



Smithsonian
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Oral history interview with Bernice
Fisher Banks, 1965 February 21

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Bernice Fisher Banks on February 21, 1965. The interview took place in Alameda, California, and was conducted by Mary Fuller McChesney for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's New Deal and the Arts project.

The original transcript was edited. In 2021 the Archives created a more verbatim transcript. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

MARY MCCHESENEY: This is Mary McChesney interviewing Bernice Fisher Banks. The name is spelled F-I-S-H-E-R and the last name B-A-N-K-S, who lives at 2329 Buena Vista Avenue in Alameda, California. And the date is February 21st, 1965. Present also this afternoon is Robert McChesney. First, I'd like to ask you, Mrs. Banks, where were you born?

BERNICE BANKS: I was born in Salt Lake City.

MARY MCCHESENEY: And what year was that?

BERNICE BANKS: That was 1906 [laughs].

MARY MCCHESENEY: And where did you get your art training?

BERNICE BANKS: Well, I was in art all the way through school. I used to have one-man shows throughout the whole grades. And in elementary school, my teachers were very greatly impressed by the work that I did. And usually, the exhibits ended up by being mostly my own things that were up.

MARY MCCHESENEY: That's very unusual.

BERNICE BANKS: And then I did some sculpture, which I understand for a young person, it's a very unusual thing for them to do to be able to do a three-dimensional realistic form.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BERNICE BANKS: And, well, I went to the university there. I had a teaching fellowship at the university in arts and sciences, and then I assisted Mr. Malin in doing some sculpture and Mr. Knaphus. Mr. Malin, incidentally, was an assistant for Gutzon Borglum. And with Roger Noble Burnham down at the Otis Art Institute, I assisted him in his studio and with the Trojan for the UC—no—San Francisco. Which school is it?

MARY MCCHESENEY: Los Angeles. The team, you mean?

BERNICE BANKS: Yeah.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: University of Southern California.

BERNICE BANKS: University of Southern California, yes. The Trojan, I helped to make that too.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Who was this that you worked with at the Otis Art Institute?

BERNICE BANKS: Roger Noble—oh, Roger Noble Burnham. Do you know him?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: I'm just—

BERNICE BANKS: He would be a very elderly man now if he is alive. He'd probably be in his 90s. He would have to be in his 90s.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well, I was at school there in 1935 and [193]6.

BERNICE BANKS: Oh, you were?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: I was.

BERNICE BANKS: Oh. I've forgotten the other teachers that I knew. I was mostly in—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Misical [ph], was Misical [ph] there?

BERNICE BANKS: I was in sculpture. And we were in a department by ourself, you know, outside.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BERNICE BANKS: I don't remember anybody else. [Cross talk.]

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: There was a young fellow, a fairly young fellow that was teaching sculpture that time.

MARY MCCHESENEY: I—excuse—[Recorder stops, restarts.] You were just talking about the period that you were at Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles, and that was 1929 and—

BERNICE BANKS: '29 and '30, yeah.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BERNICE BANKS: And then I was at the University of Utah in the Arts and Sciences in '30 and '31. And then I had some private commissions in '31 and '42, up to '42. I did a portrait of Robert Fisher. He's a musician in Salt Lake at that time. He wasn't my husband then, but we later did marry. But he's in Hawaii now. Oh yes, I did some buffalo heads for some fireplace in Salt Lake, for a private family.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Were you working in ceramics at that time?

BERNICE BANKS: No. This was all in sculpture, more or less.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Stone?

BERNICE BANKS: Well, I did a stone thing once in a while, but no, it was cast mostly.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Oh, I see. I was wondering about the fireplace. It couldn't have been carved in wood, so I was wondering what material you used.

BERNICE BANKS: Well, it was—I made it in clay, and then it was cast into a stone.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Cast stone.

BERNICE BANKS: Cast stone.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BERNICE BANKS: Or I did some bas-relief, five feet by eight feet, for the Cache County Bank. I never did see that up. [Laughs.]

MARY MCCHESENEY: Was that in Salt Lake City too?

BERNICE BANKS: That was in Cache County. Let me see. I think the name of the city is Richmond, Utah. I'm not quite sure now, I've forgotten. All of these things are so long ago.

[00:05:09]

I had this horse's head—let's see—this horse's head on exhibit in the San Francisco Society of Women Artists. I was a member of that. It was exhibited in '37. And I also had some dishes that, I think are there, that were in the exhibit in San Francisco Museum.

MARY MCCHESENEY: The horse's head is a—the horse's head is a cast ceramic piece, isn't it?

BERNICE BANKS: Yes, it's a cast ceramic.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BERNICE BANKS: And different bases from time to time. And that is about all I have to say right at this moment. [Laughs.]

MARY MCCHESENEY: How did you first make any contact with any of the government-sponsored art projects?

BERNICE BANKS: Well, first of all, what was it, SRA? Where it was—well, it was just a means of food—

MARY MCCHESENEY: Surplus of city food?

BERNICE BANKS: Yeah, a means of living, that was all. And—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well, you went on WPA then. You weren't on PWA. Did you have to go on relief to get on WPA?

BERNICE BANKS: I was already, I think.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Uh-huh [affirmative].

BERNICE BANKS: I can't remember for sure.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well, that was WPA then.

BERNICE BANKS: WPA, mm-hmm [affirmative]. And we had—it was at Porter School, I think. I went up to the administrative building for the WPA.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Was that in Salt Lake City?

BERNICE BANKS: In San Francisco.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Oh, you had come to San Francisco—

BERNICE BANKS: Yes.

MARY MCCHESENEY: —by then. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BERNICE BANKS: Uh-huh [affirmative]. And the only person that I remember there is Dorothy Collins. Do you remember Dorothy Collins?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BERNICE BANKS: And then we were at the Porter School, and there were quite a number of us. I remember Reuben Kadish. I think he's in New York now, and I think he's not doing anything in art at all. But—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: He's working in sculpture.

BERNICE BANKS: Is he working in sculpture?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BERNICE BANKS: And, oh, there was Sargent Johnson and Johnny Magnani and, of course—Bud [ph] Painter used to drop by every once in a while, and see what we were doing, and I think that he handled the publicity.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BERNICE BANKS: Bud Painter, at that time. It was mostly ceramics that we were doing then. And then we moved to Folsom. I don't know whether I have that address or not, Folsom Street. Sorry about that. Anyway, that was for the studio class, and I was in charge of, oh, approximately 15 or 20 people, and we were designing and making pottery. And this pottery was used from time to time at flower shows that were held at the city hall and things of that kind. So that was rather interesting, and we sometimes made the arrangements of the

flowers for different organizations.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: This would be vases, I assume, vases and bowls?

BERNICE BANKS: Vases and bowls and dishes, yeah.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Did the city buy this from the project?

BERNICE BANKS: I don't know. I really don't know.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: I think they did, and also some of the schools bought—

MARY MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BERNICE BANKS: Well, as I said, the San Jose [ph] school bought three heads, and this was the letter, in case you're interested. That's the letter that was notifying me that they had purchased those heads.

MARY MCCHESENEY: At this ceramic workshop that you had, who was in charge of the studio there? Where you were working on Folsom Street, was Mr. Magnani—Johnny Magnani—

BERNICE BANKS: Mr.—yeah. Yeah, Johnny Magnani was in charge of that, and Margaret Livingston had the weaving.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Oh, the weaving was there together—

BERNICE BANKS: Yeah, mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yes.

MARY MCCHESENEY: —with the ceramic, mm-hmm [affirmative]. Did you say you had 15 to 20 people working in the ceramic department?

BERNICE BANKS: Yes.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Did you have your own kilns there?

BERNICE BANKS: Yes, uh-huh [affirmative]. In fact, I used to—

MARY MCCHESENEY: And potter's wheels?

BERNICE BANKS: Yes. In fact, I used to fire the kiln.

[00:10:00]

And we did have a kiln in the Old Saint Mary's, next to the General Hospital in San Francisco, for a while. And that was a rather weird experience firing the kiln, and it would bark at you. And the people up in the psychopathic ward would yell out the window, and it was really quite a frightening thing and I was there all by myself. Over 36 hours, we would take turns firing the kiln. And sometimes it was really quite frightening. [Laughs.]

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Was that the same building that the offices were in?

BERNICE BANKS: Well, this was Saint Mary's so—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: This was—[Cross talk; inaudible.]

BERNICE BANKS: —I don't know whether there were other offices in there or not, but I know that the basement was rather fascinating because it had these small cells where they used to keep the girls. It was for incorrigible girls. And there were quite a number of rather derogatory statements written on the walls, and it was rather interesting to go through this building. And it did have kind of an awesome feeling about it. I don't think that there were people in it outside of that kiln. And it was right next door.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Was this on Potrero Avenue?

BERNICE BANKS: Yes, it was on Potrero, and it was right next door.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: It was an old red building.

BERNICE BANKS: Yes.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yeah, they had offices there.

BERNICE BANKS: Oh, did they?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BERNICE BANKS: Well, they may have moved by the time that I'm speaking of and—or at night, of course, you have to run the kiln—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yeah.

BERNICE BANKS: —throughout the whole night, and it did seem quite lonely. [Laughs.] There was one other experience that you probably would enjoy very much. I can't remember the name of the fellow, but he was a Russian and he was working at home. He was a sculptor. And he was—Johnny Magnani and Sargent Johnson went to visit him to see how he was coming along with his work, and he wouldn't let them in. And they wanted to force their way through, so he got his pistols, and he got his metals, and he said, "If you want to try and come in, go ahead." [Laughs.]

MARY MCCHESENEY: Awkward. [Laughs.]

BERNICE BANKS: [Laughs.] So, they left him alone for that time. But he was a very strange person. He did fairly good work, but—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: This wasn't Mike Shepakov [ph].

BERNICE BANKS: Mike—oh, no, it wasn't Mike, uh-uh [negative].

MARY MCCHESENEY: Michael von Meyer, could it have been him?

BERNICE BANKS: He was a young man. He was a young man, rather a nice-looking man. And he was the heel-clicking—

MARY MCCHESENEY: Oh.

BERNICE BANKS: —hand-kissing type. I don't know whether you'd remember him or not, but it was back then. Of course, now he didn't come in very often, so they went out to see how he was doing.

MARY MCCHESENEY: And he was the sculptor on the project?

BERNICE BANKS: He was on—he was a sculptor on the project in his own studio, in his own home, in his dwelling.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: I don't know who that could be.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Did you fire for many of the sculptors who were working in clay?

BERNICE BANKS: Yes, we did. We did a lot of firing. In fact, we fired statues for this Russian fellow about this tall.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Up to four feet then.

BERNICE BANKS: Yeah.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BERNICE BANKS: Yes, this was—

MARY MCCHESENEY: In one piece?

BERNICE BANKS: —a large kiln. Yes.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Oh. Good job. [Cross talk.]

BERNICE BANKS: So that's a large kiln. We built it ourselves.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: That's practically a walk-in, isn't it?

BERNICE BANKS: Oh, that—

MARY MCCHESENEY: Oh, you built that [Cross talk; inaudible]?

BERNICE BANKS: Yeah, we built it, uh-huh [affirmative].

MARY MCCHESENEY: Who was in charge of designing it?

BERNICE BANKS: Well, Johnny, I think, mainly designed it. And other people that came around had ideas and books, and everybody did a little research in different realms for the right kind of bricks, and better designs. It was quite interesting.

MARY MCCHESENEY: How long did it take you to build a kiln that size? Must have been quite a long project.

BERNICE BANKS: Well, it usually took, with a number of people, about three months.

MARY MCCHESENEY: To build one.

BERNICE BANKS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY MCCHESENEY: Well, that's not too bad.

BERNICE BANKS: No, that's not too bad, but we had around six people helping. Even I had bricks that I was helping with too [laughs].

MARY MCCHESENEY: Were the other people on this project trained potters, or were they people who were learning there?

BERNICE BANKS: They were learning, uh-huh [affirmative].

MARY MCCHESENEY: Do you remember their names, any of them?

BERNICE BANKS: I don't remember a single name, not one single name.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Oh, you've mentioned Mr. Johnny Magnani, who was the head of the ceramic department—

BERNICE BANKS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY MCCHESENEY: —on the WPA at San Francisco. What was his background in pottery? Where did he get his beginning training? Do you know?

BERNICE BANKS: Well, first of all, his training was originally in sculpture.

[00:15:00]

He could make some of the most beautiful molds that I have ever seen, plaster molds. And he'd learned this from his father and from a friend of his father's. In fact, he used to go over there and not go to school [laughs] and would be learning how to make plaster casts in numerous pieces, and these would be large works. I think that this was during the 1915 Fair, so he would be a very young person, and he'd take his lunch and instead of going to school, he'd go to the studio and help. And I don't know how old he would have been at that time, but, oh, he was probably around 12, something like that.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. He was a native of San Francisco?

BERNICE BANKS: I think so. Of course, his mother and father weren't, but I think that he was.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BERNICE BANKS: Margery, of course, was his wife, and she could give you much more information on him than I can.

MARY MCCHESENEY: She was the head of the weaving project there.

BERNICE BANKS: Yes, uh-huh [affirmative].

MARY MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. You mentioned a while ago the sculptor Sargent Johnson. Did he work there at the studio too?

BERNICE BANKS: No, he worked in his own studio.

MARY MCCHESENEY: And then brought things in for you to fire?

BERNICE BANKS: That's correct, yes. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY MCCHESENEY: We saw a little sculpture of his at Bud Painter's house, it looked as though it had been cast.

BERNICE BANKS: I have one up here.

MARY MCCHESENEY: That cast piece? Is that his?

BERNICE BANKS: Yeah. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY MCCHESENEY: Were most of the sculptures that were working there doing casting then?

BERNICE BANKS: This is a press mold. I mean this is a pressed [inaudible] mold. Not that I— [inaudible]

MARY MCCHESENEY: We're looking at a piece of clay work of Sargent Johnson's, which is—

BERNICE BANKS: [Laughs.] This is another [inaudible]—

MARY MCCHESENEY: —ceramic. [Cross talk.]

BERNICE BANKS: Mexican stone, and he just made a little figure out of it. This is a fish, isn't it cute?

MARY MCCHESENEY: It's a beauty.

BERNICE BANKS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY MCCHESENEY: It's like a dark stone's been cut, carved.

BERNICE BANKS: Yes, that's a black stone that's been polished as well as carved.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: That's a nice little mask.

BERNICE BANKS: Have you talked to Sargent Johnson?

MARY MCCHESENEY: Yes, we did an interview with him.

BERNICE BANKS: Oh, you did.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BERNICE BANKS: Oh, of course. He's one of the few people that I know that has been living on his artwork for a number of years. Wow, that's not a press, is it? That's—or—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: I don't know what that exactly means.

BERNICE BANKS: —slip-cast. But it's heavy clay. I did a lot of the calculating of the clays and glazes. In fact, I have boxes and boxes of formulas upstairs. [Laughs.]

MARY MCCHESENEY: [Loud cough] Were you preparing all your own clays and—

BERNICE BANKS: Yeah.

MARY MCCHESENEY: —clays and glazes there?

BERNICE BANKS: Yes, uh-huh [affirmative]. We did all of those.

MARY MCCHESENEY: You must have had a very good background in ceramics to go into that part of it.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Move this away from us. Okay.

BERNICE BANKS: Well, I—of course, I did make some of this in the university. This is one thing that I made.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: This is two fishes.

BERNICE BANKS: Some of these—

MARY MCCHESENEY: We're just looking at some of the pottery that was done by Mrs. Banks on the WPA Art Project in San Francisco. This is a rather tall bowl. It's about a foot high, I guess, isn't it?

BERNICE BANKS: Yes, I would say it is.

MARY MCCHESENEY: And this was cast or thrown on the wheel?

BERNICE BANKS: That is cast.

MARY MCCHESENEY: And then incised too.

BERNICE BANKS: And then incised, mm-hmm [affirmative]. These were—I did one.

MARY MCCHESENEY: And these were all glazes that you made yourself?

BERNICE BANKS: Yes, that's right.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BERNICE BANKS: This is a design that I made. This vase was exactly the same. In fact, it was a companion piece for this one. And I have the other. And this is the design for that one, the angelfish. They're kind of hard to see. They're very light.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Oh, yes, [inaudible].

BERNICE BANKS: And then these were some ray [ph]. I did a vase this size.

MARY MCCHESENEY: These were from drawings that you did at the San Francisco Aquarium.

BERNICE BANKS: Yes.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And was this drawing also placed on a bowl?

BERNICE BANKS: Yes.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Or a vase?

BERNICE BANKS: Yes. It was on a larger vase than that. I had a lot of fun going out to the Golden Gate Park and sketching these little things during that time, which I used on different pieces of work from time to time.

[00:20:05]

MARY MCCHESENEY: These are great. I like the drawings of the squirrels and smaller animals.

BERNICE BANKS: [Laughs.]

MARY MCCHESENEY: Mainly squirrels. Oh, there's a rabbit.

BERNICE BANKS: Yeah, there's a rabbit and—

MARY MCCHESENEY: [Laughs.] A chipmunk.

BERNICE BANKS: I made a bear and I made a lion, but I don't know where that is. I haven't any pictures of it. In fact, there are quite a few things. This was just a sketch of one of the lions.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Were you doing any sculpture as well as the pottery at this time?

BERNICE BANKS: No. That's what made me feel kind of bad. The only things that I did were these sketches and then put the incising on a few of the vases. But I was mostly designing the vases and calculating the clays and the glazes.

MARY MCCHESENEY: After you calculated the formulas for the clays and glazes, then you prepared them there too, I see.

BERNICE BANKS: Oh, yes.

MARY MCCHESENEY: For the—

BERNICE BANKS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

MARY MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BERNICE BANKS: Oh, yes. And we had bottles and bottles and bottles [laughs].

MARY MCCHESENEY: What happened to most of the work that you did? Who were you supplying with these vases? Were they going to schools to be used as decorative pottery in the schools or where?

BERNICE BANKS: I presume so. They were used throughout all of the different areas that wanted vases. They went to schools, and as I said before, the different flower shows. They would use a great number of our vases. In fact—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Because you said the city bought those.

BERNICE BANKS: Yes, uh-huh [affirmative]. And then the things that were done at the World Fair, I presume that those were bought by the people that were in charge of the fair. I don't know. I didn't pay much attention to the financial, and I wasn't in a position to know anyway—what happened to them. But I did lots of flower arrangements, different places from time to time and the bowls that we made.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Did you have a show room there at the studio where your pottery was on display?

BERNICE BANKS: Well, yes, we did once in a while.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Oh, you have exhibitions?

BERNICE BANKS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], yeah. Sometimes they were on exhibit over at the administration building. Didn't they have exhibits over there from time to time?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: You mean at the fair?

BERNICE BANKS: No, I mean over in San Francisco at the administration building. I can't remember even where that was, but where Dorothy Collins used to be.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Oh, I know where they—

BERNICE BANKS: They had exhibits there.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well, they moved around. They moved about three or four times.

BERNICE BANKS: No wonder I can't remember where they were.

MARY MCCHESENEY: [Laughs.]

BERNICE BANKS: [Laughs.]

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: I'm pretty sure they—the project, they were out—well, some offices were out there in Potrero Avenue, the place—

BERNICE BANKS: Yeah.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: —next to the hospital.

BERNICE BANKS: Yes.

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: And then of course, they moved down on Jackson Street.

BERNICE BANKS: Jackson is probably the building that I'm talking about, that was rather a nice building.

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: Yeah.

BERNICE BANKS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: Giacomo Patri.

BERNICE BANKS: Yes.

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: Emmy Lou Packard and several other people—

BERNICE BANKS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: —took it over after.

BERNICE BANKS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: And made studios in it. And there was one other place but I can't remember what—

BERNICE BANKS: Well, are they—do you think that they'll do any research in this and bring an idea of this type back again? It would be a wonderful thing [laughs] if they could. I mean, like they are doing this youth corps, but that's only for people 17 to 21.

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: Yeah.

BERNICE BANKS: And if they could, again, sponsor some artists, it would be a very wonderful thing. I forgot to bring over this one. And I was so delighted to find it. Well, that was—

MARY MCCCHESNEY: Mrs. Banks has gotten a book here called *Gumbo Ya-Ya*. What is it?

BERNICE BANKS: It's the WPA writer's book.

MARY MCCCHESNEY: Oh, it is.

BERNICE BANKS: Yeah. And I was so delighted when I found it, and it's a very interesting book.

MARY MCCCHESNEY: Oh, a collection of Louisiana folk tales.

BERNICE BANKS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY MCCCHESNEY: By the—material gathered by workers of the Works Progress Administration Louisiana Writers Project. Did you know any of these people who were on the project out there?

[00:25:00]

BERNICE BANKS: No, I didn't. But when I saw the book I had to have it because it's just full of the most interesting things, and I was glad to know that they had done these.

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: Yeah, it's—

BERNICE BANKS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: —interesting.

BERNICE BANKS: There were some people working out of, I think, of Porter School that were doing historic drawings of old stirrups, and do you know any of those people? I was always fascinated with that project.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: We've interviewed some—

BERNICE BANKS: You have interviewed some of those people?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: That's the—

MARY MCCHESENEY: *The Index of American Design*.

BERNICE BANKS: Yeah.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: *Index of American Design*—

MARY MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: —is what it's called.

BERNICE BANKS: Yes. Oh, I was very intrigued by the things that they were doing. I would like to have done some of those myself. [Laughs.]

MARY MCCHESENEY: How long were you on the project?

BERNICE BANKS: Well, from about '34, I guess, until '39. And I was one of those people went from the WPA project to the schooling, and that's where I went into drafting.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What was the schooling?

BERNICE BANKS: That was in 1940. And everybody that was eligible, you took a test and everybody that was eligible could choose what they wanted to be and well, drafting was the closest thing that they had to something that would be at least remotely near art. So, I took that and went to Samuel Gompers. And from there, the Navy came in and saw my work, and then they chose me for their drafting school. So, then I went into the Navy, and that was [laughs] the end of that WPA project.

MARY MCCHESENEY: You had mentioned earlier something about being involved with the fair at Treasure Island. What were you doing over there?

BERNICE BANKS: Well, I was doing art in action, pottery.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Were you casting?

BERNICE BANKS: No, I did a coil. I did a coil method and put design on this one. It's here somewhere.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Do you do a pot a day, make a new one every day?

BERNICE BANKS: [Laughs.] Just about. This one.

MARY MCCHESENEY: [Laughs.] How long were you over there? Oh, I see.

BERNICE BANKS: I was over there for about, well, for almost the full year.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Uh-huh.

BERNICE BANKS: Of '39.

MARY MCCHESENEY: This looks like a very large pot. How tall is it?

BERNICE BANKS: Yeah, it was about like that.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. It's a coil technique pot then with a rather deeply incised design.

BERNICE BANKS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY MCCHESENEY: It's almost a relief—

BERNICE BANKS: Yeah.

MARY MCCHESENEY: —a little relief.

BERNICE BANKS: Yeah.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And were all the ones you did similar to this?

BERNICE BANKS: Well, I did—yeah, they were more or less similar because we didn't have the equipment over there that would have been nice to have had.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, at least you would take back and of course fire at the studio.

BERNICE BANKS: Yes, uh-huh [affirmative].

MARY MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BERNICE BANKS: And this was the only place that we had, so—

MARY MCCHESENEY: There's a very small photograph of you in your little booth at the fair.

BERNICE BANKS: Yeah. It's sort of a—yeah.

MARY MCCHESENEY: With some of the decorated pottery around.

BERNICE BANKS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

MARY MCCHESENEY: Did other people from the ceramic studio go over there and stay with you or demonstrate too?

BERNICE BANKS: From time to time, they did.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BERNICE BANKS: But I was there most often. And this was the same place where there was a whole—

MARY MCCHESENEY: [Coughs]. Excuse me.

BERNICE BANKS: —[inaudible] of art in action, you know? And oh, everybody was doing all types of things that Mr. Carter was—he was carving a tree with an axe, you remember [laughs]?

MARY MCCHESENEY: Oh, that's Dudley Carter?

BERNICE BANKS: And he was on the gate—yeah. And he was on the Diego Rivera relief, I mean fresco.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Was that in the same room?

BERNICE BANKS: Mural. Yeah, that was in the same room.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: [Inaudible.]

BERNICE BANKS: It was a very large room of all types of activities and arts going on. Yes, it was interesting. Weaving and sculpting and jewelry and—

MARY MCCHESENEY: What kind of an effect do you think being on the WPA Art Project had on your own career as an artist?

BERNICE BANKS: Well, I think that it did open avenues for me, but I couldn't make a living in art, so I just couldn't go on, you know? Some of the best things that I have done I don't even own, and I don't have pictures of them. But of course, I would like very much to go back into sculpture again and do something especially fine.

[00:30:01]

MARY MCCHESENEY: You said that you thought it would be a good idea for the government to—

BERNICE BANKS: Oh, yes.

MARY MCCHESENEY: —start a sponsorship program for the arts again in the United States. Do you think there is a need for this?

BERNICE BANKS: Oh, I do indeed think so. I think that that's why culture is having such a very difficult time. The young people, they're not even thinking about it. They don't think of science, they don't think of art, they don't think of anything cultural. It's a shame.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BERNICE BANKS: Of course, there are some that do, but I mean the great majority of them. I don't think that they are inoculated with it nearly as much as they should be. Of course, now my boys, they like good music, but they've been listening to good music. They like art. They were brought up with it, but that's not true in lots of families.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. If the government did engage in a program like this again, would you have any suggestions about methods of running it that might improve on the WPA projects?

BERNICE BANKS: Well, I—

MARY MCCHESENEY: Or do you have any problems yourself in relationship to the projects?

BERNICE BANKS: I thought that it was a very good idea where the people could work in their environment. I thought that this was an excellent idea. And then they were just visited once in a while to see how they were doing and what they were producing. And I think that [coughing] this gives the person freedom to really create whatever is really special and individualistic to themselves, rather than as I was. I was more giving of my time to these other situations rather than creating on my own.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Because you were all really engaged in the production of the clay—

BERNICE BANKS: Yeah.

MARY MCCHESENEY: —and the glazes in the pottery and the firing—

BERNICE BANKS: Yeah.

MARY MCCHESENEY: —[inaudible.]

BERNICE BANKS: Yeah. And also designing different shapes and helping people produce them, either by the flat method or casting them or something like that, you know?

MARY MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So, you'd had very little opportunity actually to do any sculpture yourself.

BERNICE BANKS: That's true, I didn't have too much chance.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Would there have been any chance for you to transfer from the pottery department to the sculpture department? Or did you ever consider that? Did you ever suggest it to somebody?

BERNICE BANKS: I never did.

MARY MCCHESENEY: No, yeah. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BERNICE BANKS: I never did, but I think that working by themselves is a very nice way to be able to create something.

MARY MCCHESENEY: You weren't engaged yourself in any of the mural projects, any of the large—

BERNICE BANKS: No.

MARY MCCHESENEY: —undertakings of the WPA.

BERNICE BANKS: No.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What about the sculpture project in relationship to Benny Bufano, did you ever do any firing for him? Wasn't he doing a lot of small models?

BERNICE BANKS: No. That was before I knew him. I mean, Johnny Magnani did some firing for him before that time, before the project. And I didn't see him very often. Some of those lovely things that they have over in the San Francisco Museum that Benny Bufano did a long time ago—

MARY MCCHESENEY: The clay portraits.

BERNICE BANKS: —one of his mother—

MARY MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BERNICE BANKS: —and one of his daughters, and oh, they are just lovely. Now those were done before I came to this area.

MARY MCCHESENEY: But they were fired by Johnny Magnani.

BERNICE BANKS: I think that they were—

MARY MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BERNICE BANKS: —fired by Johnny. I think so. In fact, I think that they used to have a studio together at one time, Bufano and Johnny—

MARY MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BERNICE BANKS: —Magnani.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Did you have much contact with the painters on the project?

BERNICE BANKS: Only when we had the exhibits.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Oh, when you'd have group exhibits with them.

BERNICE BANKS: Yeah, uh-huh [affirmative].

MARY MCCHESENEY: What did you think of the kind of painting that was being done then?

BERNICE BANKS: Oh, I thought there were many things that were excellent, very fine paintings. I haven't seen anything that is any better than some of those that were done.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What was the main direction that the painters that you knew were working in at that time in San Francisco?

BERNICE BANKS: Well, I think that impressionistic was more or less what they were working on.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Was there any particular influences working on them from other artists, your opinion or—

BERNICE BANKS: I think that many of them worked together. I mean, they pooled their ideas and worked individually. But I wasn't in real contact with the people that were doing things outside of one of the sculptors. What was his name? I used to go and visit him, and his name started with Z.

[00:35:07]

MARY MCCHESENEY: Oh, Sazevich?

BERNICE BANKS: Sazevich, yeah.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Zygmund Sazevich.

BERNICE BANKS: Yeah. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY MCCHESENEY: Yes, mm-hmm [affirmative].

BERNICE BANKS: And I liked his work very much.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Still working.

BERNICE BANKS: Is he still working?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: [Clearing throat] Works with his son, he's an architect.

BERNICE BANKS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Done quite a few very interesting buildings there.

BERNICE BANKS: Yeah. Well, Mike Chepourkoff, he died, didn't he?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BERNICE BANKS: Now what's the other name? Scherbakoff [ph].

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yeah.

BERNICE BANKS: Yeah, is he still working?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: You contacted—

MARY MCCHESENEY: Sergey Scherbakoff [ph], mm-hmm [affirmative]. I guess did some paintings for the aquarium.

BERNICE BANKS: Oh?

MARY MCCHESENEY: I contacted him, but I haven't heard from him. I have heard from him, but I think instead of doing an interview he's going to write out—

BERNICE BANKS: Oh, mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY MCCHESENEY: He probably has a health problem now.

BERNICE BANKS: Oh.

MARY MCCHESENEY: I guess he's quite elderly. We've mentioned Mike Chepourkoff several times in the interviews. He was working in metal at that—

BERNICE BANKS: Yes.

MARY MCCHESENEY: —in that period.

BERNICE BANKS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY MCCHESENEY: That was rather unusual, wasn't it? Not many sculptors were.

BERNICE BANKS: That's very true. He made many very interesting metal sculptures for the fair at that time.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What were they like?

BERNICE BANKS: Well, they weren't like junk sculptures. They were interesting. They weren't realistic, not representational, but they weren't—I guess you could call them modernistic.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: They were abstract, in actual figurative forms.

BERNICE BANKS: Yeah.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Like one he did for the fair, it was in the federal building, and the court as you went into the Eskimo and the Northwest Indian exhibition exhibit there, he had one. There were several others out in that court, but his was really, [was an immense scare (ph)].

BERNICE BANKS: Yeah. That's right.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: [Inaudible] and just flat sheets of metal [were pinned [(ph)], more or less.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Oh, so it was cut from sheets of flat metal.

BERNICE BANKS: Yes. And then—

MARY MCCHESENEY: And then welded or riveted together in some way, or how was that done?

BERNICE BANKS: Well, then riveted and—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Don't remember that.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BERNICE BANKS: [Laughs.]

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: But he also did a lot of things, and he would take tin cans and cut little animals.

BERNICE BANKS: That's right. He did, didn't he?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Using the metal from the cans.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Quite clever. He did thousands of those things.

BERNICE BANKS: Mike did this [inaudible; laughs].

MARY MCCHESENEY: Oh, this is a portrait of him.

BERNICE BANKS: Yeah. A very quick—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yeah, it's two good caricature.

BERNICE BANKS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY MCCHESENEY: Where'd he do those?

BERNICE BANKS: He did that over in San Francisco in—I can't remember where it was.

MARY MCCHESENEY: The quick sketch caricature.

BERNICE BANKS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY MCCHESENEY: It's very good though, like that.

BERNICE BANKS: Yeah, I like it.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Are there any other sculptors that you knew very well who were on the project? Besides Sargent and them.

BERNICE BANKS: No, as I said, I very rarely got to visit any place, and I was just there eight hours a day and that was it.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Oh, you worked eight hours a day in the studio.

BERNICE BANKS: Yes. Oh, yes.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Oh.

BERNICE BANKS: Uh-huh [affirmative]. It was just like a regular job.

MARY MCCHESENEY: [Cross talk] Like a full-time job.

BERNICE BANKS: So, the only time that I got off to go and do a few sketches, and that's about the only time that I was lucky enough to be able to have some free time.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Oh, mm-hmm [affirmative]. How'd you feel about the way the project

was administrated in San Francisco? Did you have any problems with that or any difficulties with the administration? Or did everything work smoothly as far as the ceramic department was concerned?

BERNICE BANKS: Well, I think that wherever you have people you're going to have some kind of difficulty. The people that were in charge, I think that they took a great deal of liberty so that they could have free time. I didn't have a lot of free time, but Johnny had a lot of free time.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Oh, mm-hmm [affirmative]. Was it that sort of favoritism on the project as far as the people were concerned? If you had gotten a position of a bit more authority you were allowed to more indulge than the other people?

BERNICE BANKS: Don't you think that this is kind of a human trait?

MARY MCCHESENEY: Well, it seems to vary a great deal among the easel painters. I guess it seems to be that mainly on the basis of energy. The more energetic people just worked all the time, and those who were slower producers didn't.

BERNICE BANKS: Yeah.

MARY MCCHESENEY: But it wasn't so much a matter of who the office it was.

BERNICE BANKS: Well, these were people that worked in their own studios.

[00:40:05]

MARY MCCHESENEY: Yeah, mm-hmm [affirmative].

BERNICE BANKS: Yeah. Well, you see, this is a different thing.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Completely different.

BERNICE BANKS: Yes.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BERNICE BANKS: You would probably work 12 hours or 15 or 18 or forget to go to bed if you were working on something that held your attention that long. And this is what happens when you work by yourself.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BERNICE BANKS: But when you have—well, it was just like a kind of a factory.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Yes, mm-hmm [affirmative].

BERNICE BANKS: And it was eight hours a day. And that is different.

MARY MCCHESENEY: You must have produced a tremendous amount of work with 15 or 20 people—

BERNICE BANKS: Yes.

MARY MCCHESENEY: —going full-time—

BERNICE BANKS: Yes, we did.

MARY MCCHESENEY: —and working that hard.

BERNICE BANKS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Thank you very much, Mrs. Banks, for giving us the time for the interview this morning.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]

