



Smithsonian
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Oral history interview with Harry
Dixon, 1964 May 1

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Harry St. John Dixon on May 1, 1964. The interview took place in Santa Rosa, 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 2022 the Archives created a more verbatim transcript. Additional information from the original transcript that seemed relevant was added in brackets and given an -Ed. attribution. 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 FULLER MCCHESENEY: This is Mary Fuller McChesney, interviewing Harry Dixon at his home in Santa Rosa, California, 849 West College. The date is May 1, 1964. Harry, for some background material, I'd like to ask you, where were you born?

HARRY DIXON: In Fresno.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Fresno, California?

HARRY DIXON: That is right.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: And what year was that?

HARRY DIXON: That was 1890. I was born on the 22nd of June—

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: 1890?

HARRY DIXON: —1890, in Fresno, California.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: And where did you go to school?

HARRY DIXON: Well, you mean general schooling, grammar school, or art school?

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Art school.

HARRY DIXON: Art school. I first attended art school—it was then the California School of Arts and Crafts. It is now the California College of Arts and Crafts. There I attended, in Berkeley (Oakland -Ed.), in the spring term of 1909, and took the metalworking course and two other subjects in that time, free-hand drawing and—let's see—historic ornament.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Historic ornament?

HARRY DIXON: Historic ornament.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: That was a metalcraft class also?

HARRY DIXON: No, that wasn't. It was not metalcraft. I went—I took the metalcraft course and attended the classes there in the—during the week. See, I went to school three times a week. I commuted from Sausalito about that time, all the way over to Berkeley. So, I had plenty of traveling.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: By ferryboat?

HARRY DIXON: By ferryboat, and trains. And it was a worthwhile experience. I wish we had the ferryboats back because, well, they were unique, and the trip was long enough to really form—to really form friendships on the boat. And you could liken the old ferryboat trips to traveling clubhouses.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Just a minute.

HARRY DIXON: [Inaudible] well, yes, traveling clubhouses.

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: We were just talking, Harry, about your early art education at the California School of Arts and Crafts.

HARRY DIXON: Yes. One of the most interesting things I had there was a study of historic ornament. That was the Grecian, Egyptian, the Roman, Gothic, all of that. And at that time—I hope they still have that volume of Owen—and that whole book of Owen Jones plates on historical ornament. They were all done in color, beautiful color, completely authentic as to tone. And, well, it's one of those things which I—course I haven't been to school for plenty long now, and I don't know if they have—I don't know if they have such courses now or not. But it always gave you a rich background in design, something to refer to. And while you wouldn't, out of necessity use it, it was there.

The metalwork course was 90 hours and very complete, yet 90 hours doesn't give you a chance to learn the craft. But in that—in that course of metal we took up the laying out of materials, the cutting of it using shears, saws, and the bending of it, and the fastening by riveting and by hard soldering, silver soldering. We also had the cultural forming of metal, making a small bowl, and the working of a tray which was sinking a—sinking a tray in a piece of metal. And we wound up with enameling. Well, it strikes you—it strikes a person like me as rather funny. In our days, we run across people who are enamellists, and what do they do? They buy a form, a premade form, and they paint a little picture in enamel, on this, put it into a kiln and fire it. And they are enamellists then.

[00:05:03]

You ask them if they've ever done this, that, or the other kind of enameling, and they don't know what you mean, for many of them just don't know what the different terms in enameling there are, or where they came from. And I doubt if some realize why so many of the terms in enameling that we use in everyday parlance are French in derivation.

So, that was the end of the—that particular portion of my art schooling. Then, going to night school, while I was working, all through 1910. I had instrumental drawing and plain geometry—mechanical drawing, in other words.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: What night school did you go to? Was this in the public school system?

HARRY DIXON: Arts and—no, all of this was at Arts and Crafts.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: I see.

HARRY DIXON: There were practically no public school courses that I could have gone to. And I moved to—moved to the East Bay in 1909, and—because I could get my dinner on the boat and go directly up to the Art School. I would do that, and then go home from the Art School. In 1911, '12, '13, and the first half of 1914, I continued in that. I took what was called antique, which was drawing from the plaster casts, learning how—learning how to draw and visualize shapes through drawing and shading. It was quite academic, but very thorough. And then from the antique only, I began drawing from plaster casts, architectural forms chiefly. And then from that, into the life class, where I wound up in the spring term of 1914.

And that was the extent, [other than (ph)], I took three courses there in summer school. One in jewelry-making, and I had the same instructor that I'd had in the metalworking class, and she was a very fine jeweler. She was able to handle that physically, where it had been a little bit too much for her in the—in the metal course. One course of leatherwork, which for me was a washout. I had a typical old maid schoolteacher teaching the course, and she was good. But I wanted a straight line in the design I was making, and so I took a ruler, and I set it where I wanted. I ran my leatherworking tool across it a couple of times, and she practically raised the roof, You mustn't do that. You must do it freehand. Well, I wanted a straight line, and I knew darn well that I'd be able to get a straight line that way, where if I tried to do it by hand, it would be jagged. It would be wobbly. And then a special course in designing from Isabelle Percy West, who is now living in Sausalito. And that was a really worthwhile course. Other than that, no art—no more Art School. That was it.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: What did you do then, after you'd finished Art School?

HARRY DIXON: Well, after that, I went on working where I was at the time, which was in a small electric fixture house where we made our own designs, made the fixtures, and hung them. In the fall of 1909, I was able to get employment with Dirk van Erp, who was a practical coppersmith, trained in Holland. And from him I really learned how to work metal, because there I learned how to braze and how to draw the metal in, how to set it out. We made balls, we made jars, we made large trays, and anything that came along.

[00:10:00]

And the experience I'd had before I went to him stood me in good—stood me in very good stead, but—so I said, the—what I had at art school was minimal. You cannot learn very in 90 hours' time. There just isn't time. There're too many things you must know. You can get a smattering, and then if you go ahead with it, then alright. But it is nevertheless fragmentary. Anything you more want to know on the art school angle?

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: No, I think we'd better go on up to the 1930s then. Could you tell me when you first got the WPA Project, and which Project you were on, and what year that was?

HARRY DIXON: Yes. In the intervening years—the First World War, where I worked in the shipyards for 18 months there in San Francisco, and worked in the same shipyard in 1940-1945, the Bethlehem plant in San Francisco.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Oh.

HARRY DIXON: That was the shipyard experience. And that was very well worthwhile from the standpoint of working—working methods and all. It was a magnification of a smaller type of work that I had done. So, we get back to civilian life, so to speak, once more, and during the '20s, I had my own shop. But there we made decorative things, fire screens, coal hearths, wood boxes, certain amount of grill work that we did in iron rings, and the usual run of copper bowls and trays, ash trays, and cigarette boxes and whatnot.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Where was your shop located?

HARRY DIXON: It was located downtown in San Francisco in Tillman Alley, in this—it is called Tillman Place now, and it was in the basement of a hotel, way at the end of the alley, right next door to the Temple Bar Tea Room—now the Temple Bar is in there. But whether or not they serve food I don't know. I haven't been in there for years and years. And a thing we did as a group at the time—the people who were running the Temple Bar, Mr. and Mrs. William Davenport, Mr. and Mrs. George Hargins were running the bookstore, which is now occupied by Ms. [Charlotte -Ed.] Newbegin.

And we found out, or at least it seemed—I don't know really if it is authentic or not, but it seemed to be authentic that there had been a well down in that alley that people used to go to and get water from. So, we did a thing which was laudable. It was advertising mixed up with a public service. We built a brick facsimile of a well, and I made the copper basin that went into this well, and on that we mounted a drinking fountain with a little plate, etched plate showing who had put it up and when. And unless they've torn the whole thing down, that is still there for people to look at. But it was good. People came in, get a drink of water, and they'd look around, peak into the shop, and it was just sort of a happy type of thing.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HARRY DIXON: Then, like so many others in 1929, something happened, and by 1932 I'd gotten chucked out of the shop I'd been in for about 12 years. But it was alright. I had lots and lots of company [laughs]. So in the '30s I had a few orders left after I had to get out of the shop, I went back to my friends, the van Erps, and worked in their shop doing my own work and paying them a percentage of my take.

[00:14:54]

And, then in 1934—see, I guess it was 1934, I had an opportunity to go back downtown, upstairs, it's true, but I took it and dug in with the Art Students League, which had been started there. And we moved into the quarters which had been occupied by the Club Beaux Arts, which was a club started by artists to show their work. And while it was going full tilt it was very active, and had many, many very fine exhibits.

Then in 1936, the people on the Art Project, Joseph Danysh, who was the director, and Joseph Allen, the second-in-command, who I was both acquainted with—Mr. Allen, I knew quite well, Danysh, I didn't know quite so well—they called me in to help on Bufano's metalworking. He had gotten—he had gotten a go-ahead on making a large St. Francis, I think it was to be about 14 feet high, out of metal. Well, I went there, and I worked under Bufano's direction. There were many other men working on the metal things too, and Bufano and I didn't hit it off too well, I'm afraid, but we love each other now, you might say [laughs].

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Where was the studio where you worked?

HARRY DIXON: Well, it was a loft over a sheet metalworking place. I think it was Natoma Street. I've forgotten. It was so long ago.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Natoma Street?

HARRY DIXON: Natoma Street, in San Francisco. For those people that don't know San Francisco, Natoma is one of the two alleys which run east and west that you'd find in the long—in the long and a rather large block south of Market Street. And I think they're Natoma and—I've forgotten. I'd have to get out and look up the San Francisco map. But it's immaterial so long as you people know the general layout of—the general layout of the streets there.

And there Bufano really had an extensive workshop, and he was full of St. Francis at the time, and everywhere you'd look you might see a small St. Francis. And he was doing other things besides. He didn't work exclusively in metal in that place. He had other projects going there too. So, it was a very interesting—a very interesting experience. And I received a summons from on high, so to speak, and Bufano, he didn't like me very much at that time. I had been—I'd been showing off my skill as a metalworker, and rather—telling him, possibly, more than he was telling me, and letting him tell me. But I knew of certain sequences in metalworking, and I tried to tell him that you'd better do this, that, and the other thing before you do that and the other thing and that.

So, they put me to work designing a fountain, a drinking fountain, for the Frederick Burke School, which is a children's school [at San Francisco State College -Ed.]. So, I went ahead and designed what I thought would make a nice fountain. I made my design, and I got it finished. I thought it would be nice to have a kneeling figure of a woman, nude. Nudes, to me—I saw them in San Francisco, the statuary and such like, and she was properly draped. Now, we'll call her a demi-nude. And there, a man standing, and with a rather—in a rather protective attitude. He also clothed sufficiently to pass the Mrs.—well, not Mrs. Grundy, but I think all the old boys that used to run the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice would've had to have allowed it to go by.

[00:20:05]

And—Anthony Comstock—if anybody wanted a book to be a success, they'd get Anthony Comstock to go after it, and from then on it was always a sell-out. So, I also had some birds fluttering around in trees, pigeons, and I found it was troublesome to draw birds in flight. So, I was close to—I was very close to Union Square there, where the St. Francis Hotel faces it. So, I went up to Union Square with my pad, and I tried to draw pigeons. Well, it was a washout at first. Then I got the idea that if I would go after the pigeons and watch until they got into a certain position and then draw as much of that as I could memorize, just a fleeting glimpse, then I might be able to build pigeons without having to go to the archives, and out of photographs and someone else's drawings. And it worked. I got pretty good-looking pigeons.

So, I submitted the design, and I was told that it wouldn't do. We couldn't have nude figures in a public school. Well, if they'd told me that, I could have fixed it so there wouldn't have been nude figures. There may have been another factor in there—I don't know—because my drawing, it was very chintzy and very, very square, you see [laughs]?

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Where did you work while you were doing the design for this? You weren't still at Bufano's studio. Did you work at home?

HARRY DIXON: Oh no, no. No, I didn't work at home. I worked in the—see, when I'd gone downtown, I'd set up my workshop and display room within the Art Students League area, so that I did all of my drawing there. And I found this—I found this, that I had to work at least

two months doing nothing but drawing before I could get my hand in sufficiently to really draw, because the work I had been doing all my working life was hammering. And I found in the '30s that if a person hammers, they get what is called hammerman's palsy. And I had to cure that particular type of palsy, or get control over it, before I was able to draw a straight line or draw what I wished to draw. You still have—still have stuff there, okay.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: You were on WPA at this time still?

HARRY DIXON: I was on the WPA still.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: There were a few questions I wanted to ask you about the time that you were—you spent at Bufano's studio, working with him. How many people were there there at that time, and do you remember any of them?

HARRY DIXON: Yes, there was one coppersmith and sheet metal worker who was Swedish-trained. A grand guy, but he had had a fall in the—in the building construction, so he was crippled. He couldn't work in the heavy work anymore. But he was there. I think his name was Eckbaum [ph]. There was Johnny Magnani, who had been—who had worked with Bufano, and who was later an instructor at the San Francisco State. He died, unfortunately, about five, six years ago, but—

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: He was also a potter, wasn't he?

HARRY DIXON: He was—he went into pottery—ceramics, afterwards. Now they're the only two I remember. There was some others—oh, wait a minute, no—a man who had worked for Shreves [ph], and he was a metal chaser by profession. If you were a metal chaser, that's all you do. You work on castings to smooth them up and accent this, that, or the other factor in the design, and that's all you ever do at all. Yet, you have a pretty idea of metalworking in general. But he had been employed on the WPA so that he could help Bufano with his work. Well, helping Bufano with his work was quite a job in itself.

[00:25:18]

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: What type of metal were you working in?

HARRY DIXON: On copper.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: On copper?

HARRY DIXON: Yep.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: And this was to be part of the St. Francis sculpture?

HARRY DIXON: Well, what he—what Bufano had me do was work, on the fig—work on the head of the figure.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: The head was made of copper?

HARRY DIXON: Actually, it was made of heavy copper. I think it was about an eighth of an inch thick. Well, you can't just poke metal around and make it do what you want to do. You have to get it to work with you, and you can't abuse the privilege of working it either. So that—my great crime with Bufano was I broke the point of the nose of this thing, of this large mask. And I said, Well, go ahead and make a new nose and braze it on. All that was anathema to Bufano. That couldn't be done. The whole thing was gone, see? Well, okay.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: How large a head was it?

HARRY DIXON: As I remember, this head—I think from chin to top of the head, must have been about, oh, I'd say darn close to 24 inches high, and in proportion.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: What was it to be placed on? What was the rest of the statue made of?

HARRY DIXON: I think the idea originally was to make the whole thing of copper. I don't remember. Or make it a combination of copper and stainless steel. I think that's finally what the plan was. And the robe—that is the robe from the hips down had been made out of stainless steel. And that was a straight sheet metalworking job, done on machinery. And

that, I believe, is now the skirt of the Sun Yat-sen statue there in St. Mary's Square.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Oh, this—

HARRY DIXON: I had no hand in that at all.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: The St. Francis that you worked on, then, was never finished?

HARRY DIXON: No. As far as I know, it was never finished.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: How long were you there working in Bufano's studio?

HARRY DIXON: I expect I worked about maybe three months altogether. From two to three months. That's all the time that—that was as long as Bufano could stand me, I expect. [Laughs.]

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Then after you left his studio, you went to work in your own shop—

HARRY DIXON: That's right.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: —designing this fountain for the Frederick Burke Grammar School?

HARRY DIXON: Yes. Frederick Burke Grammar School.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Had you planned to cast this in metal?

HARRY DIXON: No, it was to be a piece of repoussé work.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Repoussé?

HARRY DIXON: Repoussé—well, a metal chaser works from one side of the metal. A man who is working in repoussé does what the metal chaser does, but he also—[inaudible]—but he also works from the back. He takes a flat piece of metal, and he pokes it out from the back, and then he works it down on the face of it, to get a special emphasis and accents where he wishes to bring out the design that he's planned.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Then this actually was to be a flat surface behind the fountain?

HARRY DIXON: It was a bas relief.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: A bas relief. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HARRY DIXON: A bas relief, a sculptural bas relief, but made out of sheet metal. I've done much work along those lines, and so it wasn't—it wasn't unfamiliar to me at all.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: And then what did you plan to make the basin of the fountain out of?

HARRY DIXON: Well, that was to be—that—my piece was to fit in the fountain, the back of the fountain, and the waterspout was to come out of that. And then that was to be mounted above a ceramic or stone font, per se, that other people on the project were to make.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: I see.

HARRY DIXON: I don't know why it finally was done there.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Who was your supervisor on this fountain design?

HARRY DIXON: Well, the supervisor, I think, was Joseph Allen, as I remember.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: What I really meant was who was person who told you that this was a plan that they wanted you to go ahead with a design for?

[00:30:03]

HARRY DIXON: Oh, that was Joseph Danysh.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Joseph Danysh?

HARRY DIXON: Yep.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: And then who rejected your plan of the nudes?

HARRY DIXON: Joseph Danysh.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Joseph Danysh?

HARRY DIXON: Yep [laughs].

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Did the principal of the school, the grammar school, have a word in this rejection?

HARRY DIXON: I never found out any possible detail of that sort. I don't know. If it was turned down, it was turned down, and that was that. So, the next thing they called me to do was to work in conjunction with another artist, which I was able to do this time. We understood each other well. He was no metalworker, and he didn't try to be. And, I was no painter, and I didn't try to be. So, we got along okay. And what we had to do there was to decorate the officers' club at the Presidio. He made some—he made some murals, and I made one—I've forgotten—I think it was only one—there may have been two—metal screens out of copper. And incidentally, that officers' club was then located in the old adobe, which was out at the Presidio. I think it was the only old adobe left there from the time of the Spanish and Mexican occupation of that area.

Anyhow, it was accepted, and everybody was happy, including the officers. There was one officer's wife that didn't like it, and she tried to run the whole shebang. And, when she banged her head up against the Art Project, she didn't get anywhere, and that made her pretty nearly frantic. [Laughs.] I didn't come in contact with her at all. All I did was to make this screen and go out and install it.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Where was the screen to be placed in the room?

HARRY DIXON: It was in the entrance hall. I was trying to remember the exact location. It was about head-height. It was fairly high up. It wasn't down low. Just what it was to screen, I don't remember. It was so long ago.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: And what size was it?

HARRY DIXON: I think it was about 24 inches by about 30 inches. It was a pierced design. I cut it all out by chiseling it. I had good heavy metal, so that the metal didn't—it didn't get too far out of plumb. I was able to straighten it up after I'd cut—done the cutting, so that in that way I had a nice, flat, clean-looking job.

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MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: We were just talking, Harry, about the copper screens that you did on the WPA Project, which were placed in the officers' club at the Presidio. Could you tell me what the subject matter was, or were they just a—

HARRY DIXON: It was purely geometric, but using a design. I made the design— incidentally IT was for a diaper pattern, that is repeat design. And I used an outline of some of the old gothic iron work, which I used on their doors to reinforce the doors—on the oaken doors. I simply made the cutout in that design. To describe it, it was cruciform with a—due to the shape of the screen, I had to make the perpendicular longer from the horizontal axis, and, well, it's rather hard to describe it, but think of it in this manner, as a—take the top quadrant of it—a gothic arch—a long gothic arch with two buttresses on the side, and that was repeated at the bottom. And on the sides, it was the same idea, but the arches and the buttresses were shorter, that's all. It was very simple, very direct, and I still think it was pretty good looking.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Do you know where it is now?

HARRY DIXON: [Clears throat.] No, I don't. I don't know if there'd been alterations made in the officers' club or not. I never went out there after I installed it there in 1936.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: And you don't know if that old adobe is still standing on the Presidio grounds—

HARRY DIXON: I think it is still standing there, but whether or not they—somebody's gotten in with ideas like the Jack Tar Hotel and [they laugh] redecorated it, I don't know.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Could you tell me who the painter who worked with you, who did the murals—

HARRY DIXON: Yes. Clay Spohn. S-P-O-H-N.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Yes. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HARRY DIXON: You got him listed.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: What was his mural like?

HARRY DIXON: I don't remember.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Do you remember where it was located in the building?

HARRY DIXON: I think it was located in the hall on the left-hand, possibly on the right-hand side also, of the entrance hall. And it was very nice. It was—it was up to date in 1936, yet it wasn't far out. It was understandable and yet it wasn't too stuffily academic at all. The guy was good. He knew his stuff.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: How long did it take you to work on these copper screens?

HARRY DIXON: Oh, I may—I may have worked—say working out the design, I had to go out to Presidio and take measurements, and then I had to figure out the thickness, figure out the size to make it, and then make my design, which took quite a lot of time. People think, oh well, you just go ahead and draw it. Well, you have second spaces that you can use, you have the—you have the initial space that has to be colored or filled, in this case it was covering. And if it is to be a ventilating screen, it cannot be solid. If it it's to be heating, it should not be solid. So, you have to take all of those things into consideration. In other words, it was a straight and out and out designing job. And altogether I may have worked on it two weeks for the two screens.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Did you actually do the copper and metalwork yourself?

HARRY DIXON: Oh, sure.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: And you did that in your own shop?

HARRY DIXON: Sure. It was something I could do there. It was straight cutting, and I already had [phone rings] a full set of—

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: We were just talking, Harry, about you're doing the actual copper work for the screen that was at the officers' club at the Presidio in your own workshop before the telephone rang.

HARRY DIXON: That's right. Well, that's all there was. I told you. You got it there.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: And you installed it yourself in the—

HARRY DIXON: I installed it.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: What was the next project that you worked on for WPA?

HARRY DIXON: There wasn't any. In the meantime—during the time that I made this screen and the time I started in and the time Bufano said goodbye, Bufano brought me several small jobs. I had to make the mustache for St. Francis.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Oh!

[00:05:04]

HARRY DIXON: And I have the imprint of that on a wooden block that I have out in the shop now. I had to enamel some eyes for him. I cut out the eyes, and I flowed the enamels—enamel on those eyes. He wanted me to make a small model of a head, but to make it so that could be filled with pitch and chased down there at the studio.

Well, I found that Bufano was not easy to work with again. I said, How big do you want it? He brought in a drawing, a nice drawing. It was good elevation plan, and front and side elevations. But it was about—the size of the drawing, I think was about 12 inches high, and he wanted me to make something about three or four inches high. So, I said, How big do you want it? He said, Oh, I want it about four inches. And I said, Well, now four inches? Four inches where? Top to bottom or from side to side? And I finally pinned him down by saying, All right then, I will make it four inches across at this point. All right, all right. And I said one more thing, Do you want me to make it with a cap piece for the hair, or do you want me to make it a front and back proposition? Because I couldn't have worked it up in one piece. It would have been just silly to try and do it. It could have been done, yes, but why do it that way? Even then, even though I was on the WPA, I realized it was taxpayer's money, so to speak, and I wasn't interested to loaf on a job, merely because I could take advantage of a situation like that. I wasn't interested in that matter at all. So, I pinned him down.

When he came back to pick it up, he put on his oh-my-God expression, which is very long face and eyes wide open, and told me it was wrong. I rode hard that time. I said, Wrong? Wrong be blowed, it is not wrong. I made that as you told me to make it. I said, I made it in three pieces, as you said when I pinned you down to it, and I made it the measurement that you said when I pinned you down to it, and at the point so that I'd have a point of reference from which to get the enlargement properly made. Well, next I heard, why, I was called in to see if I could make a repair on a piece of copper that had been broken, and—when it was hammered. And Bufano brought in a very beautifully little made copper head—exactly what he wanted, and I said, How did you make it, one or two pieces or what? And he mumbled, One piece. Later on, I had a chance to really examine it, and it had been electrotyped over a form that had been made on—this wax model he'd used and had it electrotyped over that. Well, that's a legitimate way of doing it if you want to do it that way.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HARRY DIXON: But—and he had made it out of one piece, sure enough, but not the way I thought he'd done it. [Laughs.]

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: What was this to be used for—the head that you made, and he rejected?

HARRY DIXON: Were you there on the Art Project in San Francisco?

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: No, I wasn't.

HARRY DIXON: Well, St. Francis was in the air. Bufano was the—you might say he was the bull of goose or he was the favored child, one or the other. And everywhere you would look, you would see a St. Francis in some state of production, either a small model or the large head, such as I worked on. At one time—the thing that always struck me humorous—as a humorous thing was one day, Bufano wasn't around and the lads on—in this drafting room where they'd been working on several of Bufano's things, gathered up all of the models of the St. Francis—heads, full models, full figure, all of the rest of it, and put these all over the model of Twin Peaks, where the original idea to have the St. Francis was.

[00:10:20]

Up on the top of Twin Peaks. Well, it never got up there. They've got all the ticky-tacky houses going up there instead, now. Anyhow, when Bufano came back, he pretty nearly went through the roof, because everywhere he looked were these St. Francis,' and the nickname on the Art Project was, "It's another Frankie that Bennie is making." So, that was merely another Frankie.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Did he ever complete any of them?

HARRY DIXON: He wasn't able to complete them. Time ran out. Money ran out. And even Bufano found it difficult to get material. That's one reason that they had this skirt, which is made for the St. Francis figure, on the Sun Yat-sen. That's it.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HARRY DIXON: They had to do that to get it finished. I have no squawk about the way the thing was run. Like all of those other WPA things and the CCC camps, it was an emergency measure to take care of a need, and considering the confusion inherent in anything like that, to me it is quite amazing. And the artworks that have come out of that WPA period and the influence it had, I think are quite remarkable. And certain it is that many paintings, many pieces of sculpture would never have been made if it hadn't been for the Art Project, and I think as a cultural—a cultural value for the nation as a whole, it was a tremendous thing.

One might think that I have no respect for [laughs] Bufano. That is wrong. I recognize him as a highly individualistic man, and he is a true artist. He is an artist right to the tips of his fingers. And I found that out first by taking a plaster model, which was given to me by Joseph Danysh before the Art Project was started, and having a casting made of it and finishing up that casting. Looking at it, I said, Oh, bosh! But by the time I had gotten through handling that form, that shape, these things were too subtle for the average person to grasp. And in San Francisco, there's Lord knows how much stuff is still locked up in warehouses that Bufano designed, and that the people under him made on the WPA projects. So, I think you'll just about have it all there with the exception that I didn't read the—read the bibliography, if you want to call it that, on my training and different things I've done. Now if you want that, I can read it or if you want to insert that in your own voice or as an addendum to your notes, I don't know.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Well, I'd like to ask you a few more questions—

HARRY DIXON: Go ahead.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Did you know any other craftsman who were on the different crafts projects in San Francisco while you were working for the WPA?

HARRY DIXON: The plaster workers, no. Because there was a certain amount of plaster casting with these things that Bufano was making. I knew David Slivka. I knew him very slightly.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Was he a sculptor who did a—

HARRY DIXON: He is a sculptor.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: —limestone relief in the Berkeley post office?

HARRY DIXON: Well, you'd have to check on your files. I don't know what these other people did. I was too busy myself.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: And you didn't work in groups with them? You worked in your studio alone on these different commissions?

HARRY DIXON: When Bufano told me goodbye through Joseph Danysh, why, I worked in my own studio. I came in contact with these other people very infrequently, and only in a sort of a—well, and oh, you're on the WPA, too. So just on that basis.

[00:15:11]

Some, I knew they were on, knew they were doing work. Bernard Zackheim was on the WPA projects. Victor Arnautoff—and I was trying to remember some of the other—well, this lad Clay Spohn that I worked with. But the—the big vista of people that were working on the art projects in San Francisco, I didn't know because I just didn't come in contact with them.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. People who worked on mural projects would have had more contact with other artists than you have—

HARRY DIXON: Surely.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Because of the nature—

HARRY DIXON: Surely.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: —of what you did. Your brother Maynard Dixon was a very well-

known painter in San Francisco during that period, and in a master's thesis written by David Sales Osborne for the University of California, he mentions that your brother did two designs for murals on the WPA that were never executed. Do you know anything about that or about his experiences with the Federal Art Projects?

HARRY DIXON: I don't remember as to that particular thing. He painted several murals for post offices and places like that, and they're all listed. I may have a—I may have a listing of that in the brochure that he and Edith Hamlin, his wife, put out in 1945. But I'd have to look it up, and I don't know if you want to take the time for that or not.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Was he living in San Francisco during the—

HARRY DIXON: Yes.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: —WPA days?

HARRY DIXON: Yes. He lived in San Francisco from, oh, I guess about 1916 until about, I think it was '39 when he moved down south after he had to get out of San Francisco due to his health.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Was Edith Hamlin, his wife, on the WPA Project?

HARRY DIXON: No. They didn't get married until about 19—I think it was about 1937.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: I have her listed as having done a fresco at Coit Tower. That was before she was married because that was done in 1933.

HARRY DIXON: Yes. Yep.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Let's see, on the list here of biographical data—yeah, I think it would be a good idea, if you don't mind [inaudible]—

HARRY DIXON: No. I call it my brag sheet. [Mary Fuller McChesney laughs.] But it's—well, you already have my birth date and where I went to school, and as to working in the shipyards. I've worked in art metal work since 1909, and in jewelry since 1912. I taught at the California School of Arts and Crafts in 1912, '14, '21, '25, '33 to '35. I've given private group instruction at—also, I taught art—I taught jewelry work at the Art Students League when it was there on—at 133 Gary Street.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: During the time that you had your own shop, you were also teaching?

HARRY DIXON: That's right. And, well, up until 1912. That is up until 1920, I was working for other people. But I was able to get a half a day off to go over to the Arts and Crafts and give the metal class and then get back and go to work for the other half day on Saturday. Those were in the days when you worked 48 hours [inaudible] for the week.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HARRY DIXON: No 40-hour stuff then, believe me, and the amount of money you took home—well, you get—you could take your wages home in silver dollars, and you still wouldn't have a hole in your pocket.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Yeah. [Laughs].

HARRY DIXON: And real money—real money in your pocket is quite something. You'd get maybe a \$10 piece and then a couple of—couple of silver dollars. But if you're really getting up into the money and really skilled, maybe you took home as much as \$20 in the week. But in 19—in 1916, if you got five dollars a day, you were really in the chips. That was real wages. You were tops. Well-organized crafts like the electricians would get five dollars a day, and they'd look at anybody who didn't get that with the greatest scorn. I got used to being scorned because I found I couldn't get into any union at that time. There was no place for me.

[00:20:10]

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Speaking of unions, I heard that you were active in organizing

the Artists' Union during the WPA days in San Francisco. Would you tell us something about that?

HARRY DIXON: No. I was not active in that.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Oh, you weren't?

HARRY DIXON: No. I took part in it, yes.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: You belonged?

HARRY DIXON: I joined it, but I took no active part in the actual organization of it. Others did that. I don't know who. You would have to get information on that from Edith Hamlin and any of the other artists, like Dorr Bothwell and Ruth Cravath, the sculptor. They'd be able to tell you.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Somebody said that Kenneth Rexroth was active in organizing it, they thought. Do you know anything about that?

HARRY DIXON: All I know about Kenneth Rexroth is that from poetry, such as it is, he's turned to art, such as it is. Now I never knew him as either poet or artist. I didn't know about him, rather, because I've never known him, personally. Far as that, he was a writer, and more recently, I've seen a painting in *Art Forum*, which is printed in San Francisco.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HARRY DIXON: I didn't know that he was painting. But then during the Art Students League days, we put on a show, and we called it, *Anybody Can Do It*. And one of the art critics came and looked at it, and took it in all seriousness. And one of the—one of the pillars of conservative art in San Francisco—I won't mention him, he took it seriously. The rest of us took it for what it was, it was a jibe. And it was glorious. We had two of them, and it showed that anybody can do it.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: They could do painting, or any kind of art?

HARRY DIXON: Montage—anything they wanted, and it was right up to the last screech of anguish, I might say.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Oh [laughs].

HARRY DIXON: That's when Dali was really riding high. I remember one piece done by a young fellow, and he called it *Time Staggers On*, and it was very Daliesque. It was very, very clever, and so it went. But it was a spoof.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Did you teach there at the Art Student Center?

HARRY DIXON: Yes. The art—the Art Students League is where I taught the jewelry there. Well, this is somewhat of a side trip for us.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: You were reading from the biography about places you had taught.

HARRY DIXON: Yep. Well, I taught at the art school, and then at the Art Students League and then one of the instructors in jewelry up in the Mendocino Arts Center in the summer of 1962. That year, the designer craftsmen supplied the instructors.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Oh.

HARRY DIXON: The last two years, in 1960—let's see '62—last year and this coming year, it will be the—the instructors will be supplied by the Sonoma State College located outside of Cotati and Rohnert Park, if you know what I mean. [They laugh.] I think we'll have to establish a separate town, call it Sonoma State College city, or something like that. One of the—the places where I have exhibited are the San Francisco City—San Francisco Women's City Club. That is now the Marines Memorial Club there on the corner of Sutter, I think it's Sutter and Mason.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Oh, yes. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HARRY DIXON: In 1928 and '29, they put on a combination garden and craft show. Murals, anything which was applicable to a garden, and they were very, very fine. Really fine. The fountains—I made fountains, and grill—grills for doors, and electric fixtures, and so on. And others would put in the statuary, and the florists or the—you know, the nursery people would do that.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Oh [inaudible], Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:25:20]

HARRY DIXON: And it was combination—well, it was really landscape gardening. And those shows—I think there was two of them—they were really outstanding and very well worthwhile. Then, there's one thing in here which I don't see listed. There in the early '20s, they put on a design—a craft—an exhibition. It was combination there, interior decorating and crafts, and I exhibited in that show. I'd have to dig down into the San Francisco art archives, newspapers, and so on. To me, it's so far back that I figure what's the use. Why mention it?

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: [It's hard to (ph)] remember the dates.

HARRY DIXON: No. I've exhibited with the Metal Arts Guild shows, and I've had stuff in the traveling show 1959, '61, and the present one, which is still on the way, which is started up 1963. And we've—I've had stuff in the De Young Museum 1963, '61, and at the Palace of Legion of Honor in 1959, '60, and '62. Those were exhibits on the Metal Arts Guild that I took part in. I've also had stuff on display in the more recent San Francisco Art Festivals, and I've taken part in some of those with Art in Action.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Oh, demonstrating there?

HARRY DIXON: Yeah. Demonstrating the work. I've had work in the California State Fair in 1957, '61, and '62. I've done Art in Action at various art and garden shows in the Marin Art and Garden Center there. Not recently, but in years back, in the '40s, and up, I guess, to about 1955. But lugging maybe 2[00] or 300 pounds of tools around to make one or two bowls and doing a whale of a lot of talking, at my age, it just doesn't seem worthwhile. It's too great an effort. I've displayed stuff at the Sonoma County Fair and the Luther Burbank Rose Festival at various times since 1950—1953, and—

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Is that when you moved up here to Santa Rosa?

HARRY DIXON: Yes.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: In 1953?

HARRY DIXON: Yeah. And year before last I was asked to be the artist and resident—artist in residence at the Lake County county fair. There they don't have any horse racing. They have a separate building for arts and crafts. Here in Santa Rosa, horse racing seems to be the big item, and where they have an arts and crafts building, it also includes home crafts, which some people say is cooking, which is good and very necessary, but to crowd your painting or your jewelry three feet away from a whole panel of jellies and jams and things like that, it's not very inspiring.

So, up at the Mendocino Arts Center in 1962, they also had those people who were teaching there display their work. They had one whole—one whole day, possibly it was two whole days for an art show.

[00:30:00]

And I've had things at the Richmond Arts Center in '59, '62, and last year, Mrs. Dixon and I were invited to have an exhibition there of our work to show how varied things could be, and with an eye particularly to the younger craftsmen.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: This was at the Richmond Arts Center—

HARRY DIXON: That was Richmond Art Center there in Richmond. And the—also, we took part in an invitational display at the San Francisco State College, and in the John Magnani Memorial Exhibition. Incidentally, we donated the piece of very square enamel work to the exhibit. It was champlevé-type of enameling, where I'd use the Byzantine design as a basis

for my design, and made it in the form of a small and very shallow saucer using the colors that they had in their color palette of enamels at that time. And that is a gift that we made along with others in the Designer Craftsmen of California to this permanent exhibit there—San Francisco State.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: San Francisco State College—

HARRY DIXON: Yeah.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: And this was in memoriam of John Magnani?

HARRY DIXON: That is right. You know, he was well liked, very well liked and we were very glad to give something in the way of metal work. And we were also very glad that we were able to give something which was of a traditional nature in enamel, rather than the quick, slick, and easy that is so often the attempt and product of so many crafts of this day.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Maybe you could tell us about some of your pieces that are around. You have a fountain here, in Santa Rosa, don't you?

HARRY DIXON: I made—I designed and made the sundial that it is in the design of the landscape architect, Leland Noel, here in Santa Rosa. He redesigned the—he redesigned the Burbank Gardens, and—he redesigned the Burbank Gardens, and I was commissioned to make the lotus that was the centerpiece in there in the gardens. [They wanted a sundial. Well, I made a sundial. -Ed.]

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