Worcester and it ended approximately the same time and we were congenial and we had this very

friendly sort of give-and-take relationship. He was a very good friend of Edward Bruce and Forbes Watson and some of the other figures, like George Biddle, who were concerned with the Public Works of Art Project in particular which, as you know, really antedated the WPA art program by about a year or a year and a half. So Francis had gotten interested in that and he had gotten involved, generally interested, in that phase of it and when the WPA art program really got into focus, I was drafted by him to assist in the Boston office, which was then established at the Gardner Museum, a most unlikely place to administer this particular project, but it existed there for about a year and a half. Three of us in those first hectic weeks of the project interviewed about six hundred artists. These were not all art artists in that sense but these were people who had had some technical experience in some craft or art.

MR. EHRLICH: How did the six hundred people come to you?

MR. SAYWER: They came to us from the Welfare people who sent them there because they felt that the skills were handicraft skills. This was the classification and they were sent there not to create art but from some kind of job classification that let them get some kind of subsidy or living.

MR. EHRLICH: This was the relief?

MR. SAYWER: Very much. And this was in the beginning entirely the motivation. We were not expected to worry too much about the quality of the art but you were expected to find some kind of productive program to which they could be attached.

MR. EHRLICH: This was the early stages of the project?

MR. SAYWER: This was, I should say, the earliest days. The project itself at that stage was scarcely planned. It had been authorized in Washington under, I guess, the Hopkins administration as an emergency work relief program along with the ones for architects and other professional personnel. The artist group was a very mixed group, and the degree and kind of skills were amazingly varied and they went all the way from school teachers to laborers who had practiced art on the side and in a most primitive fashion.

MR. EHRLICH: One of the problems was sorting out people?

MR. SAYWER: This was I should say the great dilemma of the project is that they never quite made up their minds which was the primary motivation in the Public Works of Art Program because it was clearly supposed to be the quality of the decorating public buildings whereas the WPA art program, this factor of need almost had to come first. In the last year of the project, it became more of what you might call a professional program in that by that time the artists had more or less sorted themselves out and there was then more motivation in creating and less of a concern for the relief program.

MR. EHRLICH: What were the kinds of assignments that were made for work?

MR. SAYWER: Well, during those first weeks we all racked our brains to find ways which public institutions would use this material. For example, I was assigned one group of artists who were primarily residents of Rockport and Worcester and the shore communities and this included a number of people of mature, reasonably mature, professional experience plus some other people of very limited experience who were assigned more or less as assistants and we did a series of murals in a few rapid weeks in the Tuksby State Hospital which was where one of the great welfare places in the State was. And we did this with some cooperation on the part of the administrators of the hospital and some antagonism to the whole idea of taking walls of offices and assembly rooms and covering them with pictures not all of which were liked. But they were fairly pedestrian pictures and these were illustrative kinds of things so that they didn't create a lot of any particular opposition in the sense that some of the New York decorations did, of course.

MR. EHRLICH: What were the sources?

MR. SAYWER: The sources tended to be...these were largely selected by the artist himself and sketches were made and then approved by the State and hospital administrations. These tended to be landscapes and things that were sort of adapted and suited the patients to give them a little sense of outdoors and seascapes and harbor scenes.

MR. EHRLICH: They were traditional subjects?

MR. SAYWER: Yes, the traditional subjects and a few of them had historical connotations, historic houses and so forth. We did a similar kind of project--the architects were recording pictorially, photographs of buildings. We did a series of paintings of a number of different communities in the area of Essex County, Massachusetts, like Hanerhill (?) and Salem and Andover and other communities that had a long history. This was a kind of documentation but done more in painting rather than in photography. These were done sometimes for the

archives of the local libraries and in that case the institution itself provided the material and we provided the manpower. There was a necessity again of creating some kind of union between the patron and the artist in this way.

MR. EHRLICH: This was the administrative problem?

MR. SAYWER: Yes, yes, our job was to volunteer a group to be thought of as a liaison in that way between the project and the building, the particular institution.

MR. EHRLICH: Who were the other administrators that you served with?

MR. SAYWER: Well, of the people who were there more or less regularly, John Davis Hatch, who was then the assistant director of the Gardner Museum in Boston, was a sort of local Boston administrator. Taylor was the chairman of the whole New England enterprise and at that point also Henry McIlhenny, who is recently retired as curator of decorative arts at the Philadelphia Museum, who was then an undergraduate of Harvard. Then there were other museum people from the Boston Museum, younger members of their staff who came and did this occasionally so I would say that there were not more than half a dozen of us who were what you might call regular who had some supervision of the projects. This was entirely a voluntary enterprise at that point and this was the first six months of the project. There were really not more than one or two paid people on the whole staff. Then, as the project developed, there was a little more formal structure and Harley Perkins, who was a painter and critic and very respected person in Boston, became sort of State director and in turn worked with the regional directors of the WPA art project just as that developed. But that took about a year.

MR. EHRLICH: This was approximately '34?

MR. SAYWER: This was yet the early stage.

MR. EHRLICH: What begins to happen?

MR. SAYWER: Well, I think it becomes more institutionalized; there is more or less of an amateur cooperative effort and more of a real...it begins to have a political connotation. In some ways, more jobs became administrative and less aesthetic, probably.

MR. EHRLICH: How do the changes occur?

MR. SAYWER: Well, in some ways as this professional staff grows, those of us who had been doing the day-to-day operation became more remote from them and we became more consultants and I should say referees. If the feelings became edgy between the administrators and the project and the patrons of the, custodians, of the buildings, then we sometimes had to step in and at least consult. We had no real authority except that we did have the contacts with Washington through Francis Taylor and through this continuing contact.

MR. EHRLICH: Did you have any connection with the Section of Fine Arts? Or the Treasury relief project?

MR. SAYWER: My contact with the Treasury relief project was almost entirely through my personal contact with Francis Taylor who was then the consultant for that program in New England and he used to consult me about this so that I had that contact but I had no official contact on that at all.

MR. EHRLICH: And you did not have a great deal to do with the ...?

MR. SAYWER: No, except in this way, indirect way, and when Ed Bruce or one of the other people involved with it came to New England, I usually met with them.

MR. EHRLICH: In the period after '34 and '35 when the projects became more or less divided, what were the kinds of people that appeared on the scene?

MR. SAYWER: Well, the section projects were run almost entirely from Washington, and after that to some degree from New York. They had little local autonomy and, while they had consultants on individual projects--I did work with them to that extent, at least--I advised them as to what kinds of institutions might be interested. And I was on two or three of the juries to review what was submitted but, on the whole, the difference I think was that the WPA art program, because it was so much bigger and didn't have quite the same federal institutional base, had much more local autonomy and was administered locally much more.

MR. EHRLICH: The New England project operated almost entirely in the Massachusetts area.

MR. SAYWER: Yes, I think...there was some in New Hampshire and I was familiar with that and also have New Hampshire connotations. I knew most of the people on the project there. It was small enough so that you knew almost every artist and everybody; it's typical of the New England States but the state boundaries don't stop

certain activity in the arts in that way and those people were all people who had exhibited in regional exhibitions. We knew them well and we probably had a much closer identity with them than we did with the Connecticut people who ran to a very considerable extent their own show. I went to New Haven probably four or five times and Hartford three or four times to see what was going on but they were basically semi-autonomous projects.

MR. EHRLICH: Why were the Massachusetts-New Hampshire areas more active than the rest?

MR. SAYWER: There was more structure, more organized art at that time. New Hampshire is noted for its arts and crafts and for that kind of folk art background, and that part was well done there, but also this tended to be probably more privately supported than supported by the government project itself. Whereas in Massachusetts, they used the sort of nucleus or core of groups of Boston artists who had been active in different organizations, and then the particular people like Harley Perkins were then associating with the society of independent artists in Boston, tended to bring other artists into the picture who had been connected with a good many graduate students at Harvard and Boston University, for example, as the project got organized. These people went into it because they also had the problem of making a living and a large part of the administrative structure was set up by people who were not primarily painters but who had some other student or academic or institutional connection of that kind.

MR. EHRLICH: What of the art center of the late Twenties that became well-represented in the WPA art project?

MR. SAYWER: There were a few around, for example, the Addison Art Gallery that I was connected with was very new and this was an opportunity for us to render certain social services and identify yourselves with a broader community. The Gardner Museum was a very special kind of case. This was a most unlikely museum to be associated with us but they had a spare office which none of the bigger museums happened to have at that moment which they turned over to us for this purpose and...

MR. EHRLICH: What had become of the Gardner then?

MR. SAYWER: Well, the Gardner was much as it is today essentially a museum of historic art and very remote from the world of the contemporary artist, couldn't have been more remote, in fact.

MR. EHRLICH: What were art centers in New England in the early 1930's? Provincetown?

MR. SAYWER: Well, of course I should say of the summer art colonies you could say Provincetown and Gloucester areas are the two most obvious ones and then going up the coast are Algonquin and Skowhegan and so forth. Those were active then and then there were in Connecticut, Lime, and others along the Connecticut shore. These were the typical art colonies. Then of course the urban art centers in particular had their groups of artists and in other communities the artists tended to be more individual rather than in any corporate structure.

MR. EHRLICH: Was the pattern of federal activity the same as the pattern of previous activity?

MR. SAYWER: I think it tended to depend pretty much on those centers. For example, the Worcester Art Museum and the one in Portland were important centers of the activity of the WPA art program. In the smaller cities I doubt if they could have administered without the assistance or support of already existing cultural institutions.

MR. EHRLICH: Were there any new influences that were important?

MR. SAYWER: Well, in those first projects I should say, from the standpoint of the attempt to do mural paintings in these public institutions for the WPA art program, I should say most of those were pretty stilted in style. There was more freedom in the easel pictures which the artist did in his own studio and in things like wood blocks and engravings. There was a lot of interesting work done in that. Also, there was a very important kind of printing program going on for people who were considered to have less skills, particularly in the Index of American Design, which was especially well and intelligently administered I think.

MR. EHRLICH: Are you talking about style or method or technique?

MR. SAYWER: Well, I think probably particularly people who had not been identified with some of the major patterns, just like one nationally known artist, Carl Knaths, as an example. I think when Carl Knaths first came under the federal art program, he'd lived in Provincetown and he was locally known there but he had no national or even State identification. Another fellow who was a very talented young man and went on from the WPA program to develop a reputation was Jack Levine. His first picture of any consequence was done on the WPA art program and is now in the Museum of Modern Art. I think I was probably the first one to see that picture after it had been painted. We selected it for this exhibition.

MR. EHRLICH: What was Levine's role?

MR. SAYWER: Several of his contemporaries had been young art students around Boston. They'd had a good basic training, particularly in drafting, and I suppose Jack Levine was maybe 18 or 19 at that point, and he was recognized locally as a very talented fellow, but he had at that point had no identity as a professional artist. But he was urgently in need of employment and support.

MR. EHRLICH: And the project gave him both of these things?

MR. SAYWER: The project I think gave him the particular prospective and opportunity which he might have or might not have had otherwise but I think it certainly accelerated the opportunity.

MR. EHRLICH: Did he continue to do work on the project?

MR. SAYWER: He worked, I think, on the project for probably a year or a year and a half. Then he had quite a successful show, first in Boston and then in New York and, by the end of '37 he was on his own.

MR. EHRLICH: What was the reaction of the public at this time?

MR. SAYWER: I think the...this varied a good deal. I know in this exhibition that we organized and sent around, there was a good deal of interest on the part of the public on what had been accomplished. I think it's fair to say that in the beginning there was some antagonism to the whole concept, particularly in conservative art circles, and some question as to whether this was boondoggling and a waste of federal funds and so forth. And possibly a certain amount of jealousy that a group of artists who were in a greater need were having more recognition in some respects than those who seemed not to need the same kind of support. But I don't think that that lasted very long and there was a good deal of antagonism in some places in connection with the building and decoration projects. This I guess varied a good deal from project to project. Certainly, this was not a particularly easy relationship or in every case a happy relationship.

MR. EHRLICH: Where do you feel is the basis of the antagonism?

MR. SAYWER: I think it was the idea that the...in many cases the people didn't feel that the walls were really being embellished. They felt that in a way the public taste was more conservative and as more the younger artist--the project became more important to the younger, more experimental artist--more controversy came into the subject matter. If nothing had been done but pilgrims landing on Plymouth Rock, everybody would have been happy probably.

MR. EHRLICH: What were some of the subjects that were introduced at that time?

MR. SAYWER: Well, there were various...of course there weren't as many as what I should call paintings of the proletariat as there were in the New York projects. But there were at the same time paintings that were showing the laborer and a certain amount of protest and satire in this whole projection. Although basically I think the New England project was fairly conservative.

MR. EHRLICH: It certainly was an innovation, was it not, for art to be social at this time?

MR. SAYWER: Yes, yes, and of course this I think was part of the mood of the project, at least up to the last year, where you begin to feel, I should say, a more definite aesthetic base. I mean the work of the project in its later days I think was somewhat more sophisticated. And there was a little more professional direction in the whole thing. And the group of artists that were associated with it you could identify more specifically as WPA artists while the first ones were rather incidental and in many cases they got off the project as quickly as they could.

MR. EHRLICH: Are there any of the later people who are worth mentioning?

MR. SAYWER: Well, after people like Knaths and Levine, I would think of one who is talented but not as well known nationally, Howard Gibbs. I think of another one in the Provincetown group who was respected locally but who had no national stature. Of course you think of people like John Stuart Curry who must have been connected with a good many years before. I see the name Herbert Waters in this catalogue. He went on from this project to teach at the Holden School in New Hampshire where he taught for a good many years. He's a very capable woodcut painter. Carl Zerbe is another good example of somebody who went on and became a nationally recognized figure in this group. They weren't many in numbers but the Connecticut artists had this strong mural base partly growing out of the Yale Art School tradition. Howard Cook and [?] Springfield was another important artist of this period. There were a few, not many, sculptors of real quality.

MR. EHRLICH: Was there any other tradition paralleling the Yale tradition?

MR. SAYWER: I think that of course in Boston at that time basically the controlling tradition had been a very conservative one growing out of the tradition of the Boston Museum School, the Boston Arts Club and the Guild of Boston Artists. This was the sort of the prevailing pattern of official art in Boston and in a way the federal art

project artists tended to be people who were somewhat rebelling against tradition. They weren't very radical artists by any national pattern but they were adventurous artists in the New England....

MR. EHRLICH: What were the directions of their adventure?

MR. SAYWER: I should say partly style and technique and a subject matter which had more to do with social realism than the Edmond Tarbell kind of neo-romantic painting.

MR. EHRLICH: Can you say anything more about the style and kind of technique?

MR. SAYWER: Well, take an artist like Knaths, for example. I can remember his first things were almost entirely a cycle of watercolors. They were very competent and developed but they were small in scale and I would guess that was about all he could afford in the way of materials. Then, under the encouragement of this project, he had a little more money to spend on materials. He never got into the mural things but he painted bigger canvases.

MR. EHRLICH: It was simply the fact that he had materials?

MR. SAYWER: Yes. I think this was a very important part of the problem. The subsidy wasn't just a question of subsidizing the eating and living, although that was important. But, I think that the subsidizing of supplies was a very important part of it.

MR. EHRLICH: Was the show for which this was a catalogue related to the Museum of Modern Art show?

MR. SAYWER: This was actually...I can't really remember for sure whether this show preceded or followed the Museum. I would have said that this show preceded the Museum of Modern Art show.

MR. EHRLICH: They were distinct.

MR. SAYWER: They were distinct and really this show here was put together by Richard Morrison, the director of the project, and Francis Taylor and myself. But it was actually selected by us.

MR. EHRLICH: How did you go about it? How did you put the show together?

MR. SAYWER: As I recall it, we had just two centers, Boston and New Haven, and the New Haven things were preliminarily selected then and we went down and made final selections and the Boston material was all assembled and Morrison and Perkins and Taylor and myself actually did the final selection of the show and we put it together. And, in the final stages of it, I organized and assembled it and we printed the catalogue in Addler as a joint project.

MR. EHRLICH: Did you personally play a role?

MR. SAYWER: I guess I was the organizer of the exhibition in that I was responsible for assembling the material for the catalogue and assembling the exhibition itself and actually for shipping it around the different places it was shown. We showed it first at Andover and it was shown last at Boston, actually at the WPA center itself. As I recall, it was here in Springfield and Hartford and New Haven I think were the other places it was shown at.

MR. EHRLICH: So, it was intended strictly as a regional show?

MR. SAYWER: Yes, but the national people did pick out some things from the show, including the Jack Levine. They came up and grabbed this thing and took it to New York where it stayed.

MR. EHRLICH: What happened at the end of the show?

MR. SAYWER: Well, there was no real follow up to this point of the show. I would say that, later on, the things that were either shown were shown as the work of one artist or as one part of the project and particularly the Index of American Design which was then under the administration of Gordon Smith who is now the director of the Albright Knox Gallery in Buffalo. He and his wife, in association with Harley Perkins, really assembled that material and that was shown in Washington and elsewhere as part of the general Index project. But that was a continual cycle, whereas the rest of it, from '37 on...gradual and fairly rapid disintegration.

MR. EHRLICH: What kind of reaction did you get from crafts?

MR. SAYWER: Well, we had...as I recall, the reception of the Boston press was good to the program and affirmative about the exhibition and of course fairly laudatory about certain aspects which were then comparatively unknown or unrecognized. You might say that painters like Nash were at least discovered to some extent through the show.

MR. EHRLICH: How did you feel about the show?

MR. SAYWER: Well, I felt that it was very uneven at moments but, as I say, we worked pretty hard to make it representative. I felt that some of it was fairly dull, on the other hand. I felt that the average was really pretty good.

MR. EHRLICH: Did you have a sense of its importance and significance?

MR. SAYWER: Yes, I think we were all fairly aware of the fact that this was a new adventure in art pattern and that we wanted to put its best foot forward. We of course had no sense of history in that you were writing a document that would henceforth be looked at thirty years from now. I don't think anybody paid much attention to that. But, I think all of us associated with it felt affirmatively that this was an important government activity and that we wanted at that time to do anything that we could to keep it alive and on a healthy basis. There was a difference of opinion even there. Some people were letting it die quickly. I think I was one of those who was probably most interested in trying to see if it could be kept alive.

MR. EHRLICH: Do you perceive any connection between this show and the show that followed?

MR. SAYWER: I think that the shows that followed were like the one...right about the date of the Museum of Modern Art one and the shows of the Index of Design which were then more or less nationally circulated. I think they had a continuing national impact. I think that the impact within the region of the New England shows was largely that of the individual artists as they grew and were known to have some kind of identity with the project. If anything kept this alive, it was those artists themselves.

MR. EHRLICH: Did you have some, any, connection with the New Modern Art show?

MR. SAYWER: I didn't personally because that was all selected as I remember by Cahill who was then the national director of the WPA art program and his wife Dorothy Miller was the associate curator of paintings and she still is in the Museum of Modern Art. This was something of a family affair, I say, in that sense.

MR. EHRLICH: Did you have any special kind of connection with the compilation of the Index of Design?

MR. SAYWER: Only in this somewhat editorial sense of looking at material or consulting about what was deserving and in some case selection of subject matter in local cases.

MR. EHRLICH: Yes. You mentioned the exhibit of the collection from the Index...? I came upon some mention in this pamphlet of plans to publish study of folk art. Was that ever done?

MR. SAYWER: No, I think that the publication of the material in the Index was as close to publication as anything ever came.

MR. EHRLICH: In what sense was there a kind of a local original quality which in any way merged toward the end of the project?

MR. SAYWER: I think that probably the thing that distinguished possibly the New England project from what I saw later that it became acquainted with part of the New York phases is that there was probably...the representational aspects were more stressed. There were a few artists like Carl Zerbe, for example, who were more identified with more experimental and international aspects, but this was the best formed minority in the total group so that I think you had something of this rather stout conservatism over all. But, also there were some pretty good painters involved in this group and, beyond those I've already mentioned, I would guess that the younger people, who were comparatively anonymous at that time but who were roughly at the age of Jack Levine, became the more important people. David Erickson and a whole group of those men blossomed out in the next three or four years.

MR. EHRLICH: When did your personal connection with the project end?

MR. SAYWER: I would guess at the end of 1937. Pretty much by that time it was on its way out and it was being subject to a good deal of political attack and, of course, in the following year, the European crisis became greater and its days became numbered. But I couldn't be sure whether that horizon time was in the late fall of '37 or spring of '38. This would be my guess.

MR. EHRLICH: How did New England react?

MR. SAYWER: I don't think that the political equation in that sense is very important in New England. The greater problem was probably the political equation of how this thing was going to be administered and as they became a sort of professional group of welfare administrators. There was also a certain amount of scandal in 1938 and '39 in the whole administration of welfare programs and I think that this didn't really touch the art project. But it



happened to over-all structure and by-and-large the regional administration of the over-all program was not very sympathetic to the art program. This was part of our problem. I think the administrators of the art program at that point had had a very difficult problem. They weren't very tactful themselves. So that, in a sense, they tended to antagonize, to some degree, the artist on the one hand and the administrators and the whole relief program on the other.

MR. EHRLICH: What were some of the other antagonisms?

MR. SAYWER: These were largely personalities and edgy people rubbing each other, a lack of understanding on the part of the general administrators for the rationale of the program at all. These were a group of long-hairs who were maintaining a welfare role for non-welfare purposes. There was a certain amount of this in WPA in the later stages of the project. The art had become more important than the relief to the people who were running the art program. The professional welfare administrator could understand this point of view even if he didn't agree with it. If there had been a warmer relationship between what had been the PWAP project and the WPA administrators--and then this I think went back to Washington and the whole relation of Ikes's administration and the Hopkins administration--many of these things could have been probably ironed out at the top level but there was constant friction there.

MR. EHRLICH: What about the ambiguous nature of the administration?

MR. SAYWER: On a professional basis there were some very dedicated people involved who did their very best for art that they could within the context of the project. It would have been healthy in retrospect for the whole project if at some point the relief had been liquidated and the art had been sustained.

MR. EHRLICH: This seems to me a very old New England tradition, that you do use city and county and state or something which gives to the public good.

MR. SAYWER: I think undoubtedly in some of the regional art centers like the summer colonies where there was...there was still a continuous winter population of artists who found it cheaper to live in Provincetown, Gloucester, than New York. There were undoubtedly people there who would have welcomed this as a continuity and who would have made respectful use of it and at the same time taken creative advantage of it.

MR. EHRLICH: Can you say something about the public press antagonisms?

MR. SAYWER: I think it existed partly in the anti-New Deal. It became one more means of attacking the then present administration plus the fact that there were real holes appearing in the over-all welfare relief administration as the more idealistic people left the deal and the professional people took over. There were notorious examples of feathering the nest which I don't think existed in the slightest as far as I was aware in the art project, which undoubtedly made the whole WPA program less and less tolerable politically for either the party in power or the opposition party.

MR. EHRLICH: Is it relief or is it...?

MR. SAYWER: Yes, or is it an art project? And there was a clear desire on the part of the art people to make it more and more an art project and, as the welfare need became less, undoubtedly it did have this other focus. And I think that the quality of the work grew in the process with a certain sophistication but of course there came a point where the artist got discouraged with the whole administration and manipulation of it and at that point half of the purpose was gone.

MR. EHRLICH: In retrospect now, twenty-five or more years have passed, and how does the whole thing appear?

MR. SAYWER: Well, I'm awfully glad it was done in the first place. I think it was a brave reaction response to a rather desperate situation and it seemed to me that, with all its flaws, that it was pursued with vigor and imagination and I would also believe yet that we should be able to learn from the example of this period and profit by it.

MR. EHRLICH: What do you feel the lessons to be?

MR. SAYWER: I think that the first lesson is to have a pilot program which may be a very small program or it can be expanded in this way. I think you need a series of projects and programs not only in preparation for emergencies of a military kind or for emergencies in periods of depression. I believe that we are going to have one whether we like it or not.

MR. EHRLICH: You don't believe in...?

MR. SAYWER: I don't know. I don't believe in perpetual prosperity. I am afraid the economic cycles will never be totally controlled. The total blow can be minimized and creative opportunities made to keep functioning social

life going in patterns, say.

MR. EHRLICH: What about doing the same kind of thing in the event that we do not have that pressure...?

MR. SAYWER: Well, I think that...it seems to me that an abundant civilization ought to lead somewhat to at least modest government subsidy of the arts. I'm not personally enthusiastic about a big crash program of government passage. I'd rather see the government exist in this area in limited context, first for functional purposes, like a really wise and well-directed decorating of public buildings. In relation to the poverty program I could see a valid arts and crafts program on a good high order existing, say, in the Upper Peninsula or in Michigan or in the Tennessee mountains and so forth. This requires some kind of state and government subsidy as well as private subsidy to keep it going.

MR. EHRLICH: I'm curious about other participants who might give their impressions or recollections. Of course you have Gordon Smith's name.

MR. SAYWER: Yes, I would stress him just because I think his own association, particularly in the late stages, was so much more personal and intimate than mine was in the New England Project. Unfortunately most of the people that I would recognize here have died and are no longer available. Morrison, for example, had been a graduate student and a teacher at Harvard. He died some ten or fifteen years ago. Harley Perkins has died. Dave Hatches is still available and I understand he has been interviewed, incidentally, and I think that's been covered. Theodore Sizer the Lafargist could say more about the Connecticut project but most of this committee was very what you might call an honorary committee. There is a director of the New Hampshire project...at the time was an artist by the name of Omer Lassonde who is still in Compton, New Hampshire, still an active painter. But of the artists that were there I would suggest that it would be interesting to interview people like Carl Nash and see what their attitude and recollections of the project are because I think the attitude of the artists...I'd like to know what Jack Levine thinks of this some years after.

MR. EHRLICH: Rather interesting.

MR. SAYWER: This I think would be the most worthwhile and lively reaction you could get. Whether there would be an overtone of bitterness for the failures of the project or whether there would be some feeling that it at least got things started...frankly, I wouldn't have any idea.

MR. EHRLICH: We haven't said a great deal about sculpture or arts and crafts. Is there anything that you'd like to add to this?

MR. SAYWER: Well, as far as sculpture goes...and I'd say that part was a very small bit. The one thing that I think is worth noting and this is the reason that I brought this along just to remind you that it exists, is--particularly I think in the Connecticut project and maybe to some degree in New Hampshire--this kind of craft base of giving the craftsmen at least a little more education and skills on the education side and then developing a somewhat broader base and some control of the crafts. I think that the WPA art program at least served a useful function and the real development that took place in the arts and crafts in New England and is still going on. I don't think would have been as easy if this program hadn't been really tucked into the countryside. I was involved in a show when I was in Windsor of '43 which I wouldn't want to say grew out of the federal art project, but there again I would cite this as an example of something which ten years earlier would have been very difficult to put on from the same point of reference.

MR. EHRLICH: So, you believe that instruction and experience...?

MR. SAYWER: There was a good deal of instruction given in this. Now, Hail Woodworth, who is coming here to be a lecturer for the summer at Michigan, told me last month that he had never painted a mural painting until the art project came along and then he had to go up and...to New Haven to the art school to get some technical advice as to how you enlarge one of these things because he had no idea in the world how.

MR. EHRLICH: Is there anything else that you'd like to bring up?

MR. SAYWER: No, I don't. I really don't think so. I would want to get more reactions from the people who participated as artists in the program because I think their reactions may be quite different from mine. It would be very interesting to know...different perspectives, but I would pay high tribute to the dedication of people like Harley Perkins who, for example, was a paid employee but gave of himself and his real soul to the project. Far more than he ever received.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

Last updated...October 3, 2005

