



Smithsonian
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Oral history interview with Phil Dike, 1965
June 9

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Phil Dike on June 9, 1965. The interview was conducted at Phil Dike's home in Claremont, California by Betty Lochrie Hoag for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

BETTY HOAG: This is Betty Lochrie Hoag on June 9th, 1965, interviewing Phil Dike the artist, in his home in Claremont. Mr. Dike was on the original project only as contributing without credit painting in 1934, as reported in California Arts and Architecture, and he has some very interesting letters from the government at that time which he is going to give to the Archives for their collection and I thought it might be interesting to ask him what little he can remember. He says it's very small about this time. Mr. Dike you're so well reported in all the Who's Who's and such a very well known artist here, there isn't much point in doing a resume about all the work you have done but I would just like to get it into the records that you teach at Claremont today and I would like to know where you were born and when, and where you were educated, we'll put in a brief at first.

PHIL DIKE: Well I'm a Californian by birth -

BETTY HOAG: Ah, a rare one.

PHIL DIKE: California as a matter of fact and that was April 6th, nineteen hundred and six, and most of my schooling was in this area, after graduating from high school I got a scholarship to the Chouinard Art Institute and after four years there went on to New York and then on to Europe for another year.

BETTY HOAG: In New York were you at the Arts Students League?

PHIL DIKE: The Arts Students League and also studied with a rather famous and wonderful person by the name of George Luks.

BETTY HOAG: Oh really!

PHIL DIKE: - who was a part of the Ashcan school and of course the Armory show of part of the eighth that were became [sic] so famous for that particular period.

BETTY HOAG: He was also a very fine teacher.

PHIL DIKE: He was, his class - he did teach at the Arts Student League from time to time but he was rather a broad minded bohemian and he preferred running his own classes and it was one of these private classes that I enjoyed, along with such people as Lamar Dodd and I believe Isabel Bishop was a member of this group and Doris Rosenthal, Marian Junkens who is a head of the art department in I believe, South Carolina. And she was very exciting after class.

BETTY HOAG: When you went to Europe was this on a scholarship?

PHIL DIKE: No, between the periods that I was in New York and my sojourn in Europe I taught a year at Chouinard Institute and it was mainly just to get more experience and to see the things over that became very exciting to me as painting. And then I returned to Chouinard as a teacher and it was at this period where the art project really began. I started teaching in 1932 there and it was shortly after that that things began to become a little desperate for the painters of this area. And as a teacher along with Millard Sheets, we were called in to help with whatever we might do in relation to the project because we were familiar with many of the younger painters and familiar with their problems and were also professionalists [sic] as decorators and we, for some reason, were considered qualified for this.

BETTY HOAG: Was this Merle Armitage that asked you because I -

PHIL DIKE: Ah, yes, it was Merle Armitage who I had gotten to know through Del Hatfield and Ruth Hatfield, and another member of this group was Mel Gage as I recall. He was a sculptor. I suppose he served the purpose of that particular field.

BETTY HOAG: Yes, I have interviewed him incidentally.

PHIL DIKE: Yes, he's a fine friend of mine and a wonderful man, both he and Marion have been close friends of ours over the years.

BETTY HOAG: The picture which you contributed to them at that time was a watercolor called "Aluhia" and I wondered if you remembered what it was about because I couldn't find a picture of it and they all seem to have disappeared.

PHIL DIKE: I don't think I have a reproduction of it and I can imagine that it was just about what it implies. I can remember at that time that I was tremendously impressed by a church that we attended and the enthusiasm and vitality of this particular scene impressed me and I painted a picture. I suppose this was a part of the influence of that period too, and the things that happened were terribly important and the recording of these paintings of that time were more or less the kind of art that was of that period.

BETTY HOAG: Certainly was, very much the spirit of what we have.

PHIL DIKE: But I can't remember what it looked like, you said it was a watercolor and I remember now us talking about this that we were encouraged. We felt this would be encouraging as people who were as involved with the problems of existence at that time and those who were on the project in feeling a part of it and the exhibitions of paintings that were collected at that time were being shown throughout the country so that painters do not feel, I'm sure, that they were just painting pictures without some real regard to the need for pictures in as a cultural entity, even though at that time I'm sure, the sales of pictures say, were not very active. It wasn't the kind of patronage; there wasn't the kind of money available for this kind of an area where pictures could be utilized.

BETTY HOAG: They were certainly being shown. One of yours for instance, was shown at the Los Angeles County Museum in 1934, that was there catalogue where I got it and I think as you say, they were shown across the country and of course you don't know what happened to it eventually.

PHIL DIKE: No it seems to me that this particular show, or this particular group were one that Mr. Bruce, who was the writer of the letters that we've been talking about, was anxious to see in another locality rather than the local, locality so that there could be even at that time some inter-exchange of art across the country. I think he saw it as a much broader thing than just an aid program. It had to be a program structured for things that would come after the immediate need.

BETTY HOAG: He was certainly far sighted and seems to me it was a wonderful thing, do you feel that it turned out to be this way?

PHIL DIKE: Well, I've gotten to know many of the painters who were on the program, or rather to follow them through their careers and many of them I recall, not to mention names but those who now are fine teachers in art schools and who are fine decorators practicing their applied skills and perhaps owing a great deal to the help they received at that period of their lives.

BETTY HOAG: Of course with many of them it was a matter of just being fed but I think that this business of the influenced of other people and being able to see the work of men from another part of the country, must have made a great difference.

PHIL DIKE: Yes, I'm sure this was the case, I'm sure that Los Angeles at that particular period was just becoming an art center, it hadn't really arrived, it was growing and there were many others who were to adjust you might say, were turning professional, becoming professional.

BETTY HOAG: Must be fun to think of having been a part of that.

PHIL DIKE: It was a young and vital group and there wasn't the large influx of painters from the east coast as evident now, they were pretty indigenous, they were pretty much made up of the young people out of the community who turned to an art career as opposed to any other career and were we feel, beginning to make themselves felt in other areas besides California.

BETTY HOAG: I'm sure they did, although you weren't part of it I'm sure you remember all those Treasury Department Post offices which were really wonderful.

PHIL DIKE: Yes I do, I do, and the public schools and the murals that were done in this area in the high schools as well. But the result I think was extremely encouraging, I think that most people who know this than I have could give you many more reasons than I, the outcome, the success is then, and the success is from this kind of beginning.

BETTY HOAG: I've just been talking to the Ames as you know and I of course, have been fascinated to see more of their mosaics and the work they've done and they, the first really big things they did were on the project and certainly their interest and enthusiasm was whetted and started at that time.

PHIL DIKE: By all means, I believe I recall one that they did, the Newport High School and this I think has

influenced a lot of other people in the decorative field to challenge them to do decorations in buildings because we seem to be in a particular flourishing period today where decoration of all sorts has become not unusual but almost natural for public buildings of all sorts.

BETTY HOAG: I think in California it's wonderful because we have so much color and you know, our plants and all, and it's so nice to see it brought in to the buildings.

PHIL DIKE: yes, particularly here in Claremont we have as you know, and perhaps the Ames told you, we support about 50 arts and artisans within this comparatively small community, the finest ceramists in the country, many decorators dealing in surfaces and painters and outstanding sculptors, young sculptors, many of them growing out of this area, many of them though what is now the Claremont Graduate School, having the facilities to get a background that is important to them. Men like Jack Ajax and young aggressive sculptors.

BETTY HOAG: Oh is he over here?

PHIL DIKE: Yes, he has his home within two blocks of our place.

BETTY HOAG: And I notice, aren't those Betty Davenports?

PHIL DIKE: Yes, yes. She made quite a name for herself.

BETTY HOAG: Is she in this area too?

PHIL DIKE: Right below the Ames as a matter of fact.

BETTY HOAG: I don't know that she was in the project, I had hopes of finding her name someplace.

PHIL DIKE: I think that she was a little younger, I really believe that she was going to school about 1940 so she missed it by about 10 years.

BETTY HOAG: There were no lists kept that anyone seems to know about names of artists on the project. So I'm practically looking for them under logs.

PHIL DIKE: Well until you wrote me this had not entered my mind for at least 25 years, I lost sight of it, I really had to think hard and long to even consider any links that would relate to it and it's purely by accident I found the record of these letters which might have been lost in a series of three moves, you tend to destroy everything so that you don't have to carry it on your back.

BETTY HOAG: We're very grateful that they did get saved and that you're giving them to us.

PHIL DIKE: I think that Edward Bruce was such a remarkable man of that period because he was sort of elder statesman and an artist too, he had this great sense of creating beautiful things but he was also a very practical civic minded man of some stature and he, one of the people that we had a chance to meet that was out of California was here from time to time and was recognized by us as an unusually worthwhile person. I don't know whether Clarence Henkle entered this project -

BETTY HOAG: Yes he did, he was in Santa Barbara and in Laguna Beach.

PHIL DIKE: - he perhaps has had more influence on this immediate group of this period than any other painter.

BETTY HOAG: He is dead you know.

PHIL DIKE: He passed away and I am in touch with his widow. We all think of him as a particularly gentle and elegant person, elegant painter and it's our feeling that he will be recorded on day as one of the outstanding California painters. His work is now housed, or some it at the Santa Barbara Museum in their permanent collection and it's a document of California and the light and quality of the forms and shapes.

BETTY HOAG: He was a landscape painter?

PHIL DIKE: He did figure paintings but most of it were not the so imposing in scale but the

BETTY HOAG:

PHIL DIKE: Kinds of things that brought a sort of personal identity to mountains or trees and rocks and things of this sort.

BETTY HOAG: Well I certainly want to see them, I'll ask Mr. Levitt to get them out, when I was up there last week I went to them and they have things in the basement of the project.

PHIL DIKE: Well this would be fine, do make a particular point of looking at Clarence Henkle's paintings because I think you'll be impressed by them as many of us, we haven't a retrospective show here but our galleries at the college, oh I'd say about six years ago, maybe it's a little longer, and it was a wonderful wonderful display of the mans work. And art moves at such a rapid pace today, it's nice to reflect on something that was quiet and sort of stopped in it's projection from nature.

BETTY HOAG: Well I'm certainly glad that you mentioned him on tape too. Thank you so much Mr. Dike for taking time from your very busy life to talk too.

PHIL DIKE: Well this is a very worthy project to be busy with.

BETTY HOAG: I think it's a wonderful thing, I've been grateful to be on it too.

END OF INTERVIEW

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