

An Interview with Benjamin Abramowitz

Interviewed by John Stewart

Transcription by Bridget Hughes, '11

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In the Fall of 2008 the Juniata College Museum of Art exhibited "WPA Graphic Works from the Amity Art Foundation Collection." In the lead up to the exhibit Benjamin Abramowitz, of one of the former WPA print makers, had his daughter contact John Stewart of the Amity Art Foundation about attending the opening. Benjamin Abramowitz came to Huntingdon, from his home in the Washington, D.C. area, on the day of the opening and agreed to a public interview with John Stewart on the subject of art, the WPA's Federal Art project and his career as an artist.

Benjamin Abramowitz: I'm Benjamin Abramowitz. I've been an artist all my life. When I was about four or five years old, I saw a little crayon drawing of my father's; it was a love letter he sent to my mother. It just grabbed me. I just went bananas. From then on, I was in love with everything in art: it could be handwriting, it could be printing, it could be illustration, it could be landscape, it could be portraits, it could be still life, it could be anything. And, we're talking about the 1920s.

John Stewart: Now, in the 1930s when the Works Progress Administration [WPA] got the Graphic Art Program going with the Federal Arts Project, you were in the New York Program?

BA: That's right.

Stewart: And you entered it as Ben Hoffman and not Ben Abramowitz because?

BA: Because my parents opposed my being an artist and Hoffman was a friendly name. Like I said [before], there was Hans Hoffman, the German artist. He had already made a noticeable track on history. I like the name Hoffman, largely as a protest against my parents. I really don't want to go into detail, but

they treated me terribly. I was one of three siblings and I was on my own. [...] From the time I graduated high school, where I was one of five hundred students [and] at the top of the class: I started to work in factories, in hard, exhausting labor.

I went to [the] National Academy of Design. I spent year after year after year there.

Stewart: This was before the program or after?

BA: Before the program. Or about the time it started. I'm not quite sure about the dates, but around 1937, I got on the projects.

Stewart: As you looked at it you recognized the names of some of the other artists that are in the exhibit?

BA: Right, they're familiar.

I do want to mention the fact that, equal to the WPA and their offices in New York, et cetera, there was the Union: the Artists Union. There was a couple hundred in the Union, I don't know how many. But it was headed by someone with the name of Chet La More.

Stewart: I'm familiar with his work; I have some of his prints.

BA: You have Chet La More prints?

Yes, God! He was about my size. He was close to forty, I think. I have no idea how old he was. I was about the youngest. I was very young.

Stewart: You were in the program at twenty-one, I understand.

BA: Very young. Chet was marvelous. The Union was... the only way I could characterize it was the running legs of the art world. Most of the artists in the Union were experienced, very talented. I learned a lot. They had some who actually came from Russia, who were part of the Russian avant-garde. There were some from France [as well]. A Russian once told me when I was sitting next to him; he said: "You've got to marry a very fat girl because she'll be so appreciative she'll do everything in life for you."

There was another artist in the projects, her name was Estelle Busky. She did some beautiful work; I was in love with her. The problem was she was at least ten years older than I.

Stewart: Now was there anyone in the program younger than you were?

BA: No.

Stewart: How many artists on a given day would work in the studio?

BA: In my studio?

Oh none, in other words I rented quite a number of studios. But the one I had when I was on the project was at 21st and 7th avenue; between 7th and 8th avenue. I had it on my own. My best friend, he lived next door. He was very well-known. His name was John Heliker and he was a good ten years or so older than I. He came from northern states, up north somewhere...Massachusetts or Maine. And he did a lot of landscape. Beautiful... done beautifully. He was gay. He had a friend who was a composer. But I got along, I was very naïve. It didn't seem to matter to me; it wouldn't matter to me today. But we used to go to exhibitions together, John Heliker [and I].

I had the loft to myself, it was a large loft. It was about twenty feet deep by about fifteen feet wide. And it was unheated.

Stewart: Now was there camaraderie with the other artists that were in the program?

BA: Oh, very much so. Many of the artists would come up. The Soyers would come up, Jack Tworkov would come up ...of course there was Heliker. Many that I couldn't remember their names. I'll touch upon it later.

Artists used to visit each other unannounced. We used to just go to each other's studio. The Calebs lived upstairs. I was on the first floor. It was two floors, they were on the second floor, there was a restaurant below. New York is a very harsh place and these are unheated lofts; used to be abandoned factories. But we managed very well and I did a lot of work.

Stewart: Now, in one of the brief bits of information that one can find about Ben Hoffman is that he achieved the status of senior artist and therefore got more money.

BA: Well what happened was, when I first began, being very young, according to my view of it; I was on the lowest level. That is, I taught children. I had children's classes, and I found that I liked teaching. I liked teaching kids. I liked teaching adults, but I wanted to do original work.

So then I got on the mural project. As far as the time sequences, it took about a year or so before I got on the mural project. I began to work for the Greenwood Sisters, who worked for Diego Rivera. They were very attractive women, older than I [be]cause everybody was. There was an older sister and a younger

one. They were very erotic to say the least. I was on the mural project for quite a while. I'm talking in terms of months and months and months. They had two other assistants from Mexico who were assistants to Rivera, so I learned a lot about making murals.

Then I got on the Graphic Project, we called it the Graphic Project. I bought stones; we bought these Senefelder stones, which were about four inches thick. They were very heavy. I had two stones, one about [gestures] this big and one about that big. We did a lot of graphic work. I did a lot of graphic work. We also did wood blocks. The printers were very, very capable and very helpful. To a large extent a lot of credit is due to the printers because when we got through with making one of the stones, like the drawings you have here, the stones would be picked up and delivered by truck to the printer. I would be at the printer's side and he would advise and suggest how to retain and intensify it, make it work better.

Stewart: *Now was it the same printer for a number of the artists?*

BA: No, I think they had a number of printers. A good number of printers. But they were all equally qualified. I did quite a few prints, so I would have different printers but they were to be trusted. When I ended up several years later after the Second World War, I did want to continue doing some print work and there was a printer who was the official printer at Howard University and I did some work on the larger stone and he ruined it. So the WPA printers were very efficient. Never lost anything.

Stewart: *What did you say: "Were never worth anything?"*

BA: I said the printers at the WPA were worth everything!

They never lost anything. Years later when I tried other printers in Washington they were not very good. Anyway, I'm ready for the next question.

Stewart: *Do you have any anecdotes about some of the others that worked with you in New York?*

BA: We used to drop into each other's studios and it was common. On the second floor there were two sculptors by the name of the Caleb brothers. Then there were the Sayers...big name. There were a lot of artists with very big names at the time. They were very effective in terms of: they drew very well, they painted very well whether you liked their work or not. We're talking about 1937, 1938, 1939.

There was always the avant-garde in Europe, the avant-garde in France, the avant-garde in Germany, other European countries. They were very experimental and they were dominant. We were not dominant. The work I see here is very safe and very assured in terms of looking backward.

Stewart: You had some limitations on the subject matter, did you not?

BA: Definitely! The WPA authorities were very much afraid of the avant-garde in Europe. They were afraid we would be making Picasso-esque drawings or paintings —on one hand — and the only other thing they were afraid of was the political statements we would make in the artwork. A lot of the artists, who, of course most of them were in the Union, were politically aligned. They were either socialist or communist inclined. It was very bad times. Many of us didn't expect America to survive, in the form that [it was]. We knew it would survive. They didn't know whether it would or not. Audrey McMahon was afraid of radical art whether it's political or cultural. We had no idea that such a sudden change would take place after the Second World War in the Forties. An amazing change took place, but that's another thing. We were very happy about the WPA and we knew that the drawings that we would present to them, whether we were on the graphic project [or other arts projects].

They would accept it or reject it, and if they rejected it, they had to quickly improve it to their liking. So, we played the game, most of us played the game. The names, the famous names that existed at that time, the surprising thing is they are names that are forgotten today, or hardly ever mentioned. We have today's famous names of people who threw paint out of a stick, or painted clouds out of dried-out paint, or bought stuff from the five and ten and called it art.

Stewart: Now you mention the Soyers as stopping by your studio. One of the things that has surprised me a little bit about the Soyers that Isaac and Moses...

BA: They were two brothers.

Stewart: Moses Soyer was in the painting project but not in the print making project.

BA: That's right. Some of them were already with reputations, and they got onto the painting project immediately. It took me a couple years to get on the painting project [be]cause I was precocious. When I was sixteen years old I had a show of pen and ink drawings at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. I was sixteen! So I loved art. I loved art of every kind. I even liked the avant-garde art, but I had to conceal my...you know, I had to be very careful.

Stewart: After the project, in the Forties and Fifties, your style changed significantly, did it not?

BA: Yeah well, what happened? When it gave up, the WPA gave up around the 40s, beginning of World War II. We all spread out: some went to California, some went...I don't know where they went. I heard that Chet La More went to some university in the Midwest and was teaching. I look back with nostalgia. I myself had met Sue's [his daughter] mother. I was married for about a year or two, and it was a shock but we had to. There was a draft and I was put on doing secret war work, landing charts for Italy and so on. So it was convenient to be in Washington. I began to show in Washington. That's another story. Years later, I was cited as the artist who brought contemporary art to Washington, Virginia, Baltimore. Several times publically and in two consecutive exhibitions at the Baltimore Museum in the Fifties I won the outstanding awards for modern art.

Stewart: Do you think your participation in the program kept you into art? Or was it a possibility to end up doing something else with your life if it hadn't been for the project?

BA: I kept learning —Mr. Stewart—I kept learning. It was a learning process. There are two ways to go in art: either we look backwards, and we become artists showing skill and efficiency, and showing the fact that we're very adept; or being very forward and trying new things, and revealing new situations, new concepts. I did the latter. I began to teach — when I was about twenty-nine — to adults. I taught at many places, I lectured at Maryland University, I lectured at Indiana University. I won a Ford Foundation [fellowship], as Artist-in-Residence to Texas. I began to talk about the thoughts I was having about the new ways of looking at art. I will say, to condense the whole thing, I always faced against the wind. I never went with the wind, I never went with fashion. But I was in love with fashion, I was in love with things as they were, but in my work, I faced against the wind. I had what I call, aesthetics. Most contemporary art has no aesthetics. The skills we had in the Thirties with the WPA, to draw, to be controlled, are completely irrelevant today. Most of the exhibitions today are a mixture of video. There's hardly much painting involved.

Stewart: And far less print making.

BA: As far as print making is concerned, there isn't very much of it. It's called multi-media. In other words, you combine prints and found objects, that sort of thing. Anything goes. As long as you're shocking and entertaining. In other words...let me say one thing: American art since the Second World War is very blunt, very straightforward and easily identifiable. If you make stripes, or you make clouds, you have to stick with it, you can't develop. It's not like the avant-garde in France in the Thirties. It's very American. We're very male. Males are very objective. Forgive me. When a female does a work it

has a life of its own, by and large. When a male does a work, it's an object, it's a technological thing. Today, art consists of objects. I'm not putting it down, it is what it is.

Stewart: *And the project gave an opportunity for a lot of female artists to work did it not?*

BA: A lot of them. They did very, very well; they were very skilled. But they had skills that would be completely irrelevant today. One of the most famous artists in those days in the Thirties we don't hear about him at all. It was Naho Chakbazof.

Stewart: *You're right.*

BA: Is the name familiar to you?

Stewart: *No, not at all.*

BA: He did some very large paintings that were drawing-like. He was so effective and influential, that even the academicians began to imitate him. I would say by 1938 he was one of the most famous artists in America. We don't even hear about him today because he's fallen into a hole in history, and a scab has grown over it. You don't hear about him.

Other artists, you mentioned Joe Jones. He created quite an impact when he first had an exhibition. There was Gropper, who did illustrations for *Radical*. He painted very, very well, but they're not considered important painters because it's not about painting today. It's a complicated thing; it's become much more complicated than ever.

What's happened is that the center of the art world went from Europe in the 1930s to America in the Fifties and Sixties and rest of the century. Europe began to imitate America, and America is the one that is by and large — what I mean to say is— not in every single aspect, but in most cases, America is the leading force in world art. It's a global culture, in other words, we have a global economy, where if you need to get your medical records you can get India to give you your medical records. In art, it's America that sets the tone, and the speed, and the effectiveness in the art. To the point where it's really now spread out all over the world. As I said in some of my writings, as Humpty Dumpty sat on the wall and then fell off the wall and broke into 1,000 pieces. We have 1,000 pieces [of art].

Stewart: *Now, part of participating in the project was economic need, and that was a constant struggle for artists to stay in the program?*

BA: Terrible, terrible. It was a marvelous thing, because it gave us a means of income. It was something I could hold up to my parents who opposed my being an artist. It was paying \$22.75 a week, which is a very, very good salary in those times. Before that, when I worked in factories, I worked very hard, exhausting labor. I was making an average of \$12.00 a week. My parents took ten, and they gave me two for my pocket money. They treated me shabbily. They destroyed all my drawings; they destroyed my graduation books, my paraphernalia that I stored. It was a terrible thing, so I had to [find] something which broke away. I did break away!

The Union was very exciting, by the way. That was, when I joined the Union, and the Union was the one that got me a job. They were very effective. The most exciting part of the week was Friday night Union meetings. They had invited speakers like...who was it Sue, that I said? The Northeastern Painters, (some of my senior thinking)...many of the speakers were...in some ways they were informative, many surprisingly competent, academic painters, who were very progressive. The union was very progressive and very exciting. When I was courting my wife, her mother, about 1938, 1939, she looked forward to coming with me to the Union meetings. And I was on the project. It was based on need, but it was great, it was great.

Stewart: Now how many months, how many years were you with the project?

BA: You know, I can't tell exactly. I know it was a good number of years because it took me some time to go from teaching children to being on the mural project.

Stewart: You started teaching children?

BA: I started teaching children. Then I was told I would become an assistant to the Mural painters, the Greenwood sisters. When I knocked on the door, which was about 27th Street in New York as I remember, the voice said "Come in." I opened the door and I entered and I heard the shower come on. I waited, I waited until she would come up. She did, with a white towel, all naked. She arranged where she was doing a mural with the government. It was a library down South. She was very voluptuous; she must have been about thirty-five. I joined the two other assistants, and I was with them for about a year.

Stewart: Now, did you do the mural in New York for transport or did you go down there to paint it? It was down in the South?

BA: No, it was up in New York

It was a very large space, about as large as this space and the work was on the scaffold. They made drawings on brown paper and we had pinpointed rollers [with] which we went along the lines and perforated them. With charcoal dust we passed them onto the canvas. They painted their works on the canvas.

Stewart: Was it traditional to do a smaller drawing of the mural before it was painted?

BA: Yeah. If you worked for the WPA you had to present to them what you were doing. They were definitely afraid, they were very cautious about political commentary in art. We thought—those of us—not everybody was in the Union, but most of us were in the Union. We thought that we were going to change the world by art. We were going to make the world better by making art that promoted a better world. But when we showed our work to the Unions, when we hung our work in some of the Union halls, the working class didn't like our work. They worked under deprived conditions and depressing conditions. They wanted landscapes and still-lifes and flowers.

Stewart: Pretty things?

BA: Pretty things. They didn't want the radical art. We were confused, it was very, very difficult. There was a lot of social commentary. What they began to call the radical art in the press as a euphemism, they called it social commentary art. You see that frequently. It's called social commentary.

Stewart: During the time there was a lot of controversy over the Federal Arts Project, was there not? Some of the politicians thought it was a waste of money?

BA: Yeah, yeah. They always did, just like the National Endowment of the Arts there was a lot of opposition. The difference was we didn't get away with doing the kind of work that the National Endowment of the Arts was handing out. By the time the National Endowment of the Arts was in its prime, they believed that art was always so controversial and so different that in order to promote art, you had to have a difference.

Now the WPA it was very safe, very competent work. In other words, these people could draw, they could shade, they could organize, they could do things that were very safe, secure, and showed skill. By the way, that was one of the big issues in changing art. It didn't depend on skill in the Fifties and Sixties. It did not depend on skill. It depended on innovation. It's about entertainment. I'm not criticizing it, I'm just observing. I like all of art. I like even the art that I hate. I like all of art. I always like it. Limited as I

am in my vision, I still design things whenever I write them or I make a request for background material to my daughter, so on. I design them with color, with shape, with form.

Jim Tuten: If I could interject, since you had to get preliminary drawings approved through the administrator of the arts project, were there efforts to be subtle so that presentation by the artist would get passed, would get approval to go on, even though the real message was a little trickier?

BA: You couldn't really cheat because they had people in charge that were supervising that could send it back and you had to adjust. They didn't really necessarily have to reject the whole thing. They could say this part they don't like and they don't like the implication, et cetera, et cetera.

Stewart: Did that happen to you very often?

BA: No. My problem was as you see there, I liked all of art. I could turn it on and off in any direction. It took me until I was about thirty years old to begin to find my own voice. I regretted the fact that I had all this talent, because people with less talent would find their own very quickly; their own voice, their own way of working. I didn't understand—everything I'm saying to you right now—I didn't understand it. I thought art was art. It was made into many different kinds.

When I finally came to Washington and I left New York, I left the WPA. I had time to meditate upon what I was doing. There was very little advanced, as we call it, advanced and serious art going on. I began to experiment so that the use of color and design and shape and form became forward-looking instead of backward-looking. I only regretted that I couldn't do more on the Senefelder stones that I had, I still had them. But I had no printer to do them. So I made drawings. I invite you all to come and see...I must have produced about 5,000 pieces of work in the sixty years since 1940. So there are thousands of drawings, and paintings and sculpture, and watercolors, and oil paintings. So, the house is just crammed with work.

Stewart: How much of the work that you did during the WPA period do you still have?

BA: Oh, I have it all; whatever's left. I sold hundreds of works. I used to keep an account until I moved in with my daughter. I became hard of vision about [the age of] eighty-seven or eighty-eight. I'm going on ninety-two! I still, whatever I did, I have it all, and it's all stored. Just as she [his daughter] found. I've given her charge of all the work, so she found it.

Stewart: And I understand she's kind of excited about learning about this WPA period because she didn't know that much about it?

BA: Yeah. There's a lot to do with it. For me, it was something where I was surrounded by artists. If I stayed home, they [my parents] hated what I was doing. I once remember showing my father, who had a factory. He was economically okay. I showed him my work. He says: "You give me a headache!"

Stewart: Did he ever appreciate it?

BA: No. So, I did do portraits for them [my parents]. I liked portraiture. I had a romantic streak.

Stewart: We can tell that from some of your comments.

BA: I did portraits of my mother, my father, the rest of my siblings. It was an unhappy situation, but I did it willingly.

Oh and the children, and Sue. A lot of the portraits...my granddaughter, my daughter. I would like to do it of my great-granddaughter but I don't have the vision anymore. When I look back at the work, as I see it here, I'm more proud of it than I'd ever been at the time I did it. I was never quite sure that I could meet the standard of the artists around me. And now it stands out. It's surprising how it stands out.

Stewart: It does.

BA: I was never that proud. I'm more proud of what I did in my lifetime than ever. As time goes on you either go one way or the other. I had about twenty one-man shows, and each time I could have crawled into a hole in the ground when I had to see the show. In other words, I was never quite sure I was doing right. And when I look at it now, it looks good to me.

Stewart: And you like your presentation in this show I hope?

BA: Oh yes, oh yes. I always like to look at it. I wish I had better vision but I can see it. It's a marvelous thing to be able to take a white sheet of paper or a stone—most of them were done on stone—we didn't use metal plates that much. Commercially, [in] lithography they used metal plates. They make their drawings on metal plates and the printer puts oily inks on the graphic parts so that it takes the ink. But it's never as sensitive as on the stone plates. They are very, very heavy. It's something that you don't see in today's art.

Stewart: It's still being done but not as much.

BA: Not as much. Of course, it will never be lost. There are artists today who of course are very academic, but they aren't among the leading people who are innovating what I call the aesthetic quality.

Just to elaborate, what happened before 1940, Pablo Picasso and the people around him and the Germans et cetera, were beginning to make paintings in which the character of the shapes and the lines were as important as the subjects. What happened in the Fifties, Sixties, Seventies, so on, it was possible to tell a story in painting, which didn't have a literal subject. I love to read. It's a story about a story. It tells a story about a human being, about a person, a characteristic, a thing. But it's possible to make shapes and lines and spaces and objects that don't tell a literal story, but tell a visual story, a graphic story. That was one of my fortés that told the graphic story. The paintings are interesting and exciting, they tell stories but you can't translate them into words.

Stewart: Who was your biggest influence post-1940?

BA: See before [the] 1940s, everyone was an influence! The French were an influence, Picasso was an influence, Renoir was an influence, Degas an influence, Toulouse-Lautrec was a tremendous influence. Before the 1940s and 1950s and Sixties, before I found my voice, I was in love with everything people were doing, I couldn't find myself. I was an excellent mimic. This [the WPA prints] doesn't show it. Surprisingly it doesn't show it. If you looked at all the work of the period you could see the influence of some of them. I was learning I was learning how to do things that were of importance to that day. The new things that were important weren't done at all. That's where I began to stand out.

It's quite an adventure, quite a very important adventure. The works look good to me today; very exciting to me.

Then I began to teach! One of the problems with teaching is not saying "This is good" or "This is bad". Why is the thing good? Why is the thing bad? Why don't you like something? Why *do* you like something? What's going on? What in a student's work is bothering you? Why do you approve of something? I began to think, and I began to read philosophies, the German philosophers, the Italian philosophers. I went back, way back even to Biblical times. I found ways of thinking in which I never told students I liked a piece of work or didn't like a piece of work. I was able to immediately capture what they were after and why they weren't achieving it. It's very important to say, "You want something? This is the way to do it. I can't tell you what to do, but you have to go along this line to achieve it, and you're not going after it." That kind of thing. So I would never say that a work is good or a work is bad. It taught me a lot for my own work. That if things happen, not to say "I approve of it". If I approve of it, chances are it's been done before and it looks good.

Stewart: *Well, as I sometimes say from the [Amity] Foundation's perspective, there is no such thing as good or bad art. There is only art that you like or that other people like, and if enough other people like it, it's worth a lot of money.*

BA: What works? What's important is what works. What's important is: is it stimulating, is it exciting, is it raising issues, is it revealing something that wasn't revealed before? What's the point of doing something that was proven? You already had it! What's the point of doing it again and again and again? The problem with the Thirties is that they were working with an eye to what happened before. They were working on proven things. I was working on proven things. It was very acceptable. But when it came to the Fifties and Sixties and Seventies and Eighties and Nineties and my sculptures and my drawings, I began to search for new ways of responding. If I felt it should go this way, I went in the opposite direction. I had talent, so which ever way I went, it looked good. That's the point; I realized that I was being guided. God was guiding my hand, and I'm not a religious person. At one point he said "I'm gonna turn off your eyesight."

Stewart: *It's been a real pleasure.*

BA: Nice talking with you.