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Oral history interview with Lorser Feitelson,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Lorser Feitelson on May 12, 1964. The interview was conducted at Lorser Feitelson's home in Los Angeles, California by Betty Lochrie Hoag for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

Betty Hoag: Mr. Feitelson, you were the area supervisor for the Federal Art Projects in Los Angeles from 1935 to 1940, is that correct?

Lorser Feitelson: Past '40, I think. '42 was the last.

Betty Hoag: I understand from many people that you can tell us probably more about this anyone else, so I am looking forward to our visit.

Lorser Feitelson: I was probably as active amongst the artists as anybody else.

Betty Hoag: Before I start asking you about it I thought I would ask a little about your own life and see if the facts I have are correct: you were born in Savannah, Georgia, in 1898, and you studied in New York City first. Where did you study there?

Lorser Feitelson: Well, I am really what you would call a self-made artist. My first teacher was my father who was sort of a frustrated artist himself. I began when I was knee-high to a grasshopper. I can't remember when I really began. And also I was fortunate in being surrounded by books on art and magazines on art; and the big museums themselves had material that interested me then and still interests me. I went to the Art Students League just for a very short moment, perhaps a semester or so in the summer, as a kid and studied with George Bridgman; just life drawing.

Betty Hoag: He wrote a book on drawing, *Still Life Drawing*.

Lorser Feitelson: Yes. But also in 1913 I studied with a sculptor by the name of Carl Tefft just for a little, perhaps a semester or so. I found that the information that had any meaning to me came from the outside, from museums, from libraries, from exhibitions; because my approach has always been one of analysis, and what I was searching for I could not get at the art school. I was looking for principles of composition, principles of drawing, and particularly movement within the form and also the composing of form. And composing, to this day, is what I teach. I teach drawing. In spite of the painting that you see, I still teach classic drawing.

Betty Hoag: The basic principles of it certainly always show.

Lorser Feitelson: My last television programs, as you know, deal with the exposition of the methods of the old masters: the "how-it-is-done" sort of thing, the interior of art, the mechanism plus philosophy; this has always been my interest.

Betty Hoag: You must have been about fourteen or fifteen when the Armory Show took place. Were you in New York then?

Lorser Feitelson: Yes, I was living in New York.

Betty Hoag: Did you see the Show?

Lorser Feitelson: I saw the Show. And, strangely enough, I have some of the material that has been published since on the Show and all its works and many of the things that are so meaningful to us today, but I have no memory of them at all. I have a memory of works that are very seldom mentioned and perhaps were not terribly important so far as later consequences go. Essentially, the thing that meant most to me was Marcel Duchamp's infamous painting—

Betty Hoag: *The Nude*?

Lorser Feitelson: Yes, *the Nude Descending the Stairs*.

Betty Hoag: Oh, because of the movement of course.

Lorser Feitelson: Yes, that; and of course many pictures were published on the Futurists who did not participate

in the Show. As a matter of fact, the Futurists were known before the Armory Show because they spent a great deal of time ballyhooing themselves. Marinetti, who was sort of St. Paul of the movement, believed in the Barnum approach, "You've got to let the public know by hitting them over the head." And perhaps they defeated their purpose because the public became suspicious of what may probably be good by not accepting it; they resented the method in which it was being presented—the heavy sell. And it was Futurism—or kinetics, movements, the visual experience of an object in movement, where it's unstable, the unstable condition—that meant so much to me. Even my most recent paintings, my abstract paintings, essentially are dealing with instability of color, instability of line, to make the things move psychologically. I've never gotten away from that because it wasn't that the paintings interested me so much as that I was interested in, or had an aptitude for their method; that's why I chose those things. For instance, in Picasso's work, a man whose work I admire, I have no memory at all of his things in the Armory Show.

Betty Hoag: Yet you were in Paris at the time he was active?

Lorser Feitelson: Well, no, I'm talking about the Armory Show. The first impact in New York. I went to Paris in 1919, and of course Picasso was well-known before that even in New York. But in the Armory Show, the man that meant so much to me is an artist I don't care too much for today, Augustus John, an Englishman. I liked his drawing perhaps because as a kid I struggled with drawing. But I liked the paintings, very exotic and perhaps very corny kind of paintings—maybe they would be stylish today, they'd become sort of pop art—by the American Bob Chandler, who got himself mixed up with some kind of scandal. He came from a multi-millionaire family and he got mixed up with this gal, Madame Cavalier, or whatever her name was, a famous kept-gal. But who doesn't mean anything at all to me today. He is unknown today. And he was a man with a great reputation in the art world. Today his pictures are perhaps not so hot, they are more decorative. But these are my first impressions.

Betty Hoag: Did Chandler's work show great movement? Is that why you think they appealed?

Lorser Feitelson: Exciting color! The color itself bounced all over the place! Perhaps the lines themselves: there was a fluid and a very sensual quality to his line. It was dynamic in a sensual sense, not merely just simply dynamic for its own sake. Maybe that's why I responded. But today we'd probably have to take with that same quality other things which are not so important, a lot of modern junk that belongs to the period; things which are of no consequence at all.

Betty Hoag: You went to Paris in 1919, you say, and how long were you there?

Lorser Feitelson: I was in Paris until '27. The first stay was a very brief one, then I went back in '21 for a short stay, they my real stay from 1922 to about '24, '25.

Betty Hoag: Were you studying by yourself?

Lorser Feitelson: Yes. I went there to work. I've always been what we call a "loner." I haunt the places but I know what I'm looking for.

Betty Hoag: This was at the time you said Modigliani was there painting.

Lorser Feitelson: Yes. I have some of the things that he painted at the time; they are sort of Post-Cubism but dealing with kinetics; always kinetics, always movement.

Betty Hoag: Were you particularly studying in the museums? Copying—

Lorser Feitelson: Yes. No, what I meant, it's—actually in the museums themselves, as a kid in the Met I used to make actual copies of Velasquez and some other painters; but it was actually going before the pictures and taking them apart, so to speak, without a notebook, this part; haunting the library itself—and there's where I worked with a notebook. With material you couldn't possibly get, rare reproductions, and also the actual examples of drawings that they had. To this day I collect. I have a large collection of old master paintings. So people think of this. I own a tremendous collection of old master drawings.

Betty Hoag: I didn't know that!

Lorser Feitelson: You see, my library is just filled with books on old master drawings. And I have over two hundred drawings drawn by great artists and also paintings by very famous artists, very fine Italian paintings. See the backs of them right now. Museums borrow them, and so on.

Betty Hoag: These are all classical things?

Lorser Feitelson: Yes, they are all classical things. There are some very modern pictures. I like art, period.

Betty Hoag: Good for you!

Lorser Feitelson: I like art in any form.

Betty Hoag: Were there any of the so-called “moderns” in Paris at the time who influenced you?

Lorser Feitelson: No.

Betty Hoag: Among friends that you remember.

Lorser Feitelson: No. No.

Betty Hoag: It was an experiment of your own?

Lorser Feitelson: I knew what I was searching for, and I was looking for similar statements in others that could either affirm or reaffirm what I was doing, or even to find certain potentials to what I was doing. Which I think is a process that every artist works if he does it—

Betty Hoag: If he’s honest and conscientious?

Lorser Feitelson: Yes, he does it because you cannot feed on yourself. We know what we want but we still must go to the outside for inspiration and also for measurement. Because often we may say, “Well, I like what I’m doing; I think here I’m doing something frightfully important because I believe this is an innovation, and important innovation.” Then the next thought you say, “Wait a minute! How do I know? Maybe it’s been done to death.” But if you have been very inquisitive about it, and you know your art by seeing it, and make up your mind to go through the course of all the practitioners of what you’ve been doing, and you say, “No, it hasn’t been done,” then there’s the assurance.

Betty Hoag: Like many paths in the woods and you know where some of them lead?

Lorser Feitelson: Otherwise it’s like the fellow who—you know the corny joke but it certainly fits—who’s inventing a typewriter; he doesn’t know the typewriter was already invented. I mean this would be the same thing. I think this is the thing that gives us our assurance. Also where we think we’re good, we say, “Well, wait a minute; this is not so good.” We know goddamn well the same thing has been attempted by a thousand others who have done it much better, you see.

Betty Hoag: In some of the biographies about you, I read a statement that I didn’t understand; that in 1925 you brought the first Neoclassical show in America to the Daniel Gallery in New York.

Lorser Feitelson: Yes.

Betty Hoag: What was this, a group of people in Neoclassicism?

Lorser Feitelson: I’ll tell you what—let me give you an idea. For instance, here, you look at this picture here. (Mr. Feitelson indicates it). You see kinetics going back as far as 1917, a very youthful work here, just a very small painting, eight inches. But here you see from 1922, this is almost nine feet. Classical painting. Now if you can step into the other room you will see what it is. Here’s a painting that received considerable acclaim. That’s after I did my others. I was applying all the principles of abstract art back into realism. As a matter of fact, this picture and that painting are going to be shown together in Arizona in that big show, a sort of “then and now.” Previous to that I had very abstract paintings. But in the ‘20s, in the postwar period when I first showed these things in New York, they labeled me Neoclassicist and even Margaret Salinger—when I first arrived up north in San Francisco and some of the people took me up at the Press Club there on Sutter Street—came to see me and she interviewed me. I came up there to get in touch with this lady—Quinlan, I think her name is, the head of the museum up on the hill.

Betty Hoag: Palace of the Legion of Honor?

Lorser Feitelson: Palace of the Legion of Honor, yes. I’ve had several shows up there. There were very, very generous. And I had some photographs. She said, “Well, could I use one of your photographs?” i.e. for a publicity story. It’s *The Peasants*. I have the painting here. And on two different occasions the publicity was about the “Neoclassicists of Paris” and so on; an old *Art News* clipping I have from 1924, 1925—I can’t remember, about a show at Daniel’s—speaks of “The young American Neoclassicists being the latest word in art.” Well, this was trying to amalgamate what had already been ushered in by the new movements before the war, during the war, and right after the war. There was a period of synthesis, putting together, and trying to bring it back to the figure; it was really an attempt. Of course that period didn’t last too long, but this thing was nailed to me. But the word “Classicist” is true: I am a Classicist. I may be romantic. You say I’m romantic. But I’m a Classicist in the sense that I cannot possibly work by making a decision that’s what we call “fortuitous,” like Jackson Pollock

paints. I've got to know what I'm doing. I must enter the thing not only completely emotionally but I must enter it completely intellectually. With me it's got to be both sides of the coin. I must have at all times an equilibrium between sensibility and all those areas we cannot explain. I must have both at one time. Therefore I'm a ponderer. I work very hard.

Betty Hoag: "A ponderer?"

Lorser Feitelson: "Ponderer." That's like "ponder, ponderer." Just when I think I'm through with a picture—like the painting that's now in the Museum of Modern Art—I work more on the thing. It's dated 1954, or something like that, but I actually started about 1951; it's been exhibited dozens of times and every time it gets back I say, "This area has not been resolved!" and I start working on it. Well, it's not a case of saying that this is better than the so-called intuitive way of painting. This is simply being what you are. This is the way I digest; this is the way I form things; this is my metabolism, if you wish to call it that. And there are many painters who work the same way. Cezanne was one you might call a ponderer: he never permitted people to watch him paint because some of the pictures he'd never finish; he'd use around twenty-five sittings. Because between every stroke he had to consider and reconsider it. His critical faculties must be completely satisfied. That's the classic attitude.

Betty Hoag: That's why there's this marvelous feeling of balance in your paintings.

Lorser Feitelson: Well, I think if anyone else spent that much time he'd get even a better sense of balance. That's it. That's the classic attitude.

Betty Hoag: You spoke of exhibiting in the Palace of the Legion of Honor in San Francisco. That was a little later, wasn't it? 1928?

Lorser Feitelson: I had two shows there. I had one show in 1928 and another show in 1932.

Betty Hoag: And then in 1928 you also exhibited here in Los Angeles?

Lorser Feitelson: Los Angeles and Pasadena, San Diego, about 1928 or '27, I'm not quite certain. About '28 it must have been.

Betty Hoag: And what was the Brooklyn Museum show that year, do you remember?

Lorser Feitelson: The Brooklyn Museum show was 1936. That was a group. We sent out an exhibition of what we called Post-Surrealism, our own idea of how to use introspection and the psychological phenomenon in art. Knud Merrild was one of the painters, Lucien Labaudt was one, my Helen was in on it, and Grace Clements was in on this thing. These were a few of us. And we made an arrangement with the Brooklyn Museum for the regular three-week or four-week show. And they kept it five months! We never knew we'd hit the jackpot. Excited so much interest that the magazine which is no longer in existence, the *Literary Digest*, gave it a full page. Helen had one of her paintings reproduced in the *New York Times* and what a beautiful review! While they were not completely sympathetic to what we were doing, they said at least "Helen Lundeberg and Lorser Feitelson not only paint cosmic subjects but they paint with cosmic authority." I thought that was mighty nice!

Betty Hoag: A wonderful compliment!

Lorser Feitelson: That's better than getting a brick over the head. That was away back in 1936. But the following year the Museum of Modern Art put on a Surrealist show. Ours preceded the New York show. They invited both of us to show in that international show.

Betty Hoag: In the Surrealist show?

Lorser Feitelson: In the Surrealist show in New York. That was set up by Alfred Barr.

Betty Hoag: Had the other painters in this Post-Surrealist group been Neoclassicists?

Lorser Feitelson: No, these were just painters who had banded together in this area because we had something in common.

Betty Hoag: I see. The one in the book, this Genesis Number One was probably one show, wasn't it?

Lorser Feitelson: Yes. Then Helen was shown in the first of a series of American artists called "Americans 1942." How many Americans were there? Eighteen. And her Surrealist pictures were shown in that exhibition. Then the show traveled around. That was back in 1942.

Betty Hoag: You had already come to California long before 1934, you told me.

Lorser Feitelson: Yes.

Betty Hoag: When did you come here? What year?

Lorser Feitelson: 1927. How could I have been exhibiting in San Francisco otherwise?

Betty Hoag: Well, I thought perhaps you shipped them there.

Lorser Feitelson: No, I was here in person.

Betty Hoag: Were you living in San Francisco or Los Angeles?

Lorser Feitelson: No, I was living here. As a matter of fact, my coming out here was due to the fact that my former wife was expecting a baby in Paris and we didn't want to take the risk in case it should be a boy because a boy would have to serve in the French Army.

Betty Hoag: Oh, a French citizen?

Lorser Feitelson: They consider them a French citizen if case of war. If he should go back to France they could arrest him, put him in jail you see. Well, we would do the same thing if anybody came here from another country, for instance from Czechoslovakia. A woman who has a boy born here, he becomes automatically an American citizen but because of the fact that his mother is Czechoslovakian, he would be considered Czechoslovakian too if he returned there. So we arrived in New York and she had the baby. It was a little girl. And we thought we'd come out here to visit her mother before we returned to Europe. But we knew that things were getting rather bad in the world. As a matter of fact, my folks' business was in a very sensitive spot, that of import and export trade; and they knew that people weren't paying their bills, suddenly, all over the world. The panic began before 1929, but by 1929 it was unbearable and the economic world caved in. So we came out here—I had a little money—and stayed here. I disliked it violently in the beginning, because there was no art appreciation. Then I learned to love it because there wasn't any art appreciation, therefore the artist had to paint only for one person, himself. There was no one to write about his art; no one ever to show his art; no one ever to buy his art; therefore if he wanted to paint it was only because he himself felt it must be done. And therefore he was going to paint for its own sake and then he would do honest work. That's what I liked about it. It's changed considerably since; it's an art world. But this was in 1927.

Betty Hoag: You had a show in 1952 with an interesting name, "The Functionalist-West Show." Both you and Helen Lundeberg were in this, weren't you?

Lorser Feitelson: Yes. Together with—let's see, who else was in the Functionalist? I've forgotten completely about it.

Betty Hoag: Then you had a retrospective show together in '58 at Scripps, is that right?

Lorser Feitelson: That's right. I think we had exhibitions once or twice at Scripps, I can't remember.

Betty Hoag: One joint show.

Lorser Feitelson: Oh, I see, yes. Well, I'd forgotten. Good for you. You've got these notes. I'll have to come to you to find out what I've been doing.

Betty Hoag: Well, I'll tell you one more the same year: They have this word "Classicism" again in the L.A. County Museum show, "The Abstract Classicism Show."

Lorser Feitelson: Yes. By the way this is a very interesting moment. You find people all over the world now, even the French, using the art word "hard edge." It was born right here.

Betty Hoag: I knew it was. I didn't—

Lorser Feitelson: Jules Langsner was the one who—

Betty Hoag: Gave it the name?

Lorser Feitelson: Yes. The magazine article tells you this. (Mr. Feitelson indicates *Art International* for September 25, 1963.) Did you see it?

Betty Hoag: No, I haven't.

Lorser Feitelson: There's a footnote here. Let's see, where is that? It's somewhere here.

Betty Hoag: It's a wonderful name for it. Perhaps we should get back to the Federal Arts Project period, and return to this later when we have more questions on it.

Lorser Feitelson: Yes.

Betty Hoag: I would like to ask you more particulars about that time. You said that the whole idea of the Federal Arts Project was Edward Bruce's, through Harry Hopkins; and Holger Cahill was in charge of all of the projects, and you knew him then.

Lorser Feitelson: Yes, I met him through his appointing me to my particular position: to appoint artists, to designate the kind of jobs, to administer the relationship between artists and the sponsor, the sponsor and the Project, et cetera, et cetera, and mainly to act as a troubleshooter—because we were always subject to all kinds of criticism; all kinds of disquieting things that happened that, if we weren't careful, particularly at that critical time politically speaking, could have abolished the Project entirely. Confidence was felt for me, and it was one of my major jobs to see that things did not erupt too far within the Project and to guard the Project's effect on the outside.

Betty Hoag: Actually, you had the responsibility for all these artists, then?

Lorser Feitelson: Yes.

Betty Hoag: Keeping them working, keeping the Government happy also?

Lorser Feitelson: That's right.

Betty Hoag: And had Nelson Partridge done the same thing before, and then Buckley Mac-Gurrin?

Lorser Feitelson: I don't know. These are the men that preceded me. Evidently their demise in the Project was indicative of the horrible circumstances within the Project. No one was safe. No one at the top was safe.

Betty Hoag: And at the time you were working with it, was Jason Herron your assistant?

Lorser Feitelson: Yes.

Betty Hoag: This was a woman?

Lorser Feitelson: Yes. She was a sort of an assistant to Wright. Everyone was an assistant to Wright. He liked that word—what was the word?—lieutenant. But actually these were all administrative crutches; let's call it what it is. She was supposed to be the liaison between the Project and the sponsors. She was a gentle, cultured person, perhaps a bit of a snob. We thought at that time we could use that for public relations, because a lot of bums who called themselves artists were taking advantage of the Government funds. But unfortunately she was not successful in getting jobs for the Project. She was too gentle. She could not get the jobs for the Projects until Tom Wiley appeared to help her.

Betty Hoag: The man you told me about who was—

Lorser Feitelson: Yes. It was absolutely fantastic. None of us can rationalize how he was able to do what he did.

Betty Hoag: This man was Tom Wiley?

Lorser Feitelson: Tom Wiley.

Betty Hoag: He was not an artist himself?

Lorser Feitelson: He was not an artist, hadn't the slightest idea of what art is about, and when he talked about art to us it was absolutely fantastic. But it must have been very impressive to the powerful people who headed the Government administrations. He also had an enthusiasm which was probably contagious. We judged him only one way. It was good for the Project, it was good for the artists, therefore it was good for everybody.

Betty Hoag: That was all that mattered at the time.

Lorser Feitelson: That was all that mattered, yes.

Betty Hoag: There are two other men I wanted to ask you about. I understand that Merle Armitage had been important in the beginning?

Lorser Feitelson: In the very beginning he was an impresario and was needed as you can easily see. Suddenly this Project had been thought about, money appropriated and made an accomplished fact, and the business of

setting up machinery in each area begun. Each metropolis had to be organized as to “who’s who” in the art world. He had already jelled, he was a collector, he was connected with music, he liked to publish books and he was really—well, the man that I would call between the public and the artist. This is what he loves, even to this day. And he’s a very good man.

Betty Hoag: And he was in contact with so many artists at the time that he was probably invaluable, too?

Lorser Feitelson: Yes, at that particular time I think the Government did very well in getting a man like him. He was a good organizer.

Betty Hoag: Do you remember about a Dr. Alexander from Scripps at the beginning too?

Lorser Feitelson: Oh yes, I met him but I didn’t know very much about him, other than that he was a very inspiring person, teacher, art historian, philosopher, I believe. His place used to be a sort of center for Millard Sheets and some of the younger artists. I knew of him through Arthur Miller. I believe Arthur Miller once took us to his home. (Aside to Mrs. Feitelson: Do you remember, Helen, this Dr. Alexander—Arthur taking us there?) There were sort of seminars, informal gatherings for young Millard and some of these people. It was a kind of presentation of the “Humanities in the Arts,” which is being done today in the schools. Instead of art being presented in a vacuum just within itself since it is part of life.

Betty Hoag: You were in charge of all of the artists who were doing easel paintings or murals?

Lorser Feitelson: All things, sculpture and everything else.

Betty Hoag: Design Index, too?

Lorser Feitelson: Then we had supervisors for sculpture, supervisors for Index of American Design, supervisors for everything else. But under one head. I was responsible for these people.

Betty Hoag: You had to coordinate?

Lorser Feitelson: Yes. For instance, some of these boys would have difficulties amongst themselves, or they thought they were not getting the kind of work they should be getting or the opportunities, so they’d come to me and complain about the supervisor. Of course this was not permitted unless they could bring the supervisor with them. No talking against the supervisor without the supervisor being right in front of him.

Betty Hoag: Like children in school.

Lorser Feitelson: Yes. We were not going to let anyone tear the supervisor to pieces without the supervisor being there to defend himself, nor were we going to let the supervisor use his axe for personal reasons on the workers. No supervisor was ever permitted to push anybody around. This is the thing we’re talking about. This was my dirty job. Unfortunately, some of these people played politics with some of the these boys, giving them things at the expense of others, and throwing out a guy that probably had a big family just to be nice to someone else. But this happens in all government jobs.

Betty Hoag: You mentioned keeping the artists in groups together, the ones who were particularly interested in the same type of painting.

Lorser Feitelson: Yes. It was the same idea as my enjoying seeing in my collection all forms of art. I don’t believe that art should be taught in a parochial manner, that you have to shove it down the throats of the students, that you make an absolutism of it. I recognize art is a personal thing and there cannot be a standard for all; it’s only something within the context of what the artist is doing. And it’s one’s job, if he is to get the best out of the other men, to try and make it possible for them to do their best. And also wherever it’s possible to get together a group of artists who understand one another, they can give a certain amount of warmth to each other. That was also a part of our Project: instead of letting them fight one another, to be constructive. And when we’d get them together I would take a certain man’s works and have that artist talk about it, give his point of view so the others could understand it. After a while we found these boys were experimenting, painting in opposite directions, admiring, and going to the defense of each other, trying to explain each other’s work, without having to do what the other fellow was doing. This is what I tried to do.

Betty Hoag: This is one of the wonderful things that came out of the Project.

Lorser Feitelson: This is one of the things that really put me into a spot, which I liked more than anything else, to which the others were not sympathetic. They said, “Lorser, you’re much too tolerant.” This attitude was in no way their concept: “They are not doing just the thing I’m doing, therefore I’ll show them how to do it.”

Betty Hoag: You were broadening their horizon.

Lorser Feitelson: Yes. Broadening—trying also to keep them from being pushed around. It's so easy to do. They were so frightened, so insecure. Anybody at the top could push the hell out of them.

Betty Hoag: I suppose many of them were young artists, too?

Lorser Feitelson: Most of them were not young. Some were in the early twenties, most were people in their thirties and forties and fifties, some in their sixties, some were past the age; and we knew they were past the age, but we never pushed them.

Betty Hoag: There was an age limit on their qualifying?

Lorser Feitelson: Yes. We knew some of them. Those were bad days, horrible days, particularly for the spirit of those who had already achieved—and I mean deservedly—high positions, who found themselves at that time pushed in amongst a lot of artists who they themselves considered mediocre, and not given any more respect than the mediocre ones. This was a little difficult to take.

Betty Hoag: Did you give them more important work on the Project?

Lorser Feitelson: I could not under any circumstance do anything except give the man what he was fitted for.

Betty Hoag: What he was capable of. I haven't quite understood your role in this, besides coordinating all of the thing. You actually did some of the murals yourself? How did you have time for this?

Lorser Feitelson: In the beginning.

Betty Hoag: You did the Santa Monica City Hall, for instance; didn't you do those murals?

Lorser Feitelson: No.

Betty Hoag: Or the High School?

Lorser Feitelson: No. I did only—let's see—what murals did I do, Helen? I did one for the Thomas Edison School—I don't even know where it is. The Hooper Avenue School, the colored kids' school. Well, I'll tell you about another problem, if you can imagine: On the first job at the Hooper Avenue School the artist who did the designs—I can't remember his name—tried to visualize the contribution that the Negro had made culturally to this country in music and dance and everything.

Betty Hoag: What a good idea!

Lorser Feitelson: It would seem to be. But the students mutilated the paintings.

Betty Hoag: They didn't!

Lorser Feitelson: Yes; they completely defaced them.

Betty Hoag: They felt it was pointing them out as different from other Americans?

Lorser Feitelson: Yes. So I went down and spoke to the principal there. She was very distressed but she said, "Well, the situation is this: we have some who believe implicitly that the Negro's destiny is in his own kind of culture, to stop being parasitical in trying to imitate the white man; but unfortunately this is not the opinion shared by most Negroes." She said, "Go down the street and you will see shops where they have hats and clothes posed by white faces on mannequins." I mean these are things that were so new to us. This is twenty-five years ago. Of course the Negro problem wasn't what it is today. There were very few Negroes here then. That was before the war, the second war. So we gave them the subject that they chose for their auditorium—Daniel Boone, I think; I can't remember what it was all about. The subjects were chosen by the school.

Betty Hoag: One of the people working on the Project was an Indian girl, wasn't she?

Lorser Feitelson: A Cherokee Indian, White Bead Quann.

Betty Hoag: What kind of work was she doing for the Project?

Lorser Feitelson: She was doing lithographic drawings which were translated into lithographs and prints dealing with the myths of her tribe. They were charming, charming; sort of poetic versions of the seasons, and so on, metaphor formulae; just wonderful.

Betty Hoag: What do you suppose has happened to those things she did, do you know?

Lorser Feitelson: I know the libraries sought the things. They were very highly prized.

Betty Hoag: They were given to buildings afterwards, were they not?

Lorser Feitelson: Oh yes. They were given to all institutions that are tax-supported or tax-free institutions. In other words, to public service buildings. Otherwise we would be taking public money and giving it to private enterprise.

Betty Hoag: Couldn't do that.

Lorser Feitelson: The other Indian was, we believe, color blind. He had a Spanish name and he married a friend of yours, Helen. He had a Spanish name, very, very fine—something like Rodriguez, but that's not the name—funny thing I was only thinking about this man's name the other day and now I can't just even pull it by the tail, I can't get it at all. But at any rate he did some very nice things. He was doing more or less what I would call the Spanish-Mexican concept of life.

Betty Hoag: Lithographs also?

Lorser Feitelson: Paintings. Every artist was required to do some lithography because, first of all, it gave them an opportunity to learn the process; and secondly—

Helen Lundeberg: Regaldo.

Lorser Feitelson: Rigolatto. He's still around. Very, very gentle person. Makes you think of a Mexican or Mayan, perhaps; an intellectual; pure-blooded, you know.

Betty Hoag: Is he still making his living painting, or—

Lorser Feitelson: I haven't the remotest idea. He married a Pasadena girl, a Caucasian; very nice; I think she was a school teacher.

Betty Hoag: This conversation reminds me of what you were telling about the Index of American Design being such a tribute to Holger Cahill. I wish you would tell that again for the tape.

Lorser Feitelson: You know what the name "Holger" is, don't you?

Betty Hoag: No.

Lorser Feitelson: "Cahill" is as Irish as they come. But "Holger" is Danish. He's Icelandic. His ancestors were Icelandic people. He was born in Idaho or Montana; came from your part of the world, you know.

Betty Hoag: I didn't know that.

Lorser Feitelson: Yes. Jackson Pollock came from that part of the world, too, you know.

Betty Hoag: I come to California to learn about it! I didn't know. Morris Graves is from the Northwest too, from Seattle, and he was here at this time. Do you know if he did any Project work at all?

Lorser Feitelson: Was he in Los Angeles?

Betty Hoag: He was coming through here, he and another boy, during the '30s.

Lorser Feitelson: I know he wasn't on the Los Angeles Project. He was on the Project, but I thought he was on the Project up in Seattle or Portland, the Northwest. So was Tobey.

Betty Hoag: Yes. He was up there. I knew Tobey was.

Lorser Feitelson: A friend of ours was in charge of it, Bruce Inverarity. He was on the Project up north along with Kenneth Callahan, et cetera.

Betty Hoag: Getting back to Holger Cahill's contribution, I just wish that you would tell me again for the tape about how wonderful you thought it was for America.

Lorser Feitelson: First of all, Holger Cahill before the Project had a reputation: very few people realized that he was also an experimentalist in art like Dada. He was mixed up in a movement which had a name that sounds like "Dada," but it had another name. I can look it up for you. I think this man who runs the Whitney Museum—I'm just trying to think of his name—John Baur—tells about it. I have a book here on the "The Crises in American Art;" it's called "Revolution and Tradition," by John Baur. Let's look up and see what he says about this

magnificent human being. (Feitelson reads book.) It's very strange—I thought for a moment this was about Fletcher Martin, because Fletcher Martin was on the Project. This is not. Let's see what it says about Holger Cahill. Edward Bruce is even in this book, 102; also, Figure 161 will show you what Bruce painted like.

Betty Hoag: Good!

Lorser Feitelson: 161 is a very poetic landscape. Here it is, what you'd call the American scene. He really painted what he knew and loved. All right, we'll see what else: "Holger Cahill, 28, 29, and 132." Here, somewhere around here. "Holger Cahill, the same spirit as Dada, an obscure movement, largely forgotten, since nothing was ever written concerning it, but remarkably similar to Dada in some respects. Founded by Holger Cahill about 1920, even its name 'Inje - Inje' had something of the same nonsensical cadence as Dada, as though it bore more significance in relation to the purpose of the movement, Inje"—

Betty Hoag: Is it from an Indian word?

Lorser Feitelson: I don't know what it means. Cahill had read in a book by a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society that Inje-Inje was the only word in the language of a South American tribe of Indians who managed however to communicate a wide range of meanings through different inflections of the word accompanied by various gestures. His movement proposed to return to the arts a comparable simplicity, to cut away the superstructure of our cultural refinements and discover the basic and most direct form of human expression. Painting, for instance, was to be reduced primarily to horizontal and vertical forms though not in as rigid a manner as the Dutch painters of de Stijl—that means Mondrian—nor even necessarily abstract. This was very interesting.

Betty Hoag: But apparently the movement died out.

Lorser Feitelson: Yes, well I mean all movements only last a short time. I don't care what movement it is. The early movement like Fauve lasted only two years, that's what it was. And the first Cubists, only four years. No movement lasts longer than that.

Betty Hoag: Well, this had died out before his idea for the Index of American Design began.

Lorser Feitelson: What I'm trying to say is that he was active as a young person in the art world. And also, after that he always had a curiosity about the artist beyond any national classification, just "man as a creative being." This, I think, is the key to Cahill. He was interested in the creative act. And from the ethical or moral point of view, if man could just be interested in man's creative contributions, what a wonderful world this would be! If human beings were interested in other human beings as creative persons, trying to communicate some kind of experience. Therefore, with the ability that he had to write and make himself communicable verbally, he was the proper kind of guy; and also he was interested in artists. He was an unaffected man, not a man to put on any airs; one who hated sham; and he was very courageous and outspoken. He was not a man to pull his punches, but extremely intelligent, very, very sensitive, and therefore a very good organizer because he was also quite philosophic. When he went to Oriental philosophy he could learn from it rather than putting on the gesture of humility in order to become superior, which many people become today: all of those followers of Zen deny all values. Why? Because it makes them seem superior. It's a form of vanity. A posture.

Betty Hoag: A personal thing.

Lorser Feitelson: Yes, a posture. But he was not that kind. There was no baloney about this man. This was no impresser. This was no ham actor. This was a man who respected humanity and had great dreams for it.

Betty Hoag: How lucky our country was that he was here at this time! And, as you pointed out, able to preserve something of our whole culture, even though it was a sad, dreadful time, then.

Lorser Feitelson: Yes. But he also knew how to meet a situation. As they sometimes say, you're pulled by such obstacles, if when we are going in a certain direction and we know we want to get to a certain place and yet find a thing blocking us, most of us become discouraged and say "the hell with it," we're licked. Well, the other fellow can say, "Wait a minute, why don't you go around it, get around the thing?" This is the type of fellow he was. He never lost his objective.

Betty Hoag: He must have been a marvelous man. I have some further questions about the whole Project like whether you feel in general that the work done under the Federal Arts Project helped the history of art in California or hindered it? A pretty big question.

Lorser Feitelson: Oh, only an enemy in politics would say it didn't help. I kept out of politics because I believe in the artist and I have no illusions about politics itself. But always in every political movement there is an idealist who knows how to use any kind of administration, and there are people who were on the Art Project and know in

their heart of hearts the good it has done, but for some perverse reason love to speak against it. They're like the kid who walks down a deserted street and throws bricks through glass windows.

Betty Hoag: He doesn't know why he does it really?

Lorser Feitelson: He enjoys the destruction but he knows all the time it's wrong. And the things that these people say about the Project that are unkind are vicious and malicious lies. Because every artist of any consequence that I can think of today of that generation—past forty—you'll find had his greatest impetus from the Project.

Betty Hoag: For one thing they certainly must have gotten to know the works of many other artists at this time and thought more about their own work.

Lorser Feitelson: It gave them a chance to paint. It gave them a chance to show their works. Now one of the wonderful things that they did was to have art centers in areas that were considered, as we would say, culturally underprivileged areas, which didn't know what a museum was. You could talk to such people about great achievements of Cezanne, about Van Gogh, and they wouldn't know what you were talking about.

Betty Hoag: Or ever would have known.

Lorser Feitelson: It was felt also that they were culturally starved, so they conceived the idea that all these wonderful things that were being done by artists should be shown throughout the entire country. After all, the paintings were public property so they had what you might call packaged exhibitions in boxes—boxes full of paintings with instructions for exhibiting them, and instructions about how to repack them—went to out-of-the-way places like Butte, Montana—well, that is a big city—but went to areas that never had had any art exhibitions. Show after show! So they were in communication with the outside; what New York saw, they saw. And before you knew it little art centers were putting on exhibitions of their own artists for their own people.

Betty Hoag: And of course they had schools too, teaching the people who wanted to learn.

Lorser Feitelson: Yes. That also helped, teaching people how to approach these paintings. So this is another idea that came from Cahill to spread these things. What good does a picture do when it's lying in the basement of a museum.

Betty Hoag: I was wondering whether the National Art Week exhibitions of 1938 and 1940 about which you spoke were part of the Federal Art Project?

Lorser Feitelson: Yes. That was done through the Government WPA Art Program and the President. The President declared National Art Week. The mechanism was through the art projects, which in turn organized the influential people of each area to get the space and mechanics of the thing, to get these exhibits up.

Betty Hoag: Miss Wurdemann said to ask you about Mr. Watson, who was President of International Business Machines Company. He did such a wonderful thing buying one from each show. Is that correct?

Lorser Feitelson: Yes.

Betty Hoag: All through the United States.

Lorser Feitelson: Yes, but you must realize a lot of things could be bought in those days for very little, like the Jackson Pollocks that sell now for hundreds of thousands of dollars, paintings which today are all name artists.

Betty Hoag: Probably at that time selling things at all meant a great deal, didn't it?

Lorser Feitelson: Yes. But also just realize many of our public buildings now have works of art and probably don't even know it! Some institutions have them in the basement. It's their property and some of these institutions should find out what they have and put them in a proper place. Because many were painted by the men who will be considered the artists of tomorrow, our great culture makers. Just like what happened in the past.

Betty Hoag: There are so many of the artists who aren't with us anymore on the Project whom you might remember, and I would like to ask you about some of them: one is Arthur Durston.

Lorser Feitelson: Yes.

Betty Hoag: Did you and your wife know him?

Lorser Feitelson: Yes, I not only knew him but I knew him well. I don't know if I knew him before the Project or not. He was on the Project. When it first opened I was asked to work out an exhibit at a gallery I was connected

with and then I got into a mix-up with the gallery. I wanted to present modern art and I gave Durston a show—in fact I gave him two shows. He was English-born, you know, and had gone through terrible misery. And it's a very, very small world: recently when I met Miss Ankrum I found that she had known him. She has some of his pictures. And when he died suddenly—one of our gals had gone up to pose for him—my Helen went up there—what was the situation there at Durston's? You went to pick up Mary, the model, or what?

Helen Lundeberg: I took her there.

Lorser Feitelson: Oh!

Betty Hoag: Miss Ankrum says that he had probably had been near starvation for so long that when he finally was eating his body couldn't take it.

Lorser Feitelson: Well, he told me that when he first came to this country—his parents in England were against this art—they didn't understand it. So he worked down South somewhere, in Georgia I think, in the lumber area. They cut up lumber—I don't know what they did with all the pieces—they had a machine that cuts the wood into small bits and he was down below pulling the sawdust out, as he said, from dark to dawn, before it was light. And then, talk about slave labor! The money that he had he could only spend at their stores!

Betty Hoag: The company?

Lorser Feitelson: Never had a cent of his own.

Betty Hoag: I wonder why he had come to this country in the first place?

Lorser Feitelson: He was very poor. England wasn't any better at that time.

Betty Hoag: What was he doing in Georgia?

Lorser Feitelson: Probably escaping the lack of interest in his art. So he came to this country. Finally got to San Francisco; I think it was San Francisco. He looked like a skeleton.

Betty Hoag: He was not married?

Lorser Feitelson: No.

Betty Hoag: In one of the catalogues of the Los Angeles County Museum of 1939 I notice that there was an easel painting in oil on canvas, *The Flood*, and then a lithograph *The Fisherman*. These were both done under the Project. Do you remember them at all or anything about his work?

Lorser Feitelson: No, I don't remember those paintings. Let me see, I've got something here if I can find it. He had a print in the World's Fair of 1940 or 1939.

(Betty Hoag: As we looked at this book we realized it was long past midnight and decided to continue this conversation with Mr. Feitelson after he returned from New York where he was having an exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art. This was to be in about a month from this interview.)

[END OF SESSION]

[SECOND SESSION, JUNE 9, 1964]

Betty Hoag: Mr. Feitelson, we are continuing our talk of several weeks ago and I think we'll start at the beginning, at the time when you took over after Mr. Mac-Gurrin had left the Project.

Lorser Feitelson: That's right.

Betty Hoag: Tell me how the reorganization went, please.

Lorser Feitelson: It was a mess and everything was disrupted within the organization. The Project was threatened not with abolition but with being reduced, simply by having had the budget reduced. We would have had, out of necessity, to reduce the number of workers. Unfortunately when we were dealing with murals, this was a very strange thing: when a painting was put into a public building, everybody became conscious he was a taxpayer, and therefore felt he was also an art critic. And he became a compulsive letter writer. And you'll find that the Government was very, very earnest in its reaction: it considered everything people wrote in. And besides that, political difficulties had been taken on. The Red boys were organizing them, and there were a lot of Nazis raising Cain. So Buckley Mac-Gurrin found himself out, and so did the other head, Partridge. I was asked to be a supervisor of murals and this was the first time they had had one.

Betty Hoag: Was this just for murals that you came in at this time?

Lorser Feitelson: Yes. I had been doing murals before for the Government on the WPA, or whatever it was called at that time. And the first thing I did was to organize my muralists into designers and what you might call top assistants and then the lesser ones who were to assist in the Project, because every mural necessitated a number of helpers to work within a limitation of time, for the buildings were to be dedicated at specified dates. This has been the tradition in murals. The number one necessity was to get people to be able to carry out the design according to the way the designer had planned it. Also, after the design had been made and okayed by the supervisor, it had to be okayed by the sponsor before the contracts were signed.

Betty Hoag: The “sponsor” meaning the Government or the person in charge of the post office—

Lorser Feitelson: No, it would be another governmental agency.

Betty Hoag: --who was the sponsor?

Lorser Feitelson: Well, the sponsor would be a public supported institution. It could be a hospital. For example, one was done in Duarte, California. Or it could be a library, or school building, or a city hall—tax-supported institutions.

Betty Hoag: I see; they were putting up part of the money for it?

Lorser Feitelson: They put up one to our three, or to our four. I can't remember the exact proportion. But we could not put, say, five to the one. Therefore, we had to work within the limitations. The number of dollars to be spent for all the people and materials, even to the scaffolds, to the carting, everything was charged against that Project.

Betty Hoag: Mr. Feitelson, at this time did “murals” mean just ones that were done in tempera, or painted murals, or did it include mosaic ones?

Lorser Feitelson: No, a mural meant anything that was to be fixed to a wall, then the media.

Betty Hoag: In other words, Mr. King's work came under this?

Lorser Feitelson: Yes, I think King painted some of his on canvas and applied them because many of the walls that were decorated were old walls and could not be prepared to take, say, fresco. Very few buildings are prepared for fresco. You have to have a certain support beneath the thing. But also this was about the time that a change in the structure of buildings was started, which you, as an architect's wife, will understand. Acoustic plaster was being used, particularly for public buildings, and it was applied to a separate wall which was made of a steel mesh. It stood perhaps about twelve to sixteen inches from the original reinforced concrete wall. Behind this wall went the pipings.

Betty Hoag: So there was no support?

Lorser Feitelson: Correct. And this acoustic plaster had to be preserved for its acoustical properties. Now, if we were to cover this with a film of paint, we would have undone it, so we developed a technique of painting with stains.

Betty Hoag: Oh really!

Lorser Feitelson: Yes. Helen (Helen Lundeberg, Mrs. Feitelson) did quite a number—just the oil paint mixed with kerosene or turpentine and just on the tops of the globules so it retained and kept the mural what we call open or vignette, giving it a little paint but avoiding getting a real film over this thing. It may have reduced it a bit, but I don't think more than ten percent, if that; not much.

Betty Hoag: Aesthetically this gave many of them a very romantic, soft appearance.

Lorser Feitelson: Yes. Yes. But essentially what we were planning while we were doing this was to train our workers so that when the Project ended, or when they went out on their own, they would be able to be self-supporting, by knowing how to prime these things, what the procedure is. Because there were many things they had to know: for example, that the scaffolds had to be okayed by the Los Angeles City Safety Department, and that only so many people could be on these scaffolds at the same time.

Betty Hoag: Very complicated.

Lorser Feitelson: So they were being trained. Also when the designer made a sketch I'd have him make what we called a procedure chart. He took a section of his painting, a retracing, and made it just the actual size on a board. That was fixed with, say, the acoustic plaster. Then we had the thing marked into strips. Supposing this were the sketch in this rectangle, (Mr. Feitelson demonstrates) here is the drawing, and the ground is already

there, just like the wall. We have liners here. Now he makes the first drawings and the first colors. Then the second thing he develops is what goes on next. He starts from number two, and then does the third; until you get down to the last procedure. And every one of the workers follows that procedure. So the thing looks as if it had been designed by one person.

Betty Hoag: Were these then sent in for an okay from the Government?

Lorser Feitelson: Well, we were the government. We represented—

Betty Hoag: Oh, you represented them?

Lorser Feitelson: Yes.

Betty Hoag: I see. I asked because some of the artists told me that a third of the way through they had to send in a picture of how much they'd done. Was that just for the Treasury Department?

Lorser Feitelson: Those are Treasury jobs and they had nothing to do with us. It was under a different kind of setup. Of course they had no supervisors, so in order to know just how the money was being expended, you see, they gave the money in installments; that way they were paid in proportion to what they had finished.

Betty Hoag: Thank you. I wanted to understand the difference.

Lorser Feitelson: On our Project the artists were constantly under our supervision. Now, a little later, not much later, I was given the directorship over all the painting, etchings and anything that was being done on the Project and—

Betty Hoag: How did you manage this?

Lorser Feitelson: It was very simple. To make sure that we had top people for each department.

Betty Hoag: You put one person in charge of each of the sections?

Lorser Feitelson: That's right. That's right. And it was very easy to because, after all, all the designs still had to go through our desk. I would correct the thing and so on. But my job also was to appoint and to fire: I had the nastiest job in the world. The easel project interested me very much because there were so many people who were not fitted for monumental types of work: that was not their temperament. We were not helping them by asking them to do certain things which others really could do much better. Instead, they were asked to make easel paintings, and these paintings—watercolors, et cetera—of course were distributed to the various schools, and so on. Now the thing that I thought was a great opportunity was to get the artists first of all to have confidence in the supervisor so that they would give their utmost of what they themselves sincerely believed in. Not to try to please me. So the office was working with many types of paintings in what we would call experimental art, like Charlie Mattox's who is doing very well now. He's up in San Francisco. He is very famous on the national scene for his experimental art.

Betty Hoag: What kind of thing was he doing on the Project?

Lorser Feitelson: He was doing easel pictures, experimental pictures. So I took all the experimental artists and kept them together. Every other Monday I had just a half hour get-together with their pictures and we discussed the things. They felt that they had a little world of their own. I did this with the different types of painters, from the less adventurous down to the most conservative. Then every six weeks we would have a conference with all the easel painters, and we would bring up these pictures and let each artist who worked on them, without trying to be eloquent or ostentatious just tell what he had been doing, so all the others could understand. After a while we broke down all the prejudices, and each one knew he would be appreciated if he worked in his own style.

Betty Hoag: Then this was really like a school for them?

Lorser Feitelson: Yes, but it was also what we called a civilized attitude towards art. Of course we were thinking that, after all, this was not going to go on forever; that while they were getting a living from Government support, they should also be preparing themselves to further their own art. That was the motive.

Betty Hoag: Did you have the Index of American Design?

Lorser Feitelson: Everything was under us, everyone. We appointed the various people. We were responsible.

Betty Hoag: That was quite a large group!

Lorser Feitelson: Well, it meant I sometimes went out in the field together with Wright. We traveled up and down

the Coast trying to seek the material and make arrangements for it to be used by the Index of American Design. For example, a wonderful fresco—tempera painting it probably was—on sailcloth—I think I told you about it—it was at the mission of—oh, God, what was the name of that mission?

Betty Hoag: Purisima?

Lorser Feitelson: No. Hannah, (Feitelson addresses his wife, Helen) where were those Stations of the Cross? Which mission?

Helen Feitelson: San Gabriel.

Lorser Feitelson: San Gabriel, that's right. They had them outdoors in the patio with a slight little cover above them, and this had been painted on old sailcloth by the Indians of the mission. And these were the strangest things you've ever seen. They were the Indians' ideas of Christ, of Christianity; and they used the costumes that they saw around them—soldiers with strange hats—absolutely charming because it was so naïve. Well, we made copies of these things. We photographed them and had people come down with color to match them because they were falling to pieces. We talked the church into putting them indoors to be conserved under glass, because they are frightfully important.

Betty Hoag: How recently had they been made?

Lorser Feitelson: They probably were made in the early nineteenth century.

Betty Hoag: I see.

Lorser Feitelson: Or perhaps even a little earlier than that. When these missions were being built. (Note: San Gabriel is dated 1771.)

Betty Hoag: Did they preserve them? Are they still there?

Lorser Feitelson: Yes. Yes.

Betty Hoag: And the Index contains the records by paintings?

Lorser Feitelson: Yes, well it had all kinds of paintings of all the various objects which left their influence on our California culture. We had to dig these things up. So that was a wonderful project. We had key men taking care of all these projects of course.

Betty Hoag: Since you've mentioned the missions, I'll ask one of the questions I had planned to ask you tonight. I understand that they did work in restoration of three or four missions?

Lorser Feitelson: Yes, yes.

Betty Hoag: Do you remember any in particular?

Lorser Feitelson: I can't remember. Do you remember any of those missions, Hannah, where they were doing some exterior restoration?

Betty Hoag: I have the names of some of them. I just wondered if I were to name them, whether you'd remember?

Lorser Feitelson: I recall one over a doorway. We had removed the paint—there were some designs there—until we got down to the very first layer of paint, which meant it had been painted by the American Indians; and we got those designs of theirs.

Betty Hoag: They had been whitewashed?

Lorser Feitelson: Yes, for centuries. Every time it had been redecorated there had been some changes and so on; but we wanted to get down to the originals.

Betty Hoag: And you were able to restore them?

Lorser Feitelson: Oh yes. We had a technical department, something else that we had organized. Before any mural was executed, or before we even signed the contract, we wanted to know the condition of the wall. We had the things measured by a technical man who is still out here. He is a wonderful man by the name of Joe Sutter. He is a famous restorer.

Betty Hoag: Oh, he's at Stendahl Gallery?

Lorser Feitelson: He was at Stendahl's.

Betty Hoag: You think he isn't anymore?

Lorser Feitelson: No.

Betty Hoag: They may know where he is. I'll ask them.

Lorser Feitelson: Well, Joe would give us a pretty good idea of the physical condition of the walls. Also, we had trouble with murals, particularly canvases; when they were supposed to adhere, there would be some kind of chemical action between the chemicals of the walls and the glue beneath the canvas itself; air pockets of gas would form, and they would blister, you see. Well, he was the man to come down and know how to perforate the canvas and get out the glue inside. Of course it's quite a delicate job. Very few artists know how to adhere a canvas. Naturally many of these paintings were done with canvas, and the canvases never were prepared long enough. Another problem was that they had to fit exactly, and Joe was the man to help, again. Most of the walls are not square. The ceiling line varies up and down, as you know, in some of these old buildings. With the murals that we were making for these places, we found very often that the measurements we took as just generalized measurements were incorrect. There would be variations in the walls that were not perfectly vertical or perfectly horizontal. The top and the bottom were not parallel, you know. So we had this technical department. Also the colors that we bought had to be examined chemically to make sure that we were not being gyped. The canvases were thus prepared under supervision of this department. Everything was organized in a very professional way which equipped all of the people working there with an experience that they couldn't possibly have gotten anywhere else. So when they went out on their own they knew how to do this thing.

Betty Hoag: That is wonderful! I have some more questions on the missions. You didn't do any new murals for them on the Project?

Lorser Feitelson: No. Is there a mission in Lompoc? I can't remember what in the world we were doing up there, but we were there.

Betty Hoag: Near Lompoc is La Purisima, built in 1787.

Lorser Feitelson: Purisima, yes.

Betty Hoag: I was going to ask you particularly about it.

Lorser Feitelson: It's been so long, I hardly remember.

Betty Hoag: The CCC boys restored it.

Lorser Feitelson: Yes. They had nothing to do with our Project.

Betty Hoag: No. They cleaned the beehive ovens, restored the bells so one can ring them today, and the fountain, which had been used for both drinking and laundry, and they did a tremendous landscaping job. I wondered if that came under the Art Department at all, because it would have been a branch of art research.

Lorser Feitelson: No, no. Under the Arts we did some work for the various museums, like the Museum of Science and Industry in Exposition Park. There we had some murals dealing with agriculture, and so on. Also under our Project we had some people who were doing certain things with their plants there, preserving the plants. I can't remember what the devil it was all about, it was so long ago. And also down in San Diego in Balboa Park, with the Museum of—not Natural History—I suppose it was Anthropology. I don't exactly remember.

Betty Hoag: It might still be there.

Lorser Feitelson: Oh, I doubt it very much because this was almost twenty-four years ago, around 1940.

Betty Hoag: There were panoramas built at the Los Angeles County Museum.

Lorser Feitelson: Yes. We built displays for them, and so on. We had designers doing those things.

Betty Hoag: There were three other ones that had some work done. I wonder if I tell you the names of the missions you might remember? One was Santa Inez (1804), near Santa Inez and Solvang. Do you remember anything about it?

Lorser Feitelson: I know we had a whole slue of these jobs, but I didn't see all of them. I could not get away from the Project very often, but the supervisor of that department would be sent up there. Of course photographs were made all the time, for two reasons: for our record; and secondly, to win public confidence and publicity.

Information about what was being done with their California area was sent out everywhere. We had a whole battery of fine people who at one time had held very fine jobs on newspapers before the Depression knocked them out. But we still had this terrible, terrible time breaking through the hostile press.

Betty Hoag: Did the Federal Writers Project help any with it?

Lorser Feitelson: No, we had nothing to do with the Federal Writers.

Betty Hoag: I wondered whether you had combined in any way?

Lorser Feitelson: No, we had our own press. We had a whole battery of these people, and they did an excellent job.

Betty Hoag: I understand that some of the work that the artists did was to make serigraphs of the Indian rock paintings. Was that in our area or just on the Northern Project?

Lorser Feitelson: Of rock paintings?

Betty Hoag: Done by prehistoric Indians.

Lorser Feitelson: That was not in our Project. I have an idea this Project probably would have been a little farther east, perhaps in Arizona. I can't remember who was head of that.

Betty Hoag: They did it in California.

Lorser Feitelson: In California?

Betty Hoag: Yes. Inland from Ojai, up towards Taft, that area.

Lorser Feitelson: Well, that would be under us, but I can't remember about it.

Betty Hoag: Well, it may be that artists in the northern part of the state came down.

Lorser Feitelson: No, they couldn't come down. Ours went up as far north as Saint Maria, I think.

Betty Hoag: Speaking of Indians, what about one of the Project workers, White Bead Quann?

Lorser Feitelson: Oh, she was a Cherokee Indian, the ugliest gal you've ever seen, and the sweetest human being! She was encouraged to make, in her own way, drawings that dealt with the folklore of her people.

Betty Hoag: Was this for the Index?

Lorser Feitelson: It was for the Index of American Design. She was just marvelous, just marvelous! There were made in silk-screen. Some of them were lithographs and perhaps hand-colored. Oh, she was just wonderful!

Betty Hoag: I think as a final work on the Projects someone should be sent around to all public buildings to look up such things because no one knows what has become of them. The City Hall, for instance, has many things; and all of the schools do.

Lorser Feitelson: And some of them have been lost or stolen and—

Betty Hoag: It would be a wonderful project for someone's thesis in college.

Lorser Feitelson: Yes. And many office workers have taken them home although they didn't belong to them. All these things were government property. One hundred years, that's the length of time it was lent to them. But this is the history of art. The history of art is the history of loot.

Betty Hoag: Well, I suppose so.

Lorser Feitelson: This is true.

Betty Hoag: But it's also a history of trying to find them again.

Lorser Feitelson: Yes, that's true. It's wonderful! It's probably more fun to make a discovery than to make the work of art!

Betty Hoag: I would love to hunt for them. It would be very interesting.

Lorser Feitelson: It is. It is. It's like I feel right now. I just came back from New York where I bought some six or eight drawings, old master drawings. I'm trying to identify them. I've had years and years of experience but some of these things are almost impossible to ascribe.

Betty Hoag: Aren't you having fun?

Lorser Feitelson: Oh, they are lots of fun. How about a bit of coffee? We are ready for it. Are you cold?

Betty Hoag: No.

Lorser Feitelson: Of course we can close the window.

Betty Hoag: In relation to the easel painting, did you have the International Business Machines man, I think it was Mr. Watson—

Lorser Feitelson: Watkins.

Betty Hoag: --get paintings here?

Lorser Feitelson: No, no. No private collector or commercial concern could get the work that was made on the government funds. It had to be tax-supported.

Betty Hoag: He must have circulated his own private show for the WPA Art Project.

Lorser Feitelson: Yes, perhaps he did that, but I don't remember any exhibition that we had. We couldn't even expend the time of any worker. None of us had the right to do that.

Betty Hoag: I wanted to ask you if you knew about one of the artists whom I can't seem to fit into this. It's Conrad Buff.

Lorser Feitelson: He was not on the Project. I think he may have been, in the very beginning, as an easel painter.

Betty Hoag: He was on it, I believe, in 1934.

Lorser Feitelson: Yes, when they first invited the artists, that's how I got on.

Betty Hoag: Oh, really?

Lorser Feitelson: Yes.

Betty Hoag: Well, he'd done pictures of Boulder Dam and they were going to be used for the Santa Monica High School. Of course we know that they are not there, and I wondered what happened.

Lorser Feitelson: Well, the chances are these were large paintings, what we called portable murals. His work is very decorative. He is still alive, you know. And he is one of our truly great artists, who in the beginning here, when there were very few artists of real merit, contributed a great deal. His work should be better known. We were planning to put on a show, what we call a preview. We don't tell the artists, but they really are memorial shows, because he's on in years.

Betty Hoag: Oh, I see.

Lorser Feitelson: We believe an artist should be honored and attend his own memorial show.

Betty Hoag: I think it's a wonderful thing for you to do.

Lorser Feitelson: Yes.

Betty Hoag: But he wasn't on the Project?

Lorser Feitelson: Just in the beginning when they didn't know how to organize this thing. He was having a rough time during the Depression, like everybody else. The galleries were all closed. You couldn't sell anything.

Betty Hoag: Why didn't he stay on then?

Lorser Feitelson: He is a very stubborn, humorless Swiss. His wife is a wonderful woman, and at one time, in the very beginning of the cultural renaissance here, she was the curator of the Museum. He made lithographs, and she would write, and he illustrated her writings. Their folios were sold. I think they have a son who is an architect.

Betty Hoag: They do?

Lorser Feitelson: Yes, a modern architect. And they are grand people. But he is a man with definite ideals, uncompromising.

Betty Hoag: I wanted to ask you about a mural I think you did, which we haven't talked about, for the Cedars of Lebanon Hospital. Was that one of the Project things?

Lorser Feitelson: No, that was my own.

Betty Hoag: Was this before the Project days?

Lorser Feitelson: No, I'm just trying to think when I painted it. It was done off the Project, but probably I was still on the project. I did it as a gift to them for some services rendered to my daughter. I can't remember when it was.

Betty Hoag: I see. It didn't sound like Project work.

Lorser Feitelson: No, no. It was something I did on my own.

Betty Hoag: Then of the ones that you did on the Project we have the Thomas Edison Junior High School—that's at 6200 Hooper Avenue. You did that with Mrs. Feitelson (Helen Lundeberg then) in 1939.

Lorser Feitelson: Well yes. And we had quite a crew working with us.

Betty Hoag: That was three large murals?

Lorser Feitelson: Let's see, three, yes. Two large ones, and one was a square with Edison in the center. My God, I had forgotten about it.

Betty Hoag: 360 square feet. Two at eighteen by seven feet and one at—

Lorser Feitelson: My God!

Betty Hoag: I have the titles. I wanted to ask you about the research for them because that must have been very, very interesting.

Lorser Feitelson: We had a battery of people who did nothing else but research on the apparatus. We don't know anything about what the early modern scientists, Marconi, Maxwell, or O'Henry or Faraday looked like.

Betty Hoag: Did they also suggest the subject for this?

Lorser Feitelson: Oh, yes. It had to be approved before we could paint.

Betty Hoag: Then the Hall of Records had ten murals by different artists; both you and Mrs. Feitelson had murals there, along with Buckley Mac-Gurrin, and Charles Hulbert Davis.

Lorser Feitelson: Yes, yes.

Betty Hoag: Yours was called Czar Issues Russian American Charter.

Lorser Feitelson: That's right. It shows Rezanov obtaining the treaty for Czar Paul I, of Russia.

Betty Hoag: In 1799.

Lorser Feitelson: Granting the charter for California, I think it was. He died in California.

Betty Hoag: Oh, did he? He seems to have been a scoundrel.

Lorser Feitelson: He had married the Spanish governor's daughter.

Betty Hoag: Yes, the lovely Conception Arguello, daughter of Governor Arrillaga. After obtaining the supplies he wanted for his men on the "Juno" he sailed away on a May day of 1806, promising to return for her; she waited thirty-six years but he never came back!

Lorser Feitelson: That I didn't know. He died on his way back.

Betty Hoag: The Southgate Library murals you did with Albert King and Henry Allen Nord—is this correct?

Lorser Feitelson: Southgate?

Betty Hoag: Because it sounds to me like those would have been mosaics and you wouldn't have been working on them.

Lorser Feitelson: No.

Betty Hoag: Then it was just that you were just in charge of the murals.

Lorser Feitelson: Yes.

Betty Hoag: That's why your name was given in connection with them? The same would be true of the Long Beach Auditorium.

Lorser Feitelson: Yes. Well, that was before I took it over.

Betty Hoag: I see.

Lorser Feitelson: There were no supervisors at that time. That's when the artists—Wright and his gang—did things with different artists. It was just a hodgepodge.

Betty Hoag: What about the Hooper Avenue School?

Lorser Feitelson: Yes, I did the Hendrick Hudson and what was the other one? I can't remember.

Betty Hoag: You had two of them. The other was Daniel Boone.

Lorser Feitelson: Yes.

Betty Hoag: I'll have to get down to see them. I had trouble finding Hooper Avenue on the map. It must be near Jefferson the other side of the Coliseum some place.

Lorser Feitelson: It is down in the colored district.

Betty Hoag: Jumping way back chronologically, which I shouldn't be doing, you did at least three paintings on the earlier Project in 1934. I don't know where they are and I wondered if you knew and could tell me about them? One was the Glorification of the Unknown Soldier.

Lorser Feitelson: Yes. In fact that was reproduced. I had a little clipping of it but I don't know what has happened to it. That was in the very beginning when they were publicizing the kind of artists they were going to have on the Project before it was organized. That's because we had a problem; it was really being run by someone—remember this fellow I mentioned? God!—Roufberg, or something like that?—who sat around telling the artists how to paint. He was a politician.

Betty Hoag: You told us about him on the other tape. And another painting about that time was Leaders of American Democracy. It must have been an historical thing. Do you know what it was?

Lorser Feitelson: Yes, a Lincoln and Washington. I did a lot of research on that, too.

Betty Hoag: A third was The Minuteman.

Lorser Feitelson: No.

Betty Hoag: It wasn't?

Lorser Feitelson: No.

Betty Hoag: It sounds so little like the rest of your work that I wondered.

Lorser Feitelson: It may have been something started on historical lines on very practical terms. These things were going to be in the schools. My God, we ought to have American subjects; if the children are going to be exposed to it, let them see these things illustrated by American artists and artists of their own area to familiarize themselves with their own region. People should be proud of the poets from their area, their singers, their artists; instead of presenting everything, even an American historical subject, painted by a Frenchman or by an Englishman or by a New Yorker.

Betty Hoag: As in the case of the German's Washington Crossing the Delaware.

Lorser Feitelson: Yes. Lutz.

Betty Hoag: It always seemed strange to me; and it was in all the grammar school rooms when I was a child.

Lorser Feitelson: Of course there had been very few painters in this country. Most of the American artists were living in England in early days for patronage of their portraits.

Betty Hoag: Now we'll go back to where we started. How long were you with the Project, do you remember?

Lorser Feitelson: I think approximately until the end of the Project, just a few months before it actually closed. It had really ended before I left, and I was anxious to get out of it because I wanted to do some painting, and I was having some difficulties with my divorce. I finally decided I'd better go to Las Vegas. I was told at that time there was a test case, and no one could challenge my divorce. So that was the fini and the beginning of another life.

Betty Hoag: What about the rest of them? Did a lot of the people enlist in the Army? Is that how it petered out?

Lorser Feitelson: Many of them were of age to do so. Also there were jobs all over for these people who had skills.

Betty Hoag: I see. Because of the war. I hadn't thought of that as happening at the end.

Lorser Feitelson: Because in the building of planes and ships we needed craftsmen. So these boys were doing much better working there. And some of them went into the services. In the last year or so we were on the defense program mostly doing work for the Army and Navy. We made torpedo base gadgets which we used for visual education so the military boys could learn. It took them, say, six months to learn how to work a gadget, with the help of the mechanical brains of the service. They learned where the red fluid goes; it means the electric current goes on. That kind of business. So they would learn it in six weeks.

Betty Hoag: I know. I worked for Boeing in Production Illustration, as it was called. And what about schools for the public? Did you have those set up, too, on the Project here?

Lorser Feitelson: Yes, yes. We had a good man by the name of Franchi—Fred Franchi. He's still around. I hadn't seen him for years, and I ran into him a few months ago.

Betty Hoag: Do you remember how it was spelled?

Lorser Feitelson: F-r-a-n-c-h-i.

Betty Hoag: I wonder if he is still teaching.

Lorser Feitelson: No.

Betty Hoag: Were there very many centers?

Lorser Feitelson: Yes.

Betty Hoag: They were very popular in the Northwest area. There must have been many in a city this size!

Lorser Feitelson: Well, ours was channeled. We narrowed it down just to one kind of activity, and God knows it was big enough.

Betty Hoag: What was that—for figure drawing?

Lorser Feitelson: No, teaching youngsters in the underprivileged areas, the settlement houses. Franchi was put in charge and we gave him a crew of people. He did a wonderful job. A very wonderful job.

Betty Hoag: Have you ever heard of any of the children coming out of there and going on to be artists?

Lorser Feitelson: I wouldn't even know who they were.

Betty Hoag: It would be interesting to know.

Lorser Feitelson: They were really wonderful.

Betty Hoag: Frank Stevens was telling me about how much work the Montana Project did at Warm Springs with mentally-disturbed people. That was near the end of the Project and he never heard what happened to any of those cases.

Lorser Feitelson: You'll find that there is a percentage which are always helped. And you'll find the start there.

Betty Hoag: I've often thought that a lot of the pottery that is done today was probably started then.

Lorser Feitelson: Yes.

Betty Hoag: We were living in Spokane, and practically every housewife was learning how to "throw a pot," and now you see ceramics in all the gift shops.

Lorser Feitelson: But ours was really just for underprivileged kids. We had quite a number of teachers, because there were so many settlement houses in the area, you know.

Betty Hoag: About how many, do you remember?

Lorser Feitelson: God, I haven't the remotest idea, but I know that we must have had a crew of about two dozen teachers. And the stories that they told us about those kids would really break your heart. There was one downtown, I think, where maybe there were one or two legitimate kids. Their mothers probably earned a buck this way or that. Fathers, if they had any, were in jail. The teachers got those kids together in class and first thing you know they were fighting. Their imagination was wild. God knows how many ethnic groups were represented in them.

Betty Hoag: They couldn't afford the materials; did the Project supply them?

Lorser Feitelson: The Project, yes.

Betty Hoag: That would be a large financing in itself!

Lorser Feitelson: Yes, yes, yes. It was a beautifully done job because this man believed in it. This man believed in it.

Betty Hoag: Were their works ever shown?

Lorser Feitelson: Yes. They were exhibited right along. And those kids were terrific.

Betty Hoag: Children usually do do good art work.

Lorser Feitelson: Yes, great big drawings.

Betty Hoag: Have you thought about anything more that we should talk about on the tape?

Lorser Feitelson: I don't know. This thing is so vast that any area to me is interesting. It's just a matter of what area. Many things I have just completely forgotten. I can't recall at all until something is brought up, and then all of a sudden the book is opened. All these experiences.

Betty Hoag: Should we turn it off for a few minutes?

Lorser Feitelson: Very well.

Betty Hoag: If you think of something we can come back.

END OF INTERVIEW

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