



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Louisa
Etcheverry, 1964 Sept. 23

Contact Information

Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Louisa Etcheverry on September 23, 1964. The interview was conducted by Betty Hoag for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose. This is a rough transcription that may include typographical errors.

Interview

BETTY HOAG: Mrs. King, you were very active on the Art Project in Southern California. In fact, at one time, you were in charge of all of the mosaic work; and you were one of the designers of the big Long Beach Mosaic. I'd like very much to ask you some questions about it. First, will you please tell me a little about your own life, when (if you care to) and where you were born and educated.

LOUISA ETCHEVERRY: I was born in California in 1911, December, and have lived here all my life with occasional little trips here and there. But most of the time I have been here. I am a native daughter.

MS. HOAG: One rarely meets one! Did you go to school here too?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: Yes. I went to Beverly Hills High School and U.C.L.A.

MS. HOAG: Did you go to an art school also?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: I went to the Art Students' League.

MS. HOAG: The same one where Mr. King was?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: Yes.

MS. HOAG: Is that where you met him first?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: Yes, more or less it was.

MS. HOAG: This was before the Project days?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: Yes.

MS. HOAG: You probably were one of the first women in the Art Students' League?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: From what I understand they had a class there much prior to me. For teachers; I hardly qualified for that when I started there because I was only about 19 or 18.

MS. HOAG: Were you one of Mr. Wright's students?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: No, Mr. Wright was there at the time, but I was not one of his students. I was just at the Art Students' League, where everybody went to draw.

MS. HOAG: There weren't any teachers then, per se? What kind of work did you do before you were on the Project? You must have been in ceramics because I know that you and your husband did some experimental work at the beginning of the Project.

MS. ETCHEVERRY: Well, I'd done drawing. And, yes, I did go into ceramics and worked in the pottery when Al started it.

MS. HOAG: That was here at the Lotus and Acanthus Studio?

MR. ETCHEVERRY: At the Lotus and Acanthus Studio, yes.

I had already had a very little experience with ceramics before that. My uncle was a potter, but a commercial potter.

MR. HOAG: Oh, that's interesting. Then your younger brother Robert worked in this field too, didn't he?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: He was quite a bit younger. He didn't get into it until we went into the mosaics. He joined us for a while before he went off to college.

MS. HOAG: Oh, I see. While we're on the subject, did he ever do anything with his art work after he graduated from college?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: No, he went in for science. He now teaches Science of Neurology.

MS. HOAG: Here in Los Angeles?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: No. El Cerrito, which is near Berkeley.

MS. HOAG: Did you continue doing any easel painting after the Project, or have you been in ceramics since?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: Only a little, not seriously, not to exhibit or anything. I still do a little from time to time but -

MS. HOAG: For your own enjoyment?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: Yes.

MS. HOAG: What about sculpting?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: Sculpting, yes.

MS. HOAG: Oh, you have? I didn't realize that.

MS. ETCHEVERRY: That is in line with learning ceramics in the sense of the three-dimensions with the ceramics. Of course, I was also interested in color. It's a combination of color and form in ceramics. After all, a vase is a piece of sculpture, in a sense.

MS. HOAG: Yes. Did you ever do any photographing like your husband?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: No. Photography is something completely out of my line. I got a Brownie camera and press the button and that's it!

MS. HOAG: It steps over too far into the world of science, doesn't it?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: Yes, it does.

MS. HOAG: Even though it comes out as art for many people!

MS. ETCHEVERRY: I have gone along to help him on the color side of it and for the mathematics and figuring it out. But as far as the photograph goes - no.

MS. HOAG: Mr. King on the other tape told me quite a little about how you and your brother Robert and he worked out the trial mosaic, the sample one; and then the one that was done for the Leibeg fountain, of which you have given me a photograph. So, we won't discuss that again unless there is something that you can add to it, that you remember?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: No, I don't believe there is. Except the Leibeg children were fascinated when we were putting it up.

MS. HOAG: Were they?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: They are probably all grown up now.

MS. HOAG: I'll have to go there and ask them. I'll see if it is still there' do you know?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: Oh, I'm quite sure it is.

MS. HOAG: I think they no longer own that house. Someone said they had sold the house and gone someplace else.

MS. ETCHEVERRY: I'm sure the fountain is still there.

MS. HOAG: After you'd done it, did you work on any of the high school murals before you worked on the San Diego Project? Did you work on Belmont or Hooper or - ?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: Oh yes. Stanley Spohn designed the Belmont fountain and that was the first one that was actually made for the Project. (The Libby fountain was a private commission.) Belmont was the first mosaic made on the Project; the three of us, Stanley Spohn, Albert and I, cut the tile and made the mosaic and - that was the first one. It was over the fountain there. At that time the Project thought it would be a good idea to get (I don't know whether we should put this on tape or not?) a professional tile-setter from one of the other WPA projects. He went over to put up the fountain tile but he got stuck with it, had a problem, -

MS. HOAG: That he couldn't solve?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: Yes. Al and I went over and finished it up. We finished at six in the morning.

MS. HOAG: Oh dear! After that you applied most of your own, didn't you? Or, did you train other people?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: We trained people. We trained artists rather than tile-setters from other projects. They understood the problems better.

MS. HOAG: When I first planned to tape you I thought I would go through a list of all the schools that you had worked on. When I found it was something like 40 of them, I realized it would be improbable that you could remember all of the different ones! Are there any of them that you can particularly think of which were interesting - anything about them?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: There were so many!

MS. HOAG: Hooper?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: Hooper Avenue, Ford, Thomas Edison, Whittier - I just can't remember.

MS. HOAG: You not only worked on the complete Long Beach Auditorium project, but you also designed the border for it, did you not?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: Yes.

MS. HOAG: It is a flower motif - so beautiful - Are they all California flowers? Did you do particular research for it?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: California wildflowers with everyone's name woven into the flowers -

MS. HOAG: Oh really! I didn't know that.

MS. ETCHEVERRY: Everyone who worked on it.

MS. HOAG: Oh, you mean the names of the people who worked on it?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: The names of the people are woven into the stems of the flowers. Everyone who worked on it has their names in the border.

MS. HOAG: And Mr. King told me a while ago that anyone who worked on it for as long as four or five days is in this border. Is that right?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: Yes.

MS. HOAG: That was a tremendous job to design, wasn't it, to get all those names worked into the design?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: In a way.

MS. HOAG: To say nothing of cutting the tile! I have not yet been up on the balcony to see it at close quarters.

MS. ETCHEVERRY: These were decorated tile, and everyone who worked there did some of the designing.

MS. HOAG: Certainly a form of immortality for them, isn't it?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: Yes, it is. It is certainly the most permanent medium.

MS. HOAG: Because it is so well-applied it has withstood all our earth-shakes and trembles.

MS. ETCHEVERRY: I'm sure it will continue to do so. And all they have to do to clean it is to call out the fire department and turn the hose on it!

MS. HOAG: Do the hoses reach up that high?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: Oh, yes.

MS. HOAG: They don't have to go out from a second storey of the building?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: No. They turn the hose on it every once in a while to wash off the salt water.

MS. HOAG: Mr. Stevens said to be sure to ask you about something that you were a specialist in, which is piece-molds. Now, I don't know what a piece-mold is. Could you tell me?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: Oh, I don't know.

MS. HOAG: He said they are very hard to make.

MS. ETCHEVERRY: It takes forever -

MS. HOAG: Does this refer to part of the process in making tile?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: No, it has nothing to do with that. It refers to ceramics and I don't know if it is particularly a propos. It is a very intricate type of mold. It is for sculpturing.

MS. HOAG: I see. It doesn't really fit into the San Diego project?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: No it doesn't. I don't think it does.

MS. HOAG: I can't remember the year that you took over. Was it about 1937?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: It was June of 1936.

MS. HOAG: Mr. King was made Supervisor of the whole project at that time?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: No, he was Supervisor of Mosaics at that time, right after the project first opened. That was June of '36 and I was Assistant Supervisor. Then, maybe six months later, or something like that, he was made Area Supervisor and I was made Supervisor of Mosaics and Ceramics.

MS. HOAG: And this was right in the middle of the Long Beach work probably, wasn't it?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: Yes. It was just after we started really.

MS. HOAG: Did that mean that you had charge of not only the design and the application but also organizing all of these people?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: Organizing people, yes.

MS. HOAG: Tell me something about it. That must have been tremendous with so many artists!

MS. ETCHEVERRY: Well, it was. I had two very wonderful people helping.

MS. HOAG: What were their names?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: Robert Boag, who helped with the outside installations and so on. He had several artists who worked with him. It was amazing that artists would work laying concrete and so on, but they enjoyed it. Then the rest of the people were in the project. And in addition to myself there was Paul Babcock; he helped a great deal.

MS. HOAG: Was he an artist like Bob Boag?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: Yes, they were both painters.

MS. HOAG: Well then, you probably had to teach them all about mosaics too, if they were painters to begin with. This was new to them wasn't it?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: That's true. And I think the wonderful thing about it is that everybody could create. There may have been all these people working together, and they were working in concert. But each was creating because they made the textured patterns. They cut a square tile to make a pattern for something, because they couldn't do it like the old Byzantine mosaics because that shows so much individuality. Now, Goodwin and Ames could, because there were just the two of them working together.

MS. HOAG: So their work would be the same, all the way through?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: Yes. But this you couldn't do. Yet you just can't tell creative people just to "lay this". So this way with the patterned mosaics they each had their own creativity.

MS. HOAG: Did each person design the part that he was working on in detail?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: They worked mostly on details because they were perfectly happy to do it that way. In fact everyone took great pride in what he did. They mixed paste to put on - one woman got disgusted because the boy mixing the paste made it lumpy and she said, "I've made corn starch all my life; I'll mix up the paste!" So, from then on it was her job to mix the paste. Everybody took pride in what he was doing.

MS. HOAG: Isn't that wonderful!

MS. ETCHEVERRY: It was a wonderfully integrated group.

MS. HOAG: Did you have classes at the beginning to instruct them to it? How did you work that out?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: No, each person learned as he came in. They would come in and from time to time change, you know. We'd get somebody well-trained and maybe he'd have to quit, then somebody else would come in. Everybody was extremely cooperative.

MS. HOAG: Where were all these people living at the time? Did they come from all over the city?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: All over the city.

MS. HOAG: Every day they made that trip?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: Yes.

MS. HOAG: There were no freeways then so some must have had to make quite a trip!

MS. ETCHEVERRY: They came from all over the city, and they cooperated for car-pools, and so on, when they lived in the same area. But they came from all over - San Fernando Valley - and all over.

MS. HOAG: A lot of this was during a very cold winter wasn't it?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: Oh, we had a flood one year and everybody had to swim to work practically. [Laughter]

MS. HOAG: Swim back to the ocean? [Laughter]

MS. ETCHEVERRY: It was just amazing how cooperative everybody was.

MS. HOAG: We were talking a little earlier about how the Project ended. You were telling me that you left about two months before it did close and then came back later.

MS. ETCHEVERRY: That's right.

MS. HOAG: Did you come back to the Project again or just to Los Angeles?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: By the time I came back, it had closed.

MS. HOAG: Would you mind repeating what you told me before, about how there was so much material and no place to dispense with it. I think that was very interesting.

MS. ETCHEVERRY: Well, of course I wasn't there when it happened, but I had taken copies of photographs once a month and these were given to me when I left. So, when I came back I couldn't find any trace as to what had happened to the files. Most of the files were kept in the Mosaic Department, although they didn't all have to do with mosaics. But it was the largest department as far as area went.

MS. HOAG: Yes, it must have been.

MS. ETCHEVERRY: No one knows what happened to the files.

MS. HOAG: No one ever did find them?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: No, they never did find them.

MS. HOAG: Who took over after you when you left? Do you remember?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: Well, no. There was no one. Nobody actually took over my position, because it had just about folded then. It had completely folded really. In fact, we'd moved everything out to some warehouse as I remember.

MS. HOAG: This is quite a while before the war so that wasn't the reason it had folded. Was it because there were no more government appropriations?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: I don't know. Perhaps not enough sponsors. You see, the sponsors had to pay for quite a bit of it. They had to pay for materials etc. etc. I don't know whether it was city politics or what that caused it to fold.

MS. HOAG: That's interesting. There were so many things going, one wouldn't think it would just suddenly stop. Because apparently communities would get one thing like a post office and then go on and have work for a school and then for another school.

MS. ETCHEVERRY: In September, the 1st of September in '39, we went to the World's Fair in New York and when I came back a month later everything had folded.

MS. HOAG: Did the city of Long Beach take the left-over tiles and use them later, I wonder? There must have been a lot of tile sitting around.

MS. ETCHEVERRY: No, on the Project we bought only enough for what we used. There was none left over.

MS. HOAG: Mr. King mentioned before that some of the other schools in Long Beach had tile mosaics so I thought perhaps they got them at this time.

MS. ETCHEVERRY: Well, they used ones that didn't match or something. We got some just in odd lots, very inexpensively, and they all had to be sorted. That was another thing: some of the women were very proud of the way they could sort that tile.

MS. HOAG: Well, there were an infinite number of jobs apparently.

MS. ETCHEVERRY: Yes.

MS. HOAG: About how many people were there under you?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: Oh, at one time there were probably 60. It averaged about 60, inside and out. Quite a few people helping!

MS. HOAG: One question I haven't asked you and I don't know whether we have yet asked it on the tape or not, is: where did they put the tiles together before applying them at the auditorium? Did you rent a loft some place?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: No. We had an entire floor. They were all laid out on the floor of the -

MS. HOAG: Of the auditorium itself?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: No. They were taken in sections to the auditorium.

MS. HOAG: Where were they laid out?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: At the Project.

MS. HOAG: The Project headquarters on 7th Street in Los Angeles?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: Yes.

MS. HOAG: I see.

MS. ETCHEVERRY: We had the entire fourth floor. They were all laid out there; everything was cut and laid out there, and then it was taken in sections to whatever job for which it was meant. In fact, we had two at a time going sometimes.

MS. HOAG: With a total of 466,000 tiles laid out there!

MS. ETCHEVERRY: A large cartoon was drawn on paper and laid on the floor. The tiles were placed on it and then they were mounted on cloth. We discovered it was better to set the tile, face side up. And then they were taken to the job each day.

MS. HOAG: In the border that you designed yourself I'm specially interested. Did any of the artists work out the

petals of the flowers, any other parts at all?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: That was not quite the same, you see. It was made on 4x4" tiles. Then these went around the entire edge of the mosaic. Each tile was decorated. We decorated those at a pottery.

MS. HOAG: You mean you painted them and fired the paint to them?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: Yes.

MS. HOAG: Oh.

MS. ETCHEVERRY: About half a dozen of the artists worked on that.

MS. HOAG: Did they receive a higher glaze than the rest of the surface tiles?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: No, no it was like majolica. Relatively high glaze. Each tile was hand-painted.

MS. HOAG: Was there any particular color scheme which you carried out in the border itself? For instance, did you stay with California poppies or was it strictly diversified?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: It was quite a diversity. I hope it was compatible.

MS. HOAG: Oh, I'm sure it was. I have not seen it up close so I'm at a disadvantage talking to you.

MS. ETCHEVERRY: It was all California wild flowers, poppies, lupins, etc.

MS. HOAG: It must have been fun to work it out?

MS. ETCHEVERRY: It was. It was a lot of fun.

MS. HOAG: After the Project was over, you and Mr. King were married and you together have had this Lotus and Acanthus Pottery and been actively producing ever since. You have had national and international fame for the beautiful things you've done. I've so much appreciated having the material to be microfilmed, which shows some of this for the Archives. Since it does not concern the Art Project we won't go into more details about it now. If you think of more things to tell us about the Project period, I'll come back and hope you'll let me tape you again -

MS. ETCHEVERRY: I certainly will.

MS. HOAG: I have enjoyed it.

MS. ETCHEVERRY: So did I.

MS. HOAG: Thank you so much.

END OF INTERVIEW WITH LOUISA ETCHEVERRY

Last updated...June 11, 2009