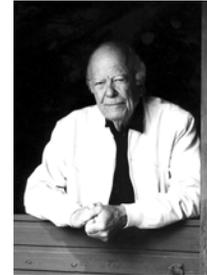




PHILIP C. CURTIS
1907 - 2000

1992
Internationally Recognized Artist



The following is an oral history interview with Philip C. Curtis (**PC**) conducted by Zona Davis Lorig (**ZL**) for Historical League, Inc. on January 9, 1992 at Philip C. Curtis's Scottsdale, Arizona home.

*Transcripts for website edited by members of Historical League, Inc.
Original tapes are in the collection of the Arizona Historical Society Museum Library at Papago Park, Tempe, Arizona.*

This is Zona Davis Lorig interviewing Philip C. Curtis for the Arizona Historical Society. The date is January 9, 1992 and the location of the interview is Mr. Curtis' home at 109 Cattle Track Road in Scottsdale, Arizona.

ZL: You were born In Jackson, Michigan.

PC: Yeah, that's true.

ZL: Can you tell me something about Jackson at the time you were growing up? How did people earn their living?

PC: Well, it was a fairly small town, probably 30,000. But at the turn of the century, it took the leadership in building cars. There were four or five different cars made there. This was before Henry Ford set in motion his ideas of manufacturing. I guess the reason it started there was there were a lot of buggy shops. Obviously, they thought it would be a good idea to get in on this new thing and it was. There was a car called the Briscoe, an Argo, a Brio, a Saxon, and they were all cars made in some quantity, not just one or two. Then the war period came along.

ZL: The First World War?



Arizona Historymakers
ORAL HISTORY



In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections
[Historical League, Inc.](http://HistoricalLeague.Inc.com) © 2012

PC: Yeah, right. And all the factories there in that small town went into war equipment. And afterwards everything changed. Ford had already taken control of Detroit and moved everything into that site. And obviously it was a better location for massive industry than Jackson was. Jackson had a little river and Detroit had the lakes.

ZL: The Great Lakes?

PC: Yeah, right. And so Jackson settled back into doing small, contracted automotive parts. It was never a great town, but it was the town. We lived sort of on one edge of the city; then you walked and in ten minutes you'd be out in the country.

ZL: Your father was a lawyer?

PC: Yeah, he was a lawyer.

ZL: Did he practice law as a private attorney?

PC: Yeah, and he finally was elected judge.

ZL: A municipal judge?

PC: A county judge and he served that until Roosevelt came along. My father was a staunch Republican and he was defeated by Roosevelt. It turned out it was better for him because he went into private practice again and made out much better.

ZL: Your mother was a musician?

PC: Yeah, she was a musician.

ZL: How did she practice her profession?

PC: Well, she had four boys.

ZL: And in those days . . .

PC: That was a full time job.



Arizona Historymakers
ORAL HISTORY



In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections
[Historical League, Inc.](http://HistoricalLeague.Inc.) © 2012

ZL: It's still a full time job.

PC: She played the organ in the church; that's the only activity I'm aware of. She was *good* at that. The organ was a wonderful organ, huge; a hundred feet high it seemed to me. I used to go with her sometimes while she was practicing and I was always impressed with the noise that organ could make when she was playing, I remember some of Bach, it seemed as though the walls of the church would be shattered! Well, I enjoyed that.

ZL: Do you think some of your artistic ability; do you attribute that to your mother?

PC: Oh, I don't know, I don't know whether she was an artist or not; she knew how to play the piano and the organ. I guess she was an artist, sure, but I never thought of that really. Didn't think about art at all until I got into college. Jackson was a small place and I never got a teacher that set me on fire, like you always hope will happen. I went all the way through high school *hating* it all.

ZL: You didn't like school?

PC: Didn't like it. And of course art, there wasn't anything in the city that had any relationship to art.

ZL: Did you know you were interested in art?

PC: No, no. Well, one teacher along the way thought I had some talent, I guess. She encouraged me to do things. And I enjoyed doing it because then I didn't have to do something else.

ZL: When you graduated from high school you went to Albion College.

PC: Yeah.

ZL: Where is that?

PC: Well, it's not too far from Jackson. In those days it was a long ways, but today it's a short drive. Well, anyway, I was there, the whole thing of college life really set me up as an eye opener. For the first time I thought school was great. I didn't want to go home for vacations. The second year I was there, they hired an art teacher. It was a woman from Chicago and actually, she was a good teacher. She was the only person in the department and I took classes from her. She started me on the path. Before that, a year before that, I got interested in writing and I thought well, that's what I'll do and then when she came along and showed me what this art . . .



Arizona Historymakers
ORAL HISTORY



In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections
[Historical League, Inc.](http://HistoricalLeague, Inc.) © 2012

ZL: Inspired you?

PC: Yeah, for me this is better and I started getting into the art side of it and from there I went on to the University of Michigan.

ZL: But you had decided that your career would be in law.

PC: Yeah, right. So, I went to the University of Michigan Law School. And I was there for one year, and the first part of it was rather good, and I sort of enjoyed the law situation and I got good marks on monthly tests. Then about the middle of the term they told me all the marks wouldn't count at all, one test at the end of the year would be the thing. Well, while I was there, I met several other students who were in the same situation as I was. Two were writers, and one was a poet. I got to looking around the university and I found they had an art department, one person, so I went to see him and asked him where he went to study this wonderful stuff. Well, he says there are a lot of places but the best place is Yale, and I thanked him. My year ended and a classmate of my father's was the dean of the law school. My father called him and asked him how his son did. And he said, "Well, George, if he doesn't come back we'll give him the credits!" So that was that and I got out of there.

ZL: So, then you went to Yale to art school?

PC: Yeah, yeah.

ZL: Well, I want to know how your parents reacted to this career change.

PC: Well, they were in sympathy. Except my father didn't know how I'd make a living. One of his other sons went into law and he told that son to sort of watch out for me and see that I ate. (Laughter) Well, I didn't need that.

When I went to the Yale school I first wrote and asked for a catalog and they said to send your work ahead before I got there so they could see what they were getting. Well, I didn't have any work so I just went there. I went to the registrar, and he didn't find my name on the list and I said, "No, I'm a blackjack." He said "Well, we're full." And I said, "You can't tell me there isn't room for one more." And he said, "You're right." So I got in. Well, it wasn't the best school in the world; I don't know what school would be. So that was the way that worked out.

ZL: Then the depression came along and you felt like New York was the place to be.



Arizona Historymakers
ORAL HISTORY



In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections
[Historical League, Inc.](#) © 2012

PC: Yeah, Yale was interested in the tail end of the Renaissance. The last artist they recognized as being a real artist was Rubens. They didn't even know who was painting or doing anything in the United States of America at that time. So I knew the only place for me was New York.

ZL: Had you been to New York before?

PC: No.

ZL: Tell me about it when you arrived there in 1935 or 1936.

PC: 1935. Yeah, a friend of mine was already there. He went there a year before I did. We decided we would get a place to live and work in the city. He made arrangements - got the place on the lower eastside and rented it. It was a change of our life style, compared to Yale. It was the Jewish- Romanian section. They spoke very little English and did all of their business in the streets using push carts. They weren't going to let us in at first. They thought we were gangsters hiding out because we didn't look like they did. We looked like foreigners, but finally they saw that we were harmless and let us stay there. We paid \$12 a month.

ZL: \$12 a month for two bedrooms?

PC: Well, one fairly good sized bedroom, a kitchen and a little living room, all in a row with windows in between each room. We had a wood stove to cook with, the bathtub was in the kitchen and the toilet was in the hallway – community thing. We were there a year. It was a good experience, because nearly every day I went out into some area of the city and made sketches and got adjusted to the city.

ZL: You liked the atmosphere of New York City?

PC: Yeah, right. This was the depression period and the WPA was in full swing. The government established an art program and before the first year was over I interviewed with them, and they took me on. The idea was that you were supposed to be on relief and need a job. They were allowed to hire five percent of the people that weren't on relief as supervisors. So I was an assistant supervisor in mural painting.

ZL: What kind of murals did they have you painting?

PC: There were quite a few. They were in hospitals, schools, libraries - public buildings. Some of them



Arizona Historymakers
ORAL HISTORY



In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections
[Historical League, Inc.](http://HistoricalLeague.Inc) © 2012

were *very* good, some were adequate and some of them were dated – looked good then, now they're kind of silly.

ZL: Were you as the supervisor allowed to select the subject matter?

PC Yeah, there were several involved, and the artists would have some say, too. It was a wonderful program because all the artists who were any good were part of the WPA. If you were selling paintings at that time you were sort of commercially minded, and you weren't in the swing of the art movement of the time. There were a few, sort of established people who could survive without the WPA. I did meet young people and others who became very well known after that.

ZL: In the first tape you mentioned a person named Gorky. What was the first name?

PC: Arshile Gorky. He was a big influence on me and a lot of others. I've got a book in there by him.

ZL: You also mentioned an artist named Sanderson.

PC: He was an artist here in the state.

ZL: Here in Phoenix? Do you remember what his first name was?

PC: No, I don't.

ZL: So a request came from Phoenix for a WPA art program?

PC: Yeah, that's true.

ZL: Was this from the women who were running the art association?

PC: Yeah, they had an art society, The Phoenix Fine Arts Association, is that what they call it? It still goes on, whatever it was. This program was set up. Any city that wanted to could ask for that kind of help. We would come with our suggestions and if they liked them they'd do it. And that's what happened in Phoenix. I didn't know anything about the program at that point. But they asked me if I would like to do that, and it sounded so good to me that I thought it would be worthwhile. I didn't know where Phoenix was. It was in the middle of summer when I went out there, July I guess it was.

ZL: They didn't have air conditioning in those days.



Arizona Historymakers
ORAL HISTORY



In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections
[Historical League, Inc.](#) © 2012

PC: No, I didn't mind it, no one else did either. It was a great program and I spent some time with the director in Washington first. His experience in the art world was rather extensive. He had just gotten the Museum of Modern Art established. He was one of the organizers. He told me how all these things should work and what to do.

ZL: A crash course.

PC: Yeah. The program was set up to give the community some taste of art that hopefully would continue. The WPA program was an emergency thing that would go for two or three years and then it would be over. They hoped that I would be able to organize it in such a way that it would continue and become a museum or something of that sort. He said the first thing you had to do was to look around for the busiest man in town. He said that you'll find that most of the people in this organization are women and as women, at that time, they wouldn't be the ones to raise money to build the building. You have to have some good businessmen to take the leadership there or they'll never make it. So I found Walter Bimson and he fit that picture very well.

ZL: You did a good job finding the right man?

PC: Yeah, he said if you do that you'll be a great success. So I was here for three years. Then I went to another city.

ZL: Tell me some of your impressions when you first came out here, having grown up in the Midwest and then living in the East.

PC: Well, Phoenix was about the same size as Jackson - 30,000 I think it was, or 40,000 maybe. It wasn't a big town at all. I was a little disappointed as I thought they said it was a desert. Well, I looked for the desert. You know, it was semi-arid. There were things growing out there, but no sand dunes. I expected to see sand dunes. Then I thought this was the Rocky Mountains and the mountains would be big and massive. Well, they weren't. You know they looked kind of silly. While I was here I didn't care too much about this area. When I left, I recalled things I liked about it. Eventually I came back, as you know.

ZL: But you didn't feel that pull the first time you lived here?

PC: No, I had to get adjusted to it. Of course, if I had known what I was getting into in the beginning, I wouldn't have been prejudiced; so I guess I would have had an acceptance for the way it is.



Arizona Historymakers
ORAL HISTORY



In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections
[Historical League, Inc.](#) © 2012

ZL: Well, it's interesting because your expectations were not reality.

PC: Yeah, right, true. But it was a nice city and I liked the people here. We had quite a successful situation.

ZL: Now, you got the museum started.

PC: Yeah, before they didn't have a board and they didn't have big meetings and no plans. It's important to have those things to make any progress. I didn't know Bimson at that time. I would soon see him a lot, every chance I'd get. Any important people who came to town in the art world I would always take them to meet him. I didn't want him to get involved with the little things we were doing at that time because he'd lose his enthusiasm for it. But I was building it up in his mind so that when the time came he would become the person that would carry on. After three years, Mrs. Heard donated the land where the museum is and so that was the starting point of it all. I met Bimson a number of times on that and the two of us sort of outlined what we should work for and I told him we'd be silly if we didn't get Frank Lloyd Wright to do the building. At that point I was leaving in a few months and he said he would work on getting Frank Lloyd Wright and he did. But the business people around town didn't like Wright.

ZL: The business people were too conservative?

PC: Well, I don't know. I heard that a lot of the business men had been insulted by Wright, or they took it that way. It was a small town. You only had to insult one or two people. So somebody else got into the thing and took it away from Wright. They didn't take it away; they just went out and hired one of Wright's students from Michigan, a son of the Dow Chemical people. Well, he was a good enough architect but his name didn't mean anything. We were counting on Wright's name to establish the Phoenix Museum. The fellow we got was good but he didn't have the glamour of the name. It was built and that was fine.

ZL: After the depression you went to Harvard to study as a museum curator.

PC: Before though I went out to Des Moines, Iowa to another art center deal. There were several of us doing this thing in the country then. One of the persons I had worked with had gone to Minneapolis and found the Walker Art Museum closed. It was a privately owned museum through the Walker family. He thought it would be a wonderful idea to reopen it. He did that and I helped and since then it has become one of the most important museums in the country.

Just before I left Phoenix, I got married. I knew that I had to have a job and that the Depression wasn't going to last forever. I went back to Harvard and I was going to become a curator, hopefully in a museum. I got acquainted with some of the curators around town, as there were several museums. One of them was



Arizona Historymakers
ORAL HISTORY



In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections
[Historical League, Inc.](#) © 2012

friendly and I asked him, "What do they you pay for a job like this?" He said, "\$1500 a year." It just blew my mind.

ZL: You were probably making almost that much?

PC: Oh, I was making more. Then he invited my wife and me to dinner. I thought, oh my God, I'd better take something along or he won't be able to afford this. Well, his place was almost as big as Harvard Square. He apologized and said, "You know, the trouble with the museum world is there are a lot of people like myself who'd just as soon work for nothing. There are a lot of us and there aren't very many museums," So that was the end of my being a curator. The war came and I got into the OSS Strategic Corp.

ZL: Now tell me what OSS stands for, please.

PC: Office of Strategic Services.

ZL: And you made movies during that time to explain what OSS did?

PC: No, we were supposed to be aides to the Joint Chiefs of Staff explaining things or ideas that were happening quickly so they would understand the rules and make actions on them. We did things that were dropped behind the lines. You know, it was a Secret Service thing, too.

ZL: This became the Secret Service?

PC: It became the CIA.

ZL: You were trying to explain things to the public?

PC: No, to the armed services. Some of the things we did would reach the public in other ways, educational types of things. They had all kinds of talent - painters, sculptors, architects, and writers in this pool. It wasn't a big pool.

ZL: Was that an interesting job?

PC: It was. We never knew enough about what was going on to have any secrets that would be shattering. The first job I remember was when the Japanese were at Pearl Harbor and they had taken many islands in the Pacific. A lot of the military and naval people didn't know what the Pacific was like. They didn't know where the islands were. I had one job to show the picture of all the islands in the area and how it wasn't a



Arizona Historymakers
ORAL HISTORY



In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections
[Historical League, Inc.](http://HistoricalLeague.Inc.com) © 2012

land mass. It was just a little island here and a little island over there. You didn't have to take each island. You'd pinch off and go behind and get one behind that would block off a lot of stuff, and you wouldn't have to take everything that you saw. And that's exactly what happened. A lot of the feeling was that in order to add to the war to help them, this was the same as a land mass and you'd have to start at the outer edge and work your way straight through. But that wasn't the way it was. So that was one of the things I was working on. It wasn't my idea, I just visualized it.

ZL: After the war you decided to come back.

PC: Well, I knew I was going to paint, *finally*. Up to that point I was sort of coasting along.

ZL: You returned to New York first, didn't you, after the war?

PC: I was going to. My decision was to start painting seriously. My experience was in New York and I thought my friends were there. There was a big movement in the art world, called abstract expressionism. All of my friends were doing that. I tried myself. It was fun for an hour or so, but I wasn't going to devote my life to that form of art. I knew if went to New York, I would probably get involved in it. There was one other artist out in Arizona and I wouldn't be influenced. So I came out here. It was a good decision.

ZL: By the time you returned to Arizona you felt the pull of the desert?

PC: Yeah, I did. It was a good atmosphere for me to work in. I didn't use it much, if you've seen my paintings. They're flat, just a horizon line, not desert really, just a stage set. I do have a mountain here and there occasionally. But I don't try to make a landscape out of it. It is a whisper of Arizona.

ZL: Some of your paintings depict objects that are found in ghost towns around Arizona.

PC: Yeah, that's true.

ZL: Have you traveled around the state quite a bit?

PC: Oh, yeah, I did do a lot of it; fit it into what I was working on. A lot of these things then were still sort of in deserted places, like Jerome. It was completely deserted. Now it's full of everything. A lot of the flavor that I liked is gone now. It's no fun going out around the state like it used to be. It was somewhat more of an adventure when you were looking at some raw country.

ZL: It's harder to find that flavor in Arizona today.



Arizona Historymakers
ORAL HISTORY



In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections
[Historical League, Inc.](http://HistoricalLeague.Inc) © 2012

PC: Yeah, you go to things that are worth seeing and there's a lot of garbage kicking around, a residue of people.

ZL: A crippling spinal arthritis attacked you at age sixteen.

PC: Yeah.

ZL: You fell beneath some ice and for most of your life you were on crutches.

PC: I never recovered from that. Two or three days after I fell through the ice, I was confined to a bed for a year. After that nothing seemed to work, you know, my bones didn't work. Before that I was sort of into some athletic activity. But they just didn't work that well anymore. So, in a way it was okay, because I was satisfied and could sit all day at an easel and be comfortable about it. Probably it was easier for me to sit there than it would have been otherwise.

ZL: So it definitely influenced you.

PC: Yeah, it was an influence. Well, it didn't all come at once; it was just a gradual thing. Now my vertebrae are all frozen together. There's no movement there, no pain either.

ZL: In 1980 you had an operation?

PC: Yeah, a hip replacement operation. It worked fine. I got off the canes. That was good because I could get up and walk a few days after the operation; no pain in movement or in my bones.

ZL: John Russell, the art critic of the London Sunday Times wrote that you're "a natural storyteller in an age which is rather short of storytelling in art."

PC: Yeah.

ZL: I've also read that if people ask you a particular question about a piece of your art, if that's what you had in mind, that you'll answer them with another question.

PC: Yeah, right. I hate to get into discussions of my meanings because once someone bought a painting and they came to me and said they had discovered the meaning of the painting. When they told me their idea, it wasn't my idea at all. If I said it wasn't my idea it would ruin it for them, so I said, "Sure, you hit it."

Philip C. Curtis audio interview 1992



Arizona Historymakers
ORAL HISTORY



In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections
[Historical League, Inc.](http://HistoricalLeague.Inc.com) © 2012

But it wasn't true. I had a psychiatrist friend who sat down and gave me six interpretations, each one plausible, none of which I'd thought of, so I gave up the idea of discussing them.

ZL: You must instill a great deal of confidence in people; because when you first returned to Phoenix in 1947 you didn't have time to develop enough paintings for a one-man show. Louis Ruskin, a retired Chicago businessman, got together a group of ten people and they each donated \$2500 a piece so that you could work for three years without worrying.

PC: Yeah, it was a wonderful idea. It helped. His idea didn't end after the three years was up. He said, "Now you need a gallery." He asked me what gallery I wanted. I said, "Well, it's gotta be in New York and I want Knoedler's." That was one of the top ones, at that time. He said that's fine and he said he'd work on it. He called up the gallery and wanted to talk with whoever was in charge.

Knoedler's never goes out to look at paintings. Ruskin said, "Well, okay you never have, but think it over and I'll call you back." So he called him back and the fellow said he'd decided to come out. He did come out and he looked at my work and he accepted them and so I was very well on my way. It would have been harder for me living in New York to get to that kind of a relationship. You know there are hundreds of artists every day looking for a gallery.

ZL: What year was that?

PC: '63. Yeah, in '64 he gave me a show. I had my first show there.

ZL: While you were in Washington, DC you met a man named Samuel Rosenberg, who was very knowledgeable about Sigmund Freud.

PC: Yeah, right.

ZL: Was this man an artist?

PC: Yeah, he was an artist. He was everything. He never had any degrees from college.

ZL: He was self-educated.

PC: Self -educated. But he was a very good authority on Freud. He'd read books on it and had some acceptance in that world. Well, he opened up the whole thing to me. I'd heard of Freud in the late '20s. This was a name in passing who was causing a lot of trouble in the thinking up to that point. Then I never heard



Arizona Historymakers
ORAL HISTORY



In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections
[Historical League, Inc.](http://HistoricalLeague.Inc.com) © 2012

of him again in any serious way until I met Rosenberg during the war period. Rosenberg taught me a lot about Freud and it influenced me quite a bit; more was going on in my head than I realized before. And I use that in my work, but not to the extent that it's that important. Except that it's just a background or starting for my paintings. That's the way it's been. It doesn't seem as important to me now as it did then.

ZL: Well, it becomes an integral part of you and it's there but you're not as aware, I suppose.

PC: Every once in a while you run across somebody who knows a lot and they enjoy talking and they become an influence. You know, those things are *good*. At Albion, my history professor was that sort of a person. He's the one who sort of set me on fire, you know. I wanted to know everything there was to know.

ZL: He's the one that really got you excited about school in general?

PC: Yeah, right. He changed my whole attitude about school. So people like that are important.

ZL: Teachers can be a wonderful influence that way.

PC: Yeah. There aren't too many that meet that situation. If you're *lucky*, you know, you come into contact with one.

ZL: You've been around a good part of this century...

PC: Yeah.

ZL: What changes do you see as significant in terms of our society?

PC: Well, the growth of the population is one of the things that sort of stupefies me. It won't be much longer before we have standing room only, in a sense. This is what bothers me. The automobile situation - you see pictures of a city like Los Angeles just solid with lights, car lights going in every direction all day long and all night; sort of scary. I'm conscious and aware of the ecology and things we are doing that are probably wrong, the danger of it. It's no longer a simple little country that I started out with in 1907. A lot of good things are happening, too.

ZL: What do you see as the biggest impact, the most positive impact?

PC: Well, I guess in my profession in the art world, it's easier to be an artist now than it was when I started out.



Arizona Historymakers
ORAL HISTORY



In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections
[Historical League, Inc.](http://HistoricalLeague.Inc) © 2012

ZL: Because?

PC: Well, because there's more interest in it; we've become more sophisticated as a group, as a country. I guess our education has opened it up a little. I don't know what all the responsible elements are but it seems to be better. And then this idea that I was working on with others, starting museums all over the country, was part of that. Those things, those museums, those art centers that we did, all the ones I worked with turned into museums.

ZL: Now you also were working on some in North Carolina?

PC: Yeah, Raleigh's got a fine museum now

ZL: Raleigh was one and where was another?

PC: Winston Salem was another. All those things are meaningful to me and I was glad to be a part of it. The way it all started was the art program in the Depression. The President liked to play poker and he had this friend, Hopkins, who was a poker player, too. Hopkins would arrange for poker parties, from time to time. And they invited a person from the art world from New York. They found out he liked to play poker too. One night Hopkins said he just got back from New York and he was astounded at how many artists there were in New York on relief. In those days in the early part of that Depression, they had a bunch of shovels and the symbol was you gave a person a shovel and a little job and have them move dirt from one place to another until we could find something more useful. The person that I knew, Holger Cahill, who became head of the art program, said "Well let's give the artists on relief *brushes* instead of *shovels*." Well, everybody liked that and it happened quickly after that.

ZL: How long had the WPA been in existence before the art part of it came in?

PC: Oh, a couple of years maybe, a year and a half. I wasn't involved in it in the very beginning; 1933 probably was the first.

ZL: Do you think people have changed in your lifetime?

PC: Oh, I don't know. I guess so. In some ways I guess they've got to change. Lifestyles have changed. I don't know whether it's better or not. I haven't thought of that

ZL: Do you remember why you began to paint pictures of an era that was gone by?



Arizona Historymakers
ORAL HISTORY



In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections
[Historical League, Inc.](#) © 2012

PC: Well, I wanted to talk just about people living and coping with life and that's why I picked a period which was already gone. People wouldn't look at my things from day to day and year to year and see changes in dress and all that sort of stuff, because that wasn't important. I wanted to make statements that would settle on the person, the humanity involved. I thought it'd be better that way.

ZL: So it was a very conscious decision?

PC: Yeah, it was conscious. When I was a little kid, my parents lived with my grandparents for a while. It couldn't have been more than a year. But they had a Victorian house which was just wonderful with turrets and a little place that you could get into and a lot of things happening around the house architecturally.

ZL: Was this in Jackson?

PC: Yeah, and so that appealed to me. We were there while our house was being built. When our house was finally built my father took us over to the new one and we were all, my brother and I were alive then, we were both disappointed in this plain, simple box. My God, it was terrible. So I had a little background, a little nostalgic feeling towards that other period.

ZL: You've always painted every day but in an article written in 1990 it said you are still producing four to five paintings a year.

PC: Well, yeah, I don't paint very many, that's for sure. It takes a long time. I could do, I have done more. I've done as many as ten, no fourteen. I guess that's the most I've ever done in a year. But, I'll settle on the lesser figure because each painting goes through a lot of changes and I'm never sure until it's finished and by the time it is finished I feel that I spent a lot of time on it and so it has more meaning to me.

ZL: A lot of people by your age have retired. Do you ever think of retiring?

PC: No, no, well not unless I have to, if I go blind or something.

ZL: That's not in your game plan?

PC: No, no. I didn't start painting really until I was forty, so you know I was a slow, slow developer.

ZL: That's a great encouragement to a lot of people.



Arizona Historymakers
ORAL HISTORY



In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections
[Historical League, Inc.](http://HistoricalLeague.Inc) © 2012

PC: Yeah, by the time I started painting I knew what I was going to do. Usually when you get out of art school, the usual pattern is that you have to try everything, what's been going on; you get involved in some phase of it and I didn't have to do that. I wasn't wasting my time doing it. The first year, I guess it was, I was able to get a show in San Francisco at the museum, their equivalent of the Modern Museum in New York and I was sort of on my way. It took me three or four more years to do what I'm doing now.

ZL: You've had some critical acclaim in Europe. You've had one-man showings in Geneva and Vienna.

PC: Ah, Geneva! They circulated into Germany and one other city in Switzerland.

ZL: I was thinking it was Berne.

PC: Berne, yeah, that's right.

ZL: Now, when you had those showings did you attend?

PC: No, I should have, but traveling was not easy for me.

ZL: You've also had a one-man showing in LA.

PC: Yeah, I've had quite a few showings in LA.

ZL: And of course, here in Arizona.

PC: It's important to have those series of shows. I like museum shows more than the commercial galleries.

ZL: You do?

PC: Yeah, well they're more satisfying. I've had quite a few.

ZL: In the first tape you were talking about when you first moved out here and you said you had a farmer friend who had 80 acres from McDonald to Lincoln and from Scottsdale Road to, was it Hayden?

PC: Yeah, this whole area right here.

ZL: What was that man's name?



Arizona Historymakers
ORAL HISTORY



In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections
[Historical League, Inc.](http://HistoricalLeague.Inc.com) © 2012

PC: George Ellis.

ZL: Then there was a man who was an engineer and later became a builder.

PC: Well, that's George Ellis.

ZL: Then you mentioned a man who bought land where Carefree is now. Was that Tom Darlington?

PC: Yeah, Tom Darlington.

ZL: Then you also mentioned a man named Lloyd Kiva. What can you tell me about him?

PC: Well, he was an Indian.

ZL: What tribe?

PC: Cherokee. His real name is Lloyd New. His mother was a Cherokee Indian. His father was, I think, a Frenchman. He came here when I was in Phoenix in the 30s. He was sent out from the Chicago Art Institute to the Indian School. He became head of the art department. Then after the war he put together a business of his own. He took the name Kiva as a business name. It sounded more Indian, in other words. He developed it into a very good business. He used Indian forms. He made clothes for women, handbags, shirts, and a lot of things like that. It became a very fashionable place to be and buy. And he's now gone all over the country and he's still at it. He gave up the business, went to Santa Fe and became the head of the Santa Fe Indian Art Institute. Yeah, and he changed the . . . Do you know Fritz Scholder's work? He changed the way Indians were painting before Fritz.

ZL: Is that right?

PC: Yeah, in other words they could paint whatever they wanted to paint.

ZL: That allowed them to come into the 20th century?

PC: Yeah, right. He never got around to painting himself. Now he's doing a lot of work for the Indians. There's a big museum in New York City. The Hyde Foundation has been in trouble financially. They had warehouses full of wonderful Indian stuff and they've been trying to figure out what the hell to do with it. And they've finally decided to make a new Indian museum on the mall in DC and another one in New York. They're doing it and he's in charge of putting this material together and selecting it. He wants to

Philip C. Curtis audio interview 1992



Arizona Historymakers
ORAL HISTORY



In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections
[Historical League, Inc.](http://HistoricalLeague.Inc.com) © 2012

emphasize the art quality, rather than just the Indian total uniqueness, and so that's what he's doing.

ZL: Sounds like he has a lot of energy.

PC: Well, he does. He's had a vision to carry him through. We've been good friends since '36 or so.

ZL: Now, I don't know if this is the same fellow or not. You mentioned an Indian artist in Scottsdale whose place burned down and then he purchased 10 acres on Scottsdale Road at 5th Avenue.

PC: Yeah, that's the one.

ZL: Was that Lloyd Kiva?

PC: Yeah, right.

ZL: So he really started 5th Avenue?

PC: Yeah, he did. I was so flabbergasted at what he did. He went out and purchased nine acres outside the city. I thought who wants that out there. He said, "Well you wait and see." I didn't have to wait too long.

ZL: You've received many honors during your lifetime. You were appointed to the Scottsdale Fine Arts Commission in 1971.

PC: Yeah, yeah.

ZL: In 1976 the Arizona Chapter of the National Society of the Arts and Letters honored you for outstanding achievements in the arts.

PC: Yeah, yeah.

ZL: In 1982 you were appointed a member of Great Britain's Royal Society of Arts.

PC: Benjamin Franklin went to London in his lifetime and they were impressed with him and he was impressed with the Royal Society of Arts. They made him a member and since then they have a section called the Benjamin Franklin Fellow and I'm a Benjamin Franklin Fellow from this country.

ZL: You're a Benjamin Franklin Fellow?



Arizona Historymakers
ORAL HISTORY

In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections
[Historical League, Inc.](#) © 2012



PC: I don't know whether it's an honor or not.

ZL: I would think it would *definitely* be an honor. In 1983 you were the recipient of Arizona's first Artist of the Year Award.

PC: Yeah, that's true.

ZL: In 1991 you received the Distinguished Alumni Award from Albion College.

PC: That's right.

ZL: And they established the Philip C. Curtis Visiting Artist Program.

PC: Yeah, that's right. My art teacher was there from the beginning. It was quite an occasion.

ZL: Your latest honor was your selection by the Historical League of the Arizona Historical Society as an Arizona Historymaker™.

PC: Yeah, that scares me. It's a beautiful building they have there. I'm really impressed. Don't you think it's beautiful?

ZL: It's wonderful. I'm very excited about it.

PC: Are you going to be working at the Arizona Historical Society Museum?

ZL: I'm a volunteer there and I love working there.

PC: Most of the people are volunteers so far.

ZL: Yes. I would like to thank you very much for having this interview.

PC: Well, it's been no pain at all. I'm delighted.

ZL: Are there any other things you would like to share for your oral history.

PC: Well, I'll probably think of them in the middle of the nights but right now I don't.



Arizona Historymakers
ORAL HISTORY

In Our Own Words: Recollections & Reflections
[Historical League, Inc.](#) © 2012



ZL: Well, then we'll conclude it and I thank you very much.



Philip C. Curtis audio interview 1992