



Smithsonian
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Oral history interview with Dorothy Cravath,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Dorothy Cravath on May 13-27, 1964. The interview took place in Berkeley, California, and was conducted by Minette Martin for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

MINETTE MARTIN: This is Minette Martin interviewing Dorothy Cravath at the home of Leota Molten, 161 Vicente Road, Berkeley, California, on May 13, 1964. Mrs. Cravath, I would like to know a little bit about your background -- when and where you were born, and something about you training in art.

DOROTHY CRAVATH: I was born in San Antonio, Texas, strangely enough, in 1901, and my only formal training in art was at the then California School of Fine Arts, which is now the San Francisco Art Institute.

MINETTE MARTIN: What year was that, do you remember?

DOROTHY CRAVATH: Let me see. I started when I was seventeen, which would be in about 1918 or '19, just after the First World War.

MINETTE MARTIN: Specifically what kind of training did you have?

DOROTHY CRAVATH: At that time it was quite different from the setup now. It was life drawing, design, commercial art, and painting -- oil painting. That was it. Sketch also. you didn't have any specific training in fresco techniques. None whatever. They didn't have any mural classes up there, or, in fact, any classes in technique except in painting. Very little of that. The technique was to give you paints and say, "Now express yourself."

MINETTE MARTIN: I would like to know when you got on the WPA or the Federal Arts Project, and specifically what projects you were on under the Federal Arts Project?

DOROTHY CRAVATH: I was on one project only, and it was quite a large project. It was the murals -- half of the murals rather -- at the Fleishhaker Memorial Mother's House, at Fleishhaker Zoo. Helen Forbes and I collaborated. She did half the murals and I did the others. And the project was the PWAP, which was the first Federal Arts Project to be started. I understand from other people that the Coit Tower here in San Francisco was the first project. I'm not sure which project started first. We all started just about simultaneously, as I remember. They may have been slightly before us, or we may have started before they did. My recollection is that everything started at once, because everybody tried to get the setup going so that all the artists that could be employed would be employed rapidly before the PWAP folded, so to speak.

MINETTE MARTIN: In other words, everybody sort of wanted to get in on a good thing while it was still going.

DOROTHY CRAVATH: They wanted to get in on a good thing while it was still going, and everybody thought it was so great that somebody was subsidizing the artists and letting them paint what they -- paying them to paint. Up to that time nobody paid them to paint. Few people bought pictures, and nobody knew what murals were.

MINETTE MARTIN: In a previous conversation with you, I understand that they were called in San Francisco "muriels."

DOROTHY CRAVATH: Oh, yes, they're called "muriels" still by various people. In fact, some of them are called "fiascoes."

MINETTE MARTIN: I would like to know more about the project at the Fleishhaker Zoo. Did you do preparatory sketches for this?

DOROTHY CRAVATH: We did indeed. Let me see if I can remember just the sequence of events. Helen Forbes and I had been drawing animals out at the Fleishhaker Zoo for a couple of years, for our own pleasure and amazement before the PWAP came along. When the PWAP started, everyone was trying to get projects going so that the artists could be employed quick, before the funds ran out. And someone asked me, since I'd been doing animals, if I would like to do the zoo murals. I thought I would, and so a bunch of us had dinner in Chinatown and tried to decide who would try out for what, and Helen Forbes and I decided that we would try out for the Fleishhaker Zoo. And that's what we did. At first it was a very small project, and we decided that the whole wall would be better than the lunettes, which is what they offered at first. We thought that if we did enough sketches

for the entire wall, and had a project going for the whole thing, it might lead to something bigger than we'd been offered.

MINETTE MARTIN: What was the subject matter of the Fleishhaker Zoo murals?

DOROTHY CRAVATH: Well, that was up to us, but we decided that a serious treatment of the theme of Noah's ark would be appropriate to the zoo, and allow us to use our animal sketches that we'd made for the past two years.

MINETTE MARTIN: That's very interesting. Did you have any supervisors on the Fleishhaker Zoo murals?

DOROTHY CRAVATH: Our immediate supervisors were Bill Gaskin and Joe Allen. Anyhow, they came out every once in a while and looked over what we were doing, but they didn't have many suggestions. I think they worked on this idea that the artists who were at the head of each of the projects knew what they were doing, and their job was just to see that the job continued, and that they had what they wanted and so on.

MINETTE MARTIN: Where did you learn about mural technique, about fresco?

DOROTHY CRAVATH: As a matter of fact, I learned about mural technique from Diego Rivera, which is why all these WPA murals look rather Rivera-ish. I think we all learned about fresco from watching Diego Rivera do the mural in art school.

MINETTE MARTIN: Did you just watch him, or did you work with him?

DOROTHY CRAVATH: We just watched him. I didn't work with him at all.

MINETTE MARTIN: There were some artists out here, however, who did work with him.

DOROTHY CRAVATH: Some artists did. Victor Arnautoff had worked in Mexico with Rivera and he helped him out here. Matt Barnes was a very good artist. He was plastering for Rivera. He was a plasterer by trade and an artist by profession, so to speak. He was his plasterer, Victor Arnautoff helped him, and three or four other people had helped him in various capacities.

MINETTE MARTIN: What would you say about the influence of Rivera in other parts of the country?

DOROTHY CRAVATH: Other parts of the country I wouldn't know, but his influence was certainly profound out here because practically no one had ever seen a mural done, let alone a fresco. I think there were about two people. Let me see. Helen Forbes had studied in Italy a little bit and knew the fresco formula and theoretically how it was done, but she'd never done a mural. I think Ray Boynton had studied abroad too, and knew how fresco was done. Victor Arnautoff had worked with Diego Rivera, and as far as I know that's about it. The rest of us had never done murals. Here we were faced suddenly with large walls to put murals on.

MINETTE MARTIN: What were the dimensions of those walls?

DOROTHY CRAVATH: You mean the Coit Tower or the Mother House?

MINETTE MARTIN: The Mother House at the Fleishhaker Zoo.

DOROTHY CRAVATH: There were two 68-foot walls and two 28-foot walls and these were about ten and twelve feet high, respectively.

MINETTE MARTIN: You must have used ladders.

DOROTHY CRAVATH: Oh, we had scaffolds all over the place. As a matter of fact, let me see. I don't know where they got this material, but they had a tremendous lot of lumber. Now they covered the entire interior of the Mother House with scaffolds.

MINETTE MARTIN: I think I've seen some photographs, at least of Helen Forbes, working on these things in overalls.

DOROTHY CRAVATH: I have some of both of us working. That was the photographic project in the WPA, by the way. There was a photographic project too, and they came out and took it. And I think they probably took other people working too.

MINETTE MARTIN: In other words, all these projects, like the photographic and the art and the dancers, they were all sort of interrelated as much as possible.

DOROTHY CRAVATH: All the WPA people were engaged in employing as many artists, writers, dancers, et cetera,

as they could, on whatever project came up. If the artists, et cetera, had a project of their own, that was fine. If not, they'd put them to work at some project that they'd thought up. Anything to keep them busy creating, which was fine with us.

MINETTE MARTIN: I understand that in the writer's project, at least out here, a California Art Research Project was created in which biographies of California artists were done.

DOROTHY CRAVATH: Yes, that's true, and they must be somewhere around now. I have mine. I know several other people who have theirs. There must be some central place -- I hope there's some central place for the effort.

MINETTE MARTIN: Well, I think that they're probably in the Library of Congress. Probably.

DOROTHY CRAVATH: But out here, I mean, there should be something.

MINETTE MARTIN: I know that the Oakland Public Library, for instance, has a set of these.

DOROTHY CRAVATH: Does it?

MINETTE MARTIN: I've seen that there. The other thing I wanted to ask you about was your assistants on the project. Can you possibly remember how many you had, or who they were?

DOROTHY CRAVATH: I can remember who I had. There were four to each of us. Helen Forbes had charge of one end wall and one side wall, and I designed one side wall and one end wall. We collaborated and worked out the idea, and we coordinated our techniques as much as possible. That was quite a job because we were quite different in our outlook when we began, but I think we came fairly close to having a unified project. We each had four assistants and we had to keep them busy even while we were designing things, which is a little difficult. I remember we had them -- Helen set all our assistants to work making portfolios to keep them out of our hair, and I had one answering the phone. Oh we had a very elegant setup for about. . . . Let me see, Jay Risling helped me, and then there were different ones at different times.

MINETTE MARTIN: Is Jay Risling still around?

DOROTHY CRAVATH: Yes, he is. He's a photographer and he's also a artist.

MINETTE MARTIN: Is he in San Francisco?

DOROTHY CRAVATH: Yes, doing photography on his own. A very good photographer. But at that time he was on the WPA as an artist, which he is. And let me see, I had better get a list of these people, because I can't think just offhand of all of them.

MINETTE MARTIN: Fine. I'll try to get that from you later.

DOROTHY CRAVATH: John Collier helped me for a while.

MINETTE MARTIN: What did he do?

DOROTHY CRAVATH: Same thing as the others. Each one did a certain thing, so that the whole effect would be unified. For instance, Jay did all the lumber work. He painted the trees and the ark. Chris Bone [phon. sp.] painted all of the trees for Helen Forbes. And then someone else did the grass. And someone else did something else. I did the figures and Helen did her figures.

MINETTE MARTIN: Who did the animals?

DOROTHY CRAVATH: I did on mine and Helen on hers. We had our assistants doing endless miles of grass, rocks, trees, and arks, and so on and so forth.

MINETTE MARTIN: Do you think that the various people working on this particular mural unified the whole thing eventually? I mean, did you feel that the whole mural was a unified work of art despite the fact that so many people worked on it?

DOROTHY CRAVATH: Oh, I think it was, yes. As a matter of fact, most people think one artist did it. However, I don't think that it's quite that unified. I think Helen's style is quite distinctive and I think mine is somewhat distinctive, but we tried to get them as close as we could together. The fact that we had one person work on grass unified the murals to a certain extent and one person working on certain things all through the mural helped.

MINETTE MARTIN: I understand that recently you have been doing some restoration of the Coit Tower murals.

DOROTHY CRAVATH: Yes, I did. I spent about two years on restoring the damages that had been done. I wasn't restoring the damages -- I was restoring the mural.

MINETTE MARTIN: In other words, remaking the whole. . . .

DOROTHY CRAVATH: I was removing the damages.

MINETTE MARTIN: And I also understand that you have a list of all the artists who had worked on the Coit Tower mural?

DOROTHY CRAVATH: Yes, I have. I haven't a list of all the assistants. I have a list of all the principals. There were about fifty-two all together counting assistants, and there were, I believe, seventeen murals. I'm not quite sure about that right now, but I think seventeen separate murals, which means seventeen master artists, so to speak.

MINETTE MARTIN: Do you remember some of the principal people offhand?

DOROTHY CRAVATH: John Howard, Ralph Stackpole, Bernard Zakheim, Suzanne Sheuer, Victor Arnautoff, Freddy Vidar. Oh dear, wait a minute. Ray Boynton, did I say? And Maxine Albro and Parker Hall, Edith Hamlin, Ralph Stackpole, Ben Cunningham, Clifford White, Ralph Chesse, James Berlingina, Edward Terrada, Lucian Labaudt, George Harris, Gordon Langdon, and John Howard. Those are the ones I think of at the moment, and I'm almost sure that that's all.

MINETTE MARTIN: Of course, we can get a list later of the things you've worked on.

DOROTHY CRAVATH: In the center of the edifice where the elevator goes up and where the desk and office is, there were oil murals. They were the only ones done in oils. There are four large ones and they are by Rinaldo Cuneo and Otis Oldfield.

MINETTE MARTIN: What was in general the subject of the murals in the Coit Tower?

DOROTHY CRAVATH: California industry and activities, what was going on in California at that time. There's one of the miners. And by the way, there was a lot of social consciousness at that time, naturally. It was the Depression, so these miners are very determined looking and rather gaunt and scraggly. There are people picking things out of dust heaps and whatnot. And there's fruit growing, dairying, the canning industry, libraries, leisure activities, all sorts of things. Everything that went on. The big categories of things that went on in California in the thirties.

MINETTE MARTIN: Insofar as the people who worked on the murals are concerned, are most of them still living?

DOROTHY CRAVATH: About half of them, I would say. Otis Oldfield is still living, Cuneo is dead, Stackpole is living, Ray Boynton is dead, Lucien Labaudt is dead. Clifford White I do not know about. He left for England years and years ago. Ralph Chesse is still living. Berlingina, Terrada, George Harris, Gordon Langdon are dead. Parker Hall is living, John Howard is living. Perhaps Arnautoff is living. I think that more of them are still alive than have died. But several of them have died.

MINETTE MARTIN: Despite the fact that you worked only on the Fleishhaker Zoo murals during this period and under the WPA project, you knew about many of the other things that were going on here?

DOROTHY CRAVATH: Oh, yes. We all knew each other in the thirties. There weren't so many artists or dancers or musicians. Almost all of us knew all the others or most of the others.

MINETTE MARTIN: What other projects did you know about at the time?

DOROTHY CRAVATH: Lucien Labaudt's project out at the Beach Chalet and numerous other projects and schools and whatnot. One of them is still extant; it's at a school out by the Panhandle. I forget what its name is.

MINETTE MARTIN: It's in San Francisco?

DOROTHY CRAVATH: It's in San Francisco, yes. And a lot of things have been destroyed, like Zakheim's murals at the medical center.

MINETTE MARTIN: I understand that some of these are being uncovered now.

DOROTHY CRAVATH: Zakheim's?

MINETTE MARTIN: Yes.

DOROTHY CRAVATH: They were just whitewashed?

MINETTE MARTIN: They were whitewashed and they're being uncovered.

DOROTHY CRAVATH: I thought they were destroyed in plaster.

MINETTE MARTIN: Well, perhaps it was plaster, but at any rate, some of them are being uncovered.

DOROTHY CRAVATH: That would be quite a spectacle. Anyhow, what else would you like to know?

MINETTE MARTIN: Well, [inaudible] murals covered?

DOROTHY CRAVATH: I'm not sure. I never did see those Zakheim murals.

MINETTE MARTIN: I would like to ask you what in general you think the WPA projects meant to the artists involved?

DOROTHY CRAVATH: What they meant was that we could do what we wanted to do and be paid for it, which hadn't been the case up to then. All the artists were just madly enthusiastic, of course, because up to this time no one bought art. They went to museums to look at art once in a while, but it wouldn't occur to anybody except a few collectors and patrons of the arts to buy anything. And as to murals, nobody had ever seen them. As a matter of fact, quite a number of the artists, including myself, had never seen any murals until we started doing them. The first we saw were Diego Rivera's murals at the art school, and that was the big school for the rest of us. We watched him like hawks and observed all the steps of making a mural by a very good technician and then we went and did likewise, as much as we could.

MINETTE MARTIN: In historical perspective, do you think that this era was very important to the arts in this country?

DOROTHY CRAVATH: I think it was terrifically important because it gave a great many artists the subsidy that they needed to make a real start. And it also was important because it educated the public. People began to think that possibly walls of buildings needed murals or could stand murals, and it hadn't occurred to them before. I think most of the American public felt that all real painting had been done in the Renaissance and stopped there. After the WPA they observed that it could be done. Whether they liked it or not, they got used to seeing it.

MINETTE MARTIN: I understand that many of the artists who worked on the project did become full-time painters later.

DOROTHY CRAVATH: They did, quite a number of them. Some of them were full-time painters before, only without much pay.

MINETTE MARTIN: What is your opinion and attitude of what artists would do now if they were offered the same opportunity?

DOROTHY CRAVATH: I think they'd all do abstracts.

MINETTE MARTIN: I mean, do you think they would like to have government subsidy now?

DOROTHY CRAVATH: I'm not sure. The art climate has changed so much. Artists have become prosperous, most of them. I don't know what the reaction would be to government subsidy. They'd have to be a lot better paid than we were. We got very little pay, considering the amount of work we did, but we were delighted to do it, and we would live on it at that time. Of course, you couldn't now.

MINETTE MARTIN: Thank you very much, Mrs. Cravath. It was a pleasure.

[END OF TAPE ONE and FIRST SESSION]

[BEGINNING OF TAPE TWO and SECOND SESSION]

MINETTE MARTIN: This is Minette Martin interviewing Dorothy Cravath at her home at 2152 Ward Street, Berkeley, California, May 27, 1964. Mrs. Cravath, in our previous talk you mentioned that there were a number of people who worked on the Coit Tower whom you knew about and that you would perhaps provide the Archives with a list of them. Would you mind doing this now?

DOROTHY CRAVATH: The principals were John Howard, William Hastall, Ralph Stackpole, Suzanne Sheuer, Bernard Zakheim, Victor Arnautoff, George Harris, Freddy Vidar, Maxine Albo, Gordon Langdon, Ray Boynton, Clifford White, Collette Bean, Parker Hall, Edward Terrada, Ralph Chesse, Edith Hamlin, Ben Cunningham, Jane Berlindina, Otis Oldfield, Rinaldo Cuneo, and Lucien Labaudt. Out of those, Lucien Labaudt, Rinaldo Cuneo, Ray Boynton, and Gordon Langdon I know are dead.

MINETTE MARTIN: When we talked about the murals in the Fleishhacker Zoo Mother's House, in going over the tape again, I realized that perhaps it would be understood that the murals were in fresco technique. However, I understand that this really isn't the case.

DOROTHY CRAVATH: No, they're in egg tempera. We did them with egg yolk and very small brushes, even the 68-foot one.

MINETTE MARTIN: I understand that you had some trouble at one point with bookmice eating the mural.

DOROTHY CRAVATH: We had a lot of trouble. The walls were damp; I think that was part of the trouble. And the place was infested with bookmice, which was most of the trouble, and they loved egg tempera. There were certain colors that they wouldn't touch at all and certain ones that they adored and they ate them to the ground, so to speak. Among the colors that they liked specially were the outline colors, so that the murals got more and more hazy as time went on. We couldn't think why, and climbed up on ladders to see why they seemed to be fading. We found that all the outlines, especially the dark ones, had been eaten up right to the ground, or to the plaster, rather, by bookmice.

MINETTE MARTIN: What did you do about this thing?

DOROTHY CRAVATH: Laid some more scaffolds, climbed up, carefully replaced all the outlines and then we varnished, et cetera, the murals.

MINETTE MARTIN: Did you have any more trouble after that with the bookmice?

DOROTHY CRAVATH: We did. We had mostly trouble with the varnish disintegrating. Later, I spent three months out there taking off the old varnish (which had yellowed and dirtied) and putting new varnish on. I don't think that this will yellow.

MINETTE MARTIN: Are the murals in very good condition now?

DOROTHY CRAVATH: They're in very good condition except for one small place where the water has come in over the windward window, which I intend to fix this year.

MINETTE MARTIN: Is there anything that you like to add that you can think about now, about the Federal Arts Project, about the WPA projects?

DOROTHY CRAVATH: I can't think of anything at the moment. I may later.

MINETTE MARTIN: All right. Thank you very much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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