

**Joseph J. Karitas Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 06/24/1964**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** Joseph J. Karitas

**Interviewer:** Pamela Turnure

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**Biographical Note**

Karitas (1901 - 1983) was the White House painter. This interview focuses on his interactions with Jacqueline Kennedy and John F. Kennedy [JFK], the redecoration of the White House during JFK's time in office, and Karitas's reaction to JFK's assassination.

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## Joseph Karitas– JFK #1

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Oral History Interview

with

JOSEPH KARITAS

June 23, 1964

The White House, Washington, D.C.

By Pamela Turnure

For the John F. Kennedy Library

TURNURE: How long have you been in the White House, Mr. Karitas?

KARITAS: Almost twenty years, since 1945.

TURNURE: Do you recall the first time you saw the President [John F. Kennedy] and Mrs. Kennedy [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy]?

KARITAS: Well, of course, I saw him at the Inauguration and I saw Mrs. Kennedy the second day she was here. We were decorating the children's room, and the first place I ever met her was in Caroline's [Caroline Bouvier Kennedy] room. She came in early in the morning with Preston Bruce, the White House doorman, who introduced her to me. Mrs. Henry Parish [Sister Parish], the decorator

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from New York, was there. We discussed the work she wanted to have done in the children's room.

TURNURE: Did she have definite ideas as to what she wanted?

KARITAS: Yes, she did. Of course, she would ask Mrs. Parish a few things. Mrs. Parish would give suggestions and Mrs. Kennedy would carry on from there. She always liked to get someone else's ideas first before she would commit herself to any definite plan. So she would ask Mrs. Parish or any other decorators around what their ideas were about certain things. We'd go ahead and do it and then if she didn't like it after it was all completed, then she would change it to suit her own preference.

TURNURE: I see. Was she apt to change quite a bit?

KARITAS: Well, yes, she was always changing things. I remember when we did her bedroom over, she had Mrs. Parish pick the colors and everything else. Mr. Boudin [Stéphane Boudin], the decorator,

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he wanted to make it real Frenchy so he had stripes all over the woodwork and everything. It was a beautiful thing, really, but Mrs. Kennedy didn't like it. And as she was going down to Palm Beach, she told Mr. West [J. Bernard West], "You know, I don't think I like it, after all. I wonder if I could do it over in an off-white." "Well," he said, "if you want it." She said, "I guess Joe will feel like killing me." (She always called me Joe, you know.) He said, "No, if you want it done over, why, we'll do it over." So we did it over and when she came back, it was all in an off-white.

TURNURE: Was she happy about it?

KARITAS: Yes, I think the other was too gaudy for her, too Frenchy. Everything was stripes, fine stripes, all over the woodwork, you know, the windows, the moldings, the paneling. I thought it was pretty, but she had her own ideas about things. She was very definite about the things she liked.

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TURNURE: Was she easy to work with, though, and understanding?

KARITAS: She was--oh, very easy, yes. I can understand her own personal preference for certain things. You know, you can take the finest decorator in the world--he can have ideas--but the person he does the work for doesn't like them at all. You like special colors and stuff like that.

TURNURE: That's true.

KARITAS: You might think you'll like them and then after you see them, then you say, "Oh, I don't like them" -- after you see it done and you change it. Just like when we were out at the farm, Atoka, and she had one of the finest decorators in the country decorate that place out there. Just before this terrible thing happened, she had me go out there and do the fireplaces over. The President had remarked that he didn't like them. They had brick all the way up to the ceiling and they were stained real antique.

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They were red brick and then stained with a glaze; it looked real old. He thought it was terrible. He said, "I want them painted over before I get back." And he went down there --. To begin with, Mrs. Kennedy--we painted them white--she was very pleased with them. I don't think the President ever got out there to see them. This thing happened right after that.

TURNURE: Did you see him often? When you were working in the House, would he come in?

KARITAS: Yes, on the second floor, I remember one time we were doing her bedroom, and we left a little molding on the baseboard, a natural oak. And it was there for a reason. We thought if it was bumped with the carpet sweeper, it wouldn't make a mark. But she didn't like it. She wanted it done off-white to match the rest of it. So we were doing it--it was on a weekend. I think she had gone down to Florida and he was still here. I think that Princess Radziwill [Lee Bouvier Radziwill]

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and her husband were here at the time. He didn't know we were there. We were in the bedroom. We were painting this molding. And he came running in there. He had on this worn bathrobe he always wears. Mrs. Kennedy too, she liked old things, you know. She didn't like anything new. So he had this old worn bathrobe on--I don't know how many years he's had it--barefooted, big cigar in his mouth, magazine in his hand. He was looking for some other magazine. He ran right in there and almost fell over us.

TURNURE: Were you surprised?

KARITAS: Yes, and he was too. He said, "What in the world? She's doing it over already?"

TURNURE: He couldn't believe it.

KARITAS: Because he knew Mrs. Kennedy--how she always changed things. And I said, "No, we're just doing this molding. Mrs. Kennedy thought it

would look better if we did the molding." He said, "Oh, and I thought you were doing it over." He was always pleasant

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and very generous about things, and kind. He never said unkind things to you ever and whenever he saw you, he always smiled and spoke to you.

TURNURE: Glad to see you.

KARITAS: Yes, yes. He was a wonderful person.

TURNURE: Did he call you 'Joe' too?

KARITAS: Yes, he always called me 'Joe.' All the First Ladies called me 'Joe.'

TURNURE: What about the children? Did you see much of them?

KARITAS: Well, once in a while we'd see them up there, but we didn't have too much contact with the children. We'd see them in the hall sometimes. They'd come up and grab you around the leg, look up, and say, "Hello" or "Hi." You know, Caroline, she was young. She would look up at you and say, "Hi, who are you? What's your name? What do you do?" Cute little thing.

TURNURE: And John [John F. Kennedy, Jr.] was the same way--asking questions.

KARITAS: Yes, but John was very young then. He didn't

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start to talk until a bit later, and I never had too much contact with him except when he'd holler at you in a little baby voice, you know.

TURNURE: Could you tell us a little bit about the redecoration of the rooms and your impressions of it?

KARITAS: Well, when the Eisenhowers were there, they liked modern things--clean, bright colors and things like that. But Mrs. Kennedy never liked anything new. She wanted everything to look like it had been used, you know, been lived with. She never liked anything new. If she ever bought anything new, like in furniture, we would antique it, age it, so it would look like it had been used. Same with flowers. She wanted it to look like they hadn't come from a florist. She wanted it like she had gone out in the garden and picked them herself. She didn't like to arrange them in a formal pattern. She would put them in vases. And that's the

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way she was about her work. She liked everything to look old. Paint a wall--she never liked a plain wall. As a matter of fact, she always wanted glaze used to give an old effect. Now all the State rooms, like the State Dining Room, their private dining room on the first floor, the main floor, were all glazed. The paint was put on real heavy to simulate like it was old. In the State Dining Room it was to simulate cracked paneling like in the old castles like they had over in France. In fact, they brought back some samples of the board that came from these particular rooms over in France. I think Mr. Boudin must have procured them for her over there. It looks like wooden paneling, old and cracked. So we had to paint them and make the paint real rough, and then glaze it and then put these imitation distress marks in them with crayon. We had to make it look like it was old and cracked.

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TURNURE: Had you done this kind of painting before?

KARITAS: Oh, I've been painting for forty-seven years.

TURNURE: But this particular kind of painting to make things look old?

KARITAS: Oh, yes, I can do anything in painting.

TURNURE: It must have been quite interesting for you then, working with her.

KARITAS: Very interesting. The White House is the only place in the Government where you do this type of work. All through the Government it's just plain ordinary painting, but over here--

TURNURE: There's room for imagination.

KARITAS: Yes, and skill in the art of painting to do this particular type of work. It isn't just anybody who can do it.

TURNURE: You also worked on actual pieces of furniture--antiquing them?

KARITAS: Oh, we did practically all the furniture in the house.

TURNURE: And when the floors were stained in the State rooms, did you do that?

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KARITAS: No, they called in a floor man from New York. We weren't able to do it. We didn't have the time. We didn't have the equipment. The floors had to be--I told Mrs. Kennedy. We had stained a couple of them first upstairs over the floors that had a finish on them and they wouldn't wear, you know. You have to get them down to the bare wood so that the stain would penetrate into the raw wood. So I explained it to her and she said, "Well, stain one of them anyway." So we stained the Oval Room--the President's study on the second floor--and it didn't wear very good. In fact, in six or seven months it started to wear off. So then they made contact with this company in New York who does floors for all these mansions up there, and they stained the floors. They scraped the floors first, sanded them thoroughly, and then they put this dark stain on. She liked dark floors; she thought the room didn't look right with the

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oak floors too bright. In proper decoration, the floors should be the darkest part of the room. That sets off the walls and the furnishings.

TURNURE: In projects of this kind, would you get your instructions directly from her or would they come from Mr. West or the curator?

KARITAS: Well, she would talk to Mr. West. Of course, Mr. West not being, you know, an artist--and he wouldn't know. So he would call us in and we'd go up together and discuss things with Mrs. Kennedy.

TURNURE: And she explained things easily?

KARITAS: Oh, yes. She'd often, when she wanted a piece of furniture decorated, why, she would draw out a plan and put a note with just what she wanted. If she wanted this piece of furniture, say it was a piece of mahogany for Caroline's room. And she said she wanted it painted an off-white and not too yellow, and she wanted glaze. Then she wanted gold stripes and then she wanted some

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pink stripes, light pink, to set it off. So she would draw a little plan--

TURNURE: Did you save these drawings?

KARITAS: Well, I have some of them.

TURNURE: Did she ever communicate with you through memorandum?

KARITAS: Mostly through Mr. West. But after you get to talking to her up there, why, then she would tell you things personally she wanted done.

TURNURE: Have you found her to be a creative, artistic person?

KARITAS: She was. She had wonderful taste, especially when it came to antiques. She was really a specialist when it comes to antiques, things with history. She liked anything that had history connected with it. She didn't want to have something in the house just for the sake of having a particular thing. But if it had history connected with it, then she appreciated it and she valued it.

TURNURE: Didn't she find a lot of these chairs and

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various items in the cellar of the White House?

KARITAS: Yes, well, yes. There were things around in the storerooms down there and I think--I'm not positive--I think she went down to Fort Washington and found many things down there. Of course, she had these albums. We have a--everything is inventoried at the White House and pictures of them in albums. She looked through these and she saw certain pieces and then she wondered where they were and she wouldn't rest until she found them. She found them and then she wanted them done the way she...

TURNURE: Of all the rooms you worked on during the restoration, which one did you find the most interesting to redo from start to finish?

KARITAS: Well, I think that the China Room was the prettiest one of all to me.

TURNURE: Can you describe that?

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KARITAS: We did that ourselves without any help. She usually had friends of hers who financed these projects. They didn't cost the Government anything. She would have her friends--like the State Dining Room. They brought them down from New York and they would pay just them, but our men worked with them in order to get the work done a little faster and they couldn't get anyone in Washington to do this particular type of work so they had our men work with them. But this China Room we did ourselves without any help and I think it looks prettier than anything. It's done in two shades of gray and white and then the red velvet she had lined, you know, inside the cabinets. And then also the Gold Room. We did that ourselves.

TURNURE: Such a rich blue.

KARITAS: That's the last project that we did for Mrs. Kennedy.

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TURNURE: Did she have other projects in mind that you know of before she left?

KARITAS: Well, I heard that she was going to do the East Room over and also the Lincoln Room. That was the next two projects she had in mind. But she never finished the Gold Room and we just about completed it when this thing happened. In fact, that's where I was when I heard the terrible news about the President. I had gone back over to the shop from the Gold Room and so when I came back to the shop, the electrician had been listening to the radio and he said, "My God, the President and the Governor of Texas have just been shot." Well, that upset me terribly and I said, "Well, I hope it wasn't anything serious." So I went over and told the other fellows about it. Of course, there wasn't much work done the rest of the afternoon. I went over to the West End. Of course, everything was in turmoil over there. They had the television going over

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there. So I listened to the reports until finally it came through that he had died. I was shook up for many days after that because we thought so much of him.

TURNURE: Hadn't you also just finished working on his office? Hadn't that been repainted recently and while he was away, the new curtains hung?

KARITAS: Yes, but we didn't have anything to do with that. They turned that over to contractors because it had to be done in a hurry. We were doing other things for Mrs. Kennedy in the House. I mixed the colors for her. She picked the colors before she left and I had to tell the contractors what she wished.

TURNURE: So that her plan was that when he came back from Texas, he would have the off-white walls.

KARITAS: Yes, it was green before. No, it wasn't green either. It was green first, when he first came in. We changed it to a flat color and that was a little deeper than the

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off-white and she thought she'd like to have that an off-white color.

TURNURE: It would have red curtains and red carpet?

KARITAS: Red curtains and a new red carpet, yes. He never saw that.

TURNURE: So you were really finishing the Gold Room when the assassination...

KARITAS: We were working on the Gold Room, yes.

TURNURE: What happened after you received this news? Did you spend the rest of the day in the White House, or...

KARITAS: Yes, I went over to the West End. The rest of the fellows stayed in the room and worked there. Of course, they were discussing the thing, wondering about what was going to happen and all. I went over to the West End because I knew the television was over there. No one knew at the time when the first report came out how serious it was.

TURNURE: And then after it was learned that he had died, were you given special instructions of things to do in connection with the funeral?

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KARITAS: Well, everything was in a turmoil. I forget what the next day was. I was at home and I saw the television. He was laid out in the East Room at that time. He was brought back the same day he was shot, wasn't he?

TURNURE: That night.

KARITAS: The next day--didn't they lay him out in the East Room?

TURNURE: In the East Room, yes.

KARITAS: Well, I saw on television, saw him laid out there and I saw some of the help, our people, going through. They walked through, and I saw a couple of fellows come in there and say a prayer. They knelt down. He's a Knight of Columbus and I am myself. He's a brother Knight and I felt awful that I wasn't there. I think it was a Saturday. It wasn't a workday; I don't work on Saturday. So I called the Usher and I said, "I see some of the fellows are paying their respects to the President. Have any arrangements been made for the employees

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to come in?" He said, "No, there's no plan. No arrangement had been made for any of the help. Can you get here by 8 o'clock?" Well, I live halfway to Baltimore and I couldn't get in that early so he said, "Well, there's been no arrangement made." So I didn't come in that day at all or the next. Let me see, Monday was the funeral and so I came into work and then some

of the fellows said, "Are you going to St. Matthews? Are you going to the funeral?" And I said, "No, I haven't an invitation to go to the funeral." He said, "Well, I got my invitation."

Well, I hadn't heard a thing about it. It made me angry because I'm a Catholic and he's a brother Knight and I did want to pay my respects someway or other. Of course it was a turmoil. Of course, Mrs. Kennedy, in her sorrow, she wasn't handling any of this. It was Mr. West and those people. So then I went upstairs. I was real angry and I said to Mr. West, "What's wrong?"

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Somebody mad at me or something here?" And he said, "Why?" I said, "Well, I understand, in fact I know, some of the other fellows got an invitation to go to St. Matthew's to the memorial Mass. What's the matter with me?" He said, "No." So he reached over and got the envelope that Mrs. Kennedy asked, you know, there were about six or seven of us that she had asked. So we went up to St. Matthew's ahead of everybody else to be sure we wouldn't get bogged down in the crowd. We were seated there. She made arrangements later--she had all the help that had any contact with him to meet in the private dining room, then come out the front, the north portico, and touch the coffin, to pay respects to the President that way. That was Mrs. Kennedy's plan. Before that, she was so busy with other things...

TURNURE:           It's interesting. I hadn't heard that before.

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KARITAS:           We weren't in anything at all until that day of the funeral. So then we went to the funeral, to the Mass and all.

TURNURE:           Do you remember when you last saw Mrs. Kennedy?

KARITAS:           Well, I saw her the day she left. She called me up there. Mr. West called me and said Mrs. Kennedy wanted to see me on the second floor. She had put up a huge oil painting there on the north wall and the gold frame was badly scarred and the picture also had some scales. The canvas showed through. And she said, "Come up here and look at it." I went up there. Mrs. Kennedy was up there; her sister was with her, the Princess. So she showed me what she wanted done to it and I went down and got my things, art brushes and everything, so I started painting the picture.

TURNURE:           Filling in the paint?

KARITAS:           Filling in the painting where the paint had been knocked off, scaled off the canvas,

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and did the gold frame. Mrs. Johnson [Claudia Alta "Lady Bird" Johnson] was supposed to come in that afternoon and she wanted it to look real nice for Mrs. Johnson. So even though--you know how she felt, leaving the White House--she sat over there and joked with me. Mr. West was there. She said "Joe, Mr. West said you should paint some Indians in the picture while you're painting there." So, I went along with it. I tried to cheer her up. I knew how she felt. So we kidded back and forth and when I got finished, she admired it very much--she was very nice. She said, "Now why don't you put your name down in the corner?" And then I had a nice talk with her for about forty-five minutes. She was waiting for a signal for her to go downstairs. I guess John was up there with her. I'm not sure, but I think some of the children. So while she was waiting, she talked to me real confidentially. I told her how much I enjoyed working with her and she invited

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me to come to see her at the house and bring my wife. She said, "I'll be very lonely. You've worked with me and I think so much of you. I'd like to have you come and see me." But I never did go up there though she did invite me. It was very nice of her.

TURNURE:                Was there anything else that you'd like to say about the family before we...

KARITAS:                Well, only one thing. I just happened to think... I know when the children were still down in Florida, when she first moved in, there was a terrible snowstorm and we were trying to get Caroline's room and John's room done before they got back. They were supposed to come in, I think, Monday. And we worked Saturday and Sunday and there was a terrible snowstorm. I couldn't get home if I stayed late, and she asked me if I could stay and finish it. So I stayed and one of the other men stayed with me and we stayed there until late--

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oh, ten or eleven o'clock. And she told Mr. West that she wanted me put up in one of the guest rooms on the third floor. She had supper sent up and breakfast the next morning. And the next morning she had the florist make up a beautiful cymbidium orchid corsage, a double orchid, for my wife. Mrs. Kennedy said, "I want your wife to have this orchid." So my wife took it down to the National Gallery. She works in the Library at the National Gallery. I separated the corsage so that it would keep longer. She kept it for about a week, and everyone at the Gallery who would see it would "ooh" and "aah." They'd never seen a cymbidium orchid. She was very proud.

TURNURE:                Oh, but that's so thoughtful.

KARITAS:                Oh, she was very thoughtful--Mrs. Kennedy was.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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