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Oral history interview with Charles W. White, 1965 March 9

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Charles Wilbert White on March 9, 1965. The interview was conducted at the Heritage Gallery in Los Angeles, California by Betty Lochrie Hoag for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

BETTY L. HOAG: This is Betty Lochrie Hoag on March the 9th, 1965, interviewing the artist, Charles Wilbert White at the Heritage Gallery on North La Cienega Boulevard in Los Angeles. And this interview is made through the help of Mr. Horowitz, who owns this gallery and to whom we're very grateful for making our meeting possible. Mr. White is one of the leading artists today in graphic arts, in oil painting. He is a teacher and a lecturer and is outstanding for his contribution to our rich Negro culture in this country. One of the nice things that I think was said about your paintings was, and your graphics, is that they showed "truth heavy with reality." I thought that was very succinct, and I think you should certainly add, by means of lyrical and romantic qualities with the strength that you have. You particularly concentrated, I believe, in doing paintings of Negro women, especially from historical sources and ballads, that kind of thing. You've had awards so numerous that they're all listed in the art indexes, and I'm not going to read them all off because the research students can look all that up. You have exhibits in leading collections, people all over the United States, and have exhibited in many places and that list is very long. The Art Institute of Chicago, Howard University, Smith College Museum, Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, Atlanta University, Newark Museum, I could go on reading these practically all afternoon.

Mr. White, before we talk about the Federal Arts Project, which is what we are mainly interested in having material about for the Archives, I'd like to ask you about your life and your painting. So we'll start on the history. First, and before we go into that, I'd like to know if you'd mind if I tell them what the "W" stands for. It's Wilbert isn't it?

CHARLES WHITE: Yes.

BETTY L. HOAG: And that's spelled W-I-L-B-E-R-T and the White is W-H-I-T-E. So, when were you born? And where?

CHARLES WHITE: I was born in Chicago, Illinois, April 2, 1918. Father was a railroad and construction worker and worked in steel mills in South Chicago. In his last years he was working at the post office in Chicago. My mother was a domestic worker all her life. She started when she was about 8 years old, still is a domestic worker, and now is about 67 or so.

BETTY L. HOAG: She lives in Chicago?

CHARLES WHITE: Yes, she still lives in Chicago.

BETTY L. HOAG: She must be very proud of you.

CHARLES WHITE: Well, yes, but she wasn't always enthusiastic about my art. I remember when I was a kid she was very tolerant and patient with it for a while, and then she saw that I was so dedicated to it, that I had chosen it for my life's work, she had second thoughts about whether this was very practical. After all, you know, it's much more practical to be a doctor or lawyer with an insured income, and so forth.

BETTY L. HOAG: How early did you show an interest?

CHARLES WHITE: She bought me an oil painting set when I was 7, and from then on I was hooked. Art became *the* most important thing in my life. I studied music for about 9 years, violin, which I never had too much enthusiasm about but she insisted on music. But art became I'd say all-consuming from the time I was 7. Well, in later years, I studied many things, I became interested in a little dance and I studied modern dance. And I worked with little theater groups for about 7 years, became interested in all phases of theater. I designed sets and costumes, even tried to act a little. But back when I was younger, in the grade-school level, or early high school, art became a thing that was not only all-consuming, but sometimes became a little problem too. Because I grew up in a very poor section of Chicago, it was a ghetto section, the south side, and these very formative years, it was at the height of the Depression and—

BETTY L. HOAG: It was hard growing up anyplace then.

CHARLES WHITE: Yes, besides that, art became a little problem because I grew up where there were a lot of gangs and art was always considered a little bit effeminate, so I used to go through back alleys to get to my music lessons and so forth so the kids in the neighborhood wouldn't see me carrying my little violin along, you see. And I used to also conceal my interest in art a little bit too because that would have been a problem.

BETTY L. HOAG: Probably until they needed somebody to make a sign and then they were glad.

CHARLES WHITE: Yes. You mentioned signs. When I was about 14 I became a professional sign painter. A young kid who, we were freshmen in high school. And we were both in the art department, and he set up a little sign painting business. We used to do signs for theaters, beauty shops, barber shops, all the local businesses. We had quite a little business going there. In fact, we had one theater where we were hired, a movie house, where we were getting the enormous sum of something like $75 a piece. At 14, and at the height of the Depression. Then, because we were so young, we couldn't join the Union, so the Union organized and forced the theater to fire us. We were so excited about that thing, but sign painting I did up until I was about 18 or 19.

BETTY L. HOAG: One of the articles that I read about you said something about window shade painting. What was that referring to?

CHARLES WHITE: Well, my mother, when she bought me this oil paint set, I knew nothing about how to use the turpentine, how to use the linseed oil that the kit included. So I remember the first time I just poured the linseed oil into the paint and it naturally became a mess and ran all over everything. But likewise, I didn't know what canvas was but I had some vague idea that it had at least a texture I could associate with something that looked like window shades. So it was the first time I decided to use the set and my mother wasn't home, so I took a couple of window shades down and painted on those and my mother gave me an awful spanking when she got home. What made it happen was that I used to paint for instance on the cardboard and I'd paint on the shirt, you know, those boards that the shirt, laundry, shirts come in, and one day I was out, we lived not too far from a park, and one day I happened to be there and there was an art class out there. Some art students from Chicago and they were all painting landscapes. I watched them carefully all day long. And I found out overhearing some of the conversation between the students, I found out they were going to be out there for a whole week. So every day after school I would run to the park and watch to see how they mixed the paints, and how they mixed their colors, and what they used the linseed oil for, and what they used the turpentine for. And I would go home each day and try to duplicate what I'd seen, so this, in a sense, was my first art lesson.

BETTY L. HOAG: Did they notice and give you any pointers?

CHARLES WHITE: Yeah, they became aware since I was out there every day. But I was very shy and they sensed that I was, and so a couple of students gave me a few hints about things.

BETTY L. HOAG: Is that how you found out about the canvas too?

CHARLES WHITE: That's how I found out about canvas. Not that we could afford it. I still couldn't use canvas, but at least I knew what it was.

BETTY L. HOAG: Well, actually, I would think that window shades wouldn't be bad.

CHARLES WHITE: No, it wasn't bad at all.

BETTY L. HOAG: You just couldn't get anymore?

CHARLES WHITE: No, my mother didn't seem to appreciate it.

BETTY L. HOAG: Mr. White, did you go to any of the museums there in Chicago and study painting?

CHARLES WHITE: Yes, I knew about the Art Institute of Chicago. The Art Institute of Chicago and the main branch of the public library were in close proximity. And my mother had developed in me the habit of reading very early in life. And my mother, when she went shopping, would leave me at the public library and this was the time I was 6 or 7 years old. And so I would go from the Art Institute—sometimes she'd leave me at the Art Institute and I'd wander through the galleries studying each picture. I remember Winslow Homer became one of my favorites, and George Inness, early little collections of landscapes. And so between the reading and the Art Institute I became, I got a pretty good art education long before I could afford to study. But also, at the same time, in grade school they used to have scholarships that were awarded to the public school students through the Art Institute of Chicago, with a lecture course. The best art students in every grade school and high school were given, would be given, a scholarship which lasted for 6 or 7 weeks. So you went on Saturdays and you listened to a lecture. I remember what the lecturer's name was, George Burrows, was one of the lecturers and I forget the other one's name. The guy would lecture and he'd give you an assignment and it would usually be in an

auditorium with about 5 or 600 kids in it. You would go home, do your assignment and next Saturday bring it in, turn it in and they would criticize it. A written criticism would be attached to your drawings the next time you returned. And if it was a good drawing, what they considered good quality, they gave you an honorable mention. And at the end of the term if you had accumulated something like 10 honorable mentions, you were given a gold pen which was inscribed. So that was a goal which all students worked toward, they were trying to get this little gold pen. And so I won these little scholarships consistently until uh, from grade school to high school. But the other, I guess, the other important thing that happened to me at least in terms of getting some kind of art education as well as being associated with other young people who were interested in be coming artists, was that when I was about 14 there was a club, an art club in the Negro neighborhood I lived in and was composed of all Negro artists. They used to meet on Sundays at various members houses. And we would hold little exhibitions and occasionally have life drawing classes and things.

BETTY L. HOAG: Was this under the direction of any adult, particularly?

CHARLES WHITE: Well, the ages varied. I was the youngest, I was 14. And there was some there, you know, in their early forties, I mean people who were all interested in art. The organization was called the Arts-Crafts Guild. The thing was interesting because they were all working people, young people. And it was also interesting because nobody in this group had really had any normal art education. They were all amateurs except one individual who was sort of the president of the group. His name was George E. Neal, and George had gone to the Art Institute for a couple of years, and he was quite a talented young man. He must have been at that time in his early twenties, and he would more or less guide us and gave us the real, formal knowledge that he was acquiring in school. So this went on for a couple of years. Then we decided that we had to find some better way to equip ourselves other than just through one person. We felt that there was enough talent in our organization to warrant other people going to art school, or having an opportunity to go. So, what we did, we devised a way. We said, "We'll use every means possible, even having little parties, every means possible to collect enough money to send one of our members to the Art Institute of Chicago to take at least one class a week.

BETTY L. HOAG: With the idea that he would bring back this information?

CHARLES WHITE: He would bring back information to us so that we could become further trained. So, what we did, we had a little competition and one of the members would win and we would send him to the art school and to whatever class we could afford. I mean, whatever classes he attended they found out how much we could afford to give to this scholarship fund so we just went on for a number of years, and that's how some of the people got their education.

BETTY L. HOAG: Were you one of those chosen?

CHARLES WHITE: No, I never won the competition. The older people were much more often, because remember that around this time I was 14 or 15. I didn't enter until I was about 16 years old.

BETTY L. HOAG: You were probably still in school then weren't you?

CHARLES WHITE: Oh yes, I was still going to school and having a great many problems in school. I was always painting, and I grew to hate school primarily because, as I said, I had become quite a, I guess an individualist in a lot of my thinking. And because I had been pretty much of a lonely child. I found the kind of, any kind of institution, formal institution like a school very difficult to adjust to and I had certain interests—I felt that the high school I went to didn't—

BETTY L. HOAG: I'm sorry, I knew this tape was going to end.

[END OF TAPE 1 – SIDE 1]

[TAPE 1 – SIDE 2]

BETTY L. HOAG: This is Betty Lochrie Hoag on March 9th interviewing the artist Charles White in Los Angeles. Mr. White, you mentioned being such a lonely child. Were you an only child or was it because of your art?

CHARLES WHITE: No, I was an only child and since loneliness came out of both my home set-up and besides being extremely poor, my father was an alcoholic and that made for many domestic problems that reacted on me. My sensitivities were repelled by his constant drinking and the embarrassment it caused me.

BETTY L. HOAG: Trouble for your mother too, would make it hard for a little boy.

CHARLES WHITE: Right, and I'd say this carried over into all my early social life, certainly in school. It was also the problem, I think, of awareness of being a Negro, and what it meant in terms of, even in school. The high school I went to which was predominantly white. I guess it was about 70 percent white at the time. As an

example, as I indicated, I was interested in acting. Up until my junior year I had been designing most of the sets for the school plays and drawing all the posters and things and I began to get interested in and curious about acting, and this was just unheard of in that school, none of the Negro students were ever allowed to act. They could participate in the broader entertainment of the school, you know, the band performances or something like this, but not in the school drama.

BETTY L. HOAG: That seems amazing today, doesn't it.

CHARLES WHITE: It may be; I'm sure that in certain cities it's probably not that restricting, but it was then.

BETTY L. HOAG: Well then you were deterred from going on with this as far as any of the school plays? They wouldn't even give you a chance for parts?

CHARLES WHITE: No, they wouldn't even consider it. And so this became a problem. Also, there were no negroes were allowed to be members of the Hi-Y Club. With a lot of other problems at school and my own in ability to make the adjustments to them I became so anti-school that I became a constant truant. Whenever I'd walk out of the house and it would be a nice beautiful day and I'd get half way to school and say, "This is ridiculous! What's the use of going to school?" I much preferred spending time in the library or going to the Art Institute, which I generally did. So, uh—

BETTY L. HOAG: Did the school check up on this?

CHARLES WHITE: No problem. And another thing which is probably the thing that really set it off long before the Hi-Y and the school drama was that, as I said, books had been my second greatest passion in life. And by the time I got into high school I'd read all the books of Jack London. I had read Mark Twain, all of his works. I was going to go through the alphabet in the library. I started with the A's and it didn't matter what the subject was, fiction or non fiction, or what it was, I was just going to read right through. So I started and naturally I didn't even get halfway, but this was the course I took. Somehow in all this exploring of books and different kinds of books on different subjects, I came across quite accidentally in the library one of the most definitive and one of the most important books that had ever been done on the culture of the Negro, which was a book called *The New Negro* by Dr. Alain Locke who was Professor of Philosophy, chairman of the Philosophy Department at Howard University. Dr. Locke was the authority on American Negro culture, with a particular interest to me because of his own special interest in art, the history of the Negro artist in America.

BETTY L. HOAG: What a bonanza for you!

CHARLES WHITE: This book opened my eyes, because I heard names, read names, read of people that I'd never heard of before, like Countee Cullen, the great Negro poet. Heard Paul Robeson's name for the first time. Most of the great literary figures of the early twenties, when it was a period which they called "The Negro Rennaissance" when the first blossoming of Negro culture in America really came to a head. And this book dealt specifically with that. Well, once I found this one book, then I began to search for other books on Negroes, which led to Negro historical figures, individuals that played a role in the abolition of slavery, names like Denmark Vesey, who led a slave revolt. Nat Turner who also led a slave revolt. Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Booker T. Washington, Frederick Douglass, all were names that in later years I've become quite well read on. For the first time, at 14 years old, these names came to my mind. I became aware the Negroes had a history in America. So, when I went to high school and had to take U.S. History, the first year I got through fine. Then the second year I decided that—I began to question why these names weren't mentioned in the standard U.S. History which we all studied, which was Beard's *History [of the United States]*. The only Negro name that was mentioned in there was Crispus Attucks, the first man to die in the American Revolution and there was one sentence on Crispus Attucks. There was nothing else throughout the whole of Beard's *History*. So I read this and I remember the first day of class I had in my second year, I raised this question to the teacher and she told me to sit down. She didn't even bother to be polite about it.

BETTY L. HOAG: She was undoubtedly ashamed because she knew nothing about it herself!

CHARLES WHITE: So I sat down and I sat out that whole class. I made up my mind I was going to sit out this whole class the rest of the term. I was not going to participate in it until somebody gave me a satisfactory explanation of why it was so and if not why weren't they included. They wouldn't let me drop U.S. History, so I didn't participate. When the term paper came, I signed my name and turned it in blank. When she asked for oral recitation I would not raise my hand, she'd call on me and I would say, "I don't know," and sit down. This was my only way of fighting.

BETTY L. HOAG: Your own sit-down strike!

CHARLES WHITE: I wasn't equipped to fight it any other way. This was the only tool I knew to use to fight it. And so naturally, the dean called me in and they tried to threaten me with expulsion.

BETTY L. HOAG: Didn't you explain this thing to him?

CHARLES WHITE: I wasn't articulate enough to explain in the full sense. I became a joke in the class. The teacher…what I was doing—even in her other class, she made them aware of what I was doing so I sort of became a little joke around the school. So all these things led to…as I say, again, not being able to participate in certain social clubs in school, and the Drama Club, it led to the truancy I referred to. So I flunked for a whole year. The only classes I passed in were art classes and English Literature. In my second year, they introduced Sociology and Philosophy class, and I passed in those. But what it wound up meaning in the end was that it took me five years to get out of high school. So I was 19 when I finished high school.

BETTY L. HOAG: Well, this art group that was formed must have been a god-send to you.

CHARLES WHITE: It was. It was the first time I met other artists. I met white artists I had never known before, and people whose names were important locally. And I used to go around and clean up the studios for Edward Millman for instance, who was a very important muralist at that time, did one of the most important murals.

BETTY L. HOAG: Your concept of history and realizing that the culture of the Negro should be in it is so interesting. You were born just way too soon, before your time! I noticed just last month our *California Historical Journal* they came out with an article about "The Negro as a Cowboy," which is simply fascinating.

CHARLES WHITE: I want to get that book, it sounds like a fascinating book.

BETTY L. HOAG: I'd like to too, I read the review of it. But we certainly are aware of it today in all different phases. It's interesting, in fact it's unbelievable, that a school board, even though you weren't very articulate, couldn't understand this and do something to develop you.

CHARLES WHITE: Yeah, well, see most of the teachers in most of my other classes weren't as sensitive about these things. Now my art teachers were, they were very sensitive about every facet of me, and I think if it hadn't been for them I wouldn't have survived. The only reason I finished, finally got down to business and really finished high school was because of their sensitivity, and because my mother became so upset by my attitude and what I was doing, terribly upset. Everybody treated me as a delinquent which I wasn't by any means.

BETTY L. HOAG: But you felt you had to show them you could get through.

CHARLES WHITE: This terrible handicap that sometimes a teenager will have when he isn't equipped verbally or any other way to fight and express the things he feels inside.

BETTY L. HOAG: Teenagers have this anyway. I mean, they all have it whether they're figments of their imagination or what, it's part of being a teenager.

CHARLES WHITE: But I finally got out and another thing, when I was about, oh, in my last year I won three scholarships. Now the first two scholarships were to two local art schools in Chicago, mostly geared to commercial art, but I was denied admittance to the school when they found out I was a Negro. So this had a cruel, traumatic effect on me to say the least. But fortunately, in the last national competition in high school was—the Art Institute of Chicago offers scholarships and holds competitions annually, and I won the competition that year, which was 1937, and so I finally got an opportunity to take some formal training. This was a great moment. You have no idea what a thrill that was.

BETTY L. HOAG: Now was this a full scholarship?

CHARLES WHITE: Yes, it was a full scholarship to be a full-time student.

BETTY L. HOAG: Now wasn't that great! Now were there any teachers who particularly influenced you there? Any time there are that you'd like to get on the tape do tell us about them.

CHARLES WHITE: There was not really any particular teacher. There were some I related to more and that inspired me, but not to any significant degree. I think I was mostly inspired by other artists in Chicago who were doing things that I saw—older artists like Mitchell Siporin. He is quite a nationally known artist, and he had a great influence on my whole thinking. Then there was Francis Chapin, who was another painter, and Aaron Bohrod was another painter at the time who had a tremendous influence on my painting.

BETTY L. HOAG: Were they all teaching at the Institute?

CHARLES WHITE: No, they weren't teaching there, that's what I say, the teachers themselves—My greatest inspiration came from people outside the Art Institute. The difficulty I had in art school, even though I had a scholarship, was that financially it was difficult to maintain myself. For instance, I used to have to walk, we lived 5300 South and the Art Institute was at Adams and Michigan and that's about 60 blocks almost, and I very often

had to walk because I had no car fare. I didn't have any money to buy materials so one of the instructors let me use his account at art supplies store, so I used to get material that way. So it was a question of hustling all the time for material. Finally it got so we reached a point, we got so desperate I had to hunt a job. So this is when I got a job as a valet and cook to one of the local artists in Chicago whose name I—.Antonio Beneduce. He made a great deal of money doing work for interior decorating firms. He advertised at the school for a valet and a cook. Well, I had never cooked in my entire life, I didn't know one thing about cooking. So, a cute little story of the way I learned is that the first time I had to cook a meal for him fortunately he wasn't home, so I called up my mother and she told me how to cook a full five course dinner over the phone. The phone must've been off the hook about three and a half to four hours and I cooked this whole dinner over the phone. Every time she'd tell me something I'd run back and do it and come back to the phone. [Laughs] Let's see, I held that job for about a year.

BETTY L. HOAG: You didn't cook the same meal over and over did you?

CHARLES WHITE: No, every evening when I'd go home from work, my mother, she'd brief me, and then she'd write out things. So he never knew, and I became a pretty good cook. He never learned but the only thing he found out, he used to worry about his phone bill, it was so enormous. Naturally, it went up every day! That first year in art school I also got another job with a Catholic high school, St. Elizabeth's Catholic High School, which I taught one class to the senior students.

BETTY L. HOAG: In painting?

CHARLES WHITE: Yes, well, drawing and painting. It was a general high school kind of teaching. And so I held those two jobs and yet I finished two years of work in one at the Art Institute.

BETTY L. HOAG: Good heavens! And you also had another scholarship that year be cause you had a National School Award, didn't you?

CHARLES WHITE: That was the same year I graduated from high school, 1937, I did the *Scholastic Magazine* Award, a national award. I won a couple of prizes in that year.

BETTY L. HOAG: Goodness, that must have been about the time of the Federal Art Project. Let's jump that and come back to it if you don't mind so we can develop it a little more. I think the next place I take you then was the Art Students League in New York. Is that right?

CHARLES WHITE: No, the next place I went to was New Orleans which was around 1941. I got a job teaching there at Dillard University, in New Orleans. I stayed there for about a year and by this time I was also married to a young woman from Washington who was quite an artist. She is a tremendous artist, a sculptor, primarily.

BETTY L. HOAG: What was her name?

CHARLES WHITE: Elizabeth Catlett. I think she is now the head of the Sculpture Department at the University of Mexico. But she was teaching at Dillard too.

BETTY L. HOAG: Did you meet her there?

CHARLES WHITE: We met in Chicago. She'd gotten her master's at Iowa where she had studied under Grant Wood, and she came to Chicago and studied at the Art Institute for one summer. We met and got married and went to New Orleans, and I was hired there too, so we worked there for about a year. And then I got a Julius Rosenwald Fellowhip which is the reason we left Dillard. The Julius Rosenwald Fellowship. And we went to New York. That's where I entered the Art Students League and took a course in graphics with Harry Sternberg.

BETTY L. HOAG: (Speaking to someone else present) Now Mr. Horowitz, didn't Mr. Sternberg exhibit here at your gallery just recently? He's the gentleman I was trying to remember, he had also been on the Project. One day I'll have to interview you about him and get him out here too.

CHARLES WHITE: He was a great teacher.

HOROWITZ: He comes out here once in a while, he teaches out at Idlewild.

BETTY L. HOAG: Maybe next summer I can catch him when he comes back.

HOROWITZ: If he does come I'll be glad to get him down here.

BETTY L. HOAG: I had a friend from Palm Springs who was so disappointed to have missed the show. She said she'd known him up there and I thought she must have meant someone else.

HOROWITZ: No, same one.

BETTY L. HOAG: Thank you.

HOROWITZ: I have a folder on him here I'd be glad to give you, if you could use it.

BETTY L. HOAG: Boy! I'd love to see it!

[Addressing Charles White]

Mr. White, we were talking about this Rosenwald Fellowship at the Art Students League. That was in 1942 to 1943 that you were there.

CHARLES WHITE: Yes. Part of the project under the fellowship was to do three months of studying at the Art Students League and the rest of the time was to be devoted to doing a mural at some Negro college in the South. And the mural was to depict the Negro's contribution to democracy in America, and the school for the mural to be presented or to be executed, was to be my choice, for which I took a trip to a number of Negro universities and finally picked Hampton Institute in Hampton Virginia where I spent the final nine months of my fellowship executing the mural at the school.

BETTY L. HOAG: Was it in the library?

CHARLES WHITE: It was in one of the main auditoriums, they had two auditoriums there and it was in one of them.

BETTY L. HOAG: And just very briefly, what was it?

CHARLES WHITE: What was the mural?

BETTY L. HOAG: What was the subject, and how did you carry it out?

CHARLES WHITE: Well, it depicted, I started with the American Revolution, depicting Crispus Attucks as the first man to die in the Revolution, came on through using individuals like Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, George Carver, Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth, and Marian Anderson. The object was to take the contributions both through physical revolt of fighting for the abolition of slavery, and also the contributions that had been made in the sciences as well as the arts, as well as politics. So to cover the contribution to many facets of American life, just what was the key to this whole struggle.

BETTY L. HOAG: With interwoven scenes it must have been a magnificent mural!

CHARLES WHITE: It was a big job, I think the mural was something like 18 by 60 feet so it was an enormous job which I executed with egg tempera directly on the wall which was a very interesting experience at Hampton because the head of the Art Department there was the man who became internationally known both as a teacher, an educator. His name was Dr. Viktor Lowenfeld. He was an Austrian.

BETTY L. HOAG: You don't know the spelling?

CHARLES WHITE: I think it's L-O-W-E-N-F-I-E-L-D, I'm not sure, but he is Viktor spelled with a K.

BETTY L. HOAG: Just as a matter of interest because I think you did a mural on the Project before this, is that where you learned egg tempera?

CHARLES WHITE: Yes, I first learned on the Project. I first learned by being an assistant to a mural painter on one mural. Then I was given a commission to do one for a branch of the Chicago Public Library.

BETTY L. HOAG: We'll come back to that. I'd like to get it in the record when we can see influence from the Project in a man's later work. Always sort of fun to know things that helped. Let's see, after that, I have you in Mexico. You probably jumped around more than that and I just don't have reference to it.

CHARLES WHITE: After, the fellowships, I had two consecutive Rosenwald Fellowships, then I was drafted into the Army in 1944. I spent about a year in a camouflage unit of the Engineers.

BETTY L. HOAG: Where were you stationed?

CHARLES WHITE: I was stationed at Camp Ellis, Illinois. I did my basic training then. Then I went to Jefferson Barracks in Missouri. As a result of fighting the floods in Missouri—the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers flooded that year—I developed pleurisy. I was sent to a base hospital. In draining the fluid of pleurisy off my chest they found

a tubercular condition, which, I was given a medical discharge from the Army, and was sent to a hospital. There I spent two years the first time and later was to spend two more years as a result of that.

BETTY L. HOAG: Your speaking of being a camouflage artist and fighting floods instead made me think of Ted Gilien. I interviewed him earlier this week and he was a camouflage artist sent to New Guinea and what he did was to move ammunition dumps.

CHARLES WHITE: Well, I painted signs for quite a while as a camoufleur. Mostly on cans that said "Edible" and "Nonedible". And I also had the opportunity of painting the Mess Hall once.

BETTY L. HOAG: Outside or inside? Do you mean a mural?

CHARLES WHITE: No, just painting with flat paint. Then finally they gave me a mural to do for one of the Non-com clubs at the post. I wound up with a rating of Corporal.

BETTY L. HOAG: Do you think that mural is still there at the base?

CHARLES WHITE: I'm sure it isn't.

BETTY L. HOAG: Well, let's see. That was '44 to '46 then?

CHARLES WHITE: Yes, between the hospital and the Army. After I was discharged from the hospital I went to Mexico.

BETTY L. HOAG: Now was this on another grant of some kind?

CHARLES WHITE: No. Just purely on our own. We went down there, I think. My wife had a fellowship—that's what it was, she had a fellowship, so we went down and spent a couple of years there.

BETTY L. HOAG: You did free-lance painting?

CHARLES WHITE: Yeah, I was painting. By this time I had become a member of the ACA Gallery, I had a one-man show in New York and—

BETTY L. HOAG: I'm sorry, I don't know what an ACA is.

CHARLES WHITE: Well, it's called the ACA Gallery, I think it stands for "American Contemporary Art." It's known by its initials rather than its full name. So, my paintings had begun to sell very well, and because my wife had a fellowship we were able to live relatively well. And I went to school at the Mexican Government School of Mexico called Escuela de Pientura y Scultura, which it means "School of Painting and Sculpture." And it's known as "The Esmaralda", because that is the name of the street it is on; that's not really the name of the school, but everybody calls it by that name.

BETTY L. HOAG: Is that the same as the Talier de Graphica?

CHARLES WHITE: No, that was the Graphics Workshop where all the artists who worked in medias of lithography and woodcuts were either members or did their work. There was quite a famous group there, and I both studied there and became a member of the Tallera.

BETTY L. HOAG: Now is that where you knew Leopolda Mendez? And Siqueiros?

CHARLES WHITE: Yeah, I lived with Siqueiros for about a year in the same house. He owned a big house and he let us have a place. And Pablo O'Higgins worked at the Talier and Orozco did some prints there as well as Diego Rivera.

BETTY L. HOAG: Do you think the Mexican work influenced your own?

CHARLES WHITE: It had a tremendous influence on me. I guess the two things that in my earlier life that had the most influence was both studying with Harry Sternberg, who was a great teacher and opened my eyes for the first time opened my eyes to my feelings that I had never been able to quite pin down to the kind of work that I was doing. He brought it out, so to speak. And Harry was the most important teacher I ever had, as well as the experience of Mexico itself, because of the nature of the kind of stuff I was doing, was more geared to "social realism" in quotes. I found that I found people in Mexico who were also dealing with the same kind of approach (in terms of content) that was just my mental experience.

BETTY L. HOAG: I know that you have done so much work in graphics and someplace it said that you do an average of about 4 oil paintings a year. Was Sternberg a painter in all these mediums, and in Mexico were you

doing all different mediums?

CHARLES WHITE: Well, Sternberg, while being a painter, was also better known as a graphic artist. I studied primarily graphics with him, and I guess in my work I've always had a stronger leaning for graphics and I found my own talents were best suited for the black and white media rather than color, and I have never felt that color in itself was absolutely necessary for an artist to be an artist. In other words, you can say if Kollwitz, Käthe Kollwitz, if she did a painting, nobody has ever seen it, that I know of, yet she was a great artist. If Daumier or Goya had never painted, they still would have been great artists. So, I always felt this way about black and white. And I used to feel a little apologetic for not painting more, but I've done, actually hundreds of paintings in my life. For instance, on the WPA I had to do a painting every 5 weeks, and I was on it for 3 years, so that leaves a lot of paintings.

BETTY L. HOAG: I think it's so unusual today for a person to be doing graphics like yours. When they're such great draftsmen, there are so few of them around and you're such a marvelously accomplished draftsman. The things just breathe right through and you don't even think about there not being any color. I think if a person can put that over—

CHARLES WHITE: I guess the most important thing is to, for me has always been to say something that is meaningful, and much more important than the media I use. And whatever media that I could do it strongest, that's the media I've always used. That's why murals are extremely important to me, even though it's hard to get mural commissions these days, but murals I've always felt very strong to because it's allowed me the room to say the kind of things—

BETTY L. HOAG: Well, in a certain sense you're a documentary artist documenting not only historical things but the ideas.

CHARLES WHITE: Yeah, the main point is that what really I've always tried to do, essentially I've boiled it down, mostly when people ask me a question, I've boiled it down to three things I've essentially tried to do, which I think most artists have to do, is that I try to deal with truth as truth maybe in my personal interpretation of truth and truth is a very spiritual sense—not "spiritual" meaning religiously spiritual, but "spiritual" in the sense of the inner-man, so to speak. I try to deal with beauty, and beauty again as I see it in my personal interpretation of it, the beauty in man, the beauty in life, the beauty, the most precious possession that man has is life itself. And that essentially I feel that man is basically good. I have to start from this premise in all my work because I'm almost psychologically and emotionally incapable of doing any meaningful work which has to do with something I hate. I've tried it. There's been a number of tragedies in my life, in my family's life. My people on my mother's side come from Mississippi and we've had 5 lynchings in my family, 2 uncles and 3 cousins over a long span of years. I've lived in the South, have had unpleasant personal experiences, been beaten up a couple of times, once in New Orleans and once in Virginia. My people all lived in rural sections mostly, were all farmers, so, and yet, at the same time I still maintain in spite of, again, my experiences, my family's experience, tragedies, I still feel that man is basically good.

BETTY L. HOAG: Well, it certainly shows in your work.

CHARLES WHITE: The other thing I try to deal with, the third point, is dignity. And I think that once man is robbed of his dignity he is nothing. And I try to take the sense, when I deal with Negro people primarily in terms of image I try to give it the meaning of universality to it. I don't address myself primarily to the Negro people. They certainly are key, you know, and a major part of the audience that I address myself to, but generally I use an image in a more formal, universal sense than is sometimes understood by critics or people who see it.

BETTY L. HOAG: Like this wonderful print that Mr. Horowitz showed me of the Civil War woman with the rock background. You have no sense of race; it isn't there, it's the idea of the strength of this woman combating right as she sees it, that comes out of the picture. Is that what you mean?

CHARLES WHITE: Exactly, what I want is so that when I say dignity and I say truth and I say beauty, these are universal kinds of things that all men aspire to, within all men. So that I'm addressing myself for people I relate to. Sometimes it may be difficult for white people to quite see it in these universal terms. I mean, I can understand, say, if somebody saw it purely and they do, I get the sense that they sometimes don't always see it because somebody's always asking me, "Why don't you paint whites? You don't paint anything other than Negroes," which indicates a certain lack of understanding and perceptiveness about this. But the point is that I've had, as a Negro in America, I've related to images that had broader symbolic meanings, in spite of the fact that the image might be white. For instance you know the Statue of Liberty is a nationally-known symbol of something, well that Statue of Liberty symbolizing exactly—

BETTY L. HOAG: You don't ask if it is Irish—

CHARLES WHITE: It has Caucasian features but I can accept this image as symbolic of what the intent was

without seeing it and saying, "well, why can't it be a black face up there?", you know. You know the thousands of images we have, Santa Claus, well, sc since I always feel that the artist only does meaningful things when he draws upon that which is closest to him, and he uses that as a springboard to deal with a more broad, all-encompassing subject.

BETTY L. HOAG: Well, I think the amazing and wonderful thing is that I never see satire in your things. And of course that would be a direct result of the way you feel about it. Satire has its place—I don't mean it doesn't—but there's no maliciousness, no cruelty in your work—

CHARLES WHITE: I tried to do. Once I did some cartoons for a small paper in New York. And it was another failure. I can't do satirical things. I tried to do cartooning early in my life, couldn't do a cartoon. I think I have a sense of humor but I can't use this media to do these kinds of things. I have to paint the things I love and respect. While I pour out a great deal, there's a certain amount of sadness in some of my things, a tragic kind of expression maybe in their bodies and faces, but essentially I'm just dealing with trying to make man aware of all these qualities.

BETTY L. HOAG: I am eager sometimes to see some of the pictures you did of Belafonte. At one time I don't know if it ever came out, you were doing either a book or jacket, book-jacket, I don't know which it was.

CHARLES WHITE: I illustrated a book, *Songs Belafonte Sings* yes. It's out.

BETTY L. HOAG: I'd love to see it.

CHARLES WHITE: Harry Belafonte and I have been very close friends for a number of years, long before he became the very important figure in the arts that he is.

BETTY L. HOAG: Everyone says he's a great person.

CHARLES WHITE: He is, a magnificent person. Our friendship has been tremendously important to me. And he's been a great help to me in interpreting my work, this sensitivity and compassion for my work.

BETTY L. HOAG: You also did titles for *Anna Lucasta* for the movies at one time. In fact, how did you get to California?

CHARLES WHITE: Well, I'll tell you, after so many years, I spent 17 years in New York and my wife was born in New York. (Incidentally, just for the record, I guess we ought to say that my first wife and I were divorced in Mexico). Then Fran and I were married 15 years ago.

BETTY L. HOAG: So you must have come to Los Angeles about the '50s?

CHARLES WHITE: No, we came out in '57, I think, 1957. We had had it in New York. I had my health breakdown; not real seriously, and then by that time we had both gotten fed up by the rat-race of New York and we wanted something, felt that life must offer something more than big apartment buildings where you couldn't see any trees and greenery and I've always loved being closer to nature. I have lived in out of the way places, there in Mexico I lived for quite awhile in a very rural section in the mountains, in a little village. I always found myself able to work in more isolated atmosphere – worked better, more conducive to my personality for creative work. So we decided we were going. Neither one of us had ever been to California and didn't know anything about it really, just knew that once in a while we'd meet somebody from California. We decided we'd take a chance and see what happened, so we came out here in '57 and fell in love with it, and can't stand New York anymore, and as far as I'm concerned California is God's Country.

BETTY L. HOAG: You live in Altadena?

CHARLES WHITE: No, not now. We built a house about a year ago in Highland Park.

BETTY L. HOAG: And you've been teaching at Occidental?

CHARLES WHITE: No, at Otis, at Otis Art Institute and the Westside Jewish Community Center.

BETTY L. HOAG: In Hollywood?

CHARLES WHITE: At Olympic and La Brea.

BETTY L. HOAG: What do you teach, just for the record?

CHARLES WHITE: I teach life drawing to second-year students at Otis and I teach open-class at the Jewish Community Center.

BETTY L. HOAG: Well, let's see, that, I think, brings us up to date except for this one thing. I think we stopped the tape when I started to ask you about doing some work for the motion pictures.

CHARLES WHITE: Oh, yeah, well, this was my first experience with motion pictures and probably my last. I'm not particularly interested in the kind of atmosphere you have to work in, the pressure you work under, when you work in films, but I did the title drawings for *Anna Lucasta*, which stars Sammy Davis and Eartha Kitt.

BETTY L. HOAG: Now what are title drawings?

CHARLES WHITE: Well, actually what they're generally used for is introduction at the beginning of the film where they superimpose the title of the picture over the drawing. But they decided originally started out with that purpose in mind, they decided because of the nature of the drawings that I did to use them as the curtain call for the key actors at the end of the picture. So for about 5 minutes you see the camera pan around the various key characters.

BETTY L. HOAG: Interesting treatment.

CHARLES WHITE: Yes, I was very pleased with the way it worked. But Hollywood is not for me really. Interesting enough though, most of my closest friends throughout the years have not been other artists, I mean other painters. Most of them have been actors or writers or musicians.

BETTY L. HOAG: Well, you have such a wide interest, have had since you were a little boy, from what you told me of those readings it would be natural. Is Mrs. White an artist?

CHARLES WHITE: No, Mrs. White is a social worker, an ex-social worker.Now all her social work is done at home. But she was with the Probation Department as a probation officer for a number of years, and before that she was with the YWCA in various cities for a number of years in social work.

BETTY L. HOAG: Well, I think probably we should get back to the Federal Arts period because there are a lot of things I wanted to ask you about that. You were going to the Art Institute and you probably hadn't begun to sell any paintings then because you were so young still when the project started. But you did have this other group of artists who were meeting unofficially, that was still in existence at the time, wasn't it?

CHARLES WHITE: Yes, by that time I wasn't too active in the organization. By this time, other organizations which involved more than just Negro artists, they were all-inclusive. And I became interested in other organizations, so, I became a part, for instance, of the Artists' Union of Chicago which just began around the time of the formation of the WPA project.

BETTY L. HOAG: When did you go on the project? Do you remember what year it was?

CHARLES WHITE: I was 20 years old, when I went.

BETTY L. HOAG: So it'd be in '38?

CHARLES WHITE: Yeah, I had just, as I say, finished my first year at the Art Institute and I began the desperation of needing money, and the only thing I ever had really been critical of the whole system of government subsidy of the arts in that period was the fact that you had practically declare yourself a pauper in order to qualify for this program.

BETTY L. HOAG: I didn't realize that.

CHARLES WHITE: Well, you had to be on relief, and first you had to apply for relief which meant, you know, state aid, which again means that you don't have anything. You had nothing, no insurance, you have nothing. That was a little undignified, to say the least, for a person to have to admit; it was embarrassing.

BETTY L. HOAG: But it was true of almost everybody at the time!

CHARLES WHITE: It is true that it was difficult, but you weren't really quite that destitute, as I say. I was doing certain menial jobs, washing dishes, I had done everything in my lifetime: shine shoes, I was a bellhop. In high school, I used to work in summer camps; and a whole slew of things I used to do, but anyhow that was the only thing really, I had criticism of, but at 20 years old we qualified, my family and myself. And then I was assigned to the Art Project. You showed, either through your work you submitted it to a jury; if it was accepted, then you were qualified to apply for a job in a specific professional area like the Arts Project.

BETTY L. HOAG: You qualified for easel painting?

CHARLES WHITE: Yes, I qualified to be an easel painter, so I was assigned to that. And that was a beautiful thing.

I know there is a lot of criticism today about government subsidy of art. And even the criticism today of government subsidy of art is generally based on the experience was on the WPA. But the artist for the first time I think it was a fantastic thing for a country to do because for the first time the artist in this country had an opportunity to work without uh…to work with freedom, to work professionally, full-time professionally, which while the money—The maximum pay as an easel painter was $97.00 a month; the only higher pay was if you were in a supervisory capacity, say like the head of the Easel Division or the Mural Division or whatever department it was, then you got a little bit more money, but generally $97.00 was maximum. And then you got all your supplies free. $97.00 was fairly adequate if you didn't have a large family, but most of us were single painters, it was quite adequate.

BETTY L. HOAG: And you only had to do one painting a month, wasn't it?

CHARLES WHITE: Yes, one painting every 5 weeks.

BETTY L. HOAG: And you could do that in your own time and turn it in when you wanted?

CHARLES WHITE: And you had also the beautiful opportunity to really work and learn in any department. For instance, if you had certain skills to do with, say, design skills you could transfer from the Easel Division to the Design Department and work there for a while; then you could go back to the Easel Department; and then you could go from Easel (like I did) to the Mural Department. So you had opportunities to utilize all your faculties for any department of art that you qualified to do.

BETTY L. HOAG: Now how did you happen to get into murals? Did someone ask for you, or did you ask to be?

CHARLES WHITE: I asked to be assigned. I wanted the experience and wanted to learn and I hadn't gone far enough in art school to have had that experience, so that was again the beautiful thing because the Art Project, it was almost a school.

BETTY L. HOAG: Well, as a matter of fact, I don't think the schools taught mural painting then, did they?

CHARLES WHITE: Yeah, but I think you had to be in your final year before you had an opportunity to do one in regular art school.

BETTY L. HOAG: So what were you assigned to?

CHARLES WHITE: I was first assigned to help work as an apprentice, really, to an artist who was executing a mural.

BETTY L. HOAG: Now who was he? Or do you remember?

CHARLES WHITE: I'll think of it in a minute. I'll have to give it time. He's a quite famous illustrator now; he does most of the drawings for Life magazine, the special things on the heart; they had a real series recently on it. Name escapes me.

BETTY L. HOAG: Well, we can always dub it in afterwards anyway. And what was he doing the mural for?

CHARLES WHITE: He was doing a mural for one of the parks, I've forgotten now, some auditorium or either exposition hall, they had in one of the parks. And I helped him on this and I learned a great deal: all about how to square the canvas, how to enlarge, how to rough it in, all these things, make all your preliminaries, do the research.

BETTY L. HOAG: Marvelous training not like some of the artists who got the mural to do and didn't know about it and had to go and get a book and try to find out.

CHARLES WHITE: And then besides that, after, that, I was able to get a job, was given a job to do for the Chicago Public Library.

BETTY L. HOAG: And this was on the Project?

CHARLES WHITE: Yes. The Chicago Public Library.

BETTY L. HOAG: What was the subject of this?

CHARLES WHITE: The subject was on the 5 great outstanding Negroes, again I picked the subject—the subject was gotten through, running through a Negro newspaper there—a competition who the people thought were the 5 outstanding Negroes throughout the last 50 years or 100 years or so. And then the names that came out were George Washington Carver, Booker T. Washington, Sojourner Truth, and Marian Anderson.

BETTY L. HOAG: So, how did you relate them all in one—I mean that would be kind of difficult—

CHARLES WHITE: Yeah, I can't verbally describe how I did it, but I picked out little symbolic things to represent each: the science thing, and Sojourner leading groups of her people, and Booker T. Washington orating one of his speeches. That's about as specific as I can describe it.

BETTY L. HOAG: I hope you have some photographs of it that we can borrow to have microfilmed. I haven't found that in any of the magazines. Some of them I've gotten pictures of but not that.

CHARLES WHITE: Don't know whether I have, I'll have to search through that because most of the old stuff…I didn't have…The Project often photographed them, but I didn't have—couldn't afford to do it always myself, and sometimes I wasn't able to get the photographs. But I have some things, other paintings I did during that period. I think I can give them to you.

BETTY L. HOAG: I hope they're not in storage, having just moved, you've probably stored things. In California the Project gave the artists photographs of their work, which was very nice. Most of the artists who were on it here in Southern California have photographs to show for it. They had a photographer working on the Project as part of it. You did a mural not too long after that, it was done by 1940, in the Chicago Coliseum, *History of the Negro Press*. That wasn't the Project's mural?

CHARLES WHITE: No, that was a private commission from the Associated Negro Press.

BETTY L. HOAG: Came as a direct result probably of the other one didn't it? And that must've been pretty big, that was in oil, 20 x 19.

CHARLES WHITE: Yes, that was a pretty large mural and I did, there was a deadline, I think, I had only about 3 weeks to do that thing.

BETTY L. HOAG: Good heavens.

CHARLES WHITE: Well, you're young and you got all this energy stored up and not yet dissipated yet. You can do it.

BETTY L. HOAG: I forgot to ask you about this library one; was it a direct fresco or was it an oil on canvas?

CHARLES WHITE: It was oil on canvas.

BETTY L. HOAG: Where did you work on it?

CHARLES WHITE: At the Federal Art Project headquarters. They had ample space for artists to execute murals.

BETTY L. HOAG: Now that's something that I don't understand that I hope you'll clarify for the tape, which is going to run out in just a minute here—but by 1941 the Illinois Art Project had started a center in Chicago.

CHARLES WHITE: No that was the Southside Community Art Center.

BETTY L. HOAG: Now did that have anything to do with the Federal Arts Project?

CHARLES WHITE: Yes, the Federal Art Project was supplied with teachers. All the community had to do was to secure the building. And the Art Project staffed the school.

BETTY L. HOAG: Well that must've been a wonderful thing.

CHARLES WHITE: It was, it was tremendous for the community. The community ran a "mile-a-dime" campaign, they called it; they went around to everybody's home and collected dimes to raise a sufficient amount of money to purchase the building, so I think the building cost about $25,000 , so it took a couple of years.

BETTY L. HOAG: I know Mrs. Roosevelt dedicated that, there are pictures of the opening of it.

CHARLES WHITE: I taught there. I taught classes there, and also for a short while was Assistant Director.

[END OF TAPE 1 – SIDE 2]

[TAPE 2 – SIDE 1]

BETTY L. HOAG: This is Betty Lochrie Hoag on March 9th, 1965, interviewing the artist, Charles White, part III. Mr. White, I think that we got a bit garbled on this last part, you were starting to tell me about this Illinois Art Project Center that was established in Chicago. And it was a different thing than the regular art center which

they had, is that right? When you started out with the easel work.

CHARLES WHITE: Yeah, you mean the art club that I used to belong to?

BETTY L. HOAG: No, when you first went on the Federal Art Project didn't they have another project center?

CHARLES WHITE: No, The Federal Art Project had only this building where they had all the activities which had to be done right on the premises, in other words, they had a Design Department; easel painting, for instance, generally was done at home. The Art Center with a community art center which was called the Southside Community Art Center. Located in the predominately Negro section of Chicago, which was southside. Generally they established art centers throughout the country, Harlem had one, New York. Several cities had them. And as I say they were staffed by the Illinois State Art Project. The only specification they had was that the community purchase the building, and at the Community Art Center was generally – they ran classes, there was a full-time staff, a Director, Assistant Director, and secretaries, again staffed by the Art Project. And all the community art activities took place at this center.

BETTY L. HOAG: I believe Mr. Peter Pollack was Supervisor of this when you were there?

CHARLES WHITE: Yes, I forgot what his position was, but he was with the American Federation of Arts, a very important executive there.

BETTY L. HOAG: *Magazine of Art*, in 1941, had a reproduction of your *Fatigue* and it was a very moving print I thought.

CHARLES WHITE: Thank you.

BETTY L. HOAG: Were there any artists who were on the Project with you there, particularly ones who are not alive today, who would be interesting for you to talk about for the tape? I should preface this by the fact that there were a lot of people on the Project who are dead and it's so hard to find information about them unless some of the artists do remember things and I wondered—

CHARLES WHITE: Well there was one very important individual who was quite an important individual in Chicago at that time and in all the art activities, and, his name was Morris Topchevsky, affectionately known as "Toppy".

BETTY L. HOAG: Toppy?

CHARLES WHITE: Toppy.

BETTY L. HOAG: Do you remember how to spell his name? Top or B. Topchevsky?

CHARLES WHITE: Topchevsky. I don't remember how to spell it. The other one was Edward Millman, who I referred to some time ago. Edward Millman and Mitchell Siporin did one of the biggest mural commissions, I guess the biggest one ever done under the Federal Art Program, and that was for the post office, I think, in St. Louis. I'm pretty sure it was St. Louis.

BETTY L. HOAG: That was the one everybody tried out for.

CHARLES WHITE: Right, right. The difference was that in the federal government, and their mural competitions then offered, you just didn't work for $97.00 a month; they offered a specific sum of money.

BETTY L. HOAG: I remember because my mother was one of the artists who tried for that.

CHARLES WHITE: Oh, yeah?

BETTY L. HOAG: She got another post office as a result and, several, oh, I think Mr. Gilien was one of them.

CHARLES WHITE: But, Ed Millman who just died, I think it was a year, 2 years ago, who was a very influential artist, a very wonderful guy. Gee, I can't think of others who have passed on.

BETTY L. HOAG: I'm a little not able to help because of the artists in California I know who the people were working here but when I get into another territory like yours I don't even know what people to ask you about because I don't know what was happening in Chicago. Are there any things that you remember about the Project days that are interesting?

CHARLES WHITE: Well, it started off with a little bit of turmoil. One of the first Supervisors of the whole Illinois State Art Project was a woman and I can't remember her name now, and I wasn't that involved with the activities because at the time that this became a real problem with her, a question of pretty serious

disagreements with her, between her and the artists who were working on the Project at the time. This was before I went on and again as I mentioned, we had an artists union. This was the first time in the history of America that artists had unionized. So the difficulty arose out of some of her practices and administrative practices, as well as charges that there was discrimination in terms of the Negro artists because at that time, in the beginning, there was only one Negro artist on the Easel Project, and I'm not sure if there was any in Designing or what, but I know there was only one artist. And his name was Archibald Motley, Jr. Archibald Motley, Jr. was probably at one time one of the best-known Negro artists in the country. He's the brother of Willard Motley the writer who wrote…just died this past week in Mexico.

BETTY L. HOAG: Was he an old-school painter?

CHARLES WHITE: Yes, quite an academician, but a very competent painter. And he was the only one hired on the Art Project, so there were other artists in Chicago who qualified as was later proven by their being hired. So these charges resulted in a strike of the artists on the Project, and was probably made one of the first sit-down strikes. Because the artists I remember very vividly the artists sitting down in the headquarters of the Art Project, and the police coming and trying to move them, and so forth. So it started out with little problems. And then they got a Supervisor. She was later transferred or fired, I don't remember what. But they got a Supervisor who was a very wonderful human being, by the name of Richard—. The first name may not be right, but the last name was Thorpe.

BETTY L. HOAG: Thorpe?

CHARLES WHITE: Thorpe. And he was a very warm, sensitive human being who had a lot of administrative abilities, an education, and was a very competent person as well as being a very warm sensitive human being. And then the Project began to move. Negro artists were hired. Whether it was due to this woman's policies or not, I'm not really in a position to say. But, and interestingly enough, our Project worked very—had a certain camaraderie between Artists' Union and the Project because most of the artists on the Project were members of the Union. So that, for instance, in the selection of painters to be hired by the Project, the Artists' Union had representatives on the committee that selected the artist. At one point I served on this committee.

BETTY L. HOAG: Now was this Artists' Union local or national in scope?

CHARLES WHITE: It became national in scope. I don't know if it started in Chicago, I'm not quite sure. I think it was affiliated with the United Office and Professional Worker Union, the CIO, I'm pretty sure it was. Then New York had one.

BETTY L. HOAG: They had an Artists Equity too.

CHARLES WHITE: No, that was later; Artists Equity was later. They had an Artists' Union too. Artists Equity evolved around 1950; I was in on the initial formation of that.

BETTY L. HOAG: Well, Mr. White, before we finish the tape I would like to ask you one question I ask everyone—and I think you've really already answered it. Do you think in the long run, the Project was something worthwhile for American art? We know it helped people eat, and all the rest of that. But as far as the all-over, historical picture developing as art, do you think it did a lot of good or not?

CHARLES WHITE: I think it was of major importance in the history of American art. I think many artists today would not, may not, it's very possible they would not have been, if they had achieved a professional status in art it would have been much more difficult. For instance, for a painter of my age at that time, this was the, it served as a springboard for me to continue, for I've worked as a professional artist ever since that time – 25 years.

BETTY L. HOAG: You might have been delayed another 10 years or something?

CHARLES WHITE: Right. And I'm one of the advocates for government subsidy of the arts. I think we're probably the only country in the world where there isn't some form of subsidy for the arts. I know every country where I've been in and we've been in about 15 countries, I've always seen them experience some form of government subsidy. And I've never seen any great problems as a result of it.

BETTY L. HOAG: I think it's going to be very interesting to see what happens when, if President Johnson gets around to doing something about it, he said he was going to—

CHARLES WHITE: Well, I think artists, you see—The thing that was interesting to me, see artists previously and after the Project; prior to and after, had always had to depend on private patronage for their income. Well, this is an extremely difficult restricting kind of thing. It had both its good points and its bad points, like any other [inaudible] but private patronage almost makes the artist completely dependent on the taste. He doesn't always shape the taste of his patrons. The patron sometimes exerts a kind of influence through his financial power; and

the artist needing a part of this sometimes has a negative effect on him.

BETTY L. HOAG: Of course that brings up the thing that people ask me quite often: in talking about this thing, I mean, not the artist but other people—what about if the government does help again, doesn't the government influence the work of the artist, politically?

CHARLES WHITE: I know. This is interesting, but my experience under the WPA, the government didn't seem to me to have any influence at all. In fact, it was more often, say for instance, in the history of the post office mural, it was more often the community itself that raised the question of the validity of the subject of the style of art that the artist, was painting in and what was going in their post office, or their library, or whatever public building it was. The government generally was very free in their acceptance of what sometimes were very radical styles, ways of working by artists who were executing the murals, and particularly subject matter.

BETTY L. HOAG: Of course I think that's great. That's on a local level where it should be. For a local building.

CHARLES WHITE: I never was told, was imposed on me any subject; I could do anything, anything I wanted to do, and easel painting I did. If there was a criticism, it came from the artists themselves. Because the artists were the ones who sat on the jury of acceptance for the work that was being brought in. You see, there wasn't ever any top official that passed judgment. The artists themselves did and we had a rotating committee.

BETTY L. HOAG: Oh really? I didn't know that.

CHARLES WHITE: The people who served on the jury, they called it a jury, were generally rotated around and no one group of people served constantly.

BETTY L. HOAG: Well that's wonderful. Then you spoke of today, having it hard to have private patronage that brings up the point you made earlier about doing murals, that today there aren't any people who want them.

CHARLES WHITE: Well, today you have to have—if the architect wants to include it, fine; if he doesn't want to include it, you don't get it, you don't get a commission to do it.

BETTY L. HOAG: Well my husband is an architect so I know that side of it too, and hear often who allows money for that.

CHARLES WHITE: The money is allowed for everything else but the mural or the sculpture that's going in the building.

BETTY L. HOAG: We're supposed to have 2 percent of Federal Buildings now that allow for that, but I don't think it's ever used. I think that's what the law says.

CHARLES WHITE: I think the artist needs something added, something. I don't think the artist should depend solely on being a government employee, as an artist. I think he needs private patronage. I think it's a healthy thing to encourage people to support the art through their own private means, but I think to pit one against the other, I think, is wrong. To say you should not have this government patronage is wrong, or that private patronage is the most beneficial thing to the growth and development of art in America is wrong too. I think they should both be coordinated and the artists should have the patronage of both. I think because it limits, you see. My main point is it limits the audience and limits the output of art. I think art should be owned by the people, by everybody; I think it should be part and parcel of the ownership of the buildings of the citizens.

BETTY L. HOAG: That brings up one other point too, then we must stop this because I know your family's waiting, but so many of the things the public did acquire at that time have completely disappeared you know and I find them in all kinds of funny places, public buildings and it's a shame.

CHARLES WHITE: The one where the mural was destroyed? Which was a very tragic thing, but I think there eventually will be some kind of support. The main thing, the healthy thing, today is that there is now a growth of art. People are becoming aware of its importance in their lives. The artist has achieved a kind of dignity he never had before.

BETTY L. HOAG: Look at this street on Monday nights Mr. White, I've enjoyed this interview so much and I thank you.

CHARLES WHITE: Well, it's been my pleasure; I've certainly enjoyed it.

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