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Oral history interview with Will Shuster, 1964 July 30

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Will Shuster on July 30, 1964. The interview took place in Santa Fe, NM, and was conducted by Sylvia Loomis for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

SYLVIA LOOMIS: The particular phase of art to be emphasized is that of the federal art projects during the 1930s and '40s. First, would you tell us something about yourself, Mr. Shuster? Where were you born and where did you receive your art education?

WILL SHUSTER: I was born in Philadelphia in 1893. November 27 of 1893. Art had been an avocation. I had started out to be an electrical engineer, and I studied art though with Server - J. William Server there in Philadelphia. I worked for the Curtis Publishing Company for quite a time prior to the war. When I was with them I met a chap who was studying with Server and he said, "Shus, why don't you go over and work with Server for a while?" So, I went over to an action sketch class on Monday evenings. First thing I know I found myself going every available moment, including Saturdays, and Sundays. That's where I got started. Then, of course, the war came along and I was in the service and that's what brought me out here. I was gassed overseas with the 314th Infantry, 79th Division. First Lieutenant of infantry. I had been gassed, TB developed and I came out here to die. I'm still waiting it out. [he laughs]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: It took a long time, didn't it?

WILL SHUSTER: Yeah, an interesting thing too, about that. I'll tell you. Dr. Bill Crowley, a cousin of mine, was just out of the service - do you want all this stuff on there?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh sure! You bet. Anything about you.

WILL SHUSTER: He was just out of the service and he had been coming to see me after I'd fallen apart and instead of arriving in the morning, he arrived late in the afternoon - after having all sorts of tests made, you know. I realized that the situation wasn't good. And, he finally told me that I had TB and I said, "What do we do?" And he said, "Oh, you can stick around here for a year. You'll probably last a year. Or, you can go up to Saranac Lake or White Haven or one of those places and you'll last a couple of years longer."

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Where was this?

WILL SHUSTER: In Philadelphia. He said, "But if I were you I would pack up and get out to the Southwest to some high dry place as soon as possible. I want you to be in bed 12 hours a day. It doesn't mean you have to go to bed at 8 and get up at 8, but stay 12 hours a day. Sleep outdoors as much as possible. Eat plenty of nourishing food, go on with your painting. Don't treat yourself as an invalid. You'll probably die of old age, snake bite or drinking too damn much bad whiskey." Within a couple weeks, I was here.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Is that right? And that was when?

WILL SHUSTER: That was in 1920. I arrived, March 3, 1920.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Were there many artists here at that time?

WILL SHUSTER: Yes. There were quite a few of the old-timers. Parsons, Henderson. Henderson was the first up here on the hill, you know - W.P. Henderson. And then [Bror Julius Olsson] Nordfeldt, Carlos, Olive Rush. [John] Sloan and [Randall] Davey had arrived the year before, and had purchased properties and so they came back in 1920. That's when I first got acquainted with Sloan.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, had you been practicing your art work much in the East before you came out here?

WILL SHUSTER: No, no...

SYLVIA LOOMIS: This was right after the war, wasn't it?

WILL SHUSTER: Yeah, this was right after the war. When I was in the Army...

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Naturally you didn't do anything about it then, but when was it that you started studying with Sloan?

WILL SHUSTER: That very first year, in 1920. I hadn't known Sloan in the East at all. But, he had lived in the place that Ellen and I were living in at the time, my first wife, and the Spanish gal who owned the place asked us to meet at dinner at her house. So, that's when I first met Sloan. Sloan looked over my work. I was working there. He got interested so it was the beginning of not only a...well, the beginning of a long, long fast and very close friendship, that lasted up until his death.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Now, what time did you form the Cinco Pintores?

WILL SHUSTER: That was about 1921.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: About a year later?

WILL SHUSTER: Yeah. I had been living in Sloan's studio and it got very cold in there with this big window, and we only had a fireplace and the kitchen range to heat it. So, I moved to a little house over on Galisteo Street and Joe Bakos who had been working with Vierra, found himself without a job and was going to leave. So, he came up and lived with us for a while. Then we talked this thing over and got the idea of getting these five young painters, who were just five youngsters here, who were kind of pushed off in the corner, you know, by the other fellows.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Who were the other three?

WILL SHUSTER: Ah, Willard Nash, Fremont Ellis, and Walter Mruk.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: How did you happen to pick those five? Just because you were all young?

WILL SHUSTER: Yeah, we were all young and we all knew each other, you know. We banded together mainly for exhibition purposes. You might say self-protection from the elders.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, is that right?

WILL SHUSTER: But we were the wild harem scarems, you see, at the time.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see, you had more advanced ideas on art than the old boys?

WILL SHUSTER: Yes, that was it, and we were always hung under the stairs or in some out-of-the-way alcove, you know.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: What was so different about your painting...than theirs?

WILL SHUSTER: I don't know. It...I can't really say.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Were you influenced by the Armory Show of 1914?

WILL SHUSTER: We may have felt some influence, you know, but I didn't see the Armory Show. But of course that ferment was in the air, you know, and we were probably a little bit more liberal...

SYLVIA LOOMIS: More receptive to it?

WILL SHUSTER: Yeah, more receptive to it than the older fellows, just as I'm not receptive to a lot of the stuff that is being done today. Now, I might be considered "old hat." [he laughs]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, we are going to talk about that later on.

WILL SHUSTER: I remember....do you know Katherine Wentzel?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

WILL SHUSTER: That little booklet she puts out, "Art and Artists of Santa Fe," or something, I can't remember the exact book or exact words, but she asked me what I thought about art and I said, "Well, I think it's the flowering of civilization, but I really believe we are getting a lot of weeds in the garden today."

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I think so too. I think there is kind of a sorry state of affairs. Well, what was the relation of this group to the Taos art colony?

WILL SHUSTER: We had no...

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Nothing at all?

WILL SHUSTER: No contact.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Even philosophically?

WILL SHUSTER: We knew all these people, and occasionally we...

SYLVIA LOOMIS: But there wasn't a group?

WILL SHUSTER: No. Well the Taos Art Society...

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, but I mean one that also shared your more liberal views?

WILL SHUSTER: Well, there may have been some young painters up there, yes. But, we had no connection with them. I mean, after all it was four hours to Taos.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: That was a long trip in those days.

WILL SHUSTER: Yeah, a rough trip. We didn't get out there very often.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: What sort of work did you do after you arrived here in Santa Fe?

WILL SHUSTER: Landscapes. I did quite a lot Indian painting, dances and that sort of thing, and the natives, the old Spanish characters.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: What about those Carlsbad murals?

WILL SHUSTER: Oh, that came later. I used to...we were broke, of course, most of the time. I remember we used to pay our models 25 cents an hour and I worked like the devil to get the thing done as soon as I could, so I didn't have to pay them. [he laughs] As a matter of fact, some of those things were as good as anything I ever did in my life.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes. Working under that kind of pressure! Well, how much later were the murals at Carlsbad?

WILL SHUSTER: I did those in 1924. Mruk and I went down there together.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Were you commissioned?

WILL SHUSTER: No, we were not commissioned. We'd read about the caverns just about the time the National Geographic Society had started their survey of the caverns. Dr. Lee was down there with his group, and we stayed up in the mine shack with Old Jim White.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, yes.

WILL SHUSTER: And, we'd go down into the caverns with him and when he wasn't around we got to know the lay of the land down there, which is pretty rugged. We climbed down the ladders ourselves and prowled around in the dark, each carrying two lanterns and a little pack with food, drawing materials, and we put the lanterns off in the formations and worked by the light of another one.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, is that right?

WILL SHUSTER: That's the way we worked it, and each night we'd come out and swear that we'd never go down there again. It was rugged, like rough underground mountain climbing.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: How much later did it become a National Park?

WILL SHUSTER: I don't know. It was several years later. I think it was quite a few years later. People in Carlsbad didn't realize what they had there. They didn't. I remember one time Mruk and I acted as assistant guides with Jim White and, I think it was, his brother-in-law, taking a party of 35 Carlsbadians through the caverns, who had never been there before.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Was Jim White the one who discovered them [the Carlsbad Caverns]? The cowboy who saw the flock of bats come out?

WILL SHUSTER: Yes. He was quite a character.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: What else did you do between that time and the '30s?

WILL SHUSTER: Oh, we were painting constantly. Of course we were always doing something on the side too, to

keep alive, even though we were selling paintings occasionally. I know I had a little forge set up there in back of my house - I was doing ornamental iron work. Joe Bakos had a carpenter shop and was doing furniture and that sort of thing. We all had some sideline, you know.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: How did you become involved in the first federal art project, the PWAP?

WILL SHUSTER: That happened shortly after the Depression, didn't it?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well that was the beginning of the Depression, 1933, I think was when it first started.

WILL SHUSTER: Let's see, I homesteaded in 1930.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Where?

WILL SHUSTER: Right out here northwest of town, about seven miles northwest of town. And Bakos came out and proved up on the thing. That was quite an experience too. Then we came back to town, and I guess that's when this project started.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Who was it that first approached you on it?

WILL SHUSTER: I don't know, but one of these letters here was the introduction to the thing.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: John Meem, Gus Baumann, and Jesse Nusbaum were the ones that were involved.

WILL SHUSTER: They were our local committee in charge of the thing, I think. Jesse Nusbaum was really the head of the show and did all the work.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: So you joined that project, and what was your first assignment? Do you remember?

WILL SHUSTER: Yes, it was the paintings of the Carlsbad Caverns that I did for that project. They were four-by-six or four-by-eight panels.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: How many?

WILL SHUSTER: I think I did four. Now, I've only got photographs of two of them here, but I think there were three or four of them.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Did you go back down there to do them?

WILL SHUSTER: Yeah. I went back down and they assigned a guide to me, rambled around, made more sketches. Had an interesting experience too - somebody turned out the lights on us.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh my! How did you ever get out?

WILL SHUSTER: [he laughs] Well what happened is this Irishman, a fine fella, who was acting as my guide, I was working in the Queens Palace and he said, "Shus, would you mind if I went and explored up here, there is a little place I haven't been in." I said, "No, go ahead." And I was working there. He had gone. All of a sudden the lights went out. I was in total darkness.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes. That's the darkest darkness in the world.

WILL SHUSTER: They had kind of a two-way switch and some other party coming through noticed the lights on where they were not supposed to be on, and turned it off.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, I see, then what happened?

WILL SHUSTER: I just sat quietly and waited until my guide crawled out of the hole and he...

SYLVIA LOOMIS: He knew where to turn them on?

WILL SHUSTER: He had a flashlight.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I've been in the Caverns when they turned the lights off, just to show us how dark it is, and it's an incredible darkness.

WILL SHUSTER: Down at the foot of the Rock of Ages, yeah.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes. What other things did you do on that project?

WILL SHUSTER: I think that one other painting, the one with the black shawled gals.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Then you went from this to the federal art project, WPA, is that right? That would be in 1935...

WILL SHUSTER: Oh no, wait a minute...here, I'm all mixed up. I've been telling you about the WPA project where I did the Carlsbad things. No, on the PWAP I did the frescos on the patio of the art museum.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, I thought those were done on WPA?

WILL SHUSTER: No, that was the PWAP. I just got reversed.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. How was that commissioned? Do you remember the details of it? Did you suggest it or did the museum suggest it?

WILL SHUSTER: Well, I suggested several things. I can't recall what they were. Maybe, in this letter....

SYLVIA LOOMIS: This one?

WILL SHUSTER: Yeah. I suggested first doing a series of portraits in oil of the distinguished Indian artists and craftsmen in the region.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Whatever happened to that - anything?

WILL SHUSTER: No. I mean they didn't accept that idea. Then the regional committee recommended to the national committee a project for the complete redesign of currency and stamps of the USA using the American Indian design motifs and the incidental design in place of the hackneyed conventional design that was then in use, and nothing was ever done about that. But I planned to work on that. The third was a mural or a series of murals of the Carlsbad Caverns interior for the decoration of some building, preferably outside the state of New Mexico. that was the one I worked on. That's how that came about.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Then this series that you did down at the museum were not suggested at that time, but apparently later?

WILL SHUSTER: That's right.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Do you recall whether or not the museum requested it or whether...

WILL SHUSTER: Well, no, I think Dr. Hewett had.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: He had?

WILL SHUSTER: Yeah, because he worked very closely with me, almost out of my hand.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, really!

WILL SHUSTER: I could hardly make a stroke without his consent. If you knew Dr. Hewett, you know what an autocrat he was.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, I know about him.

WILL SHUSTER: By golly, I had quite a time trying to get any of myself into it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Was Vernon Hunter ever your supervisor?

WILL SHUSTER: Yeah, Vernon Hunter was. He was supervisor of the project, but we practically never saw him - he was too busy with, you know, the details of the thing.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Did you have any close supervision by anyone?

WILL SHUSTER: No, except Dr. Hewett. And that was plenty close.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. And he was the museum director then, wasn't he?

WILL SHUSTER: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: What about the time that you did the murals in Carlsbad, was there any immediate supervision there?

WILL SHUSTER: No, that was when Gus Baumann was there, field man. He'd come around about once a week to make sure we were working, see what we were doing, how much we'd accomplished.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Did he come to Carlsbad?

WILL SHUSTER: No. Just came around to the studio. You see, I made drawings and sketches and color notes in color, at Carlsbad, in small scale, and brought them back up and worked them up in the studio.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Then, you were really allowed freedom of expression as far as your technique was concerned?

WILL SHUSTER: Oh, yeah.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: There wasn't any attempt to supervise that?

WILL SHUSTER: Not at all.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: How long were you employed on the project?

WILL SHUSTER: Oh golly, I can't remember. I remember they said we were paid $42.50 per week but I remember it was something like $37.50.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: How's that?

WILL SHUSTER: I don't know whether we bought our own materials. I think we did because...

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I think during the PWAP days you had to buy your own, but later in the WPA they furnished materials. That was the set-up with the sponsors - they had to furnish materials.

WILL SHUSTER: They furnished materials.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Now, the murals that you did down at the museum, were those fresco?

WILL SHUSTER: Yes. They are pure fresco.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Had you studied fresco before?

WILL SHUSTER: No, but I had worked in fresco. Yes, I'd studied it, but not with any experienced hand at it. I had blundered my way into it, you know, through it. I experimented with it until I...

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Where had you done the frescoes before this?

WILL SHUSTER: In my studio. I made panels. And I remember teaching Velino Shetay the art of fresco, too. I guess that was after I finished those down there. Dr. Hewett was interested in having one of the Indians learning the process, you know. For a long time I used to have a nice one here on the wall, on the outside wall, that Velino had done, but it got covered up.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: What other kinds of work did you do on the project, besides murals and easel painting? Did you do any etching?

WILL SHUSTER: I started to do some etching. It was at the end of the project and I think it closed down before I got anywhere with it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

WILL SHUSTER: Jess had an idea, I think, of maybe if we got a lot of small things it might make a better showing number wise, quantity. [he laughs]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes. Did this work have any effect on your work as an artist?

WILL SHUSTER: I don't think so, just kept me going.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: So you just developed in your own natural way?

WILL SHUSTER: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And what effect did it have on your fellow artists?

WILL SHUSTER: I think just the same. Yeah, because there was no attempt to put you in harness, psychological

harness, to make you do a thing a certain way, except as I have already mentioned. But, that wasn't PWAP's fault.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. Did the Depression hit pretty hard out here?

WILL SHUSTER: It was belated here. I mean we felt it long after it was felt in the East. It took time for it to roll out. I remember I also did quite a lot of etching in those early days...not on the project.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: For yourself. What effect do you think that this work had on the public?.

WILL SHUSTER: I think it was stimulating. I think it stimulated the people's interest in art and I think the great interest that we have in art today is probably due largely to the work that was done under that program, under the two programs. Murals in post offices and whatnot. I mean, American art was presented to the people. They hadn't paid any attention to it before, you know. They found they had it right here at home.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Do you think it has helped the lot of the artist since that time because it did bring art to the level of the average person?

WILL SHUSTER: Yes. I think it has helped to a degree. I don't know that I've been any better off financially as a result of this thing.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh no? It is not any easier to sell your paintings since then?

WILL SHUSTER: No, it is no easier now than it was then. But it has stimulated a lot of things. You take so many people now, the old gals, particularly, who are painting these things by numbers are having a wonderful time. And, some of them with talent kind of move on from that into painting, you know, and get interested in it. Oh golly, I wonder how many hundreds of thousands of people are painting today who were not painting. It was the rare bird who was painting in the early days.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: You think that was actually stimulated by that period?

WILL SHUSTER: I really do. I sure do. And, of course, it stimulated business for all the art supply outfits, the paint manufacturers, the whole tribe which they kept rolling.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: What direction has your work taken since then? Has it...has there been much change in it?

WILL SHUSTER: Oh, it is constantly changing. I can never tell when I start painting what it is going to turn out to be. It depends on my response to the thing. I just happened to pick up a copy of Time at Don's night before last and they had some of this new Pop art. I remember one canvas that just had a broad blank area down below and a large sharp line of a different color above. Then the painter had cut out from a newspaper, magazine or something, a copy of the figure, Goya's Maja. There was a string on it with a ring on it and you'd pull the ring and the painting would talk. It had one of these little Kathy doll things in it you know, "I'm sleepy." Something or other. They had other things that made noises. That made me hark back to something I did about 15 or 20 years ago. I made...I think I called it a Kinomatic. It was a motor-driven painting. It was the doggondest thing. I had various shapes on it and they traveled at different speeds and would move in different directions and I had a timer on it and a button which would start this thing. It was under glass. We put it down in the museum. It was a sight to see one of these Texas farm families come in. The old boy in his bib overalls would read the little thing and would go up and push the button and stand back gaping and gawking while it went through its gyrations. I planned to make several of those things. I had an idea for another one that was all full of little vibrating things, you see, and another one with bands of colors criss-crossing and moving. But all actuated by motors. Oh, but I wore myself out doing one. One was enough.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Whatever happened to it?

WILL SHUSTER: I've got pieces of it laying around. It's demobilized. [he laughs]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: This didn't start a new art trend at that time?

WILL SHUSTER: No.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Maybe you were just a little too early.

WILL SHUSTER: Yes, about fifteen or twenty years too early.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I want you to tell us about some of your civic interests, particularly Zozobra and how you got started with that, and you might tell the significance of it for the tape recorder.

WILL SHUSTER: Let's see. The first year...according to Jane Baumann, it was 1925. Bynner said it was l924, but Jane said it was the year that she and Gus got married so I think that's probably more reliable than Bynner's memory. Although I just read recently an article that he'd written, that he had found a clipping which said that it started in 1924. That first year...well really, the seed of the idea was sown by Kate Chapman and Dorothy Stewart and someone else was in on that deal. They tried to revive an affair similar to the Mummers parade in Philadelphia. Have you ever seen the Mummers parade?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I haven't seen it, but I know about it.

WILL SHUSTER: Oh, it's a gigantic thing, and they put on a New Year's parade and one of the things they had was a figure that was carried on a palenthum[?] of a gloomy one or - I don't know, it was supposed to be a wicked soul or something or other - they had a lot of people with gay colored whips that were whipping this thing, you see. Out of that came the - Dana Johnson, I think at that time he was the head of the Fiesta Council. He used to be the editor, a very live editor, of the Santa Fe, New Mexican, full of fun. We got together and hatched out this idea of making an Old Man Gloom and he dug up the name for it from a Spanish dictionary, which means the gloomy one. Dan Eastman, Max Eastman's son, was here at the time and he helped me build this first one which was only about 18 feet high. I remember we stuffed it with excelsior which we had soaked in copper sulfate and then dried and stuffed it with that. The idea being that we'd get a beautiful blue green flame. Gus Baumann made the head out of a cardboard carton. Well, this carton was too small. It looked like a little pin head on top of this figure 18 feet high, after having done that first one I realized if we were going to make a head it had to be a big head - the head is about 9 feet high now. Anyway, I had the Kiwanians who took the part of "glooms" in a procession around the figure, carrying green torches and then we had a bunch of artists who were the merrymakers who came on with colored whips and whipped the glooms away and ignited the figure. All of our work with the copper sulfate just went up in one kind of a puff of blue-green flame and that was the end of it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Where was it burned at that time?

WILL SHUSTER: It was down in back of what was then the City Hall - one of those lots where the gas company was - there was a rough, rough lot there. So, I put the figure toward the back of the lot and arranged a semi-circle of fires in front of it to keep the spectators away from the show. And we always had to have the fire department out in that little back street there. I've forgotten its name. To keep the Nusbaum house from being burned up in case sparks went over in that direction. It was kind of fun.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: When did it move to Fort Marcy?

WILL SHUSTER: I don't remember the year, but they started developments in that lot in the back. Oh golly, no. There was a premier of a movie that came here. It was called "The Santa Fe Trail" or something like that? We put on an imitation of Zozobra for this outfit, as one of the entertaining features and at that time we moved over to the field there at Fort Marcy. Is there any date on that? (A photograph)

SYLVIA LOOMIS: No. It says December 14, but it doesn't say the year.

WILL SHUSTER: Oh, one of those. They had all of the big shots of the...a lot of movie personalities, Rudy Vallee, and...

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Rita Hayworth, Erroll Flynn...

WILL SHUSTER: Erroll Flynn lighted the fire.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Donald Crisp. Oh, a lot of old-timers there.

WILL SHUSTER: We put that show on and it was in the winter. It snowed. These things are snowflakes coming down. So you can imagine what a time we had putting this show on. But, we did.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: That was up in Fort Marcy and it's been there ever since.

WILL SHUSTER: Yeah, it's been there ever since. We first did it down on the field and then we moved it up on the terrace up there and developed the show that it is now. But the idea, of course, was dispelling the spirit of gloom in the community before the fiesta, gaiety, and fun...

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I had always heard that it was taken from something in Mexico, but I guess I was wrong.

WILL SHUSTER: Well, that also was in my mind. I remember that Yaqui Village out of Tucson. They carry a - of course, this came up from Mexico - a figure, it's just like a scarecrow actually, stuffed with straw and fireworks and it represents Judas. They put him on a burro and lead him around the stations of the cross and then bring him back to the center of the plaza and ignite him. They throw up their only sky rockets, have a big to-do, you

know. So, there is that too, you see. But, this idea of destroying some unpleasant thing is...

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Very, very old.

WILL SHUSTER: Very, very old. I remember there was a newspaper man from Zurich came to see me one day and he wanted to know all about the Zozobra because they burn a large figure of Old Man Winter each year and so he was very much interested in that. Of course, winter being unpleasant, you know, they get it out of the road. Same idea. In India they have some large figures, huge things built of paper and bamboo, that are burned, too. I don't know the significance of that but I imagine it's the same idea, destroying evil spirits or something.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: How did this develop during the forty years since?

WILL SHUSTER: It was just my idea of making it a bigger and better show every year.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: When did you introduce the sound?

WILL SHUSTER: Oh, right almost in the beginning. Not the very first year, but in the first few years.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: How do you do that?

WILL SHUSTER: And at that time I'd put a speaker right up in the figure itself and a microphone out in back, you know. Now, we have a big loud-speaking outfit, PA system and Wyatt Davis takes care of the sound effects, groans and moans, all of that. It has about reached its limit - it can't go much higher.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: How high is it now?

WILL SHUSTER: Forty feet. I think it is probably one of the largest animated puppets, you might say, in existence.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Who does the actual animation during the show?

WILL SHUSTER: Well, in the last few years I've had a crew from the Kiwanians. It takes two men on each arm and they have to have relief, because it becomes pretty rugged work.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes. Well it goes on for about half an hour.

WILL SHUSTER: Others operate the eyes and the head and the mouth...

SYLVIA LOOMIS: But you design it every year, though?

WILL SHUSTER: Yes. Well, I have a model that I made at the armature - scale of an inch to the foot that we follow each year. So even though it varies in expression or appearance a bit, it is pretty much the same thing because of the foundation.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: During the war you...

WILL SHUSTER: During the war...there was one year we did it and made the head look like a combination of Hirohito, Hitler and Mussolini. We called him Hirohitlomus instead of Zozobra. But, the second year, the next year we couldn't do it and we built a small figure about six feet high and burned him on the corner of the Plaza by the art museum and a group of us dressed as clowns with hoses to keep the fire under control, and then we'd hose each other and hose the spectators. Just playing clowns. For a couple years I didn't do it. One year Ceril K. Scott had an art class and they did it out on the lot at the Saint Michael's field there. They just erected a pole and cut out a head from compo board, fastened it to the top of the pole and built a little ring of fire - wood around the bottom of the pole. After I saw that I knew I had to take it over again.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, yes.

WILL SHUSTER: Another year I was not here and Coluzzi did one that was carried around the plaza. I think it was about twelve or fourteen feet high. I didn't see that one.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: When was it that the luminarios were around the plaza?

WILL SHUSTER: That was in 1838, no 1938. I'm getting old.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: We don't want to get that old. Tell about that.

WILL SHUSTER: Well, it was when Will Harrison was editor of the New Mexican. We got our heads together on this idea of having a fiesta of light at Christmas time. So we plugged it in the newspapers and had the whole

town...the town responded very well, not only with the luminarios but farolitos all over town. We had the native woodmen on burros assemble outside of town and come in with a procession of carolers carrying torches, torches we'd made of faggots. And assembled in the plaza where the woodmen and the burros and the whole thing was blessed by a Franciscan priest and the fires were built around the plaza. It was really a very good show. Then it fell apart because the next year we had a tremendous blizzard.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: You never can tell what is going to happen on Christmas Eve, to spoil our lighting effects. Now, I know another innovation of yours in Santa Fe life is the rodeo bull.

WILL SHUSTER: Yeah. El Toro Diablo.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: El Toro. How did he get started?

WILL SHUSTER: I think it was Paul Rutledge that had the idea of having a big bull made and he came to me to see if I could do it or would do it, and I told him I thought I could, would, and then I wrote the script for the show Grand Barbecue of the El Toro Diablo.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: What year was that? '52.

WILL SHUSTER: Was that '52?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

WILL SHUSTER: It was quite an exciting show, fire and fireworks, foolishness. But, it was a little too exciting for the stock, the horses.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, this was on the rodeo grounds.

WILL SHUSTER: Yeah, right out on the rodeo ground. The second year we decided we'd better cut it out. But they've been using the old El Toro ever since. It's become a mascot or a symbol of the rodeo.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, say, one thing I forgot to ask you to mention was that time you did the float of Zozobra for the Pasadena Rose Bowl Parade.

WILL SHUSTER: Yeah, Pageant of Roses. Well, the city had been invited to enter a float and the Mayor appointed a committee and asked me to submit a design, which I did, and then went out to California and supervised the construction of the float, then came back and picked up a crew from Santa Fe. We had a group of six Taos Indians to dance on the float. We had the orchestra from the Boy's Club riding on the back of it. Father - oh for goodness sakes, here goes my hole in the head for names - Fra Angelico happened to be in California at the time so he took the part of the Padre on the float and we had DeVargas and the Queen, the works. It went over big, we had applause all along the line and won the national trophy for the show. It was a lot of fun and Santa Fe was very pleased.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I should think so. That was in 1950?

WILL SHUSTER: '50, yes. 1950.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: January 1st.

WILL SHUSTER: January 1st, 1950.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, what sort of thing are you doing now?

WILL SHUSTER: Loafing. [he laughs]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: That's nice, if you can get away with it.

WILL SHUSTER: And getting ready to take off for Alaska.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, what are you going to do up there?

WILL SHUSTER: Go up and see John, my son, his wife. He's at the University there, you know. He's in his last year. So, we thought we'd go up and see him. Also see what we can of Alaska.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: What town does he live in?

WILL SHUSTER: Fairbanks. Well, he's in college, which is about five or six miles this side of Fairbanks.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I suppose you'll go to Anchorage?

WILL SHUSTER: I think we'll probably go to Anchorage with them. They are going to take their vacation the first two weeks in September, so I think we'll probably go down to Anchorage at that time. But, we plan an interesting trip. We're going to fly up to Kethikan. Then take the inside waterway up to Skagway and then the narrow gauge railway over to White Horse in the Yukon. Then from there up to Fairbanks. So, it should be a nice interesting trip. It took a lot of looking over brochures and maps and planning to work it out that way but it sounds very interesting.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Have you ever been there before?

WILL SHUSTER: No. I don't know what to expect weather-wise either.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Everything I hear about Alaska weather is so different from what I expected that I wouldn't have any idea about it. Well, what do you feel about the present trends in art? We just touched on it briefly before, but I'd like to have you say something more about it.

WILL SHUSTER: Well, it's hard to say, living so close to it you know. I mean it really is. Of course, I'm not pleased with a lot of it, though. Especially the thing called splash, dribble and drip kind of art being done there for a while, you know.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Do you think artists are getting away from that?

WILL SHUSTER: Oh yes, I think we're definitely getting away from it, yes. We've got kind of a hangover now in this Pop art that's going on. But I really think the pendulum is beginning to swing in the other direction.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: What is you explanation of this fad?

WILL SHUSTER: Well, I don't know. I guess it began with the breakaway from the academic in France. That was the beginning of it and it snowballed. I remember Sloan had a remark about it. He said that he thought in the beginning it was very good medicine but they were taking so much of it now that it was becoming a poison.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh yes. Let's see, when did he die?

WILL SHUSTER: In 1950 was it? Or '51.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, it must have been '51 because he was still here when I came in '49 so it must have been soon after that. Well, I wonder what he'd say today if he saw some of the things that have happened since then.

WILL SHUSTER: I don't know. I don't think he'd be very happy about it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, do you think we're working out of it now?

WILL SHUSTER: I think so. I think a lot of this stuff that is done now, even work that is being sold at very high prices, is going to be relegated to somebody's basement.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I feel that way, too.

WILL SHUSTER: It's become too bizarre, everybody is trying so hard to be different, you know. You know, you don't have to try hard to be different.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: No, just be natural.

WILL SHUSTER: Well, the example I've always used is that I remember when I was a youngster going to school and I learned to write very carefully, in a fine, Spencerian hand, Spencerian letters and everybody learned the same way, but when they actually got down to writing, the writing was a very personal thing.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: That's right.

WILL SHUSTER: It didn't look at all like that script that they learned in the beginning.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: But, they at least had that discipline.

WILL SHUSTER: Yes, they had the discipline.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And that's what matters.

WILL SHUSTER: Oh, there is another thing that worries me too - bothers me, doesn't worry me. Now, there was a

time when the University, for instance, would have an artist in residence, see. They would take a recognized one. I mean like Randall Davey, an experienced artist, you know. He was not a college graduate. He'd spent his life painting and had developed a certain reputation and ability as an artist, and he was the instructor. Now, this is gone by the boards. I mean, there are very few places that have resident artists. They have Masters of Fine Arts who have college degrees in art, regardless of their talent. I think that is kind of a bad thing.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I know Kenneth Adams deplores this situation very much. He's down at the University and he was an artist in residence, you know?

WILL SHUSTER: Yeah, so was Randall down there. Well, he wasn't in residence but Randall taught there for a long time. I know it's a bad thing and then these. I remember coming up on one of our trips down South, we came back to Arkansas and stopped off at the University of Arkansas there in Fayetteville. They have a wonderful plant. Beautiful painting room, beautiful place, well lighted, plenty of space and what were these poor kids doing? The instructor had set up a still life. He'd taken a table and a board for the back of it, covered it with a black cloth and in one corner he had an old rusted Arkansas license place and he had a corroded green radiator from an ice box, and a piece of torn twisted rusted metal in the foreground and then a wheel. This was the inspiration for the class, you see. Oh well, what's going to come of that? No understanding of anatomy - none of the fundamentals were really being taught. He just put this thing up and turned them loose. Go ahead, see what you can do with it...and probably see how far you can depart from it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, probably.

WILL SHUSTER: And, the same thing was going on in the sculpture room. They were making free forms. They would take wire or mesh and bend it into various shapes, smear it with plaster and make all sorts of free forms.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Was there any instruction in design that went along with this?

WILL SHUSTER: No, I don't know. It was certainly not in evidence. If there was instruction, it was not showing up anywhere. I may be a little rough on it, but that's the way it looked to me. I felt that the students that would ultimately get a degree in Fine Arts would know very little about what they are trying to do. They would also have the possibility of becoming future instructors, you know?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

WILL SHUSTER: To show others how to be blind.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, I think it is a bad time in the period of American art.

WILL SHUSTER: As a matter of fact, it may reflect this mixed-up situation that exists all over the world.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, that's why I excused it for quite a long time. That is was a reflection of the chaotic period in which we live, but even so there are some universal truths that seem to me that the artist should interpret.

WILL SHUSTER: Exactly, exactly. If anything we should inject some peaceful motives into it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Let the artists give a little hope and faith in the future and not just say it's...

WILL SHUSTER: This is it. It's blowing up. Gone to pot.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, in retrospect I feel that that period of the federal art projects was a very fruitful one and that it did a great deal of good, not only for the financial condition of the artists but all the people of the country during the Depression, but that it also gave us a regional art that we have lost since.

WILL SHUSTER: Yes. I don't know why people despise this term "regional art," but they do.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, they do now, but I know I was talking to Gene Kloss and she brought out this point that it probably was the last vestige of regional art in America. Because after that there was this trend towards the abstract and universal art, so that you couldn't tell where any artist was from. I've always felt it was part of the responsibility of the artist to document his region and his period in time.

WILL SHUSTER: Yes. And not only that but I think it is important in many ways. Take Holland for instance, very wise in keeping as much of the old Dutch art in Holland and what do people go to Holland for? To look at windmills and clogs - that's Dutch art.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, you want to see the things that are different, the things you don't see at home.

WILL SHUSTER: That's it exactly.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, are there any other comments that you'd like to make about that particular period in art history or any other that you'd like to make about anything?

WILL SHUSTER: No. I...It was a rather severe period, wasn't it, that Depression?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

WILL SHUSTER: Thinking back on it - this generation, of which I am one, has certainly experienced a lot of wild things, you know.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I'm one of it too.

WILL SHUSTER: The great Depression, Prohibition - the great failure. [he laughs] The movement from kerosene lamps to electricity. Extensive use of the phone, those little crates that used to fly around in the beginning and now the jet planes; a terrific time to live.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes. If we can adjust ourselves to it as we go along, I think it's...

WILL SHUSTER: You know one thing I feel in my own life is that we place too much emphasis on time. I think time is a man-made thing. It's really artificial. They've gotten so they split it into microseconds now, but there is too much emphasis on time and not enough on nature or natural phenomena, living with the sun and with the seasons rather than this drive, drive, drive, drive - I've got to get there in a hurry, got to get it over with. Constant push of time. Everybody being pushed by time or running after it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And that may account for some of the art that we see.

WILL SHUSTER: Yes, it does too.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Obviously they put these things down quickly, rather than...

WILL SHUSTER: Oh golly, yes. I know one artist here who is sending away a show and Happy was packing it down at the Museum there, and this gal said, "Now wait, don't close up that crate because I've got six more to make this afternoon."

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh my!

WILL SHUSTER: This the truth!

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Gracious. Well, I think that is typical of what's going on and, as you say, the artist always has nature to fall back on if he can't accept the commercial, busy world of today and here is this great source of inspiration that is always there. You can escape to the outskirts of town to see it, or go into your own back yard.

WILL SHUSTER: Or even the life around you, contemporary things. Look at the Dutchman, Hans...gee, whenever I get up against names, Sylvia, I certainly stumble...you know the Elder in...

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Brueghel?

WILL SHUSTER: Yes, the Brueghels. For goodness sakes...

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Beautiful things that are just contemporary life, you know. Nothing has ever been more exquisite in design and the regionalism of the period, but just as design, they are beautiful things. Well, it has been very nice to have this talk with you, and we also appreciate having these papers.

WILL SHUSTER: Well, I've enjoyed it too, Sylvia.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And, if you'll let us borrow these for microfilming we will see that you get them back.

WILL SHUSTER: Fair enough.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Very safely and usually quite soon.

WILL SHUSTER: If there is anything more that you need at any time don't hesitate to call on me.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Thank you very much, Shus. We'll go through your other Zozobra pictures and see if there are a few of those we can borrow, too.

WILL SHUSTER: All right.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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