



Smithsonian  
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**Oral history interview with Michael Spafford and Elizabeth Sandvig,  
1992 September 2-4**

**Transcript**

**Preface**

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Michael Spafford and Elizabeth Sandvig on September 2 and 4, 1992. The interview took place in Seattle, WA, and was conducted by Paul Karlstrom for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

**Interview**

SEPTEMBER 2, 1992

[Session 2, Tape 2, side A ]

PAUL KARLSTROM: A continuing interview with Michael Spafford/Elizabeth Sandvig. This is September 4, 1992. Interviewer is Paul Karlstrom. This is session two, tape two. And Michael, maybe you just want to. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Well, we were talking about the fact that some of the legislators weren't as involved in the imagery—at least philosophically, the way I was. And, Elizabeth, you were saying that that was one of the things that surprised you so much was the lack of. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Well, I don't know which time we're talking about.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Well, you said you went down to Olympia. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Even at the beginning, the attitudes that were expressed within that building I felt were so anachronistic. I mean, here's this huge building built out of marble, and the dining room for the visitors and the staff was this cramped little dismal place in the basement. The hallways were full of papers because the printing plant down there didn't have enough room. They had leftover wires that were strung all over the place left from, in some cases, Nixon's visit years before.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: So you didn't like the way it. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: It was a combination of tacky neglect and lack of consideration for the employees combined with these grandiose statements that were sort of like [this] [Victoria Emmanuel] monument. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: And that's what I liked about it.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: . . . in Mussolini's period. You know, I mean, it was just not. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: But, you see, that's what I liked about it. And actually. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: I didn't like it at all.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: . . . for two years, from 1967 to 1969, Elizabeth and I spent our time at the American Academy in Rome. And it's the same kind of place. I mean, just faded elegance. You know, very pretentious but lots of cat fleas and the curtains were all tattered and they wouldn't let children in to eat there, and all of these rules and things. And yet it was terrific because it was the kind of place. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Once you learned to get around all these rules.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Well, it was like you were there as a . . . I don't know, you could sort of role play in a place like that. And I thought the same thing about the legislature when I . . . Actually, I hadn't even gotten the award. I remember Alden and I had taken our proposals down there, and we were walking through the building and we ran across a person who does the tours and she was talking about. . . . We introduced ourselves, and she said, "Well, I hope you won't do anything to hurt the building." And we were both really surprised that that would be the way she would respond. She said, well, she'd been there for decades and that her whole family was involved in showing people through this building. She actually pointed out pictures of Governor Langley in the marble tracing in the wall. She had looked at it so long that she saw Governor Langley and his wife and his dog in the marble. So she obviously had a great love for this building; it was her life. And I heard later that she was terribly upset by what we did in that building.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That you violated her. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: That's right. And she felt like it was not art. She felt like it was something which was working against what she loved. She felt like it would have a negative influence on the people that she loved to show the building to. And it wasn't just my piece but also Alden's. And much of the resistance to the work has come from the staff at the legislature.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Comes from the tour guides.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Because the legislators themselves are only there for a short time. Some of them are there for a long time, but many of them are just there for one term or for two terms and then they're supplanted by another group. But the staff-the people that more or less live there-they're the ones that really objected. Anyway, Elizabeth, you were saying that when you went down there that you were surprised at the narrowmindedness and the stupidity.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Well, I did things like. . . . I did things that were different than you did. After the murals were done and up, I would go and sit in the gallery, and the staff would be having a break and they would sit there and gossip about each other and talk about the murals. And they were so nasty! Mostly they weren't talking about the murals; they were just talking about each other. And I've never heard such, such. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: But you also were responding to what the legislators. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Well, that was later. That was another time when I went with Michael to photograph them, and we turned on the lights and some legislator chased us all over the building screaming at the top of his lungs.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: And was so nasty and mean, and, I mean, I've never been attacked like that and I didn't like it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mean, he knew that you were the artist?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: I wasn't there.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: He wasn't there. I was there, with our son.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: It was our son. Michael, our son.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I understand, okay.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: And so these people just shout out their gratuitous comments. You know, most rude and kind of. . . . And ill-mannered and. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: They shouldn't do that, but I. . . . You were saying that you felt like they were stupid and that sort of thing. I don't feel that way.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: I didn't say they were stupid.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Yes, you did. Maybe not on tape but you were saying that just as the tape went off.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Yes, I did. That's probably quite true. I'm much more of a snob than he is.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Well, it's not. . . . [laughter]

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: I mean, I feel if you're stupid, you should at least keep your mouth shut.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Well, but they have a different range of knowledge.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: True. That's certainly true.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: I mean if I were going to, if somebody asked me about irrigating for winter wheat in the Palouse, I would know nothing. And what they feel, what many of the legislators felt, was that because they were sort of the caretakers of the state and this was their palace that somehow their aesthetic preferences should be bowed to.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Right, yes.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: And that's why they had never gotten anything in there before because they could never. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Agree.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Anyway, one of the experiences that I can relate is right after I was selected to do the proposal-or not the proposal but the actual commission-I was asked to come in to the Speaker's office to talk to John O'Brien, who wasn't Speaker at that time, and the Speaker's name was William Polk. And Mr. Polk I think was a landscape architect but he was Speaker of the House at that time. And they wanted me to sort of talk about my proposal. Actually, I didn't know what to think. Judy Whetzel was partially involved in this process too, and her husband was either a legislator or a senator, Jonathan Whetzel, at that time.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Um hmm, um hmm.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: And so she told me about. . . . She said, "Well just relax and go in and tell them what you're going to do," and that sort of thing. So I did. And both O'Brien and Polk were sort of questioning why I did what I did, or why I was proposing to do what I did. And I explained to them what I told you about the political ramifications of these labors and the business of there being an Olympia, Greece. And then one of them pointed out. . . . They were looking at these one-inch-to-a-foot proposals I had, and one of them said, "Well, what's that?" And he pointed to sort of a bulge between the legs of Hercules and I said, "Well, those are his balls." And he says, "Gosh, when that gets up on the wall it'll be the size of a basketball." And I said, "Well, that's true." And he says, "Well, do you have to do that?" I said, "No, no, I don't." I said, "I'll just take it out." So I did. And then they were looking at it some more, and I believe it was Mr. Polk, although I can't be certain of this. He asked me why I didn't paint something that was more historical.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: O'Brien.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Was it O'Brien?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Um hmm.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mean real history.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Um hmm, um hmm, yes.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: That's what they said.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: And then he started to explain.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Yeah. And I said, "Well, what do you mean?" And he said. . . . And actually I knew what he meant, but he said, "Well, he really liked the murals that were up in Victoria, and they showed the people who explored the area, the Indians and stuff like that." I don't want to put words in his mouth, but I think he said something like, "It would be nice to have Lewis and Clark with the Indians perhaps presenting them a salmon, or something like that." And I said, "Well geez, that's not history." I said, "You know, I was thinking about putting something about. . . ."

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's mythology, is it not?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: That's right, that's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Same thing.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: And I guess I was being sort of nasty. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Yes. [said with a smile]

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: . . . but I said, "You know, I was thinking about doing Washington State history and the things that interested me were the IWW riots in Everett and the Chinese massacre and, you know, all of these things that happened in Washington State." And they said, "Oh, no, no, no, no," they didn't want anything like that. And I said, "Well, look, what you want is mythology, and that's what you're going to get." [laughter] But I think that that may have . . . not only did that sort of show them that I wouldn't get pushed around too much, but I think it also sort of hardened their resolve to somehow prevent this from happening.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, do you think it was then. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: John O'Brien, by the way, is very supportive of the work now, and he was a very, very strong supporter when I was being attacked.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm. And he was the one that you were meeting with.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: He was the one that was questioning me.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: And he was the one who was on the art committee and he was very, very interested in getting art in Olympia.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Yeah, it was his baby.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: And when he had his birthday, they hung decorations all over the murals and teased him about it.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Underwear. [chuckles]

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: You know, I mean it was. . . . The murals began to have a life of their own. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, I can see that.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: . . . which we weren't involved in at all. And we would not know any of these things until somebody would send us packages of strange newspapers or letters or comments or . . . that we didn't want to know about.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Anyway, I should explain that the process was that we were dealing with General Services Administration, which would be part of the executive branch rather than the legislative branch. And the person who was administering the program, who was. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Michael. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: He got fired. He didn't feel like he had to communicate as directly with the legislature, so he was always telling me that everything was fine. And it was a voucher situation where you. . . . Is that what they call it when you. . . . I spent my money on materials and then I got money back. And in the contract, it said that Alden and I had a year to do the work and an extra year if we weren't able to complete the work, and that the money-or at least he told me-that the money was unencumbered and that they couldn't spend it for any other purpose so there's no problem about that. Anyway, so about three months into the project-there was a lot of controversy going on in the newspaper and people were beginning to object to the whole idea-I was told that the biennium had come to an end and that they hadn't appropriated any money for the next biennium for the murals, so that I would not be able to complete the murals. That's why there are only two walls up there instead of the four. I was told by people who were, people like the guy who's a congressman now, the one who lived in [Montlake, Mountlake], the doctor with the beard.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Lowery?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: No, no.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: McDermott.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: [Jim-Ed.] McDermott. He was a member of the legislature, and he and his wife were very supportive of the murals and they would tell me sort of how to go about getting around these people who were obstructionists. And Judy Whetzel was recommending things for me to do too. And other people would come to my studio, which was down on Jackson Street, and sort of tell me how to go about politically to sort of get around these people. Their thought was that if I put up the Herc. . . . What I wanted to do was complete all four walls and put them all up at once. They felt like if I did that they probably would never go up. So they thought I should put up the Hercules walls that I was working on, and then we would try to get the other two up. I realize now that that was a mistake but. . . . When the Hercules walls went up, then the shit really hit the fan. They really hated them. And I was told later that maybe if I had put up something that had some color in it that they wouldn't hate it so much, but I'm not sure that that's true, but. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's plausible but. . . .

[Interruption in taping]

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: So many things that went on that I can't possibly cover it all, so I think maybe it would be a good idea to sort of break it off. And I don't even think I put on there the fact that I specifically said to the jury when the proposal was being considered that they should consider very carefully selecting me because I did have this reputation for doing controversial work. And so it was sort of like. . . . They said they didn't care.

[Interruption in taping]

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Richard Serra being supported by people that called his work, they say it's like Michelangelo. You know, I mean, it's just. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Hm! A little hyperbolizing.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Yeah. Oh, is that on? [the tape recorder-Trans.]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Oh yes, okay. Anyway, I was just saying before we broke it off that when the proposals were being made to the jury, one of the things that I was very, very careful about was to actually tell the jury that I had a controversial reputation. They knew that. And my work had been considered controversial before, that they had to be particularly aware of the fact that a lot of people didn't like my work. And they said they knew that. And so when I was awarded the commission, I assumed that I could do what I did. I mean, I wasn't trying to work for somebody else like I might if I were a commercial artist. I was working just for myself. Now I know that today most artists who work in the public arena are much more sensitive to the people who are viewing their works and what they want ahead of time. But I still feel that the best responsibility that an artist

has to his public is to do the best work they can, whether the public likes it or not. Anyway. . . . [chuckling] The other way I think is more. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let me ask you. I mean it's not entirely clear to me. Did the public, whatever, J.Q. Public-John and Jane-hate this work, or was it more complicated than that? You know I mentioned. . . . I suggested it might have come down to a kind of turf war to a degree that you were viewed as perhaps being, not insolent necessarily, but certainly intractable on the part of. . . . Do you have any insight into how this developed? It became, from what I hear, quite a cause célèbre here. The factions were aligned, and it's hard to imagine that this would happen without some fueling and feeding and other things at stake. You know what I mean? Just quickly, to try to make a national comparison. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Well, there wasn't anything at stake really. The only thing was. . . . One of the main things that had changed was an attitude which was economic. And all of a sudden, there was less money to spend.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So it wasn't sex, dirty imagery.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Well, I don't know. I don't know.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Well, there was. . . . But remember about the. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: No, I think Paul's right. I think that there was. . . . It wasn't exactly a turf war, but it was like it allowed people who were more liberal and people who were more conservative to somehow have something to talk about.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: That's true.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: And just like, clear across the country this was happening. You know, the religious right was developing as a political force.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I think of the NEA [National Endowment for the Arts-Ed.], obviously. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Of course.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . and Jesse Helms's motives, which are perhaps not as apparent as some people think. So, you know, it's not clearly sex and art.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: No, he was just trying to take the heat off the tobacco industry. You know, he was. . . . [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: I was just wondering if. . . . When I said, you know, "something else at stake," I'm wondering if there was anything here of a perhaps political nature lining up?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Well, the legislature itself was having this big fight about money.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: That's right. It was a period of economic downturn.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: All of a sudden there was a downturn. There was no money for chore services for the handicapped, and that became an incredible focus. And then they said they shouldn't be funding art; they should be funding the poor and. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Well, it wasn't even that direct though, it was like. . . . I would call it being described as the mural served a purpose that went beyond the original intent, and that was that it was something that both of these factions could talk about and dislike.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Yes. That's true.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: So they could agree on it. So apparently at that time the conversation between the two aisles-the Republicans and the Democrats-was so acrimonious that people were actually getting death threats. I mean, they were very, very angry at one another.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: And fighting and. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: But when it came to the murals they could agree that they wanted that shit out of the House, you know. So it sort of gave them an area that was almost like a no man's land that they could discuss and agree on. And I thought that was terrific.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: They could discuss it and make jokes and all kinds of things.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: That was very, very good.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Yes. It was. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: But to get back to the idea of it being sort of a symbol for the difference between the more liberal element and the more conservative element. That breaks our state down into two areas, too, because Seattle is considered sort of "Sin City" and where all the liberal, bad ideas are promoted. And then the eastern side of the state-and some of the smaller communities in the state-is considered more basic or which we'd call "family values." And that's always been true. The murals, once again, were able to sort of focus that difference.

Now, I don't think that what happened to me had anything to do with what happened with the NEA or anything like that because. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mapplethorpe's \_\_\_\_\_.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Basically, I was not censored. I did a work of art and the people didn't like it. And that's not the same as being censored, saying, well, "You can't do this," or, "You can't do that."

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: But it was covered up.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: That's true, but it's not. . . . They covered it up because they didn't like it. I mean, that's not the same as saying there's certain things that you can do and certain things that you can't do.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: That's true. And in fact the obscenity claims were made because that's the best way. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right, to rally support.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: . . . to say that you don't like something is to call it obscene.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Well, actually in the contract. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, but there lies a very important similarity, because this is what's used to try to generate the support and opposition of whatever little art \_\_\_\_\_ project.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Right.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: There was one state senator-Richard Bond-who sort of led the fight against the murals, and he genuinely did feel a sense of outrage about the murals. He was a born-again Christian, which I have no objection to whatsoever, but he was also an ex-Marine and he genuinely felt like the murals were filthy. And when I think back on it I think well he probably felt some guilt about whatever he did as a Marine. He undoubtedly had all these things bottled up that he could sort of . . . they were brought out by how he felt about the murals.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Do you remember his card?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Well, it said. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: He sent you a card?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: No, no, it's a business card.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: It's a business card and it said. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: It just said Richard Bond. Was it Bond, or no? What'd I say?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Yeah. Bond. Yes.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Is it Bond? I think it was Richard. Anyway, and then it said, "Christian."

PAUL KARLSTROM: There was a phone number? And an address?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: I thought it had more than that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Pearly gates.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: But, like I say, I don't object at all to that, but they objected to the murals because they were non-Christian. They were pagan. They were Hercules. They were pre-Christian. You know, they were all these things that they could relate to Satanic. . . . You know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right. So once they were noticed. . . . I mean, it would have been okay if somehow attention of this nature hadn't been caused, but as soon as there was some attention paid and there was publicity then, as you said earlier, even those who didn't actually see the works or the images drew these conclusions. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: That's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . and felt threatened, became outraged. Do you see this as a fairly typical pattern in this kind of thing? That it's less a direct confrontation with. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Yeah, that's right. They don't look at them.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I hear that this is bad. It's anti . . . it's unreligious and so forth.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Sure.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So this is then basically what happened. This was the phenomenon that. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: But on the other hand there were numerous supporters, and they would generally write about what a fine teacher I was. They'd talk about the University of Washington. This would just add fuel to the fire to the people who didn't like the work because the University of Washington was a place they would not send their children because of all the sin that was there. You know, in other words, the people who supported the murals put a spin on all the things I was that was good, and those same things were considered to be evil by the second group.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How did it resolve?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Well, it resolved itself by them covering up the murals and refusing to let me complete the murals. In 1987, they passed a resolution to take them down, and Alden Mason sued the state trying to get an injunction against them taking down his murals. And I was in Europe at that time, and my gallery [Francine Seders Gallery-Ed.] joined in the suit on my behalf. And so when I got back, we all went to court together. And the state won. Even before the trial began, they were given the right to take the murals down. Then the trial. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: He was a wonderful judge.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Yeah. Terrence Carroll.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: But no, the preliminary judge, that was a woman.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Uh huh.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Don't you remember?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Right, but she didn't make that ruling. Carroll made the ruling that. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: But she did this wonderful explanation about it. It was the most succinct thing we heard in at least, in five years.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mean, it really was wonderful?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: It really was.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Yes. She was very, very clear. I was trying to think. Was it Barbara. . . . [Jacobs Rothstein-Ed.]

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: I can't remember her name either but she was good. She made all the issues very clear. Anyway, after Carroll had made some kind of preruling that the state could not be prevented from taking the work down. . . . In the contract, to get back to what Elizabeth was saying earlier, the contract had a provision in it that said that the Legislature could not stop the production of the murals for aesthetic reasons. There had to be something nonaesthetic. So they went to pornography and to economic reasons as a reason to stop the murals. And this was supposed to be nonaesthetic. And that's how they stopped them. But in the contract it said that the murals could not be altered, damaged. . . . There were all kinds of things like that.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Right. But it didn't say they couldn't be removed.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: It didn't say they couldn't be moved.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Or removed.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: So the judge said since it wasn't in the contract that they couldn't be moved, as long as they could prove that they weren't going to change them in any way. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: They could move them.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: . . . then they could move them. Our defense was that they were site-specific and that they were designed specifically for that space and if they were moved it would change them. But he didn't buy that, so. . . . Anyway, as the upshot was. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: So just like Icarus, you failed.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: That's right, that's right, except that what happened was because I had put them up with the intention of them being up very, very sturdily partially because of the earthquake business and everything. . . . Alden had painted his on canvas and had them stretched and they were hung on hooks. Mine were on [Indio, indio] plywood, laminated canvas, and adhered to the wall with industrial cement.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: They couldn't. . . .

[Session 2, Tape 2, Side B]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Continuing Spafford/Sandvig session two, tape two, side B. These notorious murals.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: [laughter] Yeah, that's right. It was ruled by the judge, Terrence Carroll, that the piece could be moved as long as it wasn't damaged. And so our defense was that they couldn't be moved because they were site-specific pieces. But he finally ruled that they could. Luckily, the way I put up the murals made it very, very difficult, if not prohibitively expensive, to move them without damaging them. Alden Mason's murals, unfortunately, were painted on canvas, and they were hung on hooks, and so as soon as this ruling was made, they took them down. It took them half a day, and they just went in there and they took them down and put them in storage.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: You didn't explain that one of the things that's happened in the meantime was that they hired a designer and they spent, what, a million or so to redo the Legislative Building.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: That was for the Centennial. Right.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: And they gold-leafed everything. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Three-and-a-half million dollars, they spent.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Three-and-a-half million. They bought new carpets, hand done in England with patterns of rhododendrons.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Actually, it's quite beautiful. You'll have to go down and take a look at it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But this was at the same time they were. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: No, this was after.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This was afterwards.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: This is another governor.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So there were no longer the economic issues.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: No.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: No, no, there never was. The judge ruled that that was all artifice and subterfuge, and he awarded me the rest of the money during that trial.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: But so here the building had all been done. So the reason they wanted Alden's down was that the colors didn't go well.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: They said they didn't match the decorative scheme.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: It didn't match the new decoration.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: And they looked beautiful there.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: So they took them down. So Mike's, even though they didn't match the decorative scheme, actually. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: They do.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: . . . they couldn't take them down because they were stuck to the walls. Now they had been covered up with wooden walls for how long?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Five years. Or seven years.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: So the judge ruled they were to be uncovered. Right?

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is a second trial, now?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Same trial.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Same trial?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Same trial, right. So, see, the murals went up in 1981 and the trial was in 1987. After the murals were up for less than a year, they were covered. And then they were covered until the time that they were. . . . Alden's had never been covered. His had never actually been criticized.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Nobody ever said anything. [laughs]

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: As soon as this building was remodeled, then they decided they didn't want any of this junky art in there so they passed this resolution that all this art should be taken down, and the ruling made it possible for them to take Alden's down right away. And then what they did was they had an estimate made by experts about how. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: . . . to take his down.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: . . . how to take mine down without damaging them, and I think that. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: They made little films.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Yeah. It was incredible.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: And they showed the judge. And they were so funny; nobody would pay any attention to those films.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: The way my murals went up, they have. . . . This [Indio, scindio] plywood comes in five by nine sheets, and they were jigsawed and the canvas was sometimes laminated over the top of these joints and sometimes it wasn't. And so it was really difficult for them to know where to put something under it to pop it off without damaging the rest of it. They came up with a figure of something like \$300,000. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: . . .to take them down.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: . . . as a possibility for the amount of money it would take to take them down. But then they would have to, according to the judge, they'd have to have an expert check them every two or three months while they were in storage to make sure that they weren't getting mildewed or. . . . [laughs] It was ridiculous! I mean, I would have been perfectly willing to go down there and just rip them off and toss them. But they these. . . . I mean, they really were very hypocritical. They kept saying they didn't like them but they didn't want to destroy them because they might be worth something someday. [laughs]

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: So some people. . . . Everybody had a different opinion like, "Well, maybe we can sell them to another state."

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Yeah, right. Or they were going to put them in a cow barn at the Puyallup Fair. You know, they thought they would look good there. But at any rate they weren't able to take them down, so the judge suggested that they leave them up, leave them uncovered, and have the public respond to what they thought of them. And so they left them uncovered for something like four months?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Right, and now meanwhile, we had a new Speaker of the House or leader-Joe King?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Joe King, right.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: And then new people like. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Sure, lots of new legislators and. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: And the Henry Gallery. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: And the arts. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Richard Andrews. Well, he went down there and spoke to Joe King and spoke to the Legislature and convinced them all to. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: And Richard, of course, had been in public art at the NEA for many years, and he was very involved with the Richard Serra thing, and there became a kind of a. . . . Actually the judge-not the judge, the lawyer that wanted to. . . . One of the lawyers that I was going to use is a blind man who practices down in Portland. He's a famous art lawyer. And he actually was part of Serra's team also. So we didn't use him finally.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Well, we did for the first part of the trial-for the preliminary. But then it was too expensive.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Interesting fellow. He was an artist as a young person and he was mixing chemicals and it blew up and destroyed his sight. But he's considered a terrific art lawyer because. . . . Duboff, not DuBois.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Yes.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Is it Duboff?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Yes, that's right. Uh huh, [Leonard-Ed.] Duboff.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: He's considered a terrific art lawyer because he can't be shown to have a bias, a visual bias. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Because he can't see it. [chuckles]

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: . . . because he can't see it. At any rate, Joe King finally decided not to bring the issue of taking the murals down again to the full House. He had the executive committee of the House of Representatives make a decision that the murals should not be voted on again. And by doing that, they stayed up. And they're still up. And actually they look very good, but people still don't like them.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Some people like them.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Some do, but most don't.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: And lots of things happen where a group of Russian tourists, somebody will ask, "What will you explain about these?" And then the tour guide says. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: "We're not supposed to talk about them."

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: "Oh, I'm sorry you asked that. We're not supposed to talk about them." [laughs]

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: And there's a whole group of artists and art supporters who are down there and in Seattle who feel like this is not the right sort of thing to have up there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Artists, you say?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Um hmm. Yeah. And as a matter of fact, when the controversy was occurring, many artists said that they would put up something for nothing.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, what artists are these.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Well, these are some unknown. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: I have no idea.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Unknown artists, let's say.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Well, people. . . . I wasn't that well-known myself.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: I know. But you had quite a track record, you keep forgetting.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Well, anyway.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Everybody in Washington state has an opinion about everything, I think, you know, so. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: In terms of how it affected. . . . I think it had a really strong effect on this whole burgeoning kind of art, public art thing that was happening in the state of Washington. And I think that's really interesting because Elizabeth and I were very much involved with the TAG [The Artists Group-Ed.] group in 1971 that set up the original ordinances for the public art ["1% for Art program-Ed.]. And then we got involved in a kind of a different way with the murals. And what it did was it changed the process for selecting art. And it brought it more into the nineties-or into the eighties-and there is a strong sense of somehow communicating with the people that you were doing the art for that didn't exist before. And that's probably why I wouldn't operate quite as well today as a public artist as I had an opportunity to in the past, because I am basically very selfish and. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Right. Well, one of the things [that-Ed.] happens is that now for every public art project, there's a public dialogue, usually before, during, and maybe a little bit after. But usually what it involves is canvassing people and then going to lots of meetings. And people spend hours and days and days in

meetings trying to decide what's suitable and whether art has a healing effect or not. And then it ends up usually with what the architect decides, rather than. . . . You know, they can change the color at will. Or sometimes the architect installs something of his own. So it doesn't always work.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: But there were many people who were upset with me because of my intractability, and I'm not going to mention the person actually, but there was somebody who was very highly positioned in the state who asked me the question. He said, "If it were proven to you that your murals-or your attitude about your murals-are leading to a total, say, the removal of the art budget for the rest of Washington state, would you retract? I mean, would you let them do what they want to with the murals?" And I said, "No." I said, "That's their business." I didn't care about the effect on other artists. And they got so upset! [laughs] But, of course if you say yes, you're doing the worst thing. I mean, you're compromising and you're playing into the hands of people who want to just sort of control. It's more a power thing than it is an aesthetic thing. So they certainly don't have to choose me to do anything, and they don't have to like it once I do it, but I shouldn't have to do things so that other people, you know what I mean, so that they will fund other people.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, you don't see the artist as a team player?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: I think some artists work wonderfully in terms of teams. I can't even work if there's somebody in the same building. But no, that's not exactly true. I use the same fabricators for the murals in Olympia that I did for the piece in the Kingdome, and they're wonderful. I love to work with them as a team and they had lots of suggestions, and. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I think more of what I meant was operating in terms of a community with shared interests, that you don't feel it's the job of the artist to primarily be looking out for the, in this case, compromising in order to supposedly have a better. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Actually, Paul, I do feel that the artist has great responsibility this way, but I feel like that responsibility is best served by doing art that has energy and strength rather than trying to. . . . I've seen so many young artists that are very, very talented who go out and do awful art because they think they're doing something good for the community. And that does disturb. Anyway, do you suppose that's enough?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes. Thanks so much to both of you. Maybe we'll have another opportunity to discuss some of the other issues. Thank you.

[End of interview]

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