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Oral history interview with John Spencer,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with John Spencer on September 1, 1994. The interview took place in Spencer's home in Pasadena, California, and was conducted by Paul Karlstrom for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

PAUL KARLSTROM: The Smithsonian Institution, an interview with John Spencer, on September 1, 1994 at the subject's home in Pasadena [California]. The interviewer is Paul Karlstrom and the subject, or the main subject, is the—Dean Cornwell, with whom John Spencer worked on the Los Angeles Public Library murals back in the late '20s and early '30s. But as we talk about that, we'll also get into a little more—uh, some stories about Mr. Spencer's experiences and his ongoing relationship with Dean Cornwell. Anyway, John, it seems to me there are three topics that we might try to cover briefly in the time we have this morning: the public library murals, of course, but then your old role assisting Cornwell with the murals and your relationship with him that developed, and maybe something about him from your experience. But then, finally, your own experience—not just that incident, that particular phase, but your own background, something about you as well. And maybe we should start that way. We'll let the last be first and start with you, um, your own background, who you are. Where were you born? Where did you grow up?

JOHN SPENCER: I was born in Oakland, California but my parents came down here when I was two years old. So I'm, to all intents and purposes, a Los Angeles resident. And it was in Los Angeles that I first met Dean Cornwell. [00:02:03] I'd read in the newspapers that he had come to town to finish the Central Library murals and I called the [*Los Angeles Times*—I called around and I think the *Times*, perhaps the *Times* or the library, told me where his residence was. He had a studio apartment in Hollywood. So I took a role of life drawings with me and went out and sat on his doorstep and didn't have to wait long. He came home at, I guess, lunchtime to get his mail and took me into his studio that was filled with all, you know, working drawings and the material for the murals and a lot of his illustrations.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What year was this?

JOHN SPENCER: That was in 1931, June of '31.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Thirty-one.

JOHN SPENCER: And um, so we talked a little and he took my phone number and said he'd call me if he needed any help. And he did call a week later and told me to come to work as a gofer. We didn't have that term in those days, but I mean, if a mechanic has a grease monkey for a helper, I was his paint monkey. But uh—so my job was to clean his palette at night, set out his palette in the morning, and clean the palette at night, and in the meantime, do anything that he wanted me to do. Mostly, raising the counterweighted frames on which the murals were stretched, and either raise them up and down through a slot in the floor, so that he can paint and then he'd spot on the mural he wanted to without having to climb a ladder.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Why don't we save that? And that is very interesting, and it's the main topic that we're going to focus in on. But if we could hold that for a moment, these details of your involvement. I'd be curious to know a little bit more about you before you came to that point—in other words, what your training was, what your education, and what your own goals were, because I do know that eventually you ended up taking some art classes. [00:04:19] And how did that come about?

JOHN SPENCER: Well, in 1931, of course it was the depth of the Depression and I was out of high school. I'd at least finished high school.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And what—where did you go to high school?

JOHN SPENCER: I went to high school at Saint Agnes Parochial School in Los Angeles.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Where was that?

JOHN SPENCER: Adams and Vermont. West Adams, Vermont, one of the few.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So downtown, really.

JOHN SPENCER: Well, it is now, I guess.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, now it seems.

JOHN SPENCER: Yes, right. West Adams and Vermont. And had a good basic education there, but no art training really.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No art training was available—

JOHN SPENCER: No, no. In fact, while I was going to high school, the last couple of years I was attending night classes for life drawing at what was then Polytechnic High School. It's now Los Angeles Trade-Tech. And uh, so I—we just were too poor and jobs were too scarce in those days to really think of going to an art institute.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But would you have wanted to do that?

JOHN SPENCER: Oh, yes, very much so.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You really did dream about a career as an artist at that point.

JOHN SPENCER: Oh, sure. I was going to be another, either Dean Cornwell, Norman Rockwell, or J.C. Leyendecker. So anyway, he called me a week later and offered me \$18 a week, and uh, which was pretty good money in those days. And then I just proceeded to do whatever was needed in a rough-and-ready way. [00:06:00] He had—at that time, he had two number-one assistants. One of them worked with him in the daytime on the canvases, and the second assistant worked at night projecting the cartoons onto the cameras in charcoal and spraying them with fixative.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you remember who that was? Was this somebody you knew?

JOHN SPENCER: Oh, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean, was this a friend of yours?

JOHN SPENCER: Oh, no. I met them on the job. His number-one assistant was Joseph Nussdorf, Joe Nussdorf, whom he took with him to England.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Can you spell that, just for the—

JOHN SPENCER: N-U-S-S-D-O-R-F.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, thank you.

JOHN SPENCER: And the man who worked at night projecting them was Ivan Stoppe, S-T-O-P-P-E. He had a beautiful last name. His real name was Sergeev [ph], Ivan Sergeev [ph], but there was such an anti-red feeling in those days that he changed it to his mother's name. Then, not too long after I was there, Joe Nussdorf wanted to get married so he went back to New York to pursue a career in illustration. And Ivan, then having finished the projection of the cartoons, worked the day shift, as it were. We didn't have any shifts. We just worked from early in the morning until the light failed.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So there's one and two, first and second assistants. And how did you kind of fall into this—so you were—started working for them, then.

JOHN SPENCER: Oh, or anybody. Sure. I mean, I was just a gofer, you know?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now how old were you then?

JOHN SPENCER: I was 19.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You must have been pretty excited about—

JOHN SPENCER: Oh, boy, I'll tell you. I—

PAUL KARLSTROM: —this opportunity. I mean, here you aspired to, you know, a career as an illustrator. This was no doubt somebody you knew about, one of your—

JOHN SPENCER: Heroes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Heroes? [00:08:06]

JOHN SPENCER: Right. Oh, yes. And so when he told me to come over to the scenic studio, a large scenic studio, and I walked in there and I—I near passed out. Here were all these enormous full-color paintings, you know, and all the paraphernalia around. It was pretty exciting, as you say. So that continued, then, for—until March of 1933 when he finished the job and went back to New York to resume his illustration career. And when he left, he—there—a little group of us went down to see him off at the station. Last thing he said was, "Send me some comps"—meaning composition sketches—"and I'll give you correspondence cards." And he did just that. Then, of course, I'm jumping ahead now to the completion of the murals. We accumulated this correspondence where he would—I would send him these composition sketches, about 8.5 by 11 typing pages, mostly. He would criticize them with long letters, you know, two, three, four pages of criticism, and mail them back to me.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Those are the letters, or some of them, that you—

JOHN SPENCER: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —put into the archives.

JOHN SPENCER: That's right. And then at one point, he fi—he got the idea that these would make a marvelous basis for a book on composition for illustration. So he asked me to send the whole bit back, the composition sketches that he'd corrected, and the manuscripts. And he did use them in lectures at the Art Students League, but the book project never materialized.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Then he must have returned these letters.

JOHN SPENCER: No. [00:10:00] No, that was the end of that. I never did get a whole fistful of them back because he was still thinking he'd accumulate enough and then publish his book. It was a terrific idea.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So your correspondence, really, is subsequent to that.

JOHN SPENCER: Right, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That which is in the archives.

JOHN SPENCER: Yes, the things you have in the archives don't really refer in too many cases to the actual compositions. And they refer to general problems of illustration, but—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, getting back to—I'm not going to let you entirely off the hook in terms of your own career before I get focusing on the library murals themselves and some of the details. Why don't you just quickly describe what happened to you? I mean, you've mentioned how you met Cornwell—

JOHN SPENCER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: —sought him out, how you were involved in the murals. What—you must have been inspired to hope to pursue his kind of career.

JOHN SPENCER: That's right. Yes, illustration.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so what—how did that play out for you? I mean, what happened? [They laugh.]

JOHN SPENCER: Well, I tried to get a job. It took me quite a while to get a job. About a year, as a matter of fact, after he left to get—I mean, to get a job in the graphics field or the commercial art field. I finally did get a job at a box company, Standard Paper Box, and making mo—working drawings, black and white working drawings, and lettering, and all that sort of thing, for the plates to print the boxes. And then after that, it was just a series of jobs with the art studios and the small agencies and that sort of thing. [00:12:02] And uh, no, the illustration bit sort of petered out. Things—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you hold the hope, though, even as you got this job, the working with a box company?

JOHN SPENCER: Uh-huh [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: But did you see this as just keeping, you know—

JOHN SPENCER: Oh, yes. Sure.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —body and soul but you'd tell you could—did you still want to go and get additional training in art school?

JOHN SPENCER: Yes, I did. Thngs were still—there was still—the economy was coming out of the Depression, like

in 1934 or '35 but things were still expensive, so I went to night classes, free night classes. And one marvelous group of artists, and uh—that had a studio downtown on Spring Street where we just had models and shared the cost, and so on. And then—

PAUL KARLSTROM: That—now that wasn't at Chouinard already.

JOHN SPENCER: No, no. That was before then, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That was later. This was before Chouinard. Well, tell me about that. I'm interested in—in how you were able to keep your hand in—

JOHN SPENCER: Oh, yes. Well—

PAUL KARLSTROM: —and associate with artists and so forth.

JOHN SPENCER: Yes. Well, just going to this free class, which was just a group of artists, fine artists, more or less, all of whom had jobs in the daytime but we painted at night and on weekends. And uh, so—oh along about 1939 or '40 I decided to go to Chouinard to—I wanted to get in Pruett Carter's illustration class and I did eventually, but first I had to study with Jepson and that was the best training I ever had.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now, tell me about working—

JOHN SPENCER: Herbert Jepson.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —with Jepson. Did he really involve himself with the students—

JOHN SPENCER: Oh, absolutely.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —and give criticism and encouragement?

JOHN SPENCER: Oh, every—he, every night—see, we worked Monday and Tuesday night from seven to 10 and he also taught it all day Tuesday—Monday and Tuesday. [00:14:03] Then he had the rest of the week off. He managed to get to every student in the class every night. Very conscientious. And it was a large class. I'll bet there were 35 people in that class.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Wow.

JOHN SPENCER: Thirty anyway, with our easels all over the place. He was very conscientious and a marvelous, marvelous draftsman. And he was a lot of fun, too. He had a sense of humor. But he—

PAUL KARLSTROM: So he socialized a bit with the—the students? I mean, it wasn't too formal.

JOHN SPENCER: Oh, nothing formal. And during the breaks, the model breaks, we'd have coffee and he'd yak. I mean, people would cluster around him and—and chat and—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you remember what he talked about at all?

JOHN SPENCER: Well—

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean, did he talk about art and different kinds of art, or was it more—

JOHN SPENCER: He re—no he referred—

PAUL KARLSTROM: —gossip?

JOHN SPENCER: Oh, not gossip. He referred to—he knew his art. He referred to art. I don't think he was personally interested in painting. Drawing was his strong suit, and actually he told me one time he wanted to write. And whether he did or not, I don't know. Your archives would show that. And he—oh, he was rather humorous. He'd tell about—he was a big guy. Kind of languid but a big, white-haired fellow and he said he tried to box one time but people—people kept punching him in the nose and [laughs] he—

PAUL KARLSTROM: He didn't like that.

JOHN SPENCER: No. He couldn't get—couldn't bear that. And that sort of thing. He—I don't know, you just—his presence was there all the time but not dominant, you know. He didn't have an ego or anything like that, no. He was as much interested in the students as we were in him, you know. I mean, their outside work as he was in their work in the class. And he'd be frank, you know. When I first started there, I had been I the habit of making big slashes with charcoals, the side of charcoal, you know, and meaningless things but sort of establishing the

thing and he'd say, "Now," he says, "that's not a drawing. [00:16:07] That's just a map. That's just a place where the drawings are going to go." Well, by the time I was through, he thought I was doing pretty good drawings. Linear drawings. I mean, he—like Hulbinder [ph] or somebody like that—drawings and then show the form. Caress the form with stroke, you know, to show which way everything goes and—

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you would identify him with a strong drawing tradition in southern California, in terms of what the schools were offering.

JOHN SPENCER: Oh, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: He was really that associate—

JOHN SPENCER: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Jepson was associated with that tradition, with the linear, with—

JOHN SPENCER: Absolutely, yes. I'd say harked back to the Renaissance sort of thing.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Who were some of the other people that you would associate with—

JOHN SPENCER: There, well—

PAUL KARLSTROM: —who you would run into or knew about?

JOHN SPENCER: In the school—well there was Pruett Carter, the illustrator, and then I had summer classes with Carl Beetz, B-E-E-T-Z, I think it was. He was an Ashcan School kind of artist.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But he was more a painter, though, right?

JOHN SPENCER: Well, I just knew his draftsmanship.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I see.

JOHN SPENCER: He drew baseball players. He was—I think he was an ex-baseball player himself because he limped. I think he got hurt. And anyway, he was a kind of rough-and-ready character but a good draftsman. And well, and then the other people there, anybody that made fame and fortune? There were several people from Pruett Carter's class who preceded me I never met, but they made it fairly big in the East.

PAUL KARLSTROM: In the—

JOHN SPENCER: Illustration.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —commercial art and illustration—

JOHN SPENCER: Illustration, magazine illustration. But I—oh, well I occasionally would see McFee, Henry Lee McFee.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, yes.

JOHN SPENCER: He's a mo—

PAUL KARLSTROM: And did he—did he teach there?

JOHN SPENCER: Yes, he taught there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes. [00:18:00] Did you ever take a class?

JOHN SPENCER: No. It was daytime, I think. And Francis Murphy taught composition. And he wasn't a famous name, but he was a marvelous character. And gee, I don't know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was Rico Lebrun around yet? Was that a name that—

JOHN SPENCER: Yes. He was in town. He was—yes and he—oh and in fact, during the war, before the war ended, Herbert Jepson and perhaps somebody else started his own school to go cash in on the—I shouldn't say cash in. That cheapens it. But to get the influx of G.I.s—

PAUL KARLSTROM: G.I. Bill.

JOHN SPENCER: —on the G.I. Bill and Lebrun was on his staff then, one of the teachers.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But that was, of course, after your association with—

JOHN SPENCER: That's right. Uh-huh. Jepson at Chouinard.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you know at that time—or did you know about anything about Stanton Macdonald-Wright? Was that a name—

JOHN SPENCER: Oh, yes. Yes, in fact I was invited to—by a Chinese artist who was in Stanton Macdonald's class—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Does he—

JOHN SPENCER: I mean Stanton Macdonald-Wright. He had a class down on Spring Street near the other studio where I attended. Spring Street was kind of a raunchy Bohemian place in those days.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is that right?

JOHN SPENCER: Uh-huh [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: In the late '30s, early '40s.

JOHN SPENCER: In late '20s, early '30s. Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, back then.

JOHN SPENCER: Uh-huh [affirmative]. And but some of the people in the class had advised me not to go, and in fact, they were so Bohemian and I was such an innocent naïve character. You know, they were pretty wild.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It sounds tempting. How could you resist? I mean, that sounds like fun.

JOHN SPENCER: Well, I was—I know but I was—my bashfulness blinded me to the opportunities. [They laugh.] And I have a funny thing to tell about Macdonald-Wright but it's diverging. A friend—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well then, go ahead.

JOHN SPENCER: Well, a friend of our—of the family was a professor at UCLA, Dr. Rudolph—uh, I mean Dr. Richard Rudolph. [00:20:07] And he was a pal of Stanton Macdonald-Wright because they both were interested in things Oriental, things Chinese.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, yeah.

JOHN SPENCER: Dr. Rudolph was a teacher of Sinology, anything Chinese. And they once attended a class by somebody who was supposed to be an authority on the subject, and the two of them were sitting in the audience, a small audience, up front. And during a pause in the lecture, Stanton Macdonald-Wright turned to Dr. Rudolph and said in a loud stage whisper, "Did you ever hear of such"—I can't remember exactly the word. He said such, you know, hogwash or something like.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Probably stronger than that, I think.

JOHN SPENCER: So everybody—yeah, oh it was. I can't think of the name. And even the lecturer heard it and Dr. Rudolph said he just looked down and hoped there was a trapdoor in the floor where he could fall through [laughs].

PAUL KARLSTROM: So Macdonald-Wright, when would that have been?

JOHN SPENCER: That lecture?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes.

JOHN SPENCER: Oh that, I don't know. That could have been in the uh very late '30s or '40s.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, well before Macdonald because Macdonald, right across, ended up teaching at UCLA but that was quite a bit later.

JOHN SPENCER: Well then that's probably when they two met because Dr. Rudolph was teaching at UCLA. So that was probably it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So how did you hear about that? Was this—

JOHN SPENCER: Oh, this Chinese artist would come up to this free class at Polytechnic High School that I was attending and I'd talk about him. He was kind of wild. And anyway, I didn't join. I joined the other class. It was—

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you avoided the—

JOHN SPENCER: Bohemian life.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —the Bohemian life down on Spring Street.

JOHN SPENCER: Uh-huh [affirmative]. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: And I really don't know about this. Was there an artist community then down at that time, down there, with some studios?

JOHN SPENCER: Uh, there were studios in the building. [00:22:00] This class that I did attend was at—the studio in which our classes were held—was on the top floor, like the fourth floor of the old Lyceum building which had been the opera house many years ago. And it was then a crummy, rat-infested building with a cheap movie theater that showed cheap Westerns.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really? So that was Spring and what? I'm trying to—

JOHN SPENCER: So I think Second and Spring.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really?

JOHN SPENCER: Uh-huh [affirmative]. And it was demolished during the war. But—but that studio was just like a setting for *La bohème*.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes.

JOHN SPENCER: It had a marvelous north light, you know, that went up at an angle. Then there was a potbelly stove in one corner there, a piano in the other. They had cold running water, no hot water. And two of the guys who had jobs in the daytime lived there. They had little alcoves on the street side for their bedrooms. And uh—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now, this is where you attended the life drawing sessions. Is this—

JOHN SPENCER: Well, after I had left—after I had left the Polytechnic High School, after I got a job, then I went down to Spring Street, well, three nights a week and Saturdays and Sundays. And uh—

PAUL KARLSTROM: And how many did you say would often be there—?

JOHN SPENCER: Oh not—we don't want to confuse it with Jepson's class.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, no. No.

JOHN SPENCER: Oh. I'd say if we were lucky, we might have eight people—lucky in the sense that it was spreading the cost of the model around. But I'd say about six regulars, six, seven regulars.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So how—what was the bill? How much did the model get for—

JOHN SPENCER: Well, they were the first—we were the first ones, I think, to pay models a dollar an hour. Can you believe it? So, you know, 25 cents, 10 cents, whatever. It depended—

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you were able to get the best models.

JOHN SPENCER: Yes, we did. We got the same ones that posed at Otis, particularly Otis. [00:24:01] And oh, and then we would—we, I say. They were there—the older fellows kind of ran the show. They would—on Saturday or Sunday we'd call, go down on the street, and get a shoeshine boy to come up and pose. You know? I have things to show you. The weight of the cameras, but on the other side is a quick, quick sketch of a shoeshine boy that they found on Spring Street and talked him into coming up and posing.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so this is from one of your sessions.

JOHN SPENCER: Right, uh-huh [affirmative]. And of course it'd be quick, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes. What year was this done in?

JOHN SPENCER: That would be about 1935.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. That's great that you still have it.

JOHN SPENCER: But it's the canvas, the linen canvas that—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, it's really heavy.

JOHN SPENCER: —that shows you. That's why I have it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, this is really interesting. So you were on, in a sense, on the fringes of this art community here which included—I don't know. Certainly Stanton Macdonald-Wright and some of those other figures who are now, of course, very famous. I guess, well, they were famous then as a matter of fact.

JOHN SPENCER: Macdonald-Wright was, yes. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about—I don't want to digress too much, but you were hanging out with some of these people. There must have been some talk about—you say they were fine artists, some of them, and that they would—must have engaged in conversations about the new art, Modernism—

JOHN SPENCER: Well—

PAUL KARLSTROM: —abstraction, perhaps, but the European Surrealism and so forth.

JOHN SPENCER: No—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you remember any—

JOHN SPENCER: No, I don't think they did, or we did, because we were all pretty straight. You know, we wanted to paint academically, the old academic school, like this if that had got—you know, it turned out right. You know, the Sergeant Duveneck kind of thing. So no, I don't think we were—

PAUL KARLSTROM: But were you aware—I guess what I'm really asking, were you aware of these developments that were going on? [00:26:04] There had been, of course, earlier the Armory Show and all these—

JOHN SPENCER: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —Cubists and Futurists and Surrealists.

JOHN SPENCER: Only vaguely, I think. Just didn't grab us so we didn't bother.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Because of course, Macdonald-Wright represented the—

JOHN SPENCER: Oh, yes. Yes. What did he invent? Chromism?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Synchronism.

JOHN SPENCER: Synchronism. Uh-huh [affirmative]. He did some marvelous drawings.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Of course, he was in Paris and I just wondered if some of that, through Macdonald-Wright, or through people associated with him, some of this thinking, some of this awareness was evident in the art community. But I gather—

JOHN SPENCER: Oh, it might have been elsewhere. I imagine it is—

PAUL KARLSTROM: But not in your group.

JOHN SPENCER: —not in our group, no. We were all—we all wanted to just paint a marvelous figure or a marvelous portrait in the tried and true academic method.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What—so what—this sounds like a very auspicious beginning for you. I mean, you had this good fortune of being a gofer, as you say, for Cornwell. And we'll talk, of course, more specifically about that side of it. But despite the fact that you didn't have the means, the wherewithal, to attend art school properly—you know, you need to have a job—you did have some very interesting contacts and opportunities. And it would seem to me that this might steer you uh—well, I mean, even open up the possibility of pursuing a quotes fine arts career. You know, that certainly with the kind of, say, life drawing experience could lead to—whether it's a more academic or more progressive way. And yet at some point—and I imagine the war played some role in this. You were diverted a bit out of necessity.

JOHN SPENCER: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What happened? How did it—

JOHN SPENCER: Oh, I don't know. I guess I finally sort of gave up on illustration. [00:28:02] Uh—I did manage to get a job as a sketch artist at Paramount for about six weeks before I was fired for sheer incompetence but— [laughs].

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, come on. [They laugh.] Is that—

JOHN SPENCER: Yes. I mean, I sort of turned to that. And well, if I can't make it in New York, maybe I can be a sketch artist or an art director in the movies. Oh, I don't know. Just circumstances, you know. Just trying to make a living and—

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean, did you ever s—

JOHN SPENCER: Well I—I had a—I won't go into that but my home life was rather demanding. I wasn't married then, of course. But uh—

PAUL KARLSTROM: You were or weren't?

JOHN SPENCER: I was not.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You were not. Right. I see.

JOHN SPENCER: So—

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you had some responsibilities, I gather, that—

JOHN SPENCER: That's it. Yes, that's a way to put it. Uh-huh [affirmative]. So then I got interested in watercolor. I mean uh, inspired by the very group that you're going to talk on—on that KOCE program.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, right. Yes, the California School—

JOHN SPENCER: Yes, the California School.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Millard Sheets and company.

JOHN SPENCER: Right. Uh-huh [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you ever have any contact with Millard? Were you aware of his work?

JOHN SPENCER: Oh, very much so. All of those painters.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Some of those guys [inaudible].

JOHN SPENCER: Oh, yeah. I went to every exhibit. Phil Dike, Phil Paradise. That's a Phil Paradise silkscreen up there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, it is?

JOHN SPENCER: Uh-huh [affirmative]. And I should have mentioned before, that's an Emmy Lou Packard linoleum —

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, yeah.

JOHN SPENCER: —block print.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Hanging here right above where we're talking.

JOHN SPENCER: Right, uh-huh [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, what about those contacts, then? I mean, you say you developed an interest in watercolor and got to know at least the work of some of these people—

JOHN SPENCER: All the work and then I just went out and sketch them all. Well, in fact, I was doing watercolor sketches in the—in the Spring Street studio.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Landscapes?

JOHN SPENCER: No, no. Just the figure.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Of the figure. Sure. But did you also go out in nature?

JOHN SPENCER: Oh, yeah. I used to go out a lot on weekends and make watercolor sketches, sometimes with the—somebody from the studio, but mostly by myself. And boy, I shudder to think of the places I went all alone in those days. [00:30:03] I mean, if it were today, or even the last 20 years, I wouldn't go anywhere like that without a big group or a bodyguard.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Where did you go?

JOHN SPENCER: Oh, I'd just drive out—

PAUL KARLSTROM: I thought everything was safe in those days.

JOHN SPENCER: Well, it was. That's what I mean. It makes me think how—how naïve—well, it was safe. And that was before the war. And yes, well for instance, that was out—straight south on Main Street. You don't—

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you're pointing at, for the sake of this tape, at—Mrs. [Carolyn] Spencer just brought in a framed watercolor which I am, to understand, is yours.

JOHN SPENCER: That's mine.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And from, I don't see a date.

JOHN SPENCER: No. It was probably 19—oh gosh, I don't know. I think that was—well, it was before I went to Chouinard so it would be about 1936.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's very, very nice. Be—

[END OF TRACK AAA_spence94_7077_r.]

[UNIDENTIFIED VOICE]: Yes. Uh, so.

PAUL KARLSTROM: An interview with John Spencer. This is tape one, side B, continuing. John, we were talking about your own background and your own experience in the art world here in southern California and how at one point, you became interested in watercolor and then turned your hand to watercolor, as a matter of fact, and we were admiring one example that your wife brought out of a barn. Uh, a very, very handsome watercolor. Quite economical in means, I think. You certainly were—you could have been a terrific illustrator. But I'm wondering, this is a very rural scene and yet you say that most of your treks out—and you were describing how you went out alone—were really right in Los Angeles. Is that right?

JOHN SPENCER: Very close. I mean, in those days before of course, before the war and before the big building boom, 20 minutes or half an hour straight out, in this case, on Main Street in Los Angeles, you would hit this kind of country. A deserted barn, deserted farmhouse. I don't remember the house but it was totally deserted. And if you continued down on Main you—in about an hour's time, you'd get to the harbor. And we—down the Terminal Island was the best place, Fish Harbor. And we did some sketching there. I say we. When we had a—when I was with somebody, but as I say, the places I went when I was alone then were—they were perfectly safe but now probably they just wouldn't be safe. You wouldn't dare do that with all the crazies around, you know?

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you said earlier that even then, some of the places where you went alone were dangerous. [00:02:01]

JOHN SPENCER: Well, looking back, I thought they must have been but they weren't and I was—in those days, we just—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Didn't think of it.

JOHN SPENCER: No, we didn't. There wasn't any—there was very little crime, very little street crime or anything of that sort. And—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Unlike now, unfortunately. [Laughs.]

JOHN SPENCER: Oh, that's what I mean. Oh, I wouldn't go out without a bodyguard or a teacher and a big class.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you went down to the harbor and did watercolors there. Were you—how were you inspired to do this? I mean, who were your examples?

JOHN SPENCER: Well—

PAUL KARLSTROM: How did you know this is the—

JOHN SPENCER: The California group, you know, they had lots of exhibits then and the *Times* was their patron. Arthur Millier, the art critic at the *Times*.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sure. Did you read his columns?

JOHN SPENCER: Oh, yes. And then the exhibits by Millard Sheets, Phil Dike, Phil Paradise, Milford Zornes, all those people. And then, of course, the artist magazines like *American Artist*. They had stories on it so I thought, well I want to do that, so I did it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you envision a career for yourself then in—as—

JOHN SPENCER: I suppose.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —prior to California School—

JOHN SPENCER: Oh, I suppose so. That was my travel. I mean, not—I didn't focus on anything for very long. But anyway, I did enjoy that for a number of years. And—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you know Maury Logan?

JOHN SPENCER: Maurice Logan? Oh yes, I knew his work.

PAUL KARLSTROM: He worked in the Bay Area.

JOHN SPENCER: Oh, yes. Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Because he did a lot of harbors and boats.

JOHN SPENCER: Oh, he did marvelous things. Nice, juicy. Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But he also, of course, was an illustrator and commercial artist as well.

JOHN SPENCER: Yes, he—

PAUL KARLSTROM: He had a firm in the Bay Area.

JOHN SPENCER: Uh-huh [affirmative]. I think I knew that. Yes, he used to do a lot of things for some beer company, I think. Big 24 sheets, those nice juic—juice [laughs] —juicy landscapes and harvestings and rocks, waves breaking over rocks. [00:04:07] Yes, he was—he was very inspiring.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now, did you meet any of these people?

JOHN SPENCER: No, I—let's see. I only met Phil Paradise when we bought the print up there at Cambria, or Cambria. We asked him how you pronounce it, "Do you pronounce it Cambria or Cambria?" And he said, "Yes." [They laugh.]

PAUL KARLSTROM: He's in Santa Barbara now.

JOHN SPENCER: Is he still alive?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes.

JOHN SPENCER: Uh-huh [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: And yes, he's—he's been there for a few years. So when was it that you met him? I gather this was quite much later.

JOHN SPENCER: Much later. We were—we—when—up until a few years ago, we used to make an annual trek up to Carmel, and on the Big Sur road. And so we stopped—

PAUL KARLSTROM: So this is you and your wife.

JOHN SPENCER: Right. Uh-huh [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: And when were you married, for the record?

JOHN SPENCER: Oh—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Never late, I gather, for—

JOHN SPENCER: Sixty-one. 1961. Quite late.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes, yes .

JOHN SPENCER: But we've had 33 good years. It's not bad.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's not bad. I'm just working on—see we're not getting—my wife and I at, this year, our 30th.

JOHN SPENCER: Uh-huh [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, we're close.

JOHN SPENCER: Sure. Another 20 and you can have a big bash for your 50th.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, right.

JOHN SPENCER: So—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, so you were then, I gather, for a period of time, quite actively interested, engaged in this watercolor. Going out into nature and—

JOHN SPENCER: That's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —on the scene and working from the subject and out of doors. But I gather that that lasted just a period of time. It's not something you kept up or you did?

JOHN SPENCER: Um, I kept it up until my home situation got a little demanding. [00:06:00] And then I had to spend a lot of time on weekends at home. My mother was ill.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I see. And so you were basically taking care of her? Is that—

JOHN SPENCER: Oh, in a way. Looking in on her. But not for very long, really. And then so after that, shortly after that, we got married and I don't know why we never—Carolyn is an artist and a fashion illustrator. Now, why we didn't go out sketching—and there again, I'll—that's the story of my life. I'll do something for a couple of years and or maybe 10 years, and then suddenly just drops out, you know. I no longer have the urge to do that. I go on to something else.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How do you spell Carolyn?

JOHN SPENCER: C-A-R-O-L-Y-N.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Y-N.

JOHN SPENCER: Uh-huh [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, thank you. Well, I think I'm beginning to get the picture of how your career unfolded. Were you in the military then? Because we're now talking about—

JOHN SPENCER: Right, I was—

PAUL KARLSTROM: —close up to the outbreak.

JOHN SPENCER: Yes, right. I was drafted. Oh, let's see. Pearl Harbor was in December of '41 and I was in Jepson's class and Carter's class at the time. So shortly after December 7th came the Christmas holidays at the school. And so we all left school for the holidays and I never came back because I went in in—I was drafted and went in in May of '42.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now, is there anything from those years—well, how long were you in the service? I knew you were—

JOHN SPENCER: I was in about 16 months and then I got disabled. It was in an accident, a vehicle accident. Got a fracture through my—this part of my face, right through the eye socket which gave me a slightly dislocated eye. Until I was discharged. [00:08:00]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Where were you at—

JOHN SPENCER: At the time? I was in Camp Campbell, Tennessee. It's now Fort Campbell. We were out on maneuvers crossing the Cumberland River, which was a—I was in the armor and engineers and our job—at least the job of one of the companies in our battalion was to put out the pontoon bridge across a river, or a lake, or whatever, and then the rest of the division was—would go across on it. So we did that and we went across and got on the other side, and then our driver—we were—I was in a half-track with a driver and two or three other soldiers. And it was buttoned up, which was rather silly. It was broad daylight. There was very little visibility for the driver and the—he got the half-track caught on the berm of the road and flipped it off down the embankment, the river embankment. And I was thrown out, thank God. They weren't all thrown out. And I got these eye injuries, skull fracture, broken arm, and so on. So I was discharged.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you never went overseas after that—

JOHN SPENCER: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You were just preparing to—

JOHN SPENCER: Right. We were still training. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: And presumably, during those ye—months actually, not years—there wasn't much opportunity to—for any art activity.

JOHN SPENCER: No. There would have been the opportunity but I, I don't know. The army has somewhat of a deadening in us. [Laughs.]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay. Well so then you were discharged. You got out and recovered your health. Obviously, there must have been a bit of a recovery period of—

JOHN SPENCER: There was, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So what did you do next? Did you—you came back to—

JOHN SPENCER: I came back to Los Angeles and I was pretty demoralized then. So, uh, oh I don't know. [00:10:00] Of course, all I could think of then was sculpture. There's another thing, [laughs] see.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, really?

JOHN SPENCER: I flipped from one thing to another. All I wanted to do was spend the rest of my life quietly carving wood or stone. And of course, that didn't pan out but I did some things. And [laughs] oh, I don't know. I forgot to mention, while I was in the Army, I had a furlough that was too brief to come home so I went to New York and I did see Cornwell.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, you did. Tell me about that.

JOHN SPENCER: Yes, in August of '42. He was working on—I went to his studio. He was working on one of a series of illustrations of military activity. I think this one was either army or navy men firing big canon—that big canon. Beautiful things. They were for Body by Fisher ads. And we went to lunch and had a little visit, and that was about it. I visited one of the other assistants—well both assistants, I saw them. Joe Nussdorf and Ivan Stoppe and—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Like a reunion.

JOHN SPENCER: Yes, it was sort of a reunion. And uh, you know, went back to camp and got hurt and was discharged.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did Spencer—Spencer. [Laughs.] Did Cornwell ask you, you know, how your career was progressing, and were you continuing toward illustration?

JOHN SPENCER: I'm sure he did, yes. My morale was sort of low then and I'm afraid I didn't bounce back very—give him a very good report.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. well, I guess perhaps during the war years, there were a lot of interrupted careers.

JOHN SPENCER: Oh, I'll say there was. Interrupted lives.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um—

JOHN SPENCER: But I want to interject right here—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Please.

JOHN SPENCER: —about Cornwell, that he was—I simply can't say enough about his kindness to me all the time. You know, during the mural project and afterwards, and when I visited him, and so on and so forth. [00:12:02]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Why don't we talk now about Cornwell and about your relationship with him? Obviously you kept up some communication—

JOHN SPENCER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: —and there was that correspondence course.

JOHN SPENCER: Yes, uh-huh [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: And then additional correspondence as well. Um, you know, how would you describe it? How would you sort of summarize the nature of this uh—

JOHN SPENCER: Relationship? Well, like the mentor to a student, an ambitious student. He gave me all kinds of encouragement. Maybe a little kinder than the work I was doing warranted, but it wasn't bad really. I could show you some of it. But uh—and some advice as to, you know, to concentrate on the—learn to paint a good portrait, a good figure, a good still life, and a good landscape, and a good building, and then get them all together for your illustration. Because, as he said, the illustrator has to be many things, you know? He has to do a—a—the word escapes me. A presentable portrait figure drawing, interior, exterior, landscape, the whole bit, and get them all together. So it was regrettable that I, you know, didn't develop in a way that was warranted by all his attention.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How did your communication or contact break off?

JOHN SPENCER: Oh, I think it just petered out.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Hm.

JOHN SPENCER: You know, I just gave up on illustration and I'd write to him occasionally, but it just petered out. [00:14:03]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN SPENCER: Although I would send him, every once in a while, when something of his appeared in, you know, in the press or in the—in display, advertising, or something, I'd send him a note telling him how much I liked it, and uh—no it just sort of ground down to a halt.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did he ever express any views on the direction that art seemed to be taking, you know, in the—we're talking now even in the '40s, which of course was an interesting period. Again, some fairly radical changes going on, especially considering his very academic—well, I mean, he was an illustrator first and foremost.

JOHN SPENCER: Right, uh-huh [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: And a very—uh, we have this book here, this monograph on Dean Cornwell by Patricia Janis Broder and it describes him as the *Dean of Illustrators*, and I'm just looking through. He was extremely skillful, you know. Really quite wonderful.

JOHN SPENCER: Yes, he was.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But so he represents that particular direction.

JOHN SPENCER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: The way deploying the skills of art. But I would be curious to know if he ever made any comment at all from your—during your contact with him—about other directions in art?

JOHN SPENCER: Modern art and so on? No, he didn't except one reference to me, to my eye condition where he said, "And maybe you can become a modern artist or a Modernist." I'm sure at one point he said, "Be a cockeyed artist." No, he was strictly in the tradition and we all were. Well, after he did the library murals, he

went back to New York and did resume illustration, but I think his real love then was murals. And according to Ms. Broder, he—and she might have found that out in his other correspondence—he had hopes of immortality through the mural, his mural career, but he never used that word when we were working together at the studio. [00:16:17] He might—he jokingly referred once in a while that the history of mural painting would be from Giotto to Cornwell but that was a big joke even to him.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was this—was the L.A. Public Library project under a government arts—

JOHN SPENCER: No, that—no it wasn't. Not the WPA or anything. No, that was private.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I see.

JOHN SPENCER: Strictly private and strictly—

PAUL KARLSTROM: I guess that's a little early.

JOHN SPENCER: Establishment, yes. 1927.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, what about the fine arts projects, the whole WPA period? Was Cornwell involved?

JOHN SPENCER: No he—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was he one of the artists?

JOHN SPENCER: No, he never was. See, he was fortunate to have this project. He got it in 1927 and finished it in 1933 so he was really out of the vicissitudes of the Depression.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I see.

JOHN SPENCER: Although he lost money on it, he—the contract was for \$50,000 upon completion so he had to borrow on his life insurance, which I imagine was rather heavy, his wife and two children and himself, to finance the project.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How much was it again?

JOHN SPENCER: Fifty thousand.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Fifty thousand. That sounds like a lot.

JOHN SPENCER: In those days—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Those days.

JOHN SPENCER: —it was terrific. But out of that, he had to buy the specially woven canvases, in Bel—woven in Belgium. All the paints, all the expenses, the rent of most studios, and the rent for his wife and children in New York, and his own living expenses, and the salaries and so on.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, why don't we turn to the project—

JOHN SPENCER: All right. Uh-huh [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: —itself, you know, and—and I'll try to keep quiet, and maybe you can just describe again, as you have to me briefly, just how this unfolded, how it developed, and then perhaps some description of how they were actually done. [00:18:18]

JOHN SPENCER: There are some small gouache and charcoal sketches, preliminary sketches for the development of the murals. Well, I have a brief chronology here.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

JOHN SPENCER: In 1927, the library commission awarded Cornwell the commission. And the contract called for \$50,000 on completion, and that occurred six years later. In 192—from 1927 to 1930, Cornwell took himself and Joe Nussdorf to England where he and they worked executing panels for Brangwyn. He preferred that word, executing panels. Everything—all the other literature says he studied with Brangwyn but he didn't. He simply, like a sign painter, he took Brangwyn's cartoons and color sketches and produced the murals for him, just like an illustrator would illustrate somebody else's design. So in 1931, the two of them returned to the United States and to Los Angeles to work exclusively on the murals until they were completed. The murals were completed in March of 1933 and that was—he had five years to complete the murals but he wasn't quite finished at the end of

the five so he got an extension of time and completed them in March of '33. Then he returned to New York and carried on—to carry on his illustration career. [00:20:03] And at the same time, carried on a correspondence with me, in effect giving me a correspondence course in composition for illustration. Now, the murals are executed in oil paint on linen canvas, very heavy linen canvas, which was specially woven in Belgium. The largest panels, the four of the largest panels, were 40 feet wide by 20 feet high and they must have had a little excess on them, so I'd assume they were—canvas was 42 by 22, at least. And then there were the eight smaller panels that had to have separate canvases, and the lunettes which were overall 40 by 20, but they had the big unused space at the corners of the lunette. I don't know what happened to those pieces of canvas but I acquired a lot of scraps from the trim—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN SPENCER: —and painted on them.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Like this little—

JOHN SPENCER: Uh-huh [affirmative]. Shoeshine boy.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Shoeshine boy.

JOHN SPENCER: Uh-huh [affirmative]. Now, when the—as the mural's panels were completed, they were transported from the scenic studios, the Armstrong Scenic Studios—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Where were—where was that?

JOHN SPENCER: That was on Washington Avenue and just west of Vermont in Los Angeles. It was an enormous building, two-story building. And we worked on the second floor because the second floor had slots in the floor. I think probably four slots with two frames in each slot, and the frames then would have the canvases on them and they would be lowered through the slots so the artist could work staying on the same level without having to climb ladders to paint. [00:22:00]

PAUL KARLSTROM: They would be lowered? You say they came down from above?

JOHN SPENCER: Yes. There was an enormous work—system of cables that went up and it was counterweighted with also enormous ingots of iron and so I—

PAUL KARLSTROM: That was one of your jobs.

JOHN SPENCER: That was one of my jobs, to pull the rope that moved the canvases up and down through the slot. And of course we had the big joke there of, Up John! Up John! Like the pharmaceutical company.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Laughs.] Now, was this—you say the scenic studios. Is this where they were prepared, backgrounds for films?

JOHN SPENCER: Right, well our—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was it mainly—

JOHN SPENCER: Mostly stage scenery and—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Stage scenery.

JOHN SPENCER: —and big, enormous curtains for theaters. You know, where they'd have these enormous curtains that are probably 50 feet high that would come out, you know, and close off the screen and then open up and—and between the Movietone and the feature [laughs] and all that sort of thing. And for stage shows. And of course, during that time, there—that was the depth of the Depression. The Armstrong Studios were in receivership or shortly after and there was nothing going on of that sort there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh.

JOHN SPENCER: So he rented some panels there. At what cost, I don't know. And so we really had the whole studio to ourselves.

PAUL KARLSTROM: He was one of the few people with work.

JOHN SPENCER: Right, exactly. Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's amazing.

JOHN SPENCER: And so he was really—he knew about the WPA but he was not aware of the—that I know of, any of the projects. They were just getting going then, anyway, the WPA. But when those panels were completed, we would unloosen the panels—the canvases were laced with like, oh, a drapery cord or whatever you might call, a sash cord, to the frames. They were nailed at the top but laced on the sides and bottoms so we could tighten them up as the weather changed. [00:24:03] We'd unlace those panels and somehow or other, I wasn't responsible for getting things square and straight. They had lines on the back of the things, you know, to get the center aligned and absolute perpendicular, you know. We would take an enormous drum, a wooden drum, about 18 inches in diameter, maybe 24 inches in diameter, and nail the bottom of the—fasten the bottom of the completed panel to the drum and lower the panel and roll the drum up very carefully. Of course, before all this, making sure everything was dry, all the paint was dry.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right. [Laughs.]

JOHN SPENCER: And uh, then transporting that drum by truck down to the library itself and bringing it in to the rotunda, and then at night, hoisting it to the top right under the windows. I'm thinking of one of the large main panels, not the lunette. And affixing them to a board, a piece of wood, perhaps four inches wide by one inch thick, that had been affixed to the concrete wall, poured concrete wall. Very, very carefully. And then unrolling it from the top very carefully as some workmen plastered a thick paste of white lead to in effect paste the canvas onto the wall and they do that very, very carefully, very slowly, and then with rollers, rolling it down to squeegee it onto the—

PAUL KARLSTROM: How thick was the paste?

JOHN SPENCER: Oh—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Or was it layered—

JOHN SPENCER: Oh, thick—I think it probably would be, if not a half-inch, a good three-eighths, I would say. [00:26:09] Yeah. About three-eighths.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Essentially filling in, then out to the width of the wood that the canvasses were attached to? Is that right?

JOHN SPENCER: Yes, right. Coming down from that—starting at that wood panel and then slathering it on with a trowel. I didn't do it. I was there but I didn't have that responsible a job. As we carefully lowered the thing, and watching all the time for any pinholes that might be in the canvas that the white lead would squeeze through, and occasionally it did. But before we—before the panel left the scenic studio, we would check it out at night with a—turn all the lights off and then have somebody go on one side of it with a flashlight, and the other guy on the other side. And then they'd say, you know, if there was a hole, hold it, and then sealing it, I guess, with tape or something.

PAUL KARLSTROM: From—from the rear.

JOHN SPENCER: Yes, from the rear. Uh-huh [affirmative]. And, let's see. So we've got the—we've unrolled a canvas, a large panel. And squeegee it down, and then left the scaffolding up so that Mr. Cornwell could adjust any part of the thing that seemed to be too hot, he might say, and he was out of key. He would glaze it with a very thin wash of pale blue paint, glazing over. And that's the way it proceeded all the way through. And I have no memory of how they got those lunettes in place because that would have been entirely different. You'd have to start at the bottom, because that's the only square—or straight line you'd have, and go on up to those corners. Then, you know, there'd be—they had lines on the back of the thing, I know. [00:28:01] But I don't remember being involved in any of those lunettes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you say that—that Cornwell did most of the painting himself or did he have assistants, say, blocking in, laying in—

JOHN SPENCER: Well, yes. After we talked last week, I got to thinking that's what they did. They would scumble in a thin wash of flesh color, or blue, or red, or gold, or whatever it was. And Cornwell would come in and put the—finish painting. I would say that he painted at least—personally covered at least 90 percent of all those canvasses.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now, who were his painting assistants?

JOHN SPENCER: Well, those men I mentioned.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay. Number one and number two.

JOHN SPENCER: Yes. Number one was Joe Nussdorf. Now, he would be assigned things like, uh—oh for instance,

shields and flags, and the ecclesiastical robes on the padres, and stuff, to do those designs, paint those. Joe was good enough to be trusted with that. And probably Cornwell wouldn't even bother going back over those. Maybe a little adjustment. And, uh, and things like that the assistants did. Now, I don't think the assistants—he—I'm sure he finished every head and hand.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. The focal points.

JOHN SPENCER: And uh, yes. Right. Uh-huh [affirmative]. I know he did 90 percent of the—yes, so it was over five years' work. I mean, with 300—with all those 12 panels plus four lunettes with over 300 figures in there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Wow, isn't that something?

JOHN SPENCER: And he—and Cornwell was practically a workaholic. You know, he had no—he didn't have any hobbies at the time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So he just worked all the time on this.

JOHN SPENCER: Yes, worked all the time. His family was back in New York. And, uh, so we'd work until the light gave out and then maybe occasionally I'd go to dinner with him. [00:30:04] He'd take us to dinner and then we had a lot of chats then. And then if he went to the studio, take care of his studio apartment, take care of his correspondence and his bills. And every once in a while, he'd say, "Well I'm going to go home and bone up on my Bridgman. You know, check up on the Bridgman's anatomy and things like that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So he was very focused—

JOHN SPENCER: Oh, totally. Just a workaholic. He always was. Seven days a week.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well let me—I see that we're coming to the end of this tape. Is there anything in terms of, you know, the technical, the production—

JOHN SPENCER: Yes. I'd like to mention that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And if we run out of tape, we'll—we can just start a new one but—

JOHN SPENCER: Well, I've gone to unrolling the canvases now. The canvases were, well, I mean they were all painted in oil on linen canvas. They—he had large tubes of the basic colors like the basic palette, what might be called the pastel colored—

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PAUL KARLSTROM: American Art Smithsonian Institution, continuing an interview with John Spencer at his home in Pasadena. September 1, 1994. The interviewer is Paul Karlstrom. This is tape two, side A. And John, you were—we were talking about the production and that installation of the famous public library murals.

JOHN SPENCER: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: We'll get some more on that.

JOHN SPENCER: Well, a few words about the—the materials that were used. The murals are all painted on—in oil paint on linen canvas specially woven in Belgium, and they're affixed to the walls of the library rotunda with a thick paste of white lead and linseed oil. Now Cornwell's palette, when he was working on the, uh, panels in the studio, was composed primarily of large tubes of basic colors prepared per Dean Cornwell's swatches, by the Weber Paint Company in, I think, Pittsburgh, maybe Philadelphia. But anyway, in I'm pretty sure Pittsburgh. And that was his basic palette, but on his palette he also had the normal high value colors, I mean, in normal saturation colors because he had to adjust things as he went along. The colors were mixed with linseed and turpentine, half and half. That was the basic solvent, if that's the word. And that was about it, as far as materials go.

PAUL KARLSTROM: All of these materials had to be acquired from elsewhere. I mean, they were not available locally or—

JOHN SPENCER: No. And all had to be paid for out of Cornwell's pocket until he was paid at the end of the project. [00:02:06]

PAUL KARLSTROM: He wasn't paid until the—

JOHN SPENCER: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —project was over? There wasn't an advance?

JOHN SPENCER: No. There might have been but I never heard him refer to it. He frequently referred to having to borrow on his life insurance—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, man.

JOHN SPENCER: —to—to pay for all this. That included the—I presume when they went back and forth, went from New York to England and back again, for the two of them, he had to pay that out of his pocket on a ship. They didn't have—well they had planes then but Cornwell was spooked about planes, with good reason. So that's about the—just straightforward material. There were no tricky techniques, no tricky mediums. Just straight, permanent pigments, linseed oil, and gum turpentine, probably rectified turpentine. I mean, the real stuff from pine trees, not from—from petroleum.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes, synthetics.

JOHN SPENCER: Uh-huh [affirmative]. And that's about all on the materials.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about um—I wanted to ask you about the reception of the mural.

JOHN SPENCER: Oh, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean, this is a big project.

JOHN SPENCER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: I think a great deal was expected. It was a very prominent location and probably one of the—the major mural of cycle in Los Angeles at the time.

JOHN SPENCER: Biggest one.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Biggest one.

JOHN SPENCER: In fact, it was the biggest project in the whole country at the time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really?

JOHN SPENCER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: So obviously, along the way there must have been a tension with being paid and great expectations, what an opportunity. So when it was unveiled, was—was there a—tell me, was there a ceremony, an unveiling? Some—

JOHN SPENCER: I don't remember a big ceremony. I missed out on some of those high fashion things but I don't even recall. [00:04:00] You see, the—the murals were sort of unveiled as he went along. I mean, toward about the last year, you know, as he finished the panels and needed space on the frames for the next panels—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh.

JOHN SPENCER: —we installed them in the library so people saw them. There probably was some sort of a formal reception for them.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Dedication or something like that.

JOHN SPENCER: Yes. I think there must have been.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you didn't attend that? You didn't—

JOHN SPENCER: No, no, no.

PAUL KARLSTROM: All right.

JOHN SPENCER: Well, the reception, since the murals were—the commission was awarded in 1927 during the height of prosperity as we knew it then, before the stock market crash of '29. Nobody except very few thoughtful people, artists and critics, were aware of communism or the Mexican revolutionary muralists or any of that sort of thing. By the time they were completed in '33, there were millions of people out of work thinking rather harsh thoughts about capitalism and harboring tentative thoughts about communism, or at least socialism. And uh, they already had—the artist had a taste of the Mexican muralists and—and some of the WPA artists who painted

some rather realistic, in the sense of not pretty or romantic things, paintings. So the reception was very poor. Arthur Millier, the [*Los Angeles Times*] critic, panned them.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh.

JOHN SPENCER: And uh, then Craven, do you know the artist?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN SPENCER: Thomas Craven, the art critic, he just mercilessly panned them. Called them slick magazine paintings and, you know. In fact, he's quoted in the book here. [00:06:00] And people I knew belittled him. I mean, my contemporaries. I could see that, just the sheer magnitude, the physical magnitude of the job got my respect, if nothing else. But other people would say, a typical quote, "It's not even good Brangwyn!" Gosh, they expected good Brangwyn. He was known to be a Brangwyn disciple, more or less, and so it—so no, I didn't hear of very many—

PAUL KARLSTROM: That must have been pretty disappointing for—

JOHN SPENCER: Oh, it was. Oh, yes. He was—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did he ever say anything about—

JOHN SPENCER: Oh, yes he did. I think in one place in there, in the letters or somewhere, he said—that's when he was in Italy with Peter Helck, the illustrator. He sent a postcard back with a postcard showing Giotto's mural or murals. And he said, Somebody—"I wonder what Arthur Millier would think of these." And he says, "All kidding aside, these are beautiful, joyous color," and so on. Yes, he—it was rough on him but he took it in his stride.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you think that if he had been less focused on his work as an illustrator, a book illustrator, magazine illustrator, that he might have come up with a different solution to this problem or to—you know, to the project, perhaps incorporating some of the new styles that were being looked at?

JOHN SPENCER: I—

PAUL KARLSTROM: A little more sensitive to the times, or what?

JOHN SPENCER: I think he might have but he'd had been a product of an entirely different environment.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

JOHN SPENCER: I mean, he was in the pile, Harvey Dunn, Nancy Wyeth tradition and he worked for the magazines, which were totally romantic and unrealistic. And he'd never been subjected to this. None of us had, you know, until the Depression came along to questioning the establishment.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well of course, he was hired on the basis, no doubt, of a proposal and—

JOHN SPENCER: [00:08:02] Right. Uh-huh [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: —certain sketches and—

JOHN SPENCER: Yes. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: —and so, you know, the patrons obviously—

JOHN SPENCER: That's it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How—do you know about that, how the choice was made? How was he chosen?

JOHN SPENCER: Well, the library commission announced a contest and Cornwell was—submitted three designs, different—different motifs, I suppose. Probably all basically romantic, but three different approaches, none of which I'm sure were uh, anything but establishment, romantic style. Then they chose him and I think they had an exhibit of the—of the entrance, those people who contested for the commission. The only one I remember is Maynard Dixon.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, was he—did he—

JOHN SPENCER: He was one of them, I'm sure. And his things were rather—quite simple, like just the whole 40 feet. And I'm subject to correction on this but as I recall, would be at one of his marvelous desert landscapes or California hills, maybe with some figures in it, Indians and so on. And I don't remember any other contestants,

their names or their work. So they chose him. He won first, second, and third place, and he was awarded the commission. Of course, I mean, the library commission and the city art commission were all establishment people, well-heeled, successful, couldn't see anything wrong. I mean, they abhorred any revolutionary talk, you know. And so anybody whose work would reflect that just was out of it entirely.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I'm surprised that Maynard Dixon didn't figure—that he'd be more of a contender. But then again, maybe he was. I mean, we don't know. He may well have—

JOHN SPENCER: Yes there—

PAUL KARLSTROM: —had his supporters.

JOHN SPENCER: I'm sure he did. He must have got some [inaudible]. He did some marvelous work. I loved his paintings, although Cornwell didn't care for his flat colors. [00:10:04] His, you know, his—Dixon's colors were very flat, and I love those. And Cornwell, I remember we passed one at—over at the Ambassador Hotel. They had galleries there—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

JOHN SPENCER: —and he said, "No that"—you know, "that would have been so much better if Maynard Dixon had stippled a number of colors in there. It would be a flat area but it would have vitality." But—

PAUL KARLSTROM: And you didn't disagree, of course.

JOHN SPENCER: Oh, no. Oh, no. [Laughs.] Believe me. So, uh, let's see. You asked me about the—the setup was totally establishment. I mean, the city art commission came down there one time to pass on the things. And I have to tell you this. They were nice people. One was a banker. One was a Catholic monsignor, perfectly nice fellow, an Irishman, I'm sure, because I was a Catholic then. I am a Catholic. And a—at least one woman on the art commission, you know, a high society dame who kept referring to the murials. She kept referring to the murials.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Murials. [Laughs.]

JOHN SPENCER: And the monsignor kept saying, or said several times, "Any color, just as long as it's blue." Now, that was the sort of—

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Laughs.] That was the level of—

JOHN SPENCER: —the egis under which Cornwell got his commission. Everything's safe, safe and sound, and romantic, which of course I wasn't aware of at the time. I thought that was the way to go. I thought that was heavenly. You know, and all those marvelous figures.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, he got stuck, of course. There were social changes—

JOHN SPENCER: That's it. Exactly.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —going on around this dramatic and—

JOHN SPENCER: And that he wasn't aware of. He wasn't a part of it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes. It sort of came along in the midst of his endeavor.

JOHN SPENCER: Uh-huh [affirmative]. Exactly.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so you can't really blame him. Well, it's interesting because of course, now we're much more forgiving of this. [Laughs.]

JOHN SPENCER: Of the early stuff, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It was very interesting and we see it as history.

JOHN SPENCER: Uh-huh [affirmative], yes. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. [00:12:01]

PAUL KARLSTROM: You know, I mean it may not be to our taste, although I think that we're more—I think we're more, uh, flexible now than we—

JOHN SPENCER: Yes, we are. Very much so.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —were in what we find interesting. So he, in a way he can come back and be taken on his own terms without having to answer to, um, historical events.

JOHN SPENCER: That's right, yes. Just so long as it's known the circumstances under which these murals were conceived and—and painted.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Isn't it interesting, though, how—and this must have been a surprise for him, but already then how political art was becoming.

JOHN SPENCER: Oh, yes, with the Siqueiros murals.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative], exactly.

JOHN SPENCER: I don't know how much time elapsed between the unveiling of that mural and its being whitewashed, but the city fathers were just not about to have—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Outrage.

JOHN SPENCER: —anything, any questioning of the establishment, of capitalism, of the political situation. I wonder how they're coming along that restoration, the Siqueiros murals.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I don't know.

JOHN SPENCER: Uh-huh [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean, they should be about done, I would think.

JOHN SPENCER: The very fact that they can restore it now shows that we've become broadminded or—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes. What is it called? Tropical, uh—

JOHN SPENCER: Something, *Tropical America* or—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes. *Tropical America*—

JOHN SPENCER: Something. I forget what the title is.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um, *America Tropical*. And they were being done—um—that mural was being done at the same time.

JOHN SPENCER: At the same time, sure, because Cornwell spent—it was summertime and Cornwell spent a number of evenings down there learning the technique.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now, did you ever go along with him?

JOHN SPENCER: No, I didn't.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you didn't see Siqueiros working on the—

JOHN SPENCER: No, I didn't see Siqueiros. I saw the—the heads that Cornwell did on those newel posts.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN SPENCER: No, he didn't invite us down. Of course, we weren't entitled to go there. It was a paying—you know, the students had to pay. [00:14:00]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, but it sounds to me as if Cornwell then was aware of Siqueiros and apparently admired him enough to—

JOHN SPENCER: Well—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Or not?

JOHN SPENCER: No, I don't think—no, the thing—the trick was that Siqueiros didn't un—didn't let people know what the whole design was until he had put in the key things. And then it was—there was a reception and it was unveiled and all the city fathers went, "Oh hey, wait a minute." But no, he was—Cornwell was interested in just in the technique, learn the mediums, the emulsions, and the kind of plaster, and all that sort of thing. And he did these two heads rather caricatures, like, you know, stylized heads on two brick newel posts at the top of the

stairway, wooden stairway that led to the roof where the mural itself is being done. And in fact, he asked in some of those letters about how they were doing, and he asked how some—apparently a freestanding piece of plaster—how the colors were holding up on that, but I knew nothing of that. I don't remember his ever painting that or where he painted it. Maybe in his studio apartment, I don't know. But I would report to him on anything that he asked.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Hmm.

JOHN SPENCER: But those newel posts were destroyed, I think. Torn down and the steps were torn down—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well now how did Cornwell get that job?

JOHN SPENCER: Well, he went down there to learn the technique and I guess he just suggested to somebody, "Why don't I do two patches of plaster here," you know, and do a decoration in each one?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, that must have been Siqueiros that—

JOHN SPENCER: It could have been.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now, that's really ironic and interesting. [Laughs.]

JOHN SPENCER: Yes. It could have been. Now I ne—as I said somewhere to Christopher Knight that he didn't discuss Siqueiros, his personality or anything. Or if he did, my memory, of course after 61, [6]2 years is mad. [00:16:00] But no, he wasn't hipped on the man but I don't remember him saying anything good or bad about him.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well what an interesting experience—

JOHN SPENCER: It was.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —you had.

JOHN SPENCER: Wonderful.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But it's great that these murals are, uh, still stand and cleaned—

JOHN SPENCER: Yes, they've been restored.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And they will be preserved.

JOHN SPENCER: Beautifully restored by the Getty Foun—Getty people, I think, restored. Restoring meaning mostly just washing them with that mild solution, I guess, of soap and water. I'm not sure what they use, but no scrubbing.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I'm going to make it my business to go down to the library again—

JOHN SPENCER: Take a look at it, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —and take a look at them. It's a spectacular setting now with the—I think—what do you think? Have you been down to—

JOHN SPENCER: Oh, yes We went down on the opening day.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What do you think?

JOHN SPENCER: Of the new addition?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes. The whole—

JOHN SPENCER: Oh, the whole thing? Oh, yes. Of course, the murals, that was just like old home week and the new addition, it's fine. It's contemporary and it's mechanized and computerized. It's great.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It sure—sure provides [laughs] a new setting for Cornwell's—

JOHN SPENCER: Yes. Well, yes that's way off. He's still in the old, old building, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you know, this—this is—the interesting thing is, and this is where Cornwell gets his own finally, is that in this post-modern era of ours, the—you know, those almost discordant elements are appreciated.

They're brought together—

JOHN SPENCER: Yes, they are. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: —and it gives it a kind of spark to it, you know, when you don't expect things to be all in keeping.

JOHN SPENCER: Yes. It was all of a piece in those days, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so it's interesting that maybe in some ways he provides a more interesting counterpoint to the—

JOHN SPENCER: Right, the old and the new. There is something strange about that new addition, though. He has—the architect has some enormous pillars inside that don't seem to be holding up anything. You take a look at it when you go down there. [00:18:00]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, there you go. See, that's pure post-Modernism. [Laughs.]

JOHN SPENCER: Yes, uh-huh [affirmative]. Don't you remember that? Uh-huh [affirmative].

CAROLYN SPENCER: Are you recording?

JOHN SPENCER: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, listen. I think this is great. I've enjoyed this. Is there anything else you can think of? Oh, there were—you were going to say some story about—

JOHN SPENCER: Oh, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —this little thing that I hope you, if not now, soon give to the archives because it shows you. It's from some publication in 1932.

JOHN SPENCER: The [inaudible] section.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes. Showing you—

JOHN SPENCER: Oh, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —assisting with the—

JOHN SPENCER: Well, it shows—it shows Mr. Cornwell and his assistant, Ivan Stoppe and myself, in the studio in a totally hokey set-up. [Laughs.] Uh—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, that's fake, you mean?

JOHN SPENCER: Yes. Mr. Cornwell had seriously hurt one knee. I think he walked between two parked cars and one of them moved while he was between them. And, uh, so he had his leg in a cast, couldn't bend it. So Ivan, his assistant, built this sort of a—what would you call it? A steeplejack.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes. A bosun's chair. [Laughs.]

JOHN SPENCER: Yes, a bosun's chair, to haul him up from the floor just to the second floor where he could work normally on the thing.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, I see. Not hauling him [inaudible].

JOHN SPENCER: And there was a trapdoor. There was a trapdoor in the floor and we hauled him up in the morning with block and tackle, which was [laughs] the only way to get him up. But when the photographers came here, they were, I guess, *Hearst* photographers, or I think it says *Times* bureau. Somebody got the idea that we'd have to do something silly for public relations—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, I see.

JOHN SPENCER: —and that's exactly what they—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Something dramatic.

JOHN SPENCER: Yes. So Ivan went way up in the—in the rafters there and he rigged up this block and tackle.

[Laughs.] And—hailed him up there and then I held onto the rope, and you see I'm standing on the rope too. And then Ivan popped up on that other thing. [00:20:04]

PAUL KARLSTROM: See, and Ivan has a palette.

JOHN SPENCER: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So it looks like he's—

JOHN SPENCER: He was really big stuff, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —doing some, some work there. See, well this is how history gets made.

JOHN SPENCER: That's right. Uh-huh [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: People will look at this and say, "Well we have evidence that this is the way this [they laugh] was."

JOHN SPENCER: If he'd worked that way, he would have scratched the painting with his—with the board and with his leg and his cane and everything.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Exactly.

JOHN SPENCER: And just, you know, in those days, a publicity stunt was what people called everything. They didn't have PR men. They had publicity stunts, and that was it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well John, I'm glad that we have you here to set the record straight.

JOHN SPENCER: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, well thank you very much.

JOHN SPENCER: Thank you.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This was—I enjoyed it.

JOHN SPENCER: Right.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]