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Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Robert Colescott,
1999 April 14

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Robert Colescott on April 14, 1999. The interview took place in Tuscon, Arizona, and was conducted by Paul Karlstrom for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

Session 1, Tape 1, Side A (30-minute tape sides)

ROBERT COLESCOTT: . . . plane will take off or you're going to actually _____

PAUL KARLSTROM: of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. An interview with Robert Colescott in the artist's studio, home studio in Tuscon, Arizona, on the outskirts I guess of Tuscon. This is the first session in what we hope will be a series of interviews over time. The interviewer for the Archives is Paul Karlstrom. And the date is April 14, 1999. This is Tape 1, Side A.

Well, this is good. We finally . . . we finally did it. We tried this a year ago and it didn't work.

ROBERT COLESCOTT: M-hm.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I'm delighted to be here now. At lunch we were talking about -- at least for me -- a number of interesting issues, any one of which would probably be productive for starting this interview. But I think what I would like to do is place you a bit before getting into a particular topic. And that topic will be about issues of race and identity in the visual arts . . . your own experience and maybe your own observ . . . your observations on the circumstances of being an artist of color and certain - what? Should we say "limits", perhaps demands that seem to be imposed or expected. I'm trying to create this kind of balance between individual creative expression and then a sense of identity in community. If we could just hold that a minute - maybe you could be percolating that, ___ percolate it. Why don't you just fill . . . fill us in on your own specific background? The people you come from, where you were born and maybe some early art education.

ROBERT COLESCOTT: Well, I was born in Oakland, California in 1925. And my parents had come from New Orleans in 1919. My dad was . . . he was in World War I and had been in France with the 92nd Division, which was a Black unit in France. And then when he got . . . when he got back to his old job on the railroad - he was a waiter on the Southern Pacific, he decided to move west. And he ended up in Oakland because it was the end of the rail line and he couldn't go any further than that, heading north and west than to go to Oakland, which was the headquarters for the Southern Pacific Company. And so he and my mother had decided to come, to leave the south. It was . . . I think it was the initial - After World War I, it was . . . and the initial part of the Great Migration by Black people out of the south. And so that was . . . that was exactly . . . They were part of that . . . that first move, that first migration. They'd both been educated in segregated schools. They both went to Black schools in New Orleans. And my mother had taught in the colored schools in New Orleans. She taught for a year before she got married and then, of course, there was no - Teachers were not rehired if they married.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really?

ROBERT COLESCOTT: Yeah. They were supposed to be virgins. [chuckles]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh. Because otherwise they would be bad influences on the students?

ROBERT COLESCOTT: I don't know exactly how that works but women probably in most cases, in most of the states. And it certainly was true in New Orleans that married women were not hired as teachers. And if they . . . And when they did marry, then that was it for the teaching profession. They wanted . . . They wanted old maids to teach their kids about morality. I think that was what it . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Presumably mothers weren't qualified to teach children about morality and these issues.

ROBERT COLESCOTT: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Because obviously, they were found - from that standpoint . . .

ROBERT COLESCOTT: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, that's interesting. Now that's not just Black school system; that was the whole public education system.

ROBERT COLESCOTT: State. Yeah. And so, anyway, so . . . so then I was born in '25. And I was brought up in Oakland. I went to . . . I went through high school and then I was taken into the service for about, close to four years.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You were drafted?

ROBERT COLESCOTT: No. Actually, I volunteered. And I went for, as I said, close to four years.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What branch were you in?

ROBERT COLESCOTT: I was in the Army. And, I'm trying to think of what else is pertinent here. Oh, well - education. I came back from the Army and I went to school first of all at San Francisco State. That was in 1946. And I met a painter named Ed Corbett. And Ed was teaching at State and he was influential in that he encouraged me to . . . to continue to study painting.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let me ask you how you got to that point. There's been no mention yet of presumably you had an interest in art. Did . . . Is this something you thought of as a career?

ROBERT COLESCOTT: I never thought of it as a career. I spent quite a bit of time engaged in art as a kid. And I drew quite a bit and I painted some. And I always had some kind of a project was going. But I thought of it as avocational. I never thought of it as a possible vocation. And then - So, when I got to State College, I was still under the idea that I would be . . . not be a professional artist. That that was just . . . that was a hobby. And so I . . . so I thought I would . . . I was interested in travel and I thought maybe I would . . . I would enter the . . . I would prepare myself in some kind of international relations program. And . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: What were you studying as a major, if _____ -

ROBERT COLESCOTT: I was studying . . . Yeah, I had an elective in art with Ed Corbett. And then I . . . I was studying international relations, political science, economics - that kind of thing. And it was all of interest to me. History. I liked history a lot. And then it came down . . . When it came down to choosing my major, the counselor at the college talked to me and advised me against it because . . . or he advised me to reconsider because he didn't think that there would be a career for me as an African-American person. There would be no career say in the diplomatic corps. Things were a lot tighter and a lot different at that time. And so a person of color really could not aspire to being, to say working for the government in that capacity overseas. At least, that's what I was told. And so it made me think about things.

I found myself thinking, "Well, I really enjoy art so why don't you just focus on that." So I changed my major to accommodate that, my thinking on that. And so when I went to Berkeley, I went in as a . . . as an art major. And art in those days pretty much meant painting. You didn't find - I mean, if somebody says, "Study art" or if you were encouraged to study art, you'd start thinking about painting. And that's changed a lot.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What year was . . . What year . . .

ROBERT COLESCOTT: '46.

PAUL KARLSTROM: To Berkeley in '46.

ROBERT COLESCOTT: Yeah. It was probably '47. Because I spent a year at State.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay. So you didn't finish the program at State. You basically transferred.

ROBERT COLESCOTT: I . . . Basically, I transferred to . . . to Berkeley.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now why was that? Studying with Ed Corbett, from my vantage point, sounds like it would be pretty interesting.

ROBERT COLESCOTT: M-hm.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What I would like to do, if I may, is again for just a moment your actual experience in these art schools. I have my reasons for doing this.

ROBERT COLESCOTT: Okay.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now, your memories of what they were like at that time and . . . San Francisco State probably had a fledgling program, I would imagine.

ROBERT COLESCOTT: It wasn't much. It was a program really to service the education majors. I don't think that

at that time that State College had an art major at all. And they had some art courses and some pottery classes and things like this. But it was approached from a point of view of servicing education majors, like people that were going to go out and teach in elementary school. That kind of thing. Because as I remember, what Ed was doing had nothing to do with the program of his. And it was sort of like, "Well, make a humorous painting." Or "do something that . . . that showed action." Something like that. Kinds of things you might ask children to do. And so . . . But I liked to paint and so I took . . . I took the assignments seriously and did some kind of unusual things with those assignments. And that's why I think he got . . . got behind me.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, did he encourage you then to . . . He recognized you probably _____ [phone rings]

ROBERT COLESCOTT: . . . and . . . And my plan was to go to Berkeley any how. I was at State to pick up some credits and to get my grade points up. And so I was really looking to go to Berkeley.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you were really part of that returning GI generation

ROBERT COLESCOTT: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: which is so famous now.

ROBERT COLESCOTT: Yeah, I guess so.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Everybody talks about them. Especially, you know, at the Art Institute. But elsewhere. They were mature, more mature students who had had experience.

ROBERT COLESCOTT: But this was . . . this was over all in the universities and colleges. Those veterans came back and they . . . they were really eager and they approached it from a more mature point of view. And so they . . . Suddenly, you know, the grade point averages all over the university were up. So that if you . . . it was very hard for non-veterans to compete in any way with . . . in terms of getting a grade average, getting a good grade average. Because all the As and Bs were just outlined, you know. It was . . . It was really restrictive actually, you know, because you had to work so hard just to get a B. And so I went in and I - Let's see. And so I spent the next two years - I had some credits and then they gave you some credits for being in the . . . being away in the war. And so I needed to do two more years which I did. And I got my bachelor's. I met people that were . . . Werth Rider was one of my teachers. And James McCray.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was Earl there? Earl Lauren?

ROBERT COLESCOTT: Earl was there. And he was a very strange guy and so I ended up avoiding studying with him. And it probably something that I should have done was to study with Earl Lauren because he was one of the people there that had ideas.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, all his studies of Cezanne

ROBERT COLESCOTT: Cezanne and all . . . But he was such a - It was hard to penetrate his ego. So . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: And I know Earl.

ROBERT COLESCOTT: He's still alive I guess.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I hope so. I think Earl's still alive.

ROBERT COLESCOTT: Yeah. He's ancient. The last time I saw him he was this very thin, almost emaciated person but he was perky and active.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. That's right.

ROBERT COLESCOTT: And I understood at that time that he was painting still. But anyway, so, yeah, I kind of avoided him.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you avoid him because just . . .

ROBERT COLESCOTT: It was more personality.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes. This is what I was wondering.

ROBERT COLESCOTT: It was personality.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . accounts from the classroom that . . .

ROBERT COLESCOTT: He was difficult. And he did things like line up all the easels and . . . and then with a piece

of chalk put a number by each easel and then everybody was given a number and they had to be there and be at their own easel, you know. It's just kind of . . . It was kind of weird. And my own feelings were, you know, that I was not a very disciplined person any way. So I just . . . I avoided him though I think it would have been of some value if I hadn't.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about John Haley? Was he . . .

ROBERT COLESCOTT: Haley. I worked quite a bit with Haley. Well, I think all of those guys, the whole . . . all of them - maybe except Werth Rider - had a really kind of narrow faux academic idea. And what they . . . how they interpreted Cezanne - which was pretty general in that department - and that was the direction that was sort of encouraged. And so I felt like -- and I can see it even more now in retrospect - that the people at Berkeley like Haley and McCray and Lauren and . . . they had this kind of fake academic interpretation of Cezanne. And it was more . . . It ended up being more of a decorative approach instead of really getting into what the principles of Cezanne. There was . . . It ended up working on the surface as a kind of arrangement of decorative shapes that somehow had a modern look to it. I think Werth Rider had . . . was more flexible.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Because of the Hans Hofmann connection?

ROBERT COLESCOTT: Yeah, yeah. Glen Wessel's the same way.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, Glen was there.

ROBERT COLESCOTT: And who else?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was Margaret O'Hagen, was she?

ROBERT COLESCOTT: You know, I was thinking about her earlier when you were talking about Jay Dafeo.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, because Jay really admired . . .

ROBERT COLESCOTT: Oh yeah. Margaret was a really - Even in personality and in . . . with a sense of showmanship, Margaret O'Hagen influenced Jay Dafeo, I think, a lot. Actually, she was perhaps the best teacher of the whole bunch.

PAUL KARLSTROM: She was, huh?

ROBERT COLESCOTT: Yeah. She was tough and . . . but her courses had real content and they tended to deal with elements of form, with the elements of form in a way that had some depth and some - rather than a purely decorative output. So, I think she was a good teacher. I'd forgotten . . . forgot to mention her. And, oh God! Who was the Texan? There was a guy from Texas. Oooh boy, I can't remember his name.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you have to - How was the program set up? Were you pretty free to choose courses that interested you, you know, in the Art Department, in the _____

ROBERT COLESCOTT: No. There were certain courses . . . There were certain courses that you had to take.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Life drawing, I hope.

ROBERT COLESCOTT: Well, life drawing. You had to have so much drawing, you know. And it was all from life. And then you were required to take a course called The Architecture of Painting. That was Werth Rider's baby. He taught that. And it actually wasn't a bad course. And . . . But it was the theories that they were all using as a basis for their teaching. And that was Earl Lauren's book. And this was Earl Lauren's book come to life, so to speak.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's very interesting because I've never heard it described in quite that way. It, of course, immediately brings to mind a very different situation across the bay at the Art Institute.

ROBERT COLESCOTT: Yeah, very different.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I was wondering - You certainly must have been aware of the Art Institute.

ROBERT COLESCOTT: M-hm.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And I suppose my question would be did you at any time consider that as an option against Cal? Or maybe you want to go through the academics . . .

ROBERT COLESCOTT: You know, I have to go back. I have to regress. I'll regress - or regroup. Because one of the

reasons my parents moved from the South to the West was so that we could go to . . . and specifically to Oakland and Berkeley . . . was so that I could go to the University of California. And they knew that it was a free university. It cost \$25.00 a year.

PAUL KARLSTROM: _____

ROBERT COLESCOTT: Yeah. Because it was a public institution, public college. And so . . . So that was a factor that made me focus on Cal, on going to Cal and getting a university education. This was a duty. There was no two ways about it, see. My parents had changed their whole life style and way of life and located in . . . where we had access to the University of California.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's very interesting. I wonder how typical that might be - making those kinds of decisions about the migration.

ROBERT COLESCOTT: Well, to get free . . . to get free and un - what would I saw? I just blanked out. I was thinking about free education and education in an unsegregated school and the access to a really big fine university whereas in the South you had little colored academies.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, what about the whole issue about education for Negroes, they would have said at that time?

ROBERT COLESCOTT: M-hm.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And you think of - Now I'm blanking. Tuskegee.

ROBERT COLESCOTT: M-hm.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And who's the thinker, the great leader at the time who was, you know, Black?

ROBERT COLESCOTT: Washington . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Booker T. Washington, yeah.

ROBERT COLESCOTT: Booker T. Washington.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Booker T. Washington. And, I don't mean to sort of steer this away

ROBERT COLESCOTT: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: but it's very interesting to me, having read a little bit around this recently. And the, you know, the notion of the proper way perhaps for Blacks to achieve higher education and career, at least in the South, would have been, you know, much more that course

ROBERT COLESCOTT: M-hm.

PAUL KARLSTROM: where the community stays together.

ROBERT COLESCOTT: Yeah, but you know, it's the prestige of the University of California, the equipment, the way the school - the faculty - all of that was aimed at a very strong excellence.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, yeah, of course.

ROBERT COLESCOTT: And see, so by comparison, the place - Tuskegee. Well, there was limited majors. You know, they weren't equipped really to . . . so that you could have any . . . any normal major. You had to . . . You were limited in your choices of majors.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

ROBERT COLESCOTT: And the faculty was . . . was certainly . . . I'm sure was dedicated but they just didn't have the stature.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, it's also . . .

ROBERT COLESCOTT: So, you know, it was - All those things were available and if I had been raised in New Orleans, it probably would have been Southern University where my father went. But that was high school level. It was at high school level. And they still called it a university.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What interested me - And I guess what I was trying to get at - There are these two, you know,

very different situations. The one a more restrictive, basically playing along I suppose to some degree with what main stream white America - not in the West, not at Berkeley - I understand that. But, you know, in certain portions of the South, in effect trying to maintain the separateness.

ROBERT COLESCOTT: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And . . .

ROBERT COLESCOTT: Separate and unequal.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And unequal. And what interests me is that your parents obviously strategized - or it sounds as if -- from a very, very early stage and said this is not what they wanted for you.

ROBERT COLESCOTT: M-hm.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And basically wanted you to main stream.

ROBERT COLESCOTT: Sure.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You know, the education

ROBERT COLESCOTT: Absolutely! To go . . . be able to go out . . . And in their thinking it was going to be medicine or law or one of the other professions. I don't think they visualized - I know they didn't visualize the idea of me going to the university to study art. But it was the university. And so I had a very special obligation. And I think that the Black kids of my generation, almost all, felt - if they came from educated families, they felt that they had an obligation to go to . . . to get higher education. And in many cases, they left the state. They left the South in order to . . . to do their work, their college work. My aunt went to Oberlin to study music. My cousin went to Northwestern to study medicine. There was just . . . this was a very powerful objective. And it was understood that if your family had reached a certain level in education that you would get education. And there was no two ways about it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You know what this sounds like to me? And again, I don't want to steer us too far afield. But very much like another immigrant pattern,

ROBERT COLESCOTT: M-hm.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . being the Jewish . . . Jews in America where everything . . . it was an absolute duty, your responsibility to . . . and the parents

ROBERT COLESCOTT: To be educated

PAUL KARLSTROM: worked so hard

ROBERT COLESCOTT: and wherever possible, to integrate.

PAUL KARLSTROM: M-hm. See. But in your experience, was that not unusual within . . . among Black friends, people you know.

ROBERT COLESCOTT: No, no. The people that we knew, their kids all went to university.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So basically this is . . . We're talking about an educated middle class

ROBERT COLESCOTT: working on it. Working on it. And the Black middle class, for many people, was still middle class and . . . But these were railroad jobs, men that worked on railroad jobs. Or something else that was menial but they were putting their money aside for their kids to go to college. And those kids were going to do better than they had done. There was an upward feeling of duty. You were duty bound to do better than your parents had done.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It sounds typically American in many respects

ROBERT COLESCOTT: Sure and why not?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Why not, indeed.

ROBERT COLESCOTT: Why not? And so - You mentioned the Jewish question. Probably even closer to the mark is the . . . the Chinese and Japanese kids, you know. That's probably closer to the . . . for an apt comparison.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, my observation would be - and you know, I wasn't there paying attention at the time -

but

ROBERT COLESCOTT: Sure.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I suspect that this phenomenon that you've just described - you know, why should I be surprised? I'm interested; I'm not terribly surprised. But I wonder if at the time, most of white America would have sort of questioned this - That is to say that . . . now . . .

ROBERT COLESCOTT: I don't think they gave it the time of day.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, yeah and I -- My sense is they might have been _____ these people aren't . . . _____ too much like us.

ROBERT COLESCOTT: Yeah, they're not going to make it. And nobody cared. Absolutely not.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay. Well, let's get back to experience in the art classroom. And you made a real good regression, or digression, to get us on to that. That's a very important point. I was asking about your awareness of the San Francisco Art Institute, the California School of Fine Arts.

ROBERT COLESCOTT: Right. Then you said, "Did you ever consider that as an alternative?" And that's why I . . . was where I took us off the subject.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But in terms of this program that you described.

ROBERT COLESCOTT: I had no idea. I knew . . . I knew the school. I knew the California School of Fine Arts as it was then. And I knew it. And I had visited and I'd gone to a show or something there. But there was a real division between Berkeley - the Art Department at Berkeley which seemed overly academic and the students that went to

PAUL KARLSTROM: California School of Fine Arts?

ROBERT COLESCOTT: Fine Arts, California School. I'm sorry.

PAUL KARLSTROM: CSFA.

ROBERT COLESCOTT: Yeah, CSFA. And so a few years later when I was working on my master's, I made contact with some of the people. Some of the people were coming over there to Berkeley to get their . . .

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Here we are continuing the interview with Robert Colescott. This is Tape 1, Side B. And we're talking about schools in the Bay area, particularly one you attended, the University of California at Berkeley, but also with an awareness of a very different kind of program and perhaps a different kind of students across the Bay at the California School of Fine Arts. You were saying something about Sam Francis and others coming over to get degrees, I suppose.

ROBERT COLESCOTT: Yeah. Sam was working on a master's degree while he was there. But he was studying painting. No, to get the master's degree, he was in a couple of my painting classes. And he was a pain in the neck to his . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: How so?

ROBERT COLESCOTT: Well, not to me. But he was a pain in the neck to his teachers because he never did what he was assigned - what we were assigned to do. He always just took off and did whatever, whatever he wanted to do.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was this about '49, do you think?

ROBERT COLESCOTT: I think the master's stuff that I was working on was like '51. And that's when I . . . For a couple of years there, that's when I knew Sam Francis, Jay Dafeo. There were some others. I can't think of their names.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Which ones impressed you as artists? You must have been interested in looking around for examples, or even models if you will of what it was like to be an artist. Is that the case?

ROBERT COLESCOTT: I think I had no idea. I had no idea what it was like to be an artist. And I tried to - I felt like

maybe I could put together some of the things that I was taught about Cezanne and about composition and structure. That I could put some of those things together with, you know, maybe a degree of personality and . . . And so I was kind of proud of that that I was attempting to do that. And I probably thought of myself as being more successful than I really was. But I could draw pretty good and so I . . . I referred to drawing things and the model and so forth. And I put together this . . . these eclectic paintings. And I got a certain amount of encouragement. And that . . . In terms of my peers -- yeah, I know Sam Francis likes what I did very much. But he wasn't Sam Francis then. He was just Sam, you know. So he was a friend. And I thought he was pretty good. But I felt like there was a connection to the classic idiom in painting that he wasn't connecting to. And not many others were. Because the whole world was starting to go abstract expressionist. And there was a lot . . . there was a lot of stuff that was being left along the way. And this was the connection with the tradition of painting. And there was a lot of inventiveness happening but that tradition was being left out. And so I felt like that's what I could . . . That maybe I was equipped to do something with that. And that was the beginnings of wanting to . . . to . . . to connect with historical painting. And I'm still doing it. And I'm still working on it and I still haven't got it right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So the Art Institute, California School of Fine Arts' famous abstract, gestural painting . . .

ROBERT COLESCOTT: It was just happening, just happening at that time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And from what you say, I gather that would not have appealed to you.

ROBERT COLESCOTT: It didn't. It didn't.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Too chaotic

ROBERT COLESCOTT: It was chaotic. It was . . . I looked at it as being formalist which colored my view of the whole idea. And I was more interested in cubism at that time. Now since then, I've learned more about gestural painting. But I had to teach myself so that it's part of something else which is some kind of an original statement, a personal statement.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you think about these things at the time at all? Or is this just pretty much like retrospective, looking back and considering these issues?

ROBERT COLESCOTT: No. I think I had some thoughts about it at the time. And my thought was, "Well, it wouldn't be for me." Because of my concern and interest in formal painting. And . . . That surface was not enough, just surface. And so I . . . I thought about those things. And I kind of set my path. And along the way, I . . . you know, I experimented. I kind of blew apart abstract painting and put it back together again. And I did a lot of different things, always knowing that - the farther I got into expressionism, the more I wanted to come back to a more structured idiom. And so . . . But I did think about those things along the way. And I think I was setting my course - which is maybe at that point in my career was . . . setting my course was more important than any individual work. And so I spent - I really, by the time I . . . Let's see. '50. I'd say by 1955, I had pretty well set my course. And

PAUL KARLSTROM: Which was a conscious class history of . . . You wanted to . . .

ROBERT COLESCOTT: I didn't term it that way. No. I didn't trace it as setting my course. I phrased it more like learning to paint. And in the final analysis, the teachers that I had could teach theory, but they couldn't teach painting. And they weren't basically by . . . by intuition, they weren't themselves strong painters at all. And then I came in contact with Leget. And I came . . . At that point, I came in contact with a very strong important artist.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is that when he was at . . . He was at Mills, wasn't he?

ROBERT COLESCOTT: He did teach at Mills but I didn't know him then. But I went to Paris to study with him. And I was there for a year. I studied for a year with him. And he changed my whole view point about painting.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What year was that?

ROBERT COLESCOTT: 1949.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, and then you went back to the M.A.

ROBERT COLESCOTT: Yeah, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How did that come about? Did you just go over there . . .

ROBERT COLESCOTT: Well, I heard . . . No. James McCray said - you know, I was thinking about . . . Well, after I got my bachelor's, I started talking to him about where I should go for . . . to do some more advanced work, you know. And did he know of any . . . I wanted to go to Paris and did he know anybody that was teaching in Paris.

And he said, yeah, he thought Leget took a few students. And so I wrote. And sure enough, they did. And so I signed on and I went over there. And the . . . And he wouldn't look at my work [chuckles] because he hated it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really?

ROBERT COLESCOTT: Yeah. Well, that was disappointing to me too but I . . . after all . . . again, I was a student. So I said, "Well, you're a student; let's see what you can learn." You know? And he came to this . . . He had a little studio for his group of students. And I suppose at any given time there were ten or fifteen of us.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, what would you do in Leget's class?

ROBERT COLESCOTT: It was strange. It was very . . . I liked the . . . I liked his simple, straight forward crit - like your drawing is weak. You know? I mean, that's . . . That's all a lot of people need to hear. Your drawing is weak. Work from the still life. And then he would get into stuff that was personal to him, stylistically. Like use a black line, you know. You'd have to . . . You'd have to have some character just to reject that because it was him talking about himself. And so . . . And why? You know, why not? He was a great painter. So I learned a lot of stuff. I learned what to do, a lot of things about what to do and a lot of things about what not to do. But I think the big lesson that I got from Leget was monumentality. I mean, everything that he said such as stronger drawing, black line, simple color scheme, pure color -- Everything that he talked about -- simplicity -- it had to do with, in total, with monumentality. And so I think I'd gotten a lot of feeling about monumentality. And I don't think he ever used the words. And then he also . . . He directed me. He didn't think that abstract work had enough meaning and enough significance for his people. And so he encouraged me to go back to the figure and give up abstraction as such.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And he didn't think that abstract work

ROBERT COLESCOTT: It didn't express ideas - Something like this is what he said. It didn't express ideas for people. Yeah. You have to remember - He was a communist. And so his philosophy about the importance of the art work to the working class audience was an important thing. But he - Yeah, I know it doesn't it exactly jive but he . . . he believed it. He believed it. And all those guys - All those paintings in the fifties, early fifties, of workmen on scaffolds - that had to do with talk . . . a discussion about the importance of labor. And then the pictures of people holding bouquets of flowers and riding bicycles and all that stuff, that was about recreation. And the balance of work and recreation was . . . was a very important part of communist philosophy. And so these were things that were personally important to him. And he believed - even though it's only partially true - he believed that he was reaching ordinary people with these paintings.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is, of course, a wonderful segue into our other topic. And a way to get even closer to it. And that, of course, has to do with the notion of duty to create work that communicates to the people, whether it's the worker or racial groups.

ROBERT COLESCOTT: M-hm. Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did Leget ever talk about Diego Rivera? And were you . . . You surely were aware of Rivera.

ROBERT COLESCOTT: I was very much aware of him because of his stay in San Francisco. And I . . . in 1938 at the Treasure Island Fair.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh yeah. Did you see that?

ROBERT COLESCOTT: I saw him. I saw him up on the scaffold working. And it was just about like - you know the painting, the mural in the Art Institute - the San Francisco Art Institute - it was . . . He was exactly like that. The guy, the painter, on the scaffold.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So it wasn't covered up when you were there?

ROBERT COLESCOTT: In San Francisco? The Institute?

PAUL KARLSTROM: It was covered up for . . .

ROBERT COLESCOTT: Yeah, that was McCagey's idea. Covered the Rivera. Doesn't that say something about the power that painting?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

ROBERT COLESCOTT: You know. The fact that somebody wanted to get it, keep it covered.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, it's esthetic politics also, I think. Because it didn't jive with the heroic _____ ideal.

ROBERT COLESCOTT: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: All of which I think is very interesting. We're at an interesting point to reintroduce this very idea of notions of the responsibility of an artist, presumably a creative - an independent creative individual. I've always thought - maybe romantically - of artists in that way. You find your own way, your own voice. But any rate, this notion of responsibility that Leget emphasized and they felt was in his work. Diego Rivera, of course, was very much what his work was about to, you know, retrieve an Indian history, or authentic history of Mexico.

ROBERT COLESCOTT: And the esthetics of it too.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. And then my question and what we . . . what I thought was very interesting in our discussion earlier was how you perhaps have observed this phenomenon in the Black community. The push and pull, what I think of as a tug of war, between since you're Black, you have perhaps a primary obligation to serving community. At the same time, as an artist, presumably there is this sense of freedom and independence. That's sort of what it's about. What are your thoughts on this? And, you know, who are some of the artists, Black artists, that might come to mind as illustrating different positions on this kind of continuum?

ROBERT COLESCOTT: Well, I think . . . See, I think in the first place, the way that one serves is to serve art first. And so you want to . . . And the way you serve art is by being to yourself. And you can't have two masters. You can't be afraid to . . . to . . . you can't be afraid to hurt and to deal with subjects that have that potential. The only way that you can be true to yourself is to follow your own star. And I think considering the attitude of a lot of people in the Black community is that they really don't want to leave this up to the judgment of the artist. They want to have some kind of control over these visual statements. And I would just be happy if the . . . if Black artists, Black American artists could be free to express themselves. I think then they could do their real job, which is being courageous . . . courageous citizens, courageous artists.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you ever feel throughout your career pressure in terms of subject matter that it was your job, your responsibility?

ROBERT COLESCOTT: Oh yeah, sure.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What form would that have . . .

ROBERT COLESCOTT: Well, I had . . . But see, I had people telling me other things too. I got encouragement from people, ordinary people who happened to be Black who would look at my work. And they would say, "Did you paint this?" I'd say, "Yeah." They'd say, "It's great. I really dig it. Okay, I get it." And I'd have people, a lot of people like that. See, some people think . . . well, the Black community has only critical of my work. It's just not true.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But there is a perception . . . some incidents that

ROBERT COLESCOTT: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: there was this . . . this critical, negative . . .

ROBERT COLESCOTT: Not as much as one would think. If there's one thing that Black folks have is a sense of humor. And when they see the humor and the irony, of course, in all of the . . . the . . . the lyrics in the blues songs are often pretty rowdy, you know. And not . . . don't . . . And present a rather base expression for . . . of Black arts. The guy that's supposed to be doing the old man on the mule, see. It's really funny. If you want to get acceptance within the community, just paint a couple of old men on mules. You know. Or an old man on a mule and an old lady walking around. I mean, that's what . . . Some people will only be satisfied with that. And then some kind of heroic image which is very far from the truth. The heroic image with . . . where this guy looks like a . . . a . . . looks white with a sun tan, see. Any sense of exaggeration could be questioned. But I'm . . . What I want to say about all this is - Sure. I've seen all that. And I've heard it all. But at the same time, right from the very beginning when I first started showing some of these works that were emphasized, a response to stereotyping, right along, I got . . . I had plenty of encouragement. And I was surprised at the vigor of the responses. But sometimes they were . . . and it did . . . just didn't break down on racial lines. There were white people who were offended because they felt guilty because their . . . their people had created these images. And so it was threatening. But then, there were . . . So there were white people that felt threatened by these paintings which monumentalized these perceptions.

PAUL KARLSTROM: When did you start doing those paintings?

ROBERT COLESCOTT: '55. 1955? No. 1975.

PAUL KARLSTROM: '75.

ROBERT COLESCOTT: 1975. I did a few. I did a dozen maybe. In a long career - I've been painting for fifty, about fifty-two years, fifty-three years.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You know, Betty Sarr, whom I'm sure you know in L.A., has chosen, well sort of a different version of some of the same . . . using stereotype like Aunt Jemima. She has this series that had been exhibiting quite recently. But they're pretty scary because they have Uzi's and so on. In other words, it's a purely . . . it's a political statement and perhaps not so subtle. But again using . . .

ROBERT COLESCOTT: It's funny because what Betty has done - and I know her and I like her. But what she's done is to create works after a political idea. And so she got into the politics of all this stuff when Cara Walker became recognized. And Betty was very critical of the work that Cara's doing. And in order to prove it, she went out . . . And this is all these paintings from the last two years that she did a whole show to illustrate her political, her art politics. And so I don't think that's . . . you know, I don't think that's so - I don't look at the work as valid at all.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's just political.

ROBERT COLESCOTT: Yeah. It's just . . . She had an idea. She has a . . . a philosophy. And the philosophy did not grow out of the paintings; the paintings grew out of the philosophy. And so they're illustrations.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Illustrations.

ROBERT COLESCOTT: Exactly. And so, I . . . I - See, everybody always says this, you know. I like your old, earlier work. That's what . . . [chuckling]

PAUL KARLSTROM: You know, that's an interesting . . . and it might be an interesting case in point. I don't know all of her work. I do know her. I think her papers are going to come to the archives.

ROBERT COLESCOTT: Good.

PAUL KARLSTROM: See, there's been a little commercial message here in this. But, I think of her little collage work and wonderful little, almost domestic little albums - They're like little family domestic albums which, if I remember correctly, would somehow embrace the . . . the family experience. The experience of Black families. There's I think, her mother, and her grandmother . . .

ROBERT COLESCOTT: It's kind of ancestor references.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Exactly. And at the very least, that's not as strident but I just wonder if having those two very different images in mind, how you would think of them in terms of this bigger issue we're talking about - like conscious or subconscious . . .

ROBERT COLESCOTT: Well, you know, it's old hat already. This is all . . . what do I want to say? It's stale. It's already a stale debate. The debate has gone on ever since I painted those . . . I'm really terrible today. I can't remember anything. Ever since I . . . those . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: appropriation

ROBERT COLESCOTT: appropriation, thank you. Ever since I started doing those appropriations, there's been criticism. And I was surprised at the criticism. I thought everybody would get it. But . . . so I started doing that in '75 when I painted George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware - which is a much more complicated painting than a lot of people think. It's just . . . It's a lot more than a one liner. But so, I've gone all over the country showing slides of these paintings and exhibiting them in museums and in some of . . . and African-American venues. You know. I've gone up and down and across this country. And taken questions and talked about this work. And a lot of people, a lot of people have heard me speak of . . . speak. And so, I'm really . . . I'm surprised that it . . . that it's not a dead issue. I'm really flabbergasted that . . . that - It's deja vue. People are digging it up and they're having the same argument. And conveniently, they often leave me out of those panels. Because they know that I'm going to get up there and I'm going to say, "Wait a minute. I've been talking about this stuff for twenty years. I've been talking about this stuff for twenty years. Now we're having the debate? Why are we having a debate now? Why didn't we have the debate when I was out there debating it?" So I think it's just a dead issue. I don't . . . I think it's a waste of time to discuss it. We've already come to understand that it's about white perceptions of Black people. And they may not be pretty. And they may be stupid. We didn't make up these images. So why should we take the heat? But it's . . . it's satire. It's the satire that kills the serpent, you know. And so, I think, you know, I was - At that time, I was really interested in those issues. And then I worked through them and, as I say, I . . . I was very active in . . . and very open to discussions. And we had them. We had them in . . . in the north and in the south and all over.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you . . . What do you think of the work of Adrian Piper? She came to mind because of . . .

ROBERT COLESCOTT: Because of her dealing with her own identity.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Identity. And the image of the way white people see . . .

ROBERT COLESCOTT: How she believes they see. What I see in Adrian is that she looks just like a colored woman. And that somehow she's got this thing that goes on where people are looking at her thinking she's white and are surprised to discover that she's Black. And there's a whole bunch of us that could talk about this. But I . . . and I think she's a very clever person. But I don't feel that she's a painter.

PAUL KARLSTROM: _____ conceptual . . .

ROBERT COLESCOTT: It's conceptual, sort of. Sort of. And I don't think she's really trained as a painter.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, she's a philosopher, I guess.

ROBERT COLESCOTT: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, at least . . . Well, I mean, in this case it's absolutely true that the art comes, as you were saying about Betty Sarr, the art comes out of the ideas.

ROBERT COLESCOTT: Well, it's even a little bit different than that. It isn't that it comes out of the ideas because often . . . You know, mostly we have an idea and then we paint something about it, you know. But it's just that it . . . It's after the fact. It's after the fact. It's - You know, that you . . . It's illustration and it's just to prove that I can do it too, you know. I still have a little time but I don't know about you.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, I have just a little more time. We're almost at the end of this tape. So I might turn this one off.

[End of Interview]

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