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Oral history interview with Albert Landa,
1998 Feb. 26

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Albert Landa on February 26, 1998. The interview took place in New York City, and was conducted by Stephen Polcari and Martica Sawin 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

MARTICA SAWIN: If you didn't mind just looking at the mic.

STEVEN POLCARI: This is Steven Polcari, for the Archives of American Art on February 26, 1998, at the Archives, uh, New York office at 51st Street. Today we are talking with—go ahead.

ALBERT LANDA: Albert Landa.

STEVEN POLCARI: Landa.

ALBERT LANDA: L-A-N-D-A.

STEVEN POLCARI: L-A-N-D-A. Uh, about Thomas Hart Benton. With us is Martica Sawin, the art critic. And we're going to talk—I think mainly about the Benton murals at—at the New School. And Benton's visit to the murals.

ALBERT LANDA: Several.

STEVEN POLCARI: Several visits.

ALBERT LANDA: Yeah.

STEVEN POLCARI: I—now, he came back—of course he did them in the '30s. 1930.

ALBERT LANDA: Well, the building opened in 1930, and I—I think he completed the mural in 1929. And Orozco completed his at about the same time.

STEVEN POLCARI: Yes.

ALBERT LANDA: They worked on different floors.

STEVEN POLCARI: That's right.

ALBERT LANDA: Parallel, uh, efforts.

STEVEN POLCARI: They must've went back and forth, in terms of—?

ALBERT LANDA: But I have no—I've—I've never read anything or seen anything that indicated they had a relationship. They did have a relationship in one way, which had to do with their selection. There was a woman named—she was a—they describe her here. Alvin Johnson describes her as an agent.

MARTICA SAWIN: Alma Reed.

ALBERT LANDA: Alma Reed.

STEVEN POLCARI: Oh, yeah, Alma Reed.

ALBERT LANDA: Yes. And—but she—

STEVEN POLCARI: Orozco's dealer and lover, I think.

ALBERT LANDA: Yes. [Laughs.] And she had a salon.

STEVEN POLCARI: Yes.

ALBERT LANDA: —selling in her home. And Orozco, when he came to New York, was very much a part of that. And she suggested, knowing of the New School putting up the building, she suggested, why not.

STEVEN POLCARI: There's some bare walls.

ALBERT LANDA: Yes.

STEVEN POLCARI: Yes.

ALBERT LANDA: And, uh, and she could persuade Orozco to do this. [00:02:03] For no money.

STEVEN POLCARI: [Laughs.] How fun.

ALBERT LANDA: I must say.

STEVEN POLCARI: No money.

ALBERT LANDA: I must say, I find that hard to believe. There had to be something. Uh, in my own view. Someone, in some way, must have underwritten, or—he wasn't a wealthy man then.

STEVEN POLCARI: No, and certainly there were costs of materials. It certainly would've been reimbursed for cost of materials.

ALBERT LANDA: Yes. Yes.

STEVEN POLCARI: Uh, there.

MARTICA SAWIN: I think that's what was stipulated, was that they would do it for the cost of materials.

STEVEN POLCARI: Yes.

ALBERT LANDA: Well, certainly Benton—Benton did. There's a famous quote of his. "You give me the eggs and I'll give you the tempura."

STEVEN POLCARI: [Laughs.]

ALBERT LANDA: Something of that sort. And that's in Johnson's book.

STEVEN POLCARI: Uh—and identifying—Mr. Johns—Al Johnson was the—

ALBERT LANDA: Alvin Johnson was the, uh—

STEVEN POLCARI: The first director.

ALBERT LANDA: The first director and president of the New School.

STEVEN POLCARI: The New School. And your relationship to the New School?

ALBERT LANDA: I'm a former officer. I worked at the New School for—from 1960 to 1985 in various capacities. And the last 10 years, I was executive vice president—

STEVEN POLCARI: Uh-huh [affirmative].

ALBERT LANDA: —of the New School, so. And I knew every president except one. And I did know Alvin Johnson, because when I went to the New School, he still had an office there. Many years after his retirement. And, uh, so—Johnson agreed that Orozco would do his mural, and then the story goes that Benton wanted to see him.

STEVEN POLCARI: Wanted to—

ALBERT LANDA: Came to see him, and—and actually said, you know, "This is an American institution," and "Why are you letting a foreigner do this, when I'm available?" [Laughs.] And Johnson said, "Well, we have other walls." You know? And other similar space. [00:04:01]

STEVEN POLCARI: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ALBERT LANDA: And, um, and he said, "But I have no money." And—I'm paraphrasing, of course. And Benton said, "Well, you give me the eggs and I'll give you the tempura." And agreed to do the mural.

MARTICA SAWIN: [Cross talk.] And Al—

ALBERT LANDA: So that's the connection between the two. It—it—in that Orozco's selection led to Benton's aggressively pursuing—

STEVEN POLCARI: —pursuing the mural. And he was getting into mural painting himself.

ALBERT LANDA: Yes.

STEVEN POLCARI: Starting – having started a series in the early '20s.

ALBERT LANDA: Yes.

STEVEN POLCARI: Uh, and now he was pursuing it even more. And this is about—the Mexican moment's about to happen in America. In the '30s. Martica, yeah.

MARTICA SAWIN: No, I was just going to ask Al if he knew whether, since the panel's—since the paintings are on panels, uh, which were then attached to the wall, did Benton work on them in his studio, or did he work on them there at the New School? Do you have any idea?

ALBERT LANDA: I—I believe he worked at them in his studio.

MARTICA SAWIN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. But then they were—

ALBERT LANDA: I've never heard of him working at the—and I don't know where he would have done it at the New School, as a matter of fact.

MARTICA SAWIN: Right. Okay.

ALBERT LANDA: But I believe he did—he worked on them at his studio. And the feeling you get is that he worked on so much at the same time, he was always running around the country doing sketches of, uh—of this, that, or the other thing. And I don't think, until he got this assignment, that he seriously turned his attention to the urban scene. And what was going on in the Village, and around the school. And of course, those two New York City murals—which I think—which I am in love with—um, were a reflection of his life in the Village and who he knew, and some of them are depictions of famous people.

STEVEN POLCARI: Max Eastman, and—

ALBERT LANDA: Max Eastman.

STEVEN POLCARI: —and the subway—

ALBERT LANDA: And Lucy Mitchell. You know, Wesley Clair Mitchell's wife, who was a leading progressive educator. [00:06:02]

STEVEN POLCARI: That's right.

ALBERT LANDA: And, uh—and Alvin Johnson himself.

STEVEN POLCARI: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. That's right.

ALBERT LANDA: Yeah, that—clinching the glass—

STEVEN POLCARI: Glasses, with, uh—

ALBERT LANDA: With him.

STEVEN POLCARI: Yeah. Of course, Pollack posed—Jackson Pollack posed for the, uh, for the mural.

ALBERT LANDA: Did he? I didn't know that.

STEVEN POLCARI: Yeah, there's a—he's there, and he was a student at that time, of Benton. Um, and—well, there's a whole slew of things. Yeah.

ALBERT LANDA: So. He did the murals. And, um, I have here a letter in which evi—to Hans Simons. And, you know, I could—if you want, you could make copies of these, if you'd like them for your archives. I have a lot of Benton's letters. And some of them I think are—you must have seen this one. This is—this is the six-page description of how he did these murals. The materials.

STEVEN POLCARI: These were written in the '70s? Uh, when were these written?

ALBERT LANDA: Well, these were at different times. The first—the—the—these are basically, uh, letters having to do with his two restorations.

STEVEN POLCARI: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ALBERT LANDA: That he personally did. I was involved with the second one. I—I got assistants for him, to help him. Um, he wanted to do them himself. That was clear. He didn't like the idea of anyone else playing around with his murals. And he stated that. That he was the one best prepared. And in one of these letters, he even talks about the fact that he's an experience restorer. So.

STEVEN POLCARI: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARTICA SAWIN: When was the first restoration?

ALBERT LANDA: Fifty-seven. Let's see. I have a—a little calendar, I have here. On October—yeah. The first letter is—he had come and looked at the murals. And, uh, he found nothing that could not be repaired. [00:08:01] He knew about some of the panels being bent and cracked. What happened was that as they got lifted into the—into the building, when they first installed them, they were lifted up, and, uh—there's a little sketch I'm looking for. And they bent. And there were cracks, actually, that resulted from that. Although they never did.

STEVEN POLCARI: When—when they were first installed.

ALBERT LANDA: When they were first installed.

STEVEN POLCARI: But he didn't repair them back then, huh?

ALBERT LANDA: No, no. He didn't feel that they had to be repaired. And, uh, he thought that they could be—it would be best not to do too much to them. But he did something to them. That's described in one of these letters. And so, this ends with, "I'll be down in New York in about four days, and we'll look the business over." He was preparing to come and restore it. Then, in the second letter—

STEVEN POLCARI: Well, let's talk straightforward, uh.

ALBERT LANDA: Yeah.

STEVEN POLCARI: Let—um, I—letters are a separate thing—

ALBERT LANDA: Yeah.

STEVEN POLCARI: —in interviews. If we have documentation accompanying the interview, that's great.

ALBERT LANDA: Yes. Well, and—in talking about it, what I would say is that there's a long history of these murals having a special place in his heart. These were—and he described them—these were his first murals for a public space. And he considered them very important for that reason. And I think they were probably—they probably influenced—uh, I think they're known to have influenced a lot of artists to do mural painting. And he cared about them. And he did re—keep returning to the scene to see how they were doing. [00:10:03] Now, when the Benton mural was first installed, it was installed in what was—uh, a room that was used as the boardroom. So it was not a heavily used room. And so it wasn't anticipated that there would be, you know, deterioration.—from it being heavily used. But he did find some in 1957 and decided to come and do a restoration. He did that, uh, during a week. The first week of November, in 1957. And there is documentation. He describes what work he did, and he makes recommendations to the school to watch this, that, and the other thing, to prevent it from occurring again. Um, and actually sends a report to the school on the materials he used, the glazes, etc.

STEVEN POLCARI: That he used in the past, or that he was now using in—

ALBERT LANDA: That he used in this—

STEVEN POLCARI: —those years?

ALBERT LANDA: In, uh—let's see. For this restoration. And—in 1957. After he did it, he clearly went back to Kansas City, and immediately wrote this and sent it to the school. He probably had promised the president that he would—would do that. So—

STEVEN POLCARI: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And these are letters to?

ALBERT LANDA: This is a report. It went to the school in 1957. So it went to Hans Simons, who was the president at that time. And the preceding letter is addressed to Dr. Simons. Who was one of the German university in exile scholars. Who—who came over in those years.

STEVEN POLCARI: What—what was his area, Dr. Simons?

ALBERT LANDA: What?

STEVEN POLCARI: What was his area, Dr.—

ALBERT LANDA: Political science. His father, incidentally, was the chief justice of the Weimar Republic. [00:12:02] He came from a very distinguished, uh—

STEVEN POLCARI: No wonder he had to run for his life.

ALBERT LANDA: [Laughs.] Yes. And, um, he was a very fine president, incidentally, although sort of a rigid guy. He's—and he—he gave the school 10 very good years and then left. Well, then we come to the '60s. The next letter I have is 1968. That year the school gave Benton an honorary degree. I was there then at that time. And he agreed, when he came to do—to—to receive the honorary degree, that he would do another restoration. Because there really was substantial deterioration the second time.

STEVEN POLCARI: By—by deterioration—

MARTICA SAWIN: Excuse me, Al—

ALBERT LANDA: The—the room by then had become a classroom.

STEVEN POLCARI: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARTICA SAWIN: Uh-huh [affirmative].

ALBERT LANDA: And smoking was permitted. There was a lot of smoking going on. And, uh, there were a lot of people—it was a very popular classroom, because its size, it would take 60 or 70.

STEVEN POLCARI: Chairs against—

MARTICA SAWIN: The murals were low down.

ALBERT LANDA: Chairs, yes.

MARTICA SAWIN: You could push your chair right into them, with the—

ALBERT LANDA: Yes. Yes.

STEVEN POLCARI: What happened to the Rothko murals at, uh, Harvard.

ALBERT LANDA: And at a certain point they built—at a certain point they built a railing. To protect, because there had been some chipping that had resulted from people bumping into the—uh, the Benton mural.

STEVEN POLCARI: Can you get secondhand smoke from mural paintings?

ALBERT LANDA: I don't—that's a good question. [They laugh.] So, and—so he did come that summer. And as I said before, I helped get, uh, students to help him. It was a—it was quite a wonderful experience for everyone. He was such a character, personality. And lively. And energetic. It just amazed me to see him work. All these young people just couldn't up with it, you know.

STEVEN POLCARI: So the classroom was closed, and he was working in it? [00:14:01]

ALBERT LANDA: Yes. Yes.

STEVEN POLCARI: Uh-huh [affirmative], I've got that.

ALBERT LANDA: It was during the summer, when—uh, when the school could close down a room. During the regular academic year it wouldn't've been able to give up that space.

STEVEN POLCARI: Mm-hmm [affirmative], that's right. There was no air conditioning in the room, I assume, so.

ALBERT LANDA: No. And there was a lot of discussion about that.

STEVEN POLCARI: Were there windows? Were they—they have any—

ALBERT LANDA: Yes, but the windows were rarely opened.

STEVEN POLCARI: Uh-huh [affirmative].

ALBERT LANDA: And incidentally, the windows through which they had originally been brought in, over the years were changed so that you could—[laughs]—no longer get them out. The same way. And when the—uh, years later, when they—

STEVEN POLCARI: They were sold.

ALBERT LANDA: —when they were sold, they actually had to widen the, uh, opening of the windows in order to get them out of the building.

STEVEN POLCARI: Didn't they just take them off the stretchers and then roll them up and take them—

MARTICA SAWIN: No, they were Masonite.

ALBERT LANDA: No.

STEVEN POLCARI: Oh.

ALBERT LANDA: No. They made—the huge—

STEVEN POLCARI: They're Masonite.

MARTICA SAWIN: Aren't they on Masonite?

ALBERT LANDA: They're on board.

MARTICA SAWIN: Uh, yeah.

STEVEN POLCARI: Oh, they're on board, that's right.

ALBERT LANDA: Yes.

MARTICA SAWIN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ALBERT LANDA: And no, what they did was build large cases for each mural. I forgot the name of the woman who did that. She was a well-known restorer. I think top—top flight person. And they made special cases for them. Uh, with the idea that they were going to have to store them and take care of them for a while before they were resold.

STEVEN POLCARI: She—was she from the Williams Conservation Lab?

ALBERT LANDA: I don't think so.

STEVEN POLCARI: At that time?

ALBERT LANDA: I don't think so.

STEVEN POLCARI: Uh, they—because they were sold, and then brought up to the Williams Conservation Lab.

ALBERT LANDA: Yes. But that—that was, uh—

STEVEN POLCARI: Someday.

ALBERT LANDA: This was prior to the—well, when they were taken down from the walls, they were taken down by the broker. By the dealer who had bought them. With the idea of reselling them. So, as a result of the second restoration, uh, he again—he wrote a wh—an entire history of the mural painting. Very detailed, about every aspect, how he mixed his solutions, his paints, and—and all of that. [00:16:09] And about the problems, and his own analysis of them. And his own history related to those, uh, panels. How often he saw them, and—and that. And made a—a—another series of recommendations to the school about the future—taking care of them in the future. Here, this is what I proposed doing. And then he laid out his agenda. So. Then, in September—am I doing okay?

MARTICA SAWIN: Yes.

ALBERT LANDA: Is this more or less what you're looking for?

MARTICA SAWIN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ALBERT LANDA: I know, I'm not capable of giving too much detail. I'm not an art person.

STEVEN POLCARI: No, no. That's fine.

ALBERT LANDA: All right. Although I've been dean of the graduate art school, and all, but that was just an accident of history. But I'm really not. And then after he finished the restoration, once again—and this is just Benton—he did—[laughs]—another report on the work, what he had done, what he expects the result will be, warning about certain things that happened, the curling of the paint, etc. Trying to be helpful.

STEVEN POLCARI: Very serious, very hands-on, technical use, and—and confidence.

ALBERT LANDA: Yes. You know, in looking all this over, it—it occurred to me, which is why I originally called Martica, is that this really—this really—some art historian really ought to get this material.

STEVEN POLCARI: Oh yes.

ALBERT LANDA: And I—uh, we can talk about that a little bit. Well, I see here—I know this was my idea. In May of—oh no, this—this goes back to '76. For some reason. [00:18:01] But in the bicentennial year, we were beginning to think about selling the murals.

STEVEN POLCARI: Why? Why—just maintenance, or?

ALBERT LANDA: Because—

STEVEN POLCARI: Protection?

ALBERT LANDA: All of the things that he had warned about were happening again.

STEVEN POLCARI: Such as?

ALBERT LANDA: Cracks. People were still damaging the murals. Some people were still smoking. It turned out that having a lot of people breathing in a room—

STEVEN POLCARI: Yes, it's bad.

ALBERT LANDA: —Is bad for the mural. And it was very clear—I believe—I'm not sure of this. I wasn't there. But I think—I think Everett may have—John Everett, who was president for 18 years. And—and was president when that second restoration was done. I think he did commit himself to temperature control, to doing things to try and deal with the problem. But they never were done. And the school was very—the school was very successful then. It had had—during Everett's 18 years, it only had one year in which it had a very small deficit. All of the rest were non-deficit years. And many of them, there were substantial excesses. Beyond costs. So—but it was cash-poor.

STEVEN POLCARI: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ALBERT LANDA: It didn't really have it. And there were some needs that were evolving. People were beginning to think of endowment—had almost no endowment then. And also there was talk about buying a house. A presidential residence for entertainment, and things of that sort. So, I began to press for it. I felt that we were not taking care of these murals as—as they deserved to be. The other thing was, I would go down occasionally, as I'd go out of the building or into the building, I'd pass the guards in the lobby. [00:20:10] And I'd ask them if people were asking about seeing the murals. One out of 50 times, they'd say someone came in and asked where they were.

STEVEN POLCARI: Probably me.

ALBERT LANDA: Yeah.

MARTICA SAWIN: [Laughs.]

ALBERT LANDA: No one—no one seemed interested in—in the murals. Now, what I learned over the years was that Benton had never been a success in New York. [Laughs.]

STEVEN POLCARI: Yeah, it's the only place he isn't.

ALBERT LANDA: Right.

STEVEN POLCARI: That's right.

ALBERT LANDA: He—and—what was the name of the fellow who was at the Metropolitan Museum, in charge of contemporary American painting?

STEVEN POLCARI: Henry Geldzahler.

ALBERT LANDA: Henry Geldzahler. Actually, when we began to peddle the murals around, American Express wanted them. And Geldzahler was their consultant. And he talked them out of it.

STEVEN POLCARI: Yep.

ALBERT LANDA: And, um—

STEVEN POLCARI: It's nice.

ALBERT LANDA: Yes.

STEVEN POLCARI: We have very sophisticated, uh—[they laugh]—curators for American art in New York.

ALBERT LANDA: Yes. And the interesting thing was that [Thomas] Hoving adored them, and was actually planning a retrospective at one point. And Geldzahler worked for him.

STEVEN POLCARI: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, they didn't get along.

ALBERT LANDA: So—yes. So, at any rate. I'm wandering a little bit. Let me see where—

STEVEN POLCARI: Whom—do you know whom else it was offered to that turned it down?

ALBERT LANDA: Well, I have some of that. I have some of that here. Uh, so, we went through the restoration, and—and there was a letter to—I think I probably have it here—in December of '72 in which—we did a little brochure one Christmas, a little brochure with all of the murals. [00:22:00] I was looking for one. I couldn't find it.

MARTICA SAWIN: I have it.

ALBERT LANDA: I wanted to bring it—

MARTICA SAWIN: I have one.

ALBERT LANDA: —to you.

MARTICA SAWIN: [Laughs.] I'll give it to you.

ALBERT LANDA: And we did it in four color. And it was like a—we sent it out like a Christmas card that year. We just wanted to take pride in the—in the Benton murals. And Benton wrote a letter, a lovely letter, to Everett, saying how much he liked the brochure and appreciated it. So we had that. And in that letter he said, the murals were the first executed for a public place.

STEVEN POLCARI: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ALBERT LANDA: That he had done for a public place. Um, then a month later, he wrote a letter to Everett, saying that he was not happy that the old boardroom had become a classroom, because that was probably the principle reason that it kept—that the murals kept getting damaged. And he was—he was very concerned. He was very tied to these works. Um, then we did—here was the press release. We decided to—on the—on the occasion of the bicentennial, to have visiting hours for the murals. And we announced the [*New York Times*], and—and here, as a matter of fact, the *Times*, printed the story, and—

STEVEN POLCARI: The information about—in—uh—

ALBERT LANDA: Yes. About the fact that—and, you know, almost no one came.

STEVEN POLCARI: In the fall bicentennial.

ALBERT LANDA: Yes. All of these things convinced me that the institution would be best served, and the murals would be best served.

STEVEN POLCARI: Best served.

ALBERT LANDA: Now, I must tell you that this—that there was a firestorm of resistance. From my closest

colleagues at the school, the dean and others. [00:24:03] I was selling the school's patrim—patrimony. Uh—[laughs]—that sort of thing. Made me feel terrible, as a—[laughs]—matter of fact. But I was really convinced that I was doing the best thing. And, you know, I also had to be practical about it. I felt the school needed a rationale that people could understand. And I thought that was—it was not only true, it was a hell of a good rationale. And that whole issue of, you know, how do you deal with these works of art? Do they belong in museums, in public places, do you hide them in a classroom? How many people actually saw them from 1930 to the time—you know that more people see them in a year. I think the people ought to be interviewed across the street, about what's happened since they acquired the murals there, incidentally.

STEVEN POLCARI: Well, they—of course they were over here in the Equitable building.

ALBERT LANDA: Yes.

STEVEN POLCARI: For many years. Equitable bought them for a couple of million dollars, had them restored at Williams, uh, Conservation.

ALBERT LANDA: They bought them for 3.2 [million].

STEVEN POLCARI: Three point two. There, they did a wonderful job of restoration, they had a symposium about Benton. There was new—renewed scholarly interest in this bad boy. Uh, here, and all of that was good. The act of selling brought him back and those murals back into the public's purview. And I think that was good in itself. Uh—they were nicely installed over here in the Equitable.

ALBERT LANDA: Oh no, there's one—I told you that when I saw the restoration, that I thought the colors weren't true. Because I had been there so often with Benton as he was—as he was restoring the mural. And I thought they were much too garish, the colors. Because, after all, I'd lived with them for over 20 years.

STEVEN POLCARI: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ALBERT LANDA: And—but I just looked at them before I came over here. [00:26:03] And I don't have the same feeling where they're hung at—across the street.

STEVEN POLCARI: Maybe the freshness. It—it takes a while.

ALBERT LANDA: Yes. And I certainly didn't have the feeling. These are pretty close to what I remember. And I must say that it's absolutely sensational and beautiful.

MARTICA SAWIN: It is.

STEVEN POLCARI: Yeah.

MARTICA SAWIN: Beautiful, and—[inaudible].

STEVEN POLCARI: They're now across the street and the Equitable has moved across the street here on Sixth Avenue, and now they're in the lobby in a squared room, and they're seemingly more accessible. They were on—they were all on the same plane in the old Equitable building. Here they're very accessible. Uh, they're—which is fine. You can see them from the street, which is wonderful, too. The only drawback is, a set of them is on—is over a bunch of escalators. Which makes them somewhat removed from the public.

ALBERT LANDA: Well, I just—when I went in, just before, I talked to a couple of guards. And I said, "How often do people come in and ask about the murals or where they are?" And they said, "Every day." And that made me feel good.

STEVEN POLCARI: Yeah.

MARTICA SAWIN: Yeah. In the other place, where they were in the Equitable building, they were hung much too high. From the—well, you know, in comparison with what Benton had intended when he painted them.

ALBERT LANDA: Yes.

MARTICA SAWIN: It was really, uh, ba—I—I know they had to, to protect them. But, uh, you couldn't see them properly.

ALBERT LANDA: Now, down to—this is an area in which I was deeply involved. We began to have, in the late '70s, discussions about selling the murals. And—and John Everett, who was then president, took—did mention it to the board. I don't—I don't think they took a vote at that time, but he did tell the board that he wanted to explore, see what their value was on the market, etc. [00:28:03] And there was a firm in Philadelphia. I think it

was called David and David, if I remember correctly.

STEVEN POLCARI: David and David? Very good.

ALBERT LANDA: Yes. Did you—does it mean anything to you?

STEVEN POLCARI: No, it doesn't. [They laugh.]

ALBERT LANDA: But Carl David—or Carl David—it might've been Carl David, Inc., I have here—and they were given—an agreement was signed with them, in which they were given some limited—it may have been a year to find a buyer. And I remember that there were two or three potential buyers that they came up with. The one I remember most, because it seemed very real, was the University of Texas.

STEVEN POLCARI: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. At Austin.

ALBERT LANDA: Yes.

STEVEN POLCARI: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ALBERT LANDA: And—and they clearly wanted it and were hungry for it. But they never did come with an offer. They thought that they would be able to raise the money in order to buy the—

STEVEN POLCARI: And they weren't able to raise the money?

ALBERT LANDA: No. At that time. And we were surprised—[laughs]—all that oil. Just flowing.

STEVEN POLCARI: That's right.

ALBERT LANDA: And, um.

STEVEN POLCARI: They're—they're—they've been wonderful collectors of manuscripts and archives. The library itself here has been very good and active for many years on the market. So that's really surprising. Maybe it was just a moment of downturn, or whatever.

ALBERT LANDA: Yes. And finally, uh—the arrangement with David ran out, and we decided not to renew. They simply hadn't done the job. At that time, I contacted Abbot Kaplan [ph] at Hirshhorn.

STEVEN POLCARI: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ALBERT LANDA: I had been down there recently, I saw some Bentons in the Hirshhorn. [00:30:02] And, uh, several others had mentioned that that would be—you know, that that would be the correct museum to have something like this.

STEVEN POLCARI: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ALBERT LANDA: After all, it was a national institution.

STEVEN POLCARI: On the Mall.

ALBERT LANDA: On the Mall, in Washington, etc. And I had a wonderful conversation with Abbot Kaplan, who clearly wanted them. He was a fan of Benton's, he was hungry for them. Did you know him?

MARTICA SAWIN: No, I never did.

ALBERT LANDA: Lovely man. Lovely man. Well, he was just curator, before the museum, you know. And Hirshhorn knew the New School. He would come to occasional events of ours. I remember one in which he screamed at the chef for not—for the food not being hot enough—[laughs]—during dinner. And the, uh—so—of course his wife is still alive, isn't she? Olga? Hirshhorn.

MARTICA SAWIN: Yeah.

ALBERT LANDA: Or is—yeah.

MARTICA SAWIN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ALBERT LANDA: So.

STEVEN POLCARI: A third wife just died, couple of weeks ago.

ALBERT LANDA: Oh, that may have been her.

MARTICA SAWIN: Oh, well then that's—

ALBERT LANDA: Then—then that was her.

STEVEN POLCARI: Lily Harman [ph].

ALBERT LANDA: Oh yeah? Oh yeah?

MARTICA SAWIN: Oh, Lily Harman.

ALBERT LANDA: Oh—oh, no. No.

MARTICA SAWIN: No. Olga was the last one.

STEVEN POLCARI: Olga.

MARTICA SAWIN: She's quite a buddy of David's.

STEVEN POLCARI: Yes, I know. She lives in Florida now, I think?

ALBERT LANDA: I think.

MARTICA SAWIN: And in Washington.

STEVEN POLCARI: Yeah.

ALBERT LANDA: So, he said we—"We're serious about this." And then there was some conversation. And I believe there was a—a draft agreement. For a million dollars, for his sale of the murals for a million dollars. To the Hirshhorn. We thought that was the lowest possible price. But it was the Hirshhorn. So we were interested in going ahead and keeping this negotiation moving. Well, they assigned, uh, as their negotia—they assigned the negotiation to one of their board members. Whose name was—he may have died recently. [00:32:03] Jerome Greene. He was a board member of the Hirshhorn. He was a New York attorney, Marshall, Bratter, Greene, the name of the firm. And he began to want the price changed. Downward. And he was so crude, and bullying in his dealings with us, and with me, that we simply said, "There's no way we're going to deal with this man." And with— withdrew from it. It was just—we thought we had had a deal with them, which we weren't happy with. And he came along and wanted to squeeze. And we were not going to be squeezed.

STEVEN POLCARI: Wrong person. And an attorney. Probably didn't—what was he doing in the art world?

ALBERT LANDA: Yeah. I don't—I don't know. Um, the following year, 19—that was in 1980. The—negotiation with the Hirshhorn. The following year, Christophe Janet came. Now, that came through—

MARTICA SAWIN: Francis Naumann.

ALBERT LANDA: —Francis Naumann. Francis Naumann taught—you know more about him, I would think, than I do.

MARTICA SAWIN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah.

ALBERT LANDA: He taught at Parsons.

MARTICA SAWIN: Right. I had hired him to teach art history there, and—uh, Francis is an excellent art historian. But he also has a very good sense of the market. [Laughs.] And he always—

STEVEN POLCARI: His brother's a dealer.

MARTICA SAWIN: Right. Yeah. And so he brought this person in, then.

ALBERT LANDA: And—and he brought into it this firm, uh, called Maurice Segaura. S-E-G-A-U-R-A. They were located up on—was it 50—uh, 79th Street. Seventy-ninth Street. They had a gallery.

STEVEN POLCARI: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ALBERT LANDA: And the president was a young—I thought he was charming—Frenchman named Christophe Janet. [00:34:07] J-A-N-E-T. And—who was a Yale-trained art historian. Uh, but very French, with a French accent, etc. At first glance, I didn't much like him. But I grew to have great respect for him, because his word

was always good. Whatever he said he would do, he would do. And did. And he put together—he and Segaura—they had investors. He put together a two million dollar offer. And we sold the—murals to him. In 1982. And I do have a copy of the sales agreement. Incidentally.

MARTICA SAWIN: Al, uh, is it true that—that you put the restriction on that they had to go to—to an American museum, or?

ALBERT LANDA: Yes. So, well, I'll—I'll read you. In the agreement, which—uh, it details the total price, and how it's to be paid. There were three payments within a matter of months. And who would be responsible for packing, shipping, and all of that. Getting it out of the building—we knew that would cost money. Indicating that there was no broker involved in the deal. Um, Segaura agreed that he would accept the murals as-is. Which was an important point. Now. Point six in the agreement. "It is understood that the murals are a complete set, and Segaura agrees that the murals will in no event be separated, sold in pieces, or in any way treated by them in a manner inconsistent with this understanding. [00:36:01] Segaura further agrees that any resale by them of the murals shall be to a party located in the United States, for display primarily in the United States." And we had, uh—we knew that we were going to insist on these terms. Because, you know, it's one thing to—for the New School to sell them. It's another thing for the university to—to send them out of the country, or break them up, etc. And, um, so I have that agreement there. We knew that in the final analysis there was no way we could really hold them to that agreement. It would've been first of all very costly to have tried to hold them to the agreement. So what it really came down to was a matter of trust. Is this a—is—was this a person, or are these people, who will try to keep to that agreement? And do the—make their best effort. We weren't going to be unreasonable. But we wanted them to really make an effort.

STEVEN POLCARI: And this fellow Janet did.

ALBERT LANDA: And they did. They were wonderful. And, you know, for example, it wasn't long before they had American Express, and then that was talked out of. And they had many disappointments. And meanwhile, it cost them a lot of money. They were laying out a lot of money on a monthly basis to store them. They had spent a lot of money on crating them.

MARTICA SAWIN: Weren't they actually put on view at the Whitney during that period?

ALBERT LANDA: No. I don't remember that.

MARTICA SAWIN: No?

ALBERT LANDA: I don't remember that.

MARTICA SAWIN: I thought they were.

ALBERT LANDA: No.

MARTICA SAWIN: Oh, okay.

ALBERT LANDA: No.

MARTICA SAWIN: I know I would be—

ALBERT LANDA: So, time went on. Time went on. And they were not selling them. And he was keeping me posted. [00:38:01] Every time there was something on the horizon, he'd call me and say, "We have a meeting coming up Wednesday. We have high hopes for it," and all of that. So I knew everything that was happening. And he was totally honorable about this. And then one day he called me.

STEVEN POLCARI: And he was in the art world.

MARTICA SAWIN: I really—I would be hearing from Francis on it.

ALBERT LANDA: Yes.

MARTICA SAWIN: I would be hearing—getting bulletins from Francis all the time about how, uh—[laughs]—difficult the whole thing was.

ALBERT LANDA: Yes.

MARTICA SAWIN: And how much money they were losing on it, and they were quite despairing.

ALBERT LANDA: And he obviously had said, "We're going to make money on this deal." You know?

STEVEN POLCARI: Yes, yes.

ALBERT LANDA: So, he called me one day. And I just recognized a difference in his voice. And he said, "Al. You know that I tried." I said, "Absolutely. I know that." And I said, "You said you would make your best effort. You've made your best effort," so far as I was concerned. And one of the reasons that was important was that we now had this new president, Jonathan Fanton coming around. You know, in the picture. And if these were sold, I didn't want a new president saying they broke the agreement. I didn't want them attacked. I thought they had earned our respect and support.

STEVEN POLCARI: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ALBERT LANDA: So, he said, uh, "I have an offer, and it's from overseas." It was evidently a Japanese buyer. Through Switzerland.

STEVEN POLCARI: Of course!

MARTICA SAWIN: [Laughs.]

ALBERT LANDA: Well, you know—you knew what was going.

STEVEN POLCARI: First thing.

ALBERT LANDA: You knew what was going on then.

STEVEN POLCARI: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ALBERT LANDA: And he said, "I am—I—I'm not sure that I can hold them." He said, "It's gone on much too long." So I said, "Look. I'm going to do several things. [00:40:00] Uh, I understand what you're saying to me. I'm going to write a memo to our new president, and give him a little background on this. I don't want him just to react because some reporter's on the phone. And the other thing is, I want you to give me a little time. Because I think I ought to notify the mayor's office. Because this a New York City asset, which it may lose."

STEVEN POLCARI: It's about New York life.

ALBERT LANDA: Yes.

STEVEN POLCARI: Some of it.

ALBERT LANDA: So, he agreed.

STEVEN POLCARI: Some of it.

ALBERT LANDA: And—[laughs]—it was so funny. And this is where I think I really—I'm very proud of what I did here. Um, an old friend of mine. Actually he was a friend of Eddie Cohen's wife. Remember Eddie Cohen, the fundraiser?

MARTICA SAWIN: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative].

ALBERT LANDA: Well, Eddie Cohen's wife grew up with this fellow, who was now assistant to the mayor. Herb—Herb Rickman. Herbert Rickman was assistant to Koch.

STEVEN POLCARI: Koch.

ALBERT LANDA: Assistant to the mayor. And—Mayor Koch. And I called Herb, and told him—gave him the history of this. And I said, "Herb. You've got to tell the mayor. Because who knows what's going to happen? This gets into the paper; the mayor may get criticized. I mean, you just don't let something like this disappear from the city."

STEVEN POLCARI: I think that's very savvy, actually. Very sensitive and savvy.

ALBERT LANDA: So, the mayor responded immediately, much to his credit. And he appointed Barnabas McHenry, who was—who was—who had been president of the *Reader's Digest* Foundation for a long time. A very sophisticated guy—to chair a committee. Supposedly for all art, but it was really focused on this problem. [00:42:02]

STEVEN POLCARI: To find a buyer?

ALBERT LANDA: Yeah.

STEVEN POLCARI: In the city.

ALBERT LANDA: To find a buyer in the city.

STEVEN POLCARI: For the panels.

ALBERT LANDA: For—for the murals. And they concentrated on new buildings, or buildings—major buildings that were being renovated. Or new buildings that were going up. On developers. And I understand a couple of developers were interested. Um, one of them—I wonder if I have the name here? Yes. Resnick's. The Resnick. Burt Resnick—

STEVEN POLCARI: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ALBERT LANDA: —was putting up a building, and he was interested, uh in that. And then, Equitable came along, and they focused on Equitable. Equitable had an executive who was head of their real estate division. You see, he would be the one that they would call.

STEVEN POLCARI: That's why we are in this building ourselves.

ALBERT LANDA: Yes.

STEVEN POLCARI: He arranged a good deal for us to be—and to move from our old offices, which had become too small, on East 65th Street, to these offices. We're on several floors, because it had much more space—here. And, uh, the Equitable had a wonderful collection. They have the gallery. They used to—he brought the Whitney in, to its lobby. Commissioned the Lichtenstein. And arranged this Benton.

ALBERT LANDA: This is Ben Holloway.

STEVEN POLCARI: Yes.

ALBERT LANDA: Ben Holloway.

STEVEN POLCARI: Ben Holloway, exactly.

ALBERT LANDA: Benjamin Holloway.

STEVEN POLCARI: Absolutely.

ALBERT LANDA: And Ben Holloway—who I got to know later in an—[laughs]—entirely different context—a sculptor friend of mine did his bust. [Laughs.] He had a little bit of an ego. And, um—but Ben Holloway was the guy. And he got sold on it. And sold it to the company. So that's how the murals were saved.

STEVEN POLCARI: That's right.

ALBERT LANDA: And that's the story that I thought ought to be told, because it does take an effort. [00:44:04] And it does take—

STEVEN POLCARI: The right people.

ALBERT LANDA: —the right people and understanding people to do this. And these things don't have to disappear, you know? But someone has to care, and someone has to want to do it. And we were fortunate in just, you know, having a good run of luck. And they were sold for \$3.2 million. They didn't make a lot of money, these people.

STEVEN POLCARI: In the end, they—they were all probably—I don't know what their profit was.

ALBERT LANDA: They made a little money.

STEVEN POLCARI: They made some, but not as much, right.

ALBERT LANDA: Yeah, not as much as they—

STEVEN POLCARI: If they had sold it right away, they probably would have done very well.

ALBERT LANDA: Yes. Yes.

STEVEN POLCARI: But.

ALBERT LANDA: Yes.

STEVEN POLCARI: Okay.

ALBERT LANDA: But they were happy [laughs] at that point—

STEVEN POLCARI: Point, yes.

ALBERT LANDA: —to get out with their skin. And, um—now. I have here, just to—here's the resolution that the board finally passed, approving the purchase. And a draft press release, which I probably did. And here—oh. This—this is remarkable. I sent this memo to Fanton about this whole situation.

STEVEN POLCARI: Who's Fan—oh, Fanton is the president.

ALBERT LANDA: Fanton is the president, the new president of the New School.

STEVEN POLCARI: Yeah. Yeah.

ALBERT LANDA: Uh, two days later. I don't have the date on it, this appeared in the *Times*. I could've fainted. I was sitting at breakfast.

STEVEN POLCARI: An article about the murals being split up.

ALBERT LANDA: An article about the memo.

STEVEN POLCARI: Oh. About the memo.

ALBERT LANDA: Quoting me and everything. Someone had leaked it. The only person I sent it to was the president, so. [Laughs.] I thought it might have been my secretary. She had become friendly with some dealer who wanted an exclusive to try to sell it. And I thought she might've been slipping him information about what was going on, and that he had—he was angry at the school, so he might've done it. [00:46:06] Oh, here he is. I remember this so well. There's Benton, when he was—came and did the restoration.

STEVEN POLCARI: As an older man. We're talking about an article in the *New York Times*.

ALBERT LANDA: An article in the *New York Ti*—I don't have the date—by Michael Brenson.

STEVEN POLCARI: Michael Brenson, that's right. Who was the art critic at the time.

ALBERT LANDA: Yes.

STEVEN POLCARI: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ALBERT LANDA: And, uh, this—and this was the memo. And then, there was a big story on the Equitable purchase, which was February 14th, 1984, was that story. Then I brought—oh here's, uh—I don't remember when Benton died. You must have that.

STEVEN POLCARI: No, I don't remember the year.

ALBERT LANDA: This was, uh—the was the obit. In the *Times*.

STEVEN POLCARI: Was in the '70s though.

ALBERT LANDA: And you notice what they used in—[laughs]—the obit. They used *America Today*.

STEVEN POLCARI: Yeah. Yeah, *America Today*, the mural, there.

ALBERT LANDA: Yes. In the—in the, uh, obituary.

STEVEN POLCARI: That's right.

ALBERT LANDA: And—now here's—and lastly. I kept—someone sent this to me. I think it was in the *Washington Times*. "A mural was found in a drugstore in Washington."

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ALBERT LANDA: Yes?

STEVEN POLCARI: And it is a Benton knocked off?

ALBERT LANDA: Yes. "Washington's own mural painting by Thomas Hart Benton, unmentioned in the obituaries that followed the artist's death last February, has been salvaged from decades of dusty neglect in a drugstore basement. The seven foot by five and a foot—uh, and a half foot untitled painting, which Benton called 'The Water Story—[laughs]—mural.'" He may even—who knows? He may have been even doing this for the—

STEVEN POLCARI: Maybe it's just a preliminary sketch that he just sold, uh, the sketch.

ALBERT LANDA: Yes. "It's now stored in the National Collection of Fine Arts, where officials are unsure how much of the badly damaged work can be restored."

STEVEN POLCARI: Now known as the National Museum of American Art.

ALBERT LANDA: [Laughs.] Yes. Wasn't that inter—well, of course.

STEVEN POLCARI: That's their—

ALBERT LANDA: I recognize, from having looked at these figures all those years, that—um.

STEVEN POLCARI: I didn't know that. I just didn't know about this at all.

ALBERT LANDA: Good. There was something else I had.

STEVEN POLCARI: Amazing. [Laughs.]

ALBERT LANDA: I thought I had a—here.

STEVEN POLCARI: Well, look at that, now.

ALBERT LANDA: I thought I had a page on which the dimensions of the mural were.

STEVEN POLCARI: Oh, that's officially recorded.

ALBERT LANDA: Yes.

STEVEN POLCARI: A—I—uh, a small catalogue was put out on the murals, uh, in—when they were cleaned and restored. There—a scholarly article by a woman named Emily Braun. She now teaches at Hunter. They've—they've entered the literature.

ALBERT LANDA: If you want any of this—

STEVEN POLCARI: I would like all of it.

ALBERT LANDA: You would. Could—could someone make a copy and send me a copy when you're through? [00:02:02] I'd like to have it.

STEVEN POLCARI: Yes, certainly.

ALBERT LANDA: I'll tell you why. I really would like to call Milton Estero, who is an old friend of mine. And ask if he might be interested. And this really ought to be in some—[inaudible]—shouldn't it?

STEVEN POLCARI: Uh, I think so, yeah.

ALBERT LANDA: Yes.

STEVEN POLCARI: Uh, it's a wonderful story, actually, and it's—he's being saved, a Benton being saved by—by corporate America, much, much later.

ALBERT LANDA: The one thing—

STEVEN POLCARI: The populist Benton being—

ALBERT LANDA: The one thing I'm really convinced of now is that museums are not such a great idea. Compared to other things. I mean, when you see the traffic around across the street. And you realize what went on all those other years. And it's basically what goes on in museums every day.

STEVEN POLCARI: Well, there's tremendous traffic in museums now. Maybe in the old days, but nowadays, it's—it's a street itself.

ALBERT LANDA: But isn't it, it's—the big traffic is usually for the special shows, rather than for the—

STEVEN POLCARI: Yeah, but it's so many people, and it's enormous. I mean, you know. Thank you.

MARTICA SAWIN: And I love the fact—

ALBERT LANDA: Now, were you—would you have a copy made?

STEVEN POLCARI: Yes, I will.

ALBERT LANDA: Or I could have a copy made and send it to you. Perfect.

STEVEN POLCARI: No, I will. Uh, I'll need your address.

MARTICA SAWIN: I love the fact, though, that they are right there, with the avenue and the street traffic and everything. That's sort of—you know, that's where murals should be. In public spaces, like that.

ALBERT LANDA: Well, he—he became—he was always troubled by museums, Benton himself. A lot of his interest in murals, uh, came from that.

[Audio Break.]

MARTICA SAWIN: Pause.

STEVEN POLCARI: Oh.

MARTICA SAWIN: Okay.

STEVEN POLCARI: Okay. Uh, here we are again.

MARTICA SAWIN: I just, um, wanted to ask you about Benton's procedure during the second restoration, when you were there. First of all, he did this of his own—free of charge, and of his own volition? Is that correct?

ALBERT LANDA: Free—absolutely free of charge. Except I believe we arranged for a hotel. [00:04:00] For the time he was there.

MARTICA SAWIN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ALBERT LANDA: And, I don't think there was much beyond that. A place to stay, his transportation—I'm sure we would've offered to pay—we didn't want him to incur any costs.

MARTICA SAWIN: Right.

ALBERT LANDA: And we thought he was very generous in offering to do it and—

MARTICA SAWIN: Was he—

ALBERT LANDA: —everyone was so excited [laughs] that he was—

STEVEN POLCARI: Oh, it's a wonderful thing, to have the original artist come back.

ALBERT LANDA: —running around [laughs—

STEVEN POLCARI: Oh, yes.

ALBERT LANDA: —in the building.

MARTICA SAWIN: Did people come in and watch him work? Did he?

ALBERT LANDA: Oh, yes. [Laughs.] Including me. And, um, he was up there working. You know, touching things up, and being very meticulous. And he had four assistants who were art students at the school.

STEVEN POLCARI: Oh, from the New School.

ALBERT LANDA: From the New School.

STEVEN POLCARI: Uh-huh [affirmative].

ALBERT LANDA: We had pretty good art workshops, and—then. And, one of them was not a student. She was

just an artist. She was a friend of mine. [Laughs.] A neighbor. That I said, "Do I have something for you." [They laugh.]

MARTICA SAWIN: Do you know who what was? Do you remember her name?

ALBERT LANDA: And—and she was very—yes, but I can't remember her last name.

MARTICA SAWIN: Oh.

ALBERT LANDA: She's still around.

MARTICA SAWIN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

STEVEN POLCARI: Well, if you remember that, could you send it to me?

ALBERT LANDA: Yes. Oh, yes.

STEVEN POLCARI: I mean, because, uh, that's someone who—

ALBERT LANDA: She may. She may remember what it like.

STEVEN POLCARI: Some of just the little particulars, there.

ALBERT LANDA: Sure. And—

MARTICA SAWIN: And Benton—Benton was—could—could really, um, at least in his younger days, get extremely angry. But he wasn't angry at the New School?

ALBERT LANDA: No.

MARTICA SAWIN: For the way the—you know, the murals were damaged, or?

ALBERT LANDA: No. No. Maybe a—a little testy. Very slightly testy. No, I don't think it was—I think he was—I think he was quite understanding. Of how these things happen, and why they happened.

MARTICA SAWIN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ALBERT LANDA: And, you know, by then we were dealing with a very successful man.

MARTICA SAWIN: Right.

STEVEN POLCARI: He was a successful artist regardless in New York.

ALBERT LANDA: Huh?

MARTICA SAWIN: Yes.

ALBERT LANDA: Yes.

STEVEN POLCARI: But New York's the only place that didn't like him.

MARTICA SAWIN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, don't—those murals don't—

ALBERT LANDA: Well, all of this, uh—the—the New York School—[laughs]—was

STEPHEN POLCARI: —wiped out.

ALBERT LANDA: Yeah.

MARTICA SAWIN: Those murals led to the, um—the second mural commission, which was from Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, to do murals for the old Whitney Museum. [00:06:08]

ALBERT LANDA: I never knew that.

MARTICA SAWIN: Which are now in New Britain, Connecticut.

STEVEN POLCARI: That's right.

ALBERT LANDA: Oh, I never knew that.

STEVEN POLCARI: They're very nice.

MARTICA SAWIN: Right.

ALBERT LANDA: So, this opened up a whole—his career.

STEVEN POLCARI: Yes, that's why it was the first.

ALBERT LANDA: Yes.

STEVEN POLCARI: His career.

MARTICA SAWIN: Yeah, it was very important, I think, to him. And he'd been all during the '20s working on this American history series that were—were—he didn't have any commission or anything, but just this idea to do a great American history series that someday would be, you know—[inaudible].

STEVEN POLCARI: History painting again.

ALBERT LANDA: Yes.

STEVEN POLCARI: You know, the idea—I mean, in American terms, not academic, not grand Renaissance tradition, although there—there's some influence. But this back again. This was after he was a still life and figure painter, in—in Paris, a few years earlier.

ALBERT LANDA: Will it ever come back? History painting again?

STEVEN POLCARI: Oh, well, I argue it came back in the—in the '40s. Uh, in the—under Modernist guise. I think we'll always—if you define history painting as responding to contemporary events in—in epic scale and sensibility, sometimes with religious or political ideas, yes.

ALBERT LANDA: Uh-huh [affirmative].

STEVEN POLCARI: It will be back. Because it's part of our experience as human beings. There are just moments when it matters and moments when it doesn't matter. And that depends.

ALBERT LANDA: Yes. And maybe artists will be able to earn some money.

STEVEN POLCARI: No, I wouldn't go that far. [They laugh.]

ALBERT LANDA: Oh, you know—of course you'd know about Orozco's experiment, and why he did—what he was trying to do with his murals.

STEVEN POLCARI: He was trying to set up commissions in New York.

ALBERT LANDA: But also, he was—he was entranced by J. Ham—is it Hambidge?

STEVEN POLCARI: Yeah, uh.

MARTICA SAWIN: Oh, yes. Hambidge, yes.

STEVEN POLCARI: A dynamic symmetry.

ALBERT LANDA: Dynamic symmetry.

STEVEN POLCARI: That's right.

ALBERT LANDA: And he writes about that in his autobiography.

STEVEN POLCARI: That's right, that's right, yeah.

ALBERT LANDA: And, uh—that—not that he ever did it again. That was his one experiment. In the application of dynamic symmetry, which was—evidently every art school was overtaken by it during that period. [00:08:01] And uh—but he said it had an enormous influence on his work, on his subsequent work.

STEVEN POLCARI: Well, and they're very peaceable murals, for Orozco.

MARTICA SAWIN: Yeah.

ALBERT LANDA: Yes.

MARTICA SAWIN: A little blend.

STEVEN POLCARI: I mean, then he got the commission at Dartmouth, you know, and then, *ba-boom!*, and those were enormously influential. Everybody went to Dartmouth to see those things.

MARTICA SAWIN: Yes.

ALBERT LANDA: How many were the—did he do as many murals at Dartmouth?

STEVEN POLCARI: Oh, more.

MARTICA SAWIN: More.

ALBERT LANDA: Really, more?

STEVEN POLCARI: Oh, yeah. An entire wall of the library.

ALBERT LANDA: Oh! Oh, oh. What a wonderful thing.

STEVEN POLCARI: An entire room in the—grand design, yeah. Grand design.

MARTICA SAWIN: I think Pollack made a special trip up there to see those—[inaudible.]

ALBERT LANDA: Well, there's an irony there, isn't it? Because that was Nelson Rockefeller's school, and you look at what Nelson Rockefeller did to Rivera. [Laughs.]

STEVEN POLCARI: But he didn't do it.

ALBERT LANDA: Wasn't it Nelson?

STEVEN POLCARI: It was the architect at the building.

ALBERT LANDA: Oh, was it? Oh, oh, oh.

STEVEN POLCARI: On his own.

ALBERT LANDA: Oh, really?

STEVEN POLCARI: There was dispute, and the architect took it into his own hands.

ALBERT LANDA: Oh, I didn't know that. I didn't know that.

STEVEN POLCARI: And Rockefeller was aghast. He might've not liked having Lenin right there in the center, but, uh—but that was it. And he caught the flack.

MARTICA SAWIN: I thought it was a rental agent.

ALBERT LANDA: Now, did you know that we, the New School—we were the first—I don't know if you were there. We, uh—Rockefeller agreed to his first exhibit of his collection in Albany, at the New School.

STEVEN POLCARI: Ah.

ALBERT LANDA: And we had—what a day that was. And—so we had an exhibit of his favorite works. And he and Happy came down. We had this glamorous reception. You know, because he was a winner. [Laughs.] You know, he loved these things. And he gave a lecture, in the auditorium. Over 500 people, with slides and a pointer. And the photograph of him doing that was the front page of the *New York Times Magazine*. [They laugh.] With the huge article being his lecture on his collection. What a—Paul Matsani. [00:10:00] It was one of Paul's great coups.

STEVEN POLCARI: Coups, I was going say, yes.

ALBERT LANDA: Did you know him? Paul?

STEVEN POLCARI: No, I didn't.

ALBERT LANDA: He was really remarkable.

MARTICA SAWIN: He was indeed. What he did with that New School art center—uh, what was it called, just the New Art Center, was it called? Or the New—wasn't it?

ALBERT LANDA: Well—the New—no. No, the New School Art Center.

MARTICA SAWIN: Anyway.

ALBERT LANDA: It was—it was Vera List who—well, Abe and Vera List gave the money for that. And, um—you know, and my favorite show that he did was, he went to the Library of Congress. Someone had tipped him off. And he went to some musty attic there. And he found—rolled up, never having been unfurled since the end of World War II—German posters. Many of which, turned out, couldn't be found anymore in Germany. And he did a show. It was my favorite show. It was so powerful.

MARTICA SAWIN: Yeah, I remember.

ALBERT LANDA: Called, *From Weimar to Bonn*. To Bonn. And the first poster was a post-World War I poster calling for the reunification of Germany. And the last poster was a post-World War II poster calling for the reunification of Germany.

STEVEN POLCARI: Calling for the reunification of Germany.

ALBERT LANDA: What a—and of course, in the middle was all this Nazi—

STEVEN POLCARI: Horrendous stuff.

ALBERT LANDA: Horrendous stuff. [Laughs.]

MARTICA SAWIN: What did Paul do with all of that? What did he do with all of those posters?

ALBERT LANDA: He was a—he was a—huh?

MARTICA SAWIN: What did Paul do with all those posters?

ALBERT LANDA: I think he sent it back to them. Someone ought to redo that. That was such a powerful show.

MARTICA SAWIN: Or make a publication.

STEVEN POLCARI: That's—the American government and American military took Nazi art away. And it resides in American in the military, uh—Army museum. Which I've borrowed some works from. And it has this Nazi art over here. And they—and it's part of their denazification program—

ALBERT LANDA: Yes.

STEVEN POLCARI: —so they probably had all the stuff that they just took out.

ALBERT LANDA: Whenever there's the end of a war, they run through and they sweep everything out.

STEVEN POLCARI: They sweep everything, to get records, and—and you know. [00:12:01] It's—it's, uh, censorship, and that's—you lose, you lose.

ALBERT LANDA: So this is a Smithsonian.

STEVEN POLCARI: This is the Smithsonian, yeah. We're a branch of the Smithsonian. You mentioned the National Collection of Fine Arts, now known as the National Museum of American Art—American Art. And we're—we share a building with them in Washington. The national office of the Archives is in Washington. This is the regional center.

ALBERT LANDA: I'm part of a, uh, little group. David Levy, who is head of the corporate, myself. Art D'Lugoff, who owned the Village Gate all those years, Leonard Garment.

STEVEN POLCARI: Uh-huh.

ALBERT LANDA: Garment and David Levy were both sax players.

STEVEN POLCARI: Uh-huh. Uh-huh [affirmative].

ALBERT LANDA: And they play once a week in a bar in Washington. They've become very close friends.

MARTICA SAWIN: David told me he—

ALBERT LANDA: Well, Garment played with Woody Herman.

MARTICA SAWIN: Is that right?

STEVEN POLCARI: Well, that's serious stuff.

MARTICA SAWIN: David told me Garment was his best friend in Washington, you know.

ALBERT LANDA: Yeah, they have become close friends, of course.

STEVEN POLCARI: Well, they're the liveliest thing in Washington, except for [inaudible].

ALBERT LANDA: Well, Garment wrote that book last year, *Crazy Rhythm*, which became a bestseller. So his life has changed a little. But we have a charter from the state of New York for something called the International Jazz Museum. And we've been struggling, looking for a location, and there's—there's a real split on our board about where to put it. I'm for putting it in Harlem, even though the political problems are horrendous. And others are for putting it in a different neighborhood. At any rate, it looks like we—we have some seed money from the Empowerment Zone, related to Harlem. They even want to give us an office there. Uh, a quarter of a million dollars of matching money. And David has been talking to—to the Smithsonian about adding some money and maybe even taking over this project. [00:14:01] And doing a feasibility study for this jazz museum.

MARTICA SAWIN: Do you they could attach it somewhere to the Schomburg Center up there, in Harlem, would be an ideal kind of situation.

STEVEN POLCARI: It's already settled.

ALBERT LANDA: Yes. Well, you know, the problem is, it's such a hotbed of political shenanigans. Always has been. That's why nothing good has happened in a long time up there. They had that harbarn—or, uh—Harlem Urban Development Corporation, it was scandalous. That wrangled.

MARTICA SAWIN: You mean, the Taino Towers? That?

ALBERT LANDA: Well, they just spent money on trips to the Caribbean, and washing cars, and, yeah. And fortunes were spent. But what makes this interesting—[laughs]—is that the Apollo Theater, which is Percy's—which was owned by Percy Sutton. Who then went into bankruptcy after using up—I don't know, 300, uh—uh, three million dollars, I think, of federal money. Then was made into a nonprofit organization. Which then gave a contract to Percy—[laughs]—Sutton's organization to conduct entertainments. Oh, is that on tape?

[Audio Break.]

MARTICA SAWIN: You said it was this whole summer, or something.

ALBERT LANDA: No, not all summer. Maybe for two weeks.

STEVEN POLCARI: [Cross talk.] On the Benton murals.

ALBERT LANDA: Wait a minute, I may have it here. Um, that was '78. No, no, no, it was '60. I think I may have it. It may be in one of those documents.

STEVEN POLCARI: The documents. How long it took.

ALBERT LANDA: If not, I—I'm pretty sure I could find that out.

STEVEN POLCARI: Are there documents on the Orozco murals? You know, we don't have the papers of Alma Reed—it's one of the great losses. You know, her papers disappeared after she died.

ALBERT LANDA: Really. Really.

STEVEN POLCARI: [Inaudible] fabulous stuff. [00:16:01]

ALBERT LANDA: Wow. Uh.

STEVEN POLCARI: She didn't have anything to do with the New School, did she?

ALBERT LANDA: No. I'll tell you, uh, you know, Alvin Johnson's papers are at Yale. And it's perfectly possible that some of the earlier Orozco stuff could be—

STEVEN POLCARI: Was in the Yale collection. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ALBERT LANDA: —is in the Yale Collection, so that's one possible source. The president's office at the New

School is usually not too good at finding historical materials. Uh, everything goes into the basement, and then they forget where it is.

STEVEN POLCARI: Yes.

MARTICA SAWIN: Oh, it's so hard. It's really a shame. I don't know what's—you know, I've tried to get material from the '40s on courses that were held there, and course descriptions, and enrollments.

ALBERT LANDA: Oh, no, no. That exists.

MARTICA SAWIN: Well.

ALBERT LANDA: There is a card file in the lib—in the lib—there was a librarian there. Esther Levine. She was there for many years.

MARTICA SAWIN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Right.

ALBERT LANDA: And she retired, I guess in the '70s. And when she retired, they, uh, they gave her this job. It was a low-paying job, but it kept her busy. She lived on the block. And she built a file. I think it runs into the 1970s, maybe 1975 or '78. Where there's a card on everyone who ever taught or lectured at the New School.

MARTICA SAWIN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

STEVEN POLCARI: Wow.

ALBERT LANDA: It's a treasure trove.

STEVEN POLCARI: And where is this archive?

ALBERT LANDA: It's in the—it's in the library at the New School.

MARTICA SAWIN: The Fogle—the Fogelman Library.

ALBERT LANDA: Yeah. I recently, uh, did a—a thing for the school on—it's a jazz history. And, uh, it was—it was all there. In the library. That library, they have some good librarians there, in that.

MARTICA SAWIN: Who is—who was the previous librarian, before, um, Gail? Who was the librarian there? Because he—I asked, and he—you know, he was showing me information.

ALBERT LANDA: Yes. Who—oh, I don't remember.

MARTICA SAWIN: And he said there were lots of gaps there.

ALBERT LANDA: But Esther was wonderful. [00:18:00] And she was Marlon Brando's favorite—Marlon Brando studied acting at the New School. And—and he—for years, after he became famous, when he'd come to New York, and if he was in the Village, he would drop in and—and run over, and give her a hug. [They laugh.] In the library, you know. And he adored her. She was, uh, cute. [They laugh.] And so—but—and she was an excellent, serious, meticulous person. So, keep in mind that that's there. There's one thing I wanted to say—I meant to say, and then I—uh, I almost brought it up before. About the murals, and about their value. When they—there may be a missing story in the *New York Times*. I have the feeling it was either David Dunlap or Brenson, called me the day the murals were being removed from the wall. It was the Friday. And someone had called them. And said, "The murals are leaving the New School!" I think it was Brenson who called me. And said, "Can I come down?" "Absolutely." This is when the windows were widened in order to lower them out. They had these huge crates there. They were fixing everything into the crate, and they were moving it over to the window, and all of that. Taking them down off the wall, in a very orderly way. When I saw the murals, individually, and I realized that, really, their value was greater. Much greater.

STEVEN POLCARI: Oh, individually? Yeah, sure.

ALBERT LANDA: And the paintings were more powerful. Because in effect—you know, the way he did them, from the sketches and all that, you know—it really wasn't planned to be a set of murals. [00:20:09] Um, so.

STEVEN POLCARI: I thought he planned the whole thing out?

ALBERT LANDA: I don't think so. I don't think so.

STEVEN POLCARI: He had a—a wall there for—a wall for the pictures.

ALBERT LANDA: Well, he had a wall. He certainly planned the size, uh, of—of everything. But, no. I think he took murals on different things and put them together, whatever made sense, you know. But one doesn't relate to the other, if you look at them. But when you look at them—when I looked at those two urban murals, without everything else. In other words, when they're put together as a set, they fight each other. And when you see them alone, you—you're looking at each one as a different work of art. It was so much more powerful. I was—and after all, this was after 20 years of looking at them. But to see them that way—and I'll never forget that impression. And for some reason, money was on my mind, at that time. [Laughs.] And I said to myself, "Had these guys broke them up, and sold them individually—"

STEVEN POLCARI: Uh, you'd get a million a piece—probably at that time.

ALBERT LANDA: Yes. Yes. A million a piece. At that time.

MARTICA SAWIN: Oh, at least. Al, um, do you remember, did he resilver the moldings? And did you ever talk to him about the moldings at all?

ALBERT LANDA: No, I didn't. But I think he did.

MARTICA SAWIN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ALBERT LANDA: Yes. Everything was freshened up.

MARTICA SAWIN: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. But you never, um, asked him anything about how?

ALBERT LANDA: No. No. No.

MARTICA SAWIN: Okay.

STEVEN POLCARI: He didn't speak at all, too. I mean, while he was there a lecture, and interview—that kind of thing.

ALBERT LANDA: He didn't—no public.

STEVEN POLCARI: No public.

ALBERT LANDA: No. No, he didn't. He came in to do this job, and—the most, I think, would've been two weeks. [00:22:01] I thought of it as a—I guess it was two weeks, now that I think about it. Um, and he would—he would come, and his pattern was to come in he already knew what he wanted each of those assistants to do. And he would mix the paints, until they were right. And then he would instruct them about what he wanted them to do with the paints, you know, so that they had some of his hand on things, and he was watching everyone's work. And he also was working. On a ladder, you know. Painting.

MARTICA SAWIN: One other question. Uh, I know I did send—when I heard they were going, I sent my assistant, uh, who helped making slides, over to photograph them in place, before they left. But she didn't do any real close-up things. But did anybody, before the previous restorations, photograph the condition of the—of the murals?

ALBERT LANDA: No.

MARTICA SAWIN: No. Okay.

ALBERT LANDA: Although I—I—it's funny, the Orozcós. At one point, we were trying to estimate what it would cost to restore them. And through Maus [ph], the cultural attaché, I got the head of restoration for the—uh, the major museum in Mexico City. Who came up during the summer for a week to make an assessment of what actually—why were they flaking, what was causing the flaking, etc. So, a lot of chemical analysis, and all of that. And there was a marvelous report. The school must still have it somewhere. A marvelous report. Um, scientific report, on what was wrong, and what would have to be done to restore it. [00:24:04] And we made an estimate. I think he made an estimate then—and it was around that same period—of \$300,000 then. To restore it. So I don't know what it cost. The Williamstown people, I guess, came down and did it. Did they? At—

STEVEN POLCARI: Well, uh, yeah, I mean, they were shipped up to there.

ALBERT LANDA: Oh, they were shipped?

STEVEN POLCARI: Oh, yeah, they were shipped to—there.

ALBERT LANDA: Really. Oh my gosh.

MARTICA SAWIN: Not the Orozcos.

STEVEN POLCARI: No, not the Orozcos.

ALBERT LANDA: No, no, no, no. I'm talking about the Orozcos.

STEVEN POLCARI: Oh, oh. Yeah, no. No. They didn't.

ALBERT LANDA: So—but I think the Williamstown people came down, because Equitable did that too, so.

STEVEN POLCARI: Yeah. They were very good. It's a good center.

ALBERT LANDA: They were the natural—yeah.

STEVEN POLCARI: Yeah.

MARTICA SAWIN: Yeah. I remember the dedication of them. I don't remember if Koch was there, but somebody from the mayor's office. Some of them had the dedication, and Perry Stave [ph] spoke. She was the Equitable, you know, curator.

STEVEN POLCARI: And still is.

MARTICA SAWIN: But they also had someone who had worked on the, um—on the restoration there. I don't remember who or where, but that all must be in the New School records.

ALBERT LANDA: But that's a report you should know about. Because that was quite—oh, it's on there. Good. Yeah, that was quite—I'm getting a little recall, you know. I'm also getting old, so, I mean—[laughs]—it takes longer. And, uh.

STEVEN POLCARI: Well, there are wonderful things.

ALBERT LANDA: They did—Equitable really—this was a great thing.

STEVEN POLCARI: [Cross talk.] And they did a first-class job.

ALBERT LANDA: In both cases, they did a first-class—they really did. You have to give them—well.

STEVEN POLCARI: You know, I think it was Holloway. You know, you get such a patron, that is—that is a patron who works for a corporation. You know. It was a patron of the arts. They have a lot of Benton drawings, stuff, up there. And if you go to the top floors—at that time, I don't know what they've done now—they had a lot of art. A lot of art.

ALBERT LANDA: A lot of the—the, uh—where was it? Chilton?

STEVEN POLCARI: Chilmark.

ALBERT LANDA: Chilmark, yeah.

STEVEN POLCARI: They got a lot of stuff from Chilmark.

ALBERT LANDA: Yeah. They have some of that at the Hirshhorn. [00:26:01] Chilmark painting.

STEVEN POLCARI: Yes. Well, I want—I want to thank you.

ALBERT LANDA: Well, thank you. You're very welcome. What a pleasure.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]