



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Alf Bruseth,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Alf Bruseth on April 24, 1964. The interview took place in Oakland, California, and was conducted by Minette Martin 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

MINETTE MARTIN: This is Minette Martin interviewing Mr. Alf Bruseth, B-R-U-S-E-T-H, April 24, 1964, at his home, 2256 High Street in Oakland, California.

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

Mr. Bruseth, I would like to know when you were born, and where you were born, and what your early art training was?

ALF BRUSETH: I was born in Silvana, Washington in 1898. And my art training has been self-taught. I've always worked during the day, and then I painted and drew, mostly pencil, worked in composition for only being told two or three o'clock in the morning, and sometimes longer than that. Otherwise, I don't—that's about all I can say on that subject.

MINETTE MARTIN: I would like, also like to know, how you got on the Federal Arts Project Index of American Design?

ALF BRUSETH: That was in 1938, and I heard about the project starting in Seattle, and I submitted some work to Mr. Inverarity, who was the supervisor of the Federal Art Project in Seattle, and he took this work that I had, in his travels around the state of Washington, and brought this painting—this portrait that I had that I loaned him for that purpose, to show what the type of work that was required that he would like to have artists who were capable, rather, at least that's what he told me, to be on this project.

MINETTE MARTIN: What was the purpose of the project, of this particular one, of the Index of American Design?

ALF BRUSETH: Well, the purpose of this project, the Index of American Design, I believe was—I like to believe, that it's to carry on the traditions of our forefathers in this country. How little people had, fact is, people, when they came to this country they didn't have a tool, they didn't have a thing to work with. Not a thing to work with. They had to make their own tools to improvise. Say, for example, garden tools, everything was made out of wood. Later on, they started to make them out of metal. But first, there was nothing. Everything was made out of wood, or parts of wood, and mostly wood and those traditions are slowly being—well, some of them are lost forever, others are in attics. People don't feel there's any significance in them. People don't get a chance to see them, and they're given, possibly, to the younger generation, and they put them in the category of junk, and they finally possibly end up in the garbage dump someplace.

[00:05:03]

MINETTE MARTIN: However, you as an artist, working on the Index of—

ALF BRUSETH: I was—

MINETTE MARTIN: —American Design copied objects, is that true? In—

ALF BRUSETH: Yes.

MINETTE MARTIN: —museums and private collections?

ALF BRUSETH: Private collections and in homes.

MINETTE MARTIN: And in homes?

ALF BRUSETH: In homes from—borrowed articles from different homes.

MINETTE MARTIN: And the purpose of this actual—of this particular project was to copy and to put on paper, and in a place where it would never be lost, these various youthful objects, craft objects of our American heritage, is that correct?

ALF BRUSETH: That's right.

MINETTE MARTIN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ALF BRUSETH: That's right. The—we did so [inaudible] actually numerous things from needlepoint, homemade workable beautiful pipe organs, mastheads that are completely lost to the—you might say, almost completely lost to the American public. From the first banks, to also the tin banks, to the mechanical banks, beautifully done. These traditions that we—I can't find the words.

MINETTE MARTIN: Well.

ALF BRUSETH: You go ahead.

MINETTE MARTIN: At any rate, I do understand that you feel very strongly about the Index of American Design—

ALF BRUSETH: I certainly do. Yes.

MINETTE MARTIN: —and the objects that you actually recorded. What kind of mediums did you use to record?

ALF BRUSETH: Our mediums to record were specified watercolor. Specified.

MINETTE MARTIN: And who—

ALF BRUSETH: Specified to be—

MINETTE MARTIN: —by whom was it specified?

ALF BRUSETH: By Holger Cahill and Glassgold.

MINETTE MARTIN: These were the—

ALF BRUSETH: These are coordinators. The director and the coordinator.

MINETTE MARTIN: The national directors.

ALF BRUSETH: National directors.

MINETTE MARTIN: National directors of the Index.

ALF BRUSETH: Yes, of the Index.

MINETTE MARTIN: Uh-huh [affirmative]. And also, do they specify exactly the kind of work that must be done, the way you were supposed to copy these objects?

ALF BRUSETH: Oh, yes. These objects were often—we—I know I have worked as long as a month on one painting alone by using, sometimes, just one hair of a brush because you even—well, I felt personally that being a perfectionist that everything in on that, the colors, the lights, the paint where it's been painted over maybe 15 or 16 times, each layer of paint to be shown, and also the rust pockets. The colors that are in those little rust pockets to be shown. Sometimes maybe 20 or 30 different colors and shades and the whole category of colors in that one little spot of about a quarter of an inch. It was a project, this Index of American Design was a project where a person had to suited temperamentally, extreme patience, and love of what he was doing, otherwise he'd never make it.

[00:10:00]

MINETTE MARTIN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. That's very interesting. And do you feel that this, the kind of approach that you had to the objects, the just strict recording of the surface, and the form, and the shape of the object, do you feel that this hampered at all your creativity?

ALF BRUSETH: That can go very deep, [clears throat] because is there anyone greater, whoever the creator is that has created the things on this earth? The material that you worked with and the people that created them in the first place, and to be able to put those—the colors, the forms, on paper, to represent that article in its true form, I think that is in itself a creative thing.

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

MINETTE MARTIN: Where did you work on the Index of American Design?

ALF BRUSETH: I started in to work on the American Design in Seattle, Washington in 1938. I think that was—

MINETTE MARTIN: Did you ever work on the project in California?

ALF BRUSETH: No, no, I did not. No, because I left the project in the state of Washington, in anticipation of what was going to happen before the World War II, and so I joined up for the U.S. Engineers and went to Alaska. I worked there for a year and a half.

MINETTE MARTIN: When was this?

ALF BRUSETH: This was in '41.

MINETTE MARTIN: 1941?

ALF BRUSETH: 1941.

MINETTE MARTIN: Well, I understand that the Index of American Design actually ceased also in 1941.

ALF BRUSETH: Yes. I understand it did.

MINETTE MARTIN: Mm-hmm[affirmative].

ALF BRUSETH: That whole project would've—well, that's what I understood after I got back down that the—didn't have anymore—well, it was rather difficult at that time to get any artists because most of the artists had to go join the army—were conscripted, you know, for the army at that time.

MINETTE MARTIN: I see.

ALF BRUSETH: See? And by the way, too, we had a Major Detlie. I believe he was Veronica Lake's husband who had some men from Walt Disney's in Seattle, and they did map work of maps, and—

MINETTE MARTIN: This was also on the Federal Art Project?

ALF BRUSETH: This was also on the Federal Art Project. I think they worked through Boeing.

MINETTE MARTIN: That's Boeing Aircraft?

ALF BRUSETH: Boeing Aircraft.

MINETTE MARTIN: Aircraft.

ALF BRUSETH: Yes. We also made not only the Index in this, Index work, I mean, the reproductions from artifacts, but we also had shops where we had murals, painted murals, where mural painters, there were easel painters, and model builders who worked from aerial photographs to geodetic survey maps of proposed airfields, and workable models of dams. I mean, that was a [inaudible] with respect to water and [inaudible].

[00:15:35]

MINETTE MARTIN: Do you happen to remember any of the other people with whom you

worked, either in the Index of American Design or the other people in Seattle at the time who worked for the federal arts project?

ALF BRUSETH: Yes, there was a Mark Tobey, and Morris Graves, Malcolm Roberts, Mr. Fletcher, Jacob Elshin.

MINETTE MARTIN: Is that E-L-S-H-E-N?

ALF BRUSETH: E-L-S-H-I-N.

MINETTE MARTIN: Jacob Elshin.

ALF BRUSETH: Jacob Elshin.

MINETTE MARTIN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ALF BRUSETH: Who did easel painting.

MINETTE MARTIN: What did Mark Tobey do?

ALF BRUSETH: Mark Tobey worked on murals, mostly murals.

MINETTE MARTIN: Do you know where these were located?

ALF BRUSETH: The murals were in—all these paintings, especially the mural paintings, were depicting the progress of American life, from the beginning of our forefathers to the present day.

MINETTE MARTIN: And where were these painted, Mr. Bruseth?

ALF BRUSETH: Where were they painted?

MINETTE MARTIN: Where were they painted? In what buildings, do you remember?

ALF BRUSETH: Well, the one—these paintings were painted in the studio at the Maritime Building, when Mark Tobey was with us in Seattle. Should I—

MINETTE MARTIN: Did he—did he actually paint murals in the Maritime Building?

ALF BRUSETH: Yes.

MINETTE MARTIN: He did?

ALF BRUSETH: Yes.

MINETTE MARTIN: And what about Morris Graves? Did he do any murals?

ALF BRUSETH: Yes. No.

MINETTE MARTIN: No?

ALF BRUSETH: No.

MINETTE MARTIN: What did he do?

ALF BRUSETH: All his work was, well, he worked with oils on easel painting.

MINETTE MARTIN: Whatever happened to the easel paintings that Morris Graves did?

ALF BRUSETH: That I wouldn't know, other than, most of those paintings went to—the murals, and the easel paintings were placed in government institutions, public institutions.

MINETTE MARTIN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ALF BRUSETH: Not, they didn't—none of these things went to private collectors. It was all—they were all donated to the state or the local governments. Or as in regards to the models, a lot of the models, that is the models that they made of the Indian—the traditions of Indians, their summer homes, their winter homes of the Chilkat and the Kwakiutl Indians of British Columbia. Those were placed in the museum in the University of Washington. Most of

the information on these Indians was given to us by Dr. Gunther, who's the curator of the Museum of Natural History at the University of Washington.

[00:20:06]

MINETTE MARTIN: I see, and did you work on anything besides the Index of American Design for the Federal Arts Project? Did you do any, any easel paintings or any murals?

ALF BRUSETH: No. No, I did not. I helped occasionally on these models, building these models.

MINETTE MARTIN: Did—who else did you know on the Index itself?

ALF BRUSETH: The only person that I recall and remember was a Mr. Fletcher.

MINETTE MARTIN: Did he also record objects in watercolor—

ALF BRUSETH: Yes.

MINETTE MARTIN: —for the Index?

ALF BRUSETH: Yes. That was at our studio there in Seattle, although there were numerous other places all over the state of Washington that did Index work and they were sent to me to be looked over and judged before they went to Washington, D.C.

MINETTE MARTIN: Oh, I understand that you became a technical advisor.

ALF BRUSETH: Yes, I was a technical advisor.

MINETTE MARTIN: After your first work on the Index.

ALF BRUSETH: Yes, yes.

MINETTE MARTIN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ALF BRUSETH: Through the suggestion of Holger Cahill and Mr. Glassgold.

MINETTE MARTIN: Do you happen to have anything else to say about the Federal Arts Project? What you thought of the project as a whole, and what you thought of working on it?

ALF BRUSETH: I personally think it is the finest thing that the government has ever done, and I would like very much—and I wish they would subsidize the artists in all these types of work to beautify our public buildings, and statuary, and paintings. Carry on this—the beautiful, I think, personally, not only the traditions of our country, and of our artists, the talent that's here. We have talent that doesn't—they don't get a chance to show themselves properly. Why should we have to go to Europe? Why should we have to travel into foreign countries to see the beauty of art? Don't we have the artists here in this country?

We have to travel to Mexico and South America to see the beautiful buildings, mosaics, and wonderful artwork, but here we only think about the—how much we can make out of a building. It's stark, naked, sanitary, flat, no character whatsoever to the buildings—most of the buildings that we put up, and those buildings that are, the old ones, were built here years ago, have a tremendous a lot of beauty because people took pride, great pride in what they were doing.

The craftsmanship is going to waste completely. We just won't have any craftsmen in this country anymore. Traditions and the beauty will be lost completely.

[00:25:33]

MINETTE MARTIN: Do you feel that you would like to work on a project of this sort again?

ALF BRUSETH: Oh, that would be second-heaven.

MINETTE MARTIN: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Alf Bruseth.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]