

## Oral history interview with Fritz Eichenberg, 1964 Dec. 3

This transcript is in the public domain and may be used without permission. Quotes and excerpts must be cited as follows: *Oral history interview with Fritz Eichenberg, 1964 Dec. 3, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.*

### **ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH FRITZ EICHENBERG DECEMBER 3, 1964 230 E. 15th NEW YORK, N.Y.**

**HP:** Harlan Phillips

**FE:** Fritz Eichenberg

Fritz Eichenberg is director of the Graphic Arts Center in Brooklyn and is also on the faculty of Pratt Institute.

**HP:** I wish I had some material here that I could refer to. In terms of this process, you have the source of material that you carry with you -memory, whatever it is. Perhaps the easiest way to slip into what you were doing and what you were thinking about is go back to the thirties. What sort of intellectual luggage and interest did you bring through to the 1930's? What were you doing? What were you deeply involved in?

**FE:** I was always involved in the graphic arts as long as I can remember. I was born in Cologne, Germany and spent eighteen years there my first eighteen years. Then I went to Leipzig and studied at the Academy of Graphic Arts there until I left in 1921 or so. I went to Berlin, and I stayed there from 1926 until 1933.

**HP:** That was Leipzig?

**FE:** Yes, I studied in Leipzig.

**HP:** Sometimes, you know, people are like ships that pass in the night. You meet hundreds and thousands, and one or two leave some paint and give you a sense of direction. Teachers are like this or can be. Do you remember any at Leipzig from the Academy?

**FE:** Oh sure.

**HP:** Who illuminated an area, projected you into it?

**FE:** Well, I picked my teachers. I worked as an advertising artist in my early youth. I was eighteen or nineteen when I left Cologne, and I worked in a department store as

a guy for everything - you know; I did posters and advertising. I was an apprentice in a lithographic print shop before I took on my first job. So, I became interested in lithography and I did a lot of lithographs on my own. My great idols were Goya, Durer and Kathe Kollwitz, and so on. This gave me actually the direction in which I wanted to proceed. I did this with a single mindedness all my life. I never had any appetite for leaving this line. It was so clear to me that this was desirable for me. When I was an apprentice, I did my first lithographs very much influenced by Goya and Daumier, I would say. I was seventeen or eighteen. Then I had to make a living, and I went to work in a department store and after two years, I told the head of it that I would like to study seriously. I had been studying at night in the art schools in Cologne. I would like to go to Leipzig to the Academy of Graphic Arts because I wanted to study with Hugo Steinerpark who was a well known illustrator and perhaps overrated, if you think of him now. At the time he gave me a feeling that this was the right man for me. He was not only interested in the illustration, but in the book as a whole - the design, the binding, the type - the illustrations were just a part of his work. He was the head designer for Ulstein Books, which are still beautiful. He did most of the bindings, and they were just marvelous. I studied under him and became almost immediately one of his master students; that meant that I had the privilege of having a studio by myself under the roof of the academy. The academy was a huge building almost like the supreme court -- built along those lines. It had really everything that a graphic art school should have and never has. It had a marvelous scholastic program. We had Pindar as a lecturer in the history of art. He was the great authority on the Renaissance. We had all the machinery that you have to know in the graphic arts. You had the instructors in the various graphic media. Leipzig was the center of the book publishing world really at the time, which it isn't any more. I had a marvelous time working more or less by myself for myself. I began to illustrate books right away. I did Gulliver's Travels and Dostoevski, whom I always adored as an author. The first book was Crime and Punishment, and I did it while I was a student. Then came 1932 ---

**HP:** What were the alternatives when you were in Leipzig? To go out on your own, to become an apprentice?

**FE:** No, the consequent thing would be to go from Leipzig right into the publishing field and become an illustrator. That was what I wanted to be. I wanted to illustrate books. Since I had already started with Dostoevski -- where could we go from there? That was a little early.

**HP:** What took you to Berlin?

**FE:** I fell in love with a fellow student, and we got engaged there. I followed her to Berlin where she lived, and we got married in 1926. By that time I had to make a living because I had a wife and a child was coming shortly after I had settled in a profession which enabled me to make a living. I began by becoming a staff artist for the Ultstein chain which is comparable -- not in quality, but in the extent - to the Hearst chain. It was a very good publishing house which had everything. It had paperbacks. It had a beautiful history of art, which is still one of the best ever done. Then they had a history of the world. Then they had at least six newspapers, and they had four magazines -- one for children, one for the grownups and so forth -UHU which means the owl, which was the trademark of Ultstein. Ultstein means "owl of stone." The UHU was a magazine perhaps comparable to something between Life and Reader's Digest, I would say. I became a staff artist for the UHU and began to travel

for them. I always liked to write. I still do. I began to write. After a few years I became one of the lucky people who could pick what they wanted to do. I traveled to Paris to cover a certain event or went to Vienna. Any place that I wanted to go, I could go and write and illustrate at the same time. It was not an ideal profession for me but I made a lot of money and I could support my family. Then I began to get interested in political cartooning. When I discovered that Hitler was on the rise, I did everything that I could to induce Ultstein to become articulate about their anti-Nazi sentiments. Ultstein being known as a Jewish firm -- the whole family was Jewish -- should have known what was at stake, but they didn't. I began cartooning around 1927, or 1928, or 1929 politically for the Beizett-Emitah. It is still published now. I did political cartoons for the UHU, this magazine I mentioned. There was another evening paper, which I have forgotten, also Ultstein, for which I did anti-Hitler cartoons. That lasted but two or three years, and we had long conferences with the editorial staff, and it became more and more clear to me that they were folding up. They didn't want to resist really. They wanted somehow or other to play footsie with Hitler. My origin not being Aryan, although I was not in any way Jewish conscious, never had any occasion to confess anything religiously or racially -- you lived like a German, you know. By the time Hitler was in the wings ready to jump, I was ready to jump too, and that was in '32 before he was in power. I had long conferences with editors at Ultstein who said, "You are just foolish. Nothing is going to happen. I don't know why you want to leave us. We need you very much. You have a sense of humor. You are one of the great cartoonists we have." I said, "I don't feel any more like being funny. I would like to travel." I got myself several contracts from various newspapers both outside of Ultstein and inside of Ultstein. Ultstein was not very cooperative. They did not want to let me go. In March of 1933, I had everything assembled. I had a big pack of contracts. I had one with Hopok, the shipping line which plied the ocean between Germany and the United States. There was some Ultstein paper in Cologne and some in my hometown for which I worked. I worked for about a half a dozen different newspapers and magazines. So it was comparatively easy. I had gotten myself a passport with a twelve months' visa which turned out to be my salvation. At the time, I didn't pay much attention to it. I left my family in Berlin and my daughter was two years old. I went to Mexico and Guatemala where I had always wanted to go and stayed for about three months writing articles and sending them back and getting them published. Then I went up North through San Antonio, up through Texas to Chicago where the World's Fair had just been opened. I don't know whether you remember that?

**HP:** I went out there as a kid. It was marvelous.

**FE:** I was more than a kid then. I covered this for the Berlin \_\_\_\_\_ at the time. I landed finally in New York and made a lot of friends very quickly. I was here only for one week. Through someone who had visited us in Berlin and had friends here I was immediately surrounded as kind of a white elephant by people who had never seen someone who had come from Germany and was crazy enough to go back. I was in great danger being a cartoonist and anti-Hitler. I had shown him as a monster in various disguises. I had no choice; I had to go back, because my wife was there and my baby was there, and I had to talk them into leaving because they were not convinced that I was in my right mind. They all implored me not to go but to write, to telephone, to telegraph my wife to come over. It couldn't be done. We had to make arrangements. We had to pack up our things. You didn't think in terms of an emergency, really. I went back and the fact that I had a twelve months' visa, I think,

saved my life. I came back into Germany under no cloud of any kind. They hadn't noticed that I had left officially. The government hadn't taken any interest in that yet. I went to Berlin and my wife met me in Bremen, I remember, and I talked with her very fast. I said, "Let's pack up and leave." I went back to Ultstein and I said, "I like it so much in the United States, I have decided to go back." They said, "Oh gosh, you will regret this. You will regret this forever. Here you have a marvelous position and you go over to America, and who knows you? You'll be completely lost." I said, "Good bye," I had never to raise my arm or to say "heil Hitler" and for which I bless the Lord, really. My wife was very courageous and didn't like to leave, but left anyhow. I went back in October, and we came back in November. We had about three or four weeks to pack. I didn't take much. I left most of my things behind because I didn't want to create a big stir. I went to the police inspector of my district, and he stamped my passport. This was a tense moment.

**HP:** Indeed; you felt all this?

**FE:** I was engaged in it. I was determined to do something about Hitler as far as my little power reached. They were not full-page cartoons. They were quarter of a page every week or so. I made fun of him and made fun of the Nazis and sometimes became rather grim. I thought this was the line one should take. Ultstein didn't see it this way. It was a very strange thing. I remember I said goodbye to friends in Hamburg. He was the senator of the Hamburg Senate and a very important man, and he said, "Do you know what you are running into in the United States?" I said, "No, what?" He said, "There is a depression going on." I had never heard of depression -- you know, so I said, "So what? I want to get out." I had never heard of a depression. I didn't even know what a depression was. I had gone through the inflation in 1921, when I had left the Academy. It was starvation, you know. Staggering! It was just fantastic! We had nothing to eat, but we lived through it. Very happily as students, we didn't care too much. We had a grand time. So when I got here, everyone was complaining and aching with fatigue from wandering around trying to get jobs. It was just a situation for an artist to come from another country and say, "Here I am, take note." No one knew me here. I took my portfolio and made the rounds. I had piles of work, as you can imagine. I had illustrated many books. It was in all the papers. I had a staggering amount of work, but it was alien kind of work that didn't apply to the local scene. There was no such thing as a political cartoon in this country. Herb Block and Fitzpatrick are all good people, but to me it always lacked bite. It was funny stuff, but it wasn't anything that Goya or Daumier would have approved of.

**HP:** You mean of the graver kind?

**FE:** Yes. Really significant stuff -- It doesn't go in this country and still doesn't. Many people have tried to start magazines. Americana, I don't know whether you remember Alexander King and George Grosz. In those days, all of these things collapsed after awhile. I made the rounds and I was received by most people with kindness but they said, "We are all in trouble now. We can't take any chances. We can't give you any work. We have laid off this and that artist and this paper has folded up. Try advertising or try window display, or some such thing." Well, I had no talent for window display. Advertising -- you have to know a country before you know what appeals to a buyer. I was completely green and not interested really, but I did. I tried everything. The first job that I think that I landed was for the Nation. I did cartoons for the Nation for about a year. I worked with Freda Kuchway and Joseph Wood

Krutch who has written those marvelous nature books. They were wonderful people to work for. I did it for about a year. I had a full page in the Nation which always surprised me. It was at the time that Mussolini invaded Ethiopia and such things. These weren't any great shakes because I still felt rather green here in this country -- always felt like a guest and not like an old settler, but I was grateful that I had the chance. Then Alvin Johnston got interested in the New School, and I taught there for five years in classes on book illustration and wood engraving, which is my field actually as a technique. I met a lot of wonderful people, but I didn't make any money. You know, how much can you make at the New School there. You have a class of ten people, and in those days it was a percentage deal. I think the Nation paid the twenty-five dollars for the cartoon so that a hundred dollars a month, if they took a cartoon every week, which they didn't. I would say they took a cartoon, perhaps, every two or three weeks. So you piece my income together, it was insignificant. I still got some little money from Germany from the articles which had been accepted, but after a while I didn't want to work for them anymore. It would have been risky for my friends there, if they had published me. It just dried up. I gave it up. I had some contracts for a children's book for instance, which I never consummated. I concentrated on the things here. At that time, Alvin Johnston said, "Have you tried the WPA?" He knew all the people. He is a marvelous guy. I said, "No." As far as I remember he must have said go and see someone. It could have been Groschurtz or it could have been Cahill. I am not quite sure. I went there with a few of my wooden engravings, or prints and asked him what I could do. It was just as simple as that. He said, "Oh, this is marvelous work. Go ahead and do what you want to do." It was that simple. There were no strings attached to it, except I am a very conscientious person, and I wanted to know exactly how much he wanted. I have forgotten what the pay was -- \$22.75 a week or something like that. It was an odd figure. We just got by. I lived where there is now the \_\_\_\_\_ Parkway in a little ramshackle house. It was a beautiful old wood shingle house. It looked like a cape cod. It was overlooking the Hudson Bridge, and we made friends immediately. It was really a marvelous experience. The friends I still have, and this was a long time ago. We were the first, you know. There was no one there before us. Everyone tried to help and be nice, and we had a young child, and she needed to be taken care of in kindergarten -- \_\_\_\_\_ infantry they called it. Scholarships at Fieldson School. People were just wonderful.

**HP:** Did you work at home then?

**FE:** Yes, doing what I wanted to do. I got box wood, which is very hard to get -- the WPA had kind of a supply room and everything we needed. You had to say what you needed, and you got it. They bought the tools. They bought the gravers and they sharpened the gravers and you took your material home with you. You just picked it up there -- beautiful wood blocks, any size. I made a decided assignment of each one. I said to myself, "I will do this and in that time." I don't know what the other artists actually did. I think they took it rather seriously, especially the ones on the graphic arts project. Groschurtz would ask me what I wanted to do and under what technique. I said, "Wood engraving." "Any special idea you have?" I said I was interested in Dos Passos, and I think I did some illustrations or single prints; some satirical and some based on my travels. I did a print which I think was used in the Encyclopedia Britannica -- Military Escort -- it shows a train in Mexico with soldiers sleeping on the benches with bare feet and their guns stacked somewhere. It was an experience I had had. The train was derailed by bandits. In those days in 1933, there were still bandits there. So every train, the last car was for the military escort so they could jump out

and begin shooting. When this print was shown, it must have been to another member of this gang with whom I worked, a Mexican artist, and when he saw this print, he just flew into a rage. He said I was defaming the Mexican Army and that they wore shoes - - which they didn't really -- at least not when I saw them and he would see that I was never able to get back to Mexico because his uncle was the mayor of Larado. That is about the only trouble I had, which wasn't very serious. I did a lot of things based on my trips through Mexico and Guatemala, some characters I had met and some people collecting outside of a train and offering their tamales and chicken legs and so on. It wasn't any great shakes probably looking back. What I did was an honest attempt to fit into a new kind of a world, to pick up some feeling of belonging, which is not too easy. I don't really know how long I worked on the art project. I've forgotten. It could have been two years. I must have produced about a dozen prints or so, and we had about four or six weeks for each assignment, so that would be about twelve prints per year. Maybe I didn't work for more than a year. I'm not quite sure. I met a lot of interesting people there, naturally. We stood in line for our paychecks. I've forgotten where that was. There is Louie Shanky I remember.

**HP:** Where is he now?

**FE:** He is still at Bard College, I think. I think he died -- no.

**HP:** I don't know. He is a name that crops up.

**FE:** I think he is still at Bard College; at least, I know he taught there, and they would be able to give you his address. I think Louie Lozowick (?) worked on it. He's still around. Stuart Davis I believe was on it. It seems amazing. Kuniyoshi, I think almost every graphic artist was there. I can't think of any who wasn't. There was a nice spirit of fellowship there. We were all in the same boat. It wasn't the most comfortable boat, but it fitted into the times in which we lived. It was a kind of an emergency, and we felt that something had been done which helped us in a rather dignified fashion. We thought we produced adequately for the pay which we got. One wood engraving -- \$400 is not too expensive. I also met some painters. I remember one who worked in the same building -- Johann Deraco. He was on the same project. I was on a committee of the artists. It could have been in connection with the Artists' Congress. We had a meeting with General Somerwell -- "old iron pants."

**HP:** What was the prevailing attitude toward "old iron pants" himself?

**FE:** Well, he didn't know what he was doing with artists really. I remember we sat at a long table, and I was about the only one because I am rather a rebellious person when it comes to militaristic attitudes, and he was a real sabre rattler. He looked us over. I remember his little moustache was slightly waxed -- a very dapper, handsome man. Did you meet him?

**HP:** No.

**FE:** He died some years ago. He was head of the whole WPA in the New York area.

**HP:** I think he was the director.

**FE:** He was an engineer. Why he was picked? Maybe because he was an engineer.

**HP:** I think there was a good bit of building and road construction and so on going on

so that it made sense. A man with military pretensions solely may be efficient for all I know, but his sensitivity with respect to the odd unique things called artists --

**FE:** He had no use for them.

**HP:** No.

**FE:** He must have felt that it was a complete waste of money.

**HP:** I'm sure he did.

**FE:** I could see him lining us up against the wall. It wouldn't have been any great loss in his picture of the world. Anyhow, we had a meeting, I remember that, and we tried to iron out certain wrongs which -- I have forgotten really what it was.

**HP:** Was this the question of sick pay? Or is this the time that Somerwell announced periodically a percentage of people were going to be cut off the rolls?

**FE:** It could be, yes.

**HP:** He dealt with these people in the Federal Art Project as though they were fungible goods -- peas in a pod -- instead of human. Nineteen percent Monday -- well, you know, what nineteen percent? What is your criteria? He may have been under some pressure from Washington too, I don't know. I suspect that he was.

**FE:** Well, we were all expendable, and there was no distinction in his mind as to whom he should knock off.

**HP:** Yes, but it was a numbers game and he made the mistake of announcing this to the press before granting a hearing. Then as I understand at the hearing he would listen to a man and then dismiss him and then listen to another man and dismiss him. Maybe you sat around talking.

**FE:** Yes, we did. That is the way it was. I still see it. If I could only remember the other artists who were with me. I think Augustus Peck was there from the Brooklyn Museum. There were several big fellows. I was the shortest and the frailest among them. I got hot under the collar finally. He kept on saying, "You've said enough. Now you." He was talking to underlings. "Now you talk," and he didn't even know who we were. We were just beatniks in his mind. I have a great forbearance normally. I can get along with all kinds of people, but I built up such a tremendous pressure that after five or ten minutes of this and when he said finally, "Now you go home," just as you said. He dismissed us. I said, "Just wait a minute. We are artists. I don't know whether you have had anything to do with artists." I don't know literally what I said, but he began to look at me with great astonishment and I said, "I have never talked to anyone who gets his sword between his legs and this is the impression I am having. I am not talking to anyone who understands what we are here for and why we are here, and I resent being treated like a subordinate." He began to smile. He thought it was extremely funny. Nobody had ever done this apparently, put him in his place, but I didn't care. If he had said, "You go out first and be short tomorrow at nine o'clock," I would have said, "Just try it!" I was completely fed up with it. I think he smiled from that time on, and became noticeably nicer and said he would see what he could do, but I have forgotten what the issue was. It must have been a very burning one for us at the time.

**HP:** I think there was a problem introduced at one time where an artist had to report for work at nine o'clock in the morning.

**FE:** Could be.

**HP:** Remember? Instead of staying at home. If you were Stuart Davis reporting for work -- you know, it would be the last thing you would think of. Arshile Gorky came in three o'clock in the afternoon sometimes, the day starts, and it may go on for forty-eight hours.

**FE:** Well, he didn't know, and nobody told him.

**HP:** He was asked to speak a language that he hadn't been instructed in.

**FE:** He had no practical experience with this kind of men from Mars -- you know. I was thinking of Stuart Davis. I was on a committee very recently which was supposed to commission some prominent artist to create a stamp for the fine arts -- commemorative for the fine arts in the United States. It was the first time in the history of the United States, that is thirty years after Somerwell, that somebody had the idea of honoring the fine arts in the United States, and as far as I know it is the first time on a stamp. So a committee consisted of Einar Johnston of the Brooklyn Museum, Centari Fasconi, Julian Levey of the New School and myself, and John Ross of the Society of Graphic Arts was the chairman. We deliberated for considerable time, whom to commission and what to do. We had about four or five thousand dollars from the Albert List Foundation for it, so we were rather independent of Federal money, but the Post Master General was eager and also John Carter Sand of the National Gallery was eager to get something which could be called a real commemorative stamp for the fine arts. After several mistakes we made, we commissioned several artists and I don't want to mention their names because they fell down on the job. We got some very prominent artists to try it, and they got scared, and somehow it didn't work. At the last moment John Ross thought of using an existing work of art. I brought in some of my stamps which I had collected for that purpose -- French stamps with Braque, Leger and Matisse on them. We all said, "Why can't we do it this way. We take an existing work of art of a real contemporary artist which has a decorative quality and then we apply it to the size and design of the stamp, and it shouldn't be too difficult. If the French can do it, we can do it too." John Ross got in touch with Stuart Davis. That was four weeks before he died. Davis said, "By all means, do use some of my designs. I would like to see it." He had done for the workshop of which I am the head, a long time ago, a print -- a lithograph -- so John Ross adapted this lithograph for the stamp. He separated the colors and did a very efficient job, and Stuart Davis was very happy, and then he died. So the stamp became not only a commemorative to the fine arts, but to Stuart Davis. The strange thing is, the Postmaster General accepted this naturally and it was issued on December 2nd with a special ceremony at the National Gallery, to which I couldn't go because I couldn't get away. I would have liked to have gone to see how this was manipulated, because I discovered that the Government still is not interested in the fine arts, and that the Stuart Davis stamp must have been a thorn in the side of most of the people in the Post Office Department. I got a letter from the Postmaster General's office with press releases and a letter saying I might be interested in seeing what they sent out. The press release was couched in such words that General Somerwell might have used in describing Stuart Davis -- "the master of the squiggle" -- you know, a man who died a short while ago and has been honored

greatly and so -- "the master of the squiggle," implying in this press release that of course the stamp was selected by a committee outside of the jurisdiction of the Post Office Department, and of course it had been accepted, and of course it would be issued on December 2nd, but, you know -- "don't blame us." Things haven't changed much.

**HP:** No, not at all.

**FE:** I was shocked. I was really shocked. If I had had a little more time -- I'm very rushed because I am engaged in so many different projects -- I would have followed this up. I would have demanded a showdown that the Post Office Department which issues a stamp, should declare itself fully behind it and suppress whatever feelings they have and say, "All right this honors a great American artist, one of the former president's, Armory Show" -- no they couldn't do it. It was just a dirty trick.

**HP:** Did you meet him in the thirties?

**FE:** Yes. I think he came to the New School when I was teaching there.

**HP:** He had what, a corporal's guard of students?

**FE:** We never had any more than six, eight or ten students. If we had ten students, we were rich. It was a very funny experience. Considering the position now of the artists in the world, the arts have come up socially. We were just a bunch of derelicts, you know.

**HP:** Left-hands in a right hand society.

**FE:** Yes, that's true. No one thought much of art or artists.

**HP:** I think it is interesting in retrospect, to see that the Government was willing at that time, to invest its funds in artists, not necessarily because they enjoyed artists, but because he was non-competitive with private industry. You weren't overturning anything, and you weren't competing. As a matter of fact, there was one example in New Jersey. They discovered an old glass blowing factory which hadn't been in operation for seventeen years, and they discovered on the relief rolls some old glass blowers, so they started the factory up again. One of the industries -- Steuben was it? -- somebody complained. Corning maybe. Someone complained, and they had to stop. This was competitive. It tells its own story, doesn't it? In a sense, the initial purpose was to feed, maintain and support while artists did what came naturally, instead of having them out moving brick, or swinging a pick or a shovel. In that sense it was good because it showed a certain discerning discriminating taste, I think, on the part of the government.

**FE:** Wasn't it Roosevelt himself who had an interest in that? Or where did it come from?

**HP:** It came I suspect, in part, because Ickes Public Works Program never got off the ground in time, so they needed something. They needed something quickly.

**FE:** It wasn't that expensive as an experiment, compared to our expenditures now.

**HP:** No. Ickes was busy trying to design a contract so that local politicians wouldn't

ciphren off some of the public funds for the construction of public buildings, a percentage of which was to be used for decoration. He never came up with a contract, so they had to turn to Harry Hopkins. We needed all kinds of projects. For example, we never had a national health survey -- never. We had one under the WPA, the first one. You know, it is marvelous, instead of playing guessing games, we had at least some basis for judgment -- this was the national health. It was this project and others, and it was the Federal Art Project No. 1 that was sparked.

**FE:** The Index of American Design was really a magnificent thing.

**HP:** Did you know much about that in New York?

**FE:** No. There were some people who worked on it, and I always admired them. I didn't know it existed among American artisans or artists -- this ability to render in facsimile something they saw. It looked like colonial master artisans at work. I didn't know where these people came from, nor do I have a clear view now where they came from and where they went. Most of the work was so impressive because it was so honest and so complete. There was nothing shoddy about it. It was really the best a person could do on such an assignment. I think you would have trouble now creating or duplicating this kind of thing.

**HP:** I suspect you are right. Since you were limited in a way to relief rolls, except for a certain percentage of professional people in a sense of supervisory help like Burgoyne Diller, otherwise you were restricted to the relief rolls where you had someone who was an artist but without originality, who couldn't teach. What could he do? He could render in facsimile. Painstaking work.

**FE:** That is where most of these people came from?

**HP:** Yes, they were artists, but they weren't creative in the sense of a Davis, or a Gorky.

**FE:** You don't know where they went? Advertising agencies, probably, or some such thing. It is a pity. It is a staggering amount of work that they produced, isn't it?

**HP:** Yes, tremendous. It had relevance to industrial design in the sense that if we could gather together representative samples of our past, it might be a continuing storehouse for new designs, or at least an enrichment; otherwise it would pass away without any possibility of there being any continuing impulse from the American past. In fact, it's like the rediscovery of your grandfather, in a way.

**FE:** Yes, and it was very American and non-controversial.

**HP:** That's true. There were controversies afoot though. Were you part of the Artists Congress, or Artists Union?

**FE:** Yes. Artists Congress it was called and then later it became Artists Equity. I was at the time, yes. I don't know what it meant to me. I probably paid dues or some such things. I attended some of the meetings. I had belonged to many artists' organizations, and it never works. It takes a few years, and then they get into each other's hair. They are such individualists. I remember Kuniyoshi on the stage somewhere talking on and on and somebody, I think it was Ralph Pearson, reached around his middle, literally lifted him off the ground and took him off the stage,

because he thought he had talked long enough. I will never forget that. That was a fantastic picture. I think the life span of an artist organization which is not devoted solely to artistic endeavors, or geared to artistic creative endeavors, is bound to break up. It becomes a political or a pseudo-political organization, and they can't decide whether they are Democrats, or Republicans, or Socialists, or Communists -- it just blows the thing up from inside, and this is what happened, I think, to the Artists Congress. Equity was a little better because they tried to improve the lot of the artists regardless of affiliation, and I don't know whether it still exists or not.

**HP:** I don't know either, but I doubt it. It was on the Attorney General's list, I think. I may be wrong.

**FE:** Yes, 175 or more.

**HP:** Well, that's neither here nor there. In my judgment it's almost an accolade. It doesn't mean a thing, and even in those days in the thirties, a collective group effort was in the air -- it was in the thinking. Individualists bending together over a glass of gin or a cup of tea was social in the sense of camaraderie rather than necessarily political, or subversive, or anything else.

**FE:** Artists couldn't stick long enough to any one particular political issue, you know. Art is the most important thing in the end, unless you are a cartoonist working for the New Masses, Daily Worker, or some such thing. Then you are bound to a party line. How many artists can do that, you know two or three. They had so few. Art Young was good, Hugo Gellert is still around too. I haven't seen him since the WPA. He was on the project.

**HP:** He was one of the spokesmen for the point of view during the period.

**FE:** He was a real Marxist with a big moustache and was kind of dashing looking.

**HP:** He was also a social critic.

**FE:** Yes, he illustrated Marx's, Das Kapital. I have that somewhere. It was very well done. I liked his work at the time. It doesn't wear too well. Among these artists in Artists Equity and on the project there was a kind of reluctance to become political. They didn't want to take that much of a chance. They could show an unemployed person standing on the corner selling apples, and that is as far as they went. But they couldn't attack the Government that fed them. It just couldn't be done.

**HP:** A sense of frustration.

**FE:** Yes.

**HP:** They certainly were among the first groups to identify for America, Hitler and Mussolini as alien winds.

**FE:** Yes, that is probably true.

**HP:** That is a sense of feeling, or thinking, sort of like discovering something that is there.

**FE:** They have a greater sensitivity that's all.

**HP:** I think there was something to do with an invitation to Heidelberg for some art show. It may have been discussed in the Artists Union, which is a prior organization to the Artists Congress, I don't know.

**FE:** I never had anything to do with the Artists Union. I don't even know what it is. Was it purely a trade organization?

**HP:** Yes. It was intensely local with New York City. I think with the Artists Congress, it was an effort to make a national organization gain a national voice, so that they brought in people from St. Louis, California, sometimes for their national meeting.

**FE:** There was also an organization -- Artists for Victory -- I just remembered. I was in on that too. I think it was undertaken by the Artists Congress when the war started. It must have been in 1939. They had an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum if I'm not gravely mistaken. It was prints and drawings.

**HP:** From Europe?

**FE:** No America. There must be a catalog somewhere.

**HP:** They ultimately did put on shows.

**FE:** It must have been the Artists Congress.

**HP:** You don't remember how long you stayed on the project?

**FE:** I just don't remember. I could only trace it back if I would know how much time I had for each print. I suspect it must have been six weeks instead of four weeks. It was about six weeks for each print, and I must have produced roughly twelve, or it could have been twenty. They are rather complicated things and very meticulously executed. Then they were printed by a printer provided by the Project. I have forgotten who that was. They were done, and there was a little stamp on the back saying something -- not for sale, federal art project. I still have one or two of those. I think Karl Kup of the New York Public Library has a complete set of all the prints made under the project. I don't know whether you have seen them or not.

**HP:** Yes. I think they are microfilming whatever records he has. That is quite a collection.

**FE:** There must be at least thousands, I would say, when I think of all the people who clustered around me there -- two thousand prints at least. Where are they? I should really go and see them. I would like to see them. Probably no great shakes looking back. They have never been produced or shown completely in a catalog of any kind?

**HP:** No. Not that I am aware of.

**FE:** Maybe they shouldn't be.

**HP:** It certainly marked a period in our cultural life where but for the WPA, the print makers would have been doing something else.

**FE:** True.

**HP:** If nothing else, it has kept skill and momentum alive.

**FE:** They must have had workshops with presses.

**HP:** I think they discovered stones in Brooklyn somewhere, and they brought them to the office here, which was downtown somewhere near City Hall -- some building around, I don't remember the street, but it was there. They had their wood shop, their cabinetmakers, their furniture makers and so on, and their print place was right there. It was centrally located, so that you brought in your work, and it was done there. There were a lot of things going on.

**FE:** The mural project was a tremendous thing.

**HP:** When you put that in perspective of the present day, it did keep a lot of skills alive, you know.

**FE:** I don't know how successful the painting project really was. Have you seen a lot?

**HP:** No.

**FE:** Lots of it has been destroyed I would presume.

**HP:** That was one of the problems as a government agency. It terminated with 1943, I think. The number of people on the rolls dropped suddenly. They were taken off into other lines. The Government just called it surplus and swept it off onto the floor.

**FE:** They rolled them up, didn't they, and sold them by the pound?

**HP:** Yes.

**FE:** Remember the article in Life Magazine?

**HP:** Yes. Some astute purchaser.

**FE:** Some joint on 7th Avenue and Broadway where they now sell the second-hand magazines. They had a whole shop full of those rolled up canvases. He brought them for ten cents a pound, I think.

**HP:** From the Government's point of view it was space that --

**FE:** They could have given them to a reputable dealer and said "We'll pay for the storage until you have sifted the material," or some such thing, and "give them out to hospitals or nurseries or public buildings." This was the idea.

**HP:** Right. I think an effort was made to share with non-private institutions -- public institutions -- whatever was available. The speed and the efficiency with which this was done varies in various regions. Here was a warehouse, and things were dumped. This was -- preparedness was in the air, troops were marching by -- the whole question of art, or feed them, or get through the emergency was turned into a struggle between the group representing America first and the Committee to Aid America by Aiding the Allies. This became the big thing. William Allan White -- the Committee to Aid America by Aiding the Allies, which is sort of a back door approach, because we faced that hideous prospect of the Johnston Act which was isolationist.

**FE:** Which Johnston? General Johnston?

**HP:** From California. Senator Hiram Johnston. This was the consequence of the Spanish Civil war where we stood off shore and let everybody else do what they pleased, while we maintained neutrality. We had to get by that somehow, and the public argument was between William Allan White's crowd and Lindbergh's crowd. You must have gotten wrapped up in this once it started in Germany. You proved your point though as to what transpired?

**FE:** When I left Germany, this wasn't discernible at all.

**HP:** But you felt it was in the air.

**FE:** No. American politics were not discussed, or considered of any importance. I can't remember that I ever got involved in it. You know, being born there in Cologne, which is an ancient city. It is over 2,000 years old. I remember what I thought vaguely of America and it was actually what George Grosz thought America was -- the prairies for the buffalos, some settlement somewhere and some big city somewhere in maybe two or three different places like New York, Chicago and San Francisco and in between, vastness, and there was the old prairie schooners and all that kind of thing. We had very little conception. I would say we in general, people who lived in Germany at the time, or perhaps in Europe at the time, had very little conception of what America actually was. It was to us who were sympathetic towards the idea of considering any country as equal, let's say, still we thought this was a country where immigrants pour in through Ellis Island -- helter skelter -- all kinds of people -- pour in and they are just like mice. They scurry off into the vastness of the country and settle here and settle there. There was no cohesion. You couldn't describe the country in any form or fashion. It was just impossible was it an industrial empire, or was it an agricultural society, was it still pioneer, was it sophisticated? No, certainly not. We never heard about American art -- never. I remember Otto Kahn being the only person one talked about as being the patron of the Metropolitan Opera, or some such person -- J.P. Morgan having started a most fantastic collection. We would say he is just an upstart -- a financier who manipulates a lot of things and for prestige reasons he starts a big collection. Everyone knew he had Roger Pryor, or someone picking up the things in Paris for him. The same applied to other things. He had an opera in Chicago and he had to have an angel for it. Who supported this? The Government? No. In Europe almost every theater is supported by either the municipality, or the single state, or the federal state. Statz Opera and all these things. There were hundreds of them in the little conclave called Germany. Wherever you go there are now hundreds of them, any little place like Karlsruhe, Darmstadt, and so on. They all have state opera. This is taken for granted. Well, this didn't exist in this country. You could hardly support an opera here in New York. You still cannot, because there isn't the money for it. Who is to give the money -- Otto H. Kahn did, or what- ever his name was. The picture you had actually of a country as a whole was fragmented. There was something good here and something good there. You couldn't describe it as a whole. It is just impossible. It defies description. I know when George Grosz came over he fully expected some Indians on horses racing around in New York State. He was very naive. I think he was very disappointed in the end that life was not the Wild West life that he had dreamed of. He never fitted in here. He went back finally about five years ago and died. He was a very disappointed man. I feel a great affection for the country, because I was treated so marvelously. I think this is the key to any reaction that you will find. I lived

very poorly, naturally. There was a time when no one that I liked would have lived richly. People were so wonderfully helpful in very tactful ways. Within a few months we had a group of friends around us which assured us of some sort of security -- whenever you need something, it is there. We did not ask for it. I remember living in this little house, which by the way was Alexander Calder's house before. He had lived there, and the house is still standing, a tiny little thing all the sky scrapers. One day there was a car standing in front of it. It was an old Model T Ford convertible. You knew how these things looked -- like toys. It was so marvelous, you know, a new-found friend who loved us very much and wanted to do something. We said, "No, we'll get along there." We didn't have any money, you know. He had gone out to a used car lot and bought the car for twenty-five dollars. It worked beautifully. We had it for several years. These things don't happen anywhere else, really. I have a radio, which I don't have here, which the same friend bought for us in 1933. It has no cabinet -- it is just the innards. It is a very heavy thing. It has lots of tubes and so on and you can see the whole works. A loudspeaker also unconcealed, and I put this on the same desk here which I still have. I attached the loud speaker to the side of the desk and I used this -- I learned English this way. I turned it on, and it was on continuously, and then I discovered WQXR. Most of my work I did at home. I illustrated so many books. I always collected books. The good I got out of this was just inestimable, you know. There was good music and you felt at home. The machine is still working. The genius things now, every half hour or so, all of a sudden -- boom, it turns itself off. I don't know why. This machine which has survived a lot of movings is still working as the Model T still would work. When I finally had a little more money a few years ago, I bought a new Rambler station wagon. That was my first new car that I bought in this country. There was everything wrong with it from the very beginning.

**HP:** You got a lemon.

**FE:** A lemon, yes. Later on, people told me that this is what to expect -- every tenth car or so is always a lemon. It shows that something has changed -- you know, the radio and the car. They made things in those days to last and now they make them not to last. Spiritually there is a wilfulness in there to increase the consumption.

**HP:** In addition to that, the money is to be made not so much on the original sale, but on the replacement of parts. The parts are standardized, but you have a different model. You get the same part he does and you put it in a given car, and somehow or other it enhances the value. Of course, we don't know anything about that anymore.

**FE:** I don't know anything about cars, but that Model T was so simply constructed. I remember when I first climbed in there -- this young man who was the son of the friend who bought it and I said to him, "What is this?" There were wires hanging out of the dashboard. He said, "It is very simple, you just splice them together." If anything went wrong, you could see the works, just as you could see in that radio. There was no fancy cabinet to conceal these things. It was such an honest way of selling things.

**HP:** It was a good way.

**FE:** Yes, very good.

**HP:** We are about at the end here.

**FE:** That is a long tape. How long does it last? For a half hour?

**HP:** We have been going about an hour and twenty minutes.

**FE:** I talk too much.

**HP:** It is very interesting -- really.

**FE:** It brings up things that I had forgotten about. Audrey McMahan was one. I always remember Sommerwell because I had this tangle with him.

**HP:** Everything about him was negative. He is important because of the antibodies he aroused. Audrey McMahan in her way was tough as nails, just as he was.

**FE:** Yes, they probably got along.

**HP:** They did, but it was a continuous struggle. She was a battler. Some of her staff you may have bumped into. Did you know Harry Knight?

**FE:** No.

**HP:** Because you were in this special project, so you wouldn't know.

**FE:** Where was he?

**HP:** He was in the office and handled problems with respect to artists, generally. Of course, you wouldn't have had anything to do with the mural project -- that was Burgoyne Diller.

**FE:** I wonder how many of the murals are still in existence?

**HP:** I don't know. I know the one that Gorky did over in the Newark Airport has vanished.

**FE:** Yes. Most of them vanished. There was one at the customs.

**HP:** That is still there.

**FE:** Didn't they tear down that building?

**HP:** No, that's --

**FE:** Refugier -- no, what's the French name?

**HP:** I thought he was an American graphic artist, who did "Why not take the L," remember that?

**FE:** Benton?

**HP:** No.

**FE:** Benton did some, didn't he?

**HP:** The old Whitney Museum down on 8th Street.

**FE:** Is it still in the building?

**HP:** I don't know what they did with it.

**FE:** I can't think of the fellow's name. I have a vague recollection of it.

**HP:** Marsh -- that's the fellow.

**FE:** Marsh. He had an army of people working with him.

**HP:** Well, they were exciting times, I think.

**FE:** I have been on so many committees since. The National Academy had a committee. I was on their Council for three years or six years and fought all the way. It was kind of a stuffy outfit. I had the same reaction usually that I had with Sommerwell. Lawrence White was the president at the time -- the architect. They were nice people, but I was always in a fight of some sort. They had a Committee for Government in Art, or some such thing. I was on it for a short while and saw that we would never get anywhere. I am not quite sure now after hearing so many pros and cons and being involved in the stamp project and I'm on the Committee of the Library of Congress and travel for the state department. I went to Russia last year. I'm not quite sure -- well, I am almost sure, I would say, that the artists will never fit into a scheme of Government help for any length of time. What the Government should do, in my opinion, is to support institutions where artists are perhaps given scholarships, where they are taken out of government restrictions, where they can do and work as they please. If the government gives commissions like statues and sculpture business in Washington, you know what that looks like, it is going to be under the auspices of a few hundred Congressmen who wouldn't know art if they fell over it, and who determines these things but the Congress really. Among the Senators, there isn't much enlightenment either except Fulbright, perhaps, and maybe two or three others who have to fight their way through. They have a problem. This last venture with the Stuart Davis stamp -- you can't imagine if we didn't have the money from the Albert List Foundation, what would have happened. They would have said, "You squandered Government money to get the "master of the Squiggle! on a postage stamp." How you can enlighten a Congressman? This is the great trick. If there would be a school for Congressmen where they could learn not the art of diplomacy, though they would have to do that too, probably. There is something about the importance of culture in our society -- just plain culture -- the arts; the performing arts, literature, dance, music, fine arts -- they don't support it because they don't know a thing about it, but they are really the majority. I remember in the Equity days when we heard of a Congressman -- I have forgotten the fellow's name here in New Jersey, someone who was interested in the arts and supported some kind of a motion. It wasn't a law really to egg the Government on to do something. He was the only one. He couldn't carry the burden. He needed support in Congress. If they don't know what you are talking about, you are licked. I don't think that Javits or maybe Lindsay, if he gets into Congress, may be interested in a project of this sort. I don't know of anyone that I would turn to find an understanding. Nelson Rockefeller, perhaps. He has been in the arts for a long time and has a private collection. He is not a typical Senator.

**HP:** I think the typical Senator shares much of the attitude of the Soviet leadership -- "A good picture is my portrait." That is art!

**FE:** That is right. Socialist realism, democratic realists, republican realists -- I have tried to explain things to the Russians.

**HP:** Did you?

**FE:** Yes. It was much easier for me. If I had to do the same thing here with the Congress, I don't think I would succeed.

**HP:** That is a sad commentary -- really -- a big stumbling block to our alleged leadership where from their point of view it simply gets too controversial. So its subjective -- "I like it."

**FE:** They are scared of it.

**HP:** I like it. "You can hate it if you want to, but I like it." What are you going to do when you give a nation a --

**FE:** Well, if they don't back the fine arts, they could support music, you know, or the theater, but even that is a delicate thing. They wouldn't stand for Tennessee Williams, or support it in the Congress.

**HP:** They didn't stand for Hallie Flanagan.

**FE:** They didn't?

**HP:** They curtailed her and curtailed the theater project. She designed, or had designed the play, "One Third of a Nation," and the people who put the "One Third of a Nation" together bothered to quote a few Senators correctly and used their names. Well, you know, that wasn't good policy. Senatorial courtesy being what it is, they didn't have any further appropriation for the theater project.

**FE:** I never followed the theater project, although I was tremendously interested in the theater and always have been. What did they put on really that stands out? Can you remember any?

**HP:** Well, she was experimental. They had this living theater, living newspaper thing and you heard Orson Welles in New York.

**FE:** Did he do the Hamlet thing, or Othello or something?

**HP:** I don't remember the substance of what he did, but this was also encouragement for new writers too, that "One Third of a Nation."

**FE:** Well, you see, they were really there -- the difficulties of Government support and subsequently control. If you can divide the two things, yes, but you can't.

**HP:** It extends Justice Holmes notion of not only freedom for the thought you hate, but freedom and support for the thought you hate and that takes courage and also a big person. We expect midgets -- I shouldn't say midgets really. We expect reflections of ourselves to do this.

**FE:** Can I offer you something to drink.

**HP:** Yes, I'm a little on the thirsty side.

[Return to Top](#)

[Return to List of AAA Oral History Interviews](#)

---

This transcript is in the public domain and may be used without permission. Quotes and excerpts must be cited as follows: *Oral history interview with Fritz Eichenberg, 1964 Dec. 3, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.*

[Top of page](#)

---