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Oral history interview with William Hesthal,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with William Hesthal on December 22, 1964. The interview was conducted at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art in Santa Barbara, California by Mary Fuller McChesney for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Robert McChesney is also present.

Interview

Mary Fuller McChesney: This is Mary McChesney interviewing William Hesthal at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art in Santa Barbara, California. The date is December 22, 1964. I'd like to ask you first, where were you born?

William Hesthal: In San Francisco.

Mary Fuller McChesney: What year was that?

William Hesthal: August 24, 1908.

Mary Fuller McChesney: And where did you receive your art training?

William Hesthal: In San Francisco at the California School of Fine Arts, and I spent a year in Europe as well.

Mary Fuller McChesney: How did you first make any contact with any of the government-sponsored art projects?

William Hesthal: It was pretty hard to avoid at that time. It was in the air. Everybody knew about it, and I suppose most of the people working in the area were aware of it. I don't know that there were actual contacts. It seemed to be that people got together and went to work.

Mary Fuller McChesney: Which one of the projects did you go onto first?

William Hesthal: It's hard to say. I think I was doing easel painting and watercolors to begin with. And then I spent a long time designing a mural for Mills College which was finally turned down - it was a mosaic, by the way. It was turned down by, I suppose, the regents of Mills College, the directors or regents. It was a disappointment at the time. It was one of those things that passed by everybody but the regents. It was reproduced in the papers, and the equivalent of the "letters to the editor" boys got hold of it, and there was some dissension, shall we say, and I think it frightened off the University from going through with the project.

Mary Fuller McChesney: How large a mural was it?

William Hesthal: As I remember roughly - it's hard to remember - it was about sixteen by twenty-four feet. It was to be in the foyer of the Music Building.

Mary Fuller McChesney: It was to be done in mosaic?

William Hesthal: In mosaic.

Mary Fuller McChesney: And what was the subject matter?

William Hesthal: It was angels of music, as it were. A lot of flying figures, a kind of Apollo theme, I suppose, with muses. It's hard to even picture it anymore. I think Orpheus and Eurydice were in it somewhere.

Mary Fuller McChesney: Do you know what their objection to it was?

William Hesthal: I think it was probably the style. It was somewhat formalized. I thank God it never was done now, though, because murals are something you can't destroy. But, at the time, it was a disappointment.

Mary Fuller McChesney: Do you know what year that was when you did the design for it?

William Hesthal: I can't remember well, what were the years of the art project?

Mary Fuller McChesney: Well, it started in about '33 and ran to '43, the different ones. In the late 30's?

William Hesthal: Yes, I think it was in the late 30's. Now I'm beginning to question my own chronology. When was the Coit Tower Building? Because I was on that.

Mary Fuller McChesney: 1933.

William Hesthal: Well, then that must have been in between this and the easel project.

Mary Fuller McChesney: You did work on the Coit Tower?

William Hesthal: Yes, I have one of the panels there, the one on the railroads, which I'd just as soon forget.

Mary Fuller McChesney: How large a panel was that?

William Hesthal: Again, I'm guessing, but it wasn't a large one. I think that perhaps it was ten by twelve feet, and it was cut by a window in the middle of it.

Mary Fuller McChesney: Was that a fresco?

William Hesthal: Yes.

Mary Fuller McChesney: Had you done any fresco before you went to work on Coit Tower?

William Hesthal: Yes. Again that was one of the things that everybody around in the area did at that time. I had done some things in the studio, some panels, and things of that kind.

Robert McChesney: Where was your panel placed?

William Hesthal: It's next to John Howard's.

Mary Fuller McChesney: Is that upstairs?

William Hesthal: No, when you come in, to the right.

Mary Fuller McChesney: Oh, yes, right in the entrance hall.

William Hesthal: Yes.

Mary Fuller McChesney: How long did you work on the Coit Tower project?

William Hesthal: The payroll would tell. I can't remember.

Mary Fuller McChesney: But that was the first one you did – the Coit Tower fresco?

William Hesthal: Yes, I think that was the first mural done for WPA.

Mary Fuller McChesney: That was PWA.

William Hesthal: PWA, yes.

Mary Fuller McChesney: Do you remember how it came about that you were asked to do that mural?

William Hesthal: I think that Stafford Duncan was somewhere involved in this. I think the program got a little bit out of hand. Everyone was running in every direction and picking where they would like to do murals, which I wish had happened, and they decided to coordinate the artists and get them all in one place, which for some was a happy solution, for other not too happy.

Mary Fuller McChesney: What was that name you mentioned – Stafford Duncan?

William Hesthal: Stafford Duncan. He was active in the art picture. He wasn't active in the WPA or whatever the initials are. But I know he was involved. I think Dr. Heil at that time was involved, too – Walter Heil –, and I think he was advertising Dr. Heil.

Mary Fuller McChesney: Was he a museum man, or what was his connection with the art project?

William Hesthal: Well, he was an artist, but he was also an art director for one of the advertising agencies. He was a portraitist and painter in the area.

Mary Fuller McChesney: Oh.

William Hesthal: I mean, he had two careers: one as an artist, and one as a business man in the advertising business.

Robert McChesney: He used to be around the Iron Pot a lot.

William Hesthal: No, he wasn't what you'd call bohemian.

Robert McChesney: There was an artist – a commercial artist there.

William Hesthal: No, that was – what was his name? Charlie Duncan.

Robert McChesney: Charlie Duncan, yes.

Mary Fuller McChesney: This man was named Duncan?

William Hesthal: Stafford Duncan. Duncan was his last name.

Mary Fuller McChesney: After the PWA Coit Tower project, did you do any further fresco paintings?

William Hesthal: No, not on the project. I did a lunette at the art school, but that was a mere private commission, not a WPA project.

Mary Fuller McChesney: But then from PWA you went on to the easel project and painted in your own studio?

William Hesthal: Yes. I think I did some watercolors, and I got involved – now I have the chronology straight –, I got involved with this Mills College thing.

Mary Fuller McChesney: When you were on the project as an easel painter, who was your supervisor?

William Hesthal: Bill Gaskin. And I know there was something else. I had too much money or was making too much so that I got on as a – you probably know the classification – but it wasn't the poorest artist classification.

Mary Fuller McChesney: Yes. But you were on relief, or did you have to go on relief?

William Hesthal: No, that's the thing. I wasn't on relief ever on this thing, which, at the time, I felt bitter about.

Robert McChesney: Did you go on as a technical advisor, or something, as a lot of the artists did?

William Hesthal: No, it wasn't technical advisor. Oh, I did lithographs, too, between these things. I remember that. It comes back by just talking about it.

Mary Fuller McChesney: Was that with Raymond Bertrand?

William Hesthal: Ray was there, yes. That's right, he was. Where is he, by the way? Have you run into him?

Mary Fuller McChesney: I can't locate him.

William Hesthal: I know he was sick for awhile. He was in a sanatorium, but I haven't heard since.

Mary Fuller McChesney: How long ago was that?

William Hesthal: You know how you hear these things. They telescope. I would say about five years or so. See, Sargent Johnson was around them too.

Mary Fuller McChesney: Yes, I interviewed Sargent.

William Hesthal: You were doing lithographs then, too, weren't you?

Robert McChesney: No, I was stuck on the Herman Volz mural at the Fair.

William Hesthal: Well, that had nothing to do with the project people, did it?

Robert McChesney: Oh, sure.

William Hesthal: Oh, it did? That's right, at the tail end, yes. I remember now. Where is Herman, by the way?

Robert McChesney: He's in the same place, in Mill Valley.

William Hesthal: He was a painting contractor for awhile, wasn't he?

Robert McChesney: Well, no. I don't think he ever was a contractor. He worked out of the union.

William Hesthal: I thought he was.

Robert McChesney: He might have been. I don't recall. He worked with Carleton Williams. Do you remember

Carleton Williams?

William Hesthal: That's a name, but no face comes with it.

Robert McChesney: Two or three other artists on the project became painters. A lot of them turned out to be house painters.

William Hesthal: Well, Jose Ramis was one, too. Do you run into him? He comes down to visit us quite often.

Robert McChesney: I haven't seen Jose for a long time. I hear about him all the time. Sargent said he saw him quite often.

William Hesthal: Well, he may be in Spain as far as that goes, I guess. We had a Christmas card from him.

Robert McChesney: Somebody said something about this. Didn't he have a daughter or something?

William Hesthal: No, not Jose. Oh, I know how that came about. He traveled in Mexico with a girl who could have been his daughter. That's probably where that came from.

Robert McChesney: He goes back and forth all the time.

William Hesthal: Yes, on nothing. I don't know how he manages it. Of course, in Spain he has a family there, so it costs him nothing except the transportation to get there.

Mary Fuller McChesney: Did you do many lithographs when you were on the project?

William Hesthal: Yes, quite a few, yes.

Mary Fuller McChesney: Do you remember what they looked like, or what they were about?

William Hesthal: Yes, I think everyone was American Scene at the time. I think they probably were, too. Yes, I know they were. There were one or two I remember that had rather surrealist overtones, and some were pretty literal, San Francisco houses and San Francisco motifs.

Mary Fuller McChesney: In some of the artists' work, who were on the lithograph project there, was quite a definite surrealist influence, like Shirley Staschen's.

William Hesthal: Yes.

Mary Fuller McChesney: I was wondering, nobody seems to be too clear about how that happened in opposition to the Diego Rivera influence and the American Scene influence, but it crept in some way. Did you ever think about how it came about that there was this surrealist thing going on, too?

William Hesthal: It seems that Dalí had a show or had a number of pictures at that time in the area, and San Francisco seems to be a place where the last big show is likely to make the next annual pretty much like what the last big show was. And I have a feeling that something like this happened. Perhaps a surrealist show was traveling then. You remember the Museum of Modern Art surrealist show was traveling the country.

Robert McChesney: Reuben Kadish was working in that direction.

William Hesthal: Yes, Reuben Kadish.

Robert McChesney: Barbara Olmsted, Clay Spohn, Shirley Staschen, that's four I can think of. They were all definitely influenced.

William Hesthal: Yes, I think this was true.

Robert McChesney: There were surrealist posters out of L.A.

William Hesthal: Actually, I think it was a misunderstanding of surrealism, but the implication was there. I mean, it was surrealism in subject matter more than in feeling.

Mary Fuller McChesney: What sort of paintings did you do when you were on the watercolor project?

William Hesthal: Again, it was more or less using local material, San Francisco material.

Mary Fuller McChesney: Did you go through the city and paint and do landscape?

William Hesthal: No, most of them were done in the studio, very few things on trips.

Mary Fuller McChesney: Who were the other artists who were on the easel project under Gaskin when you were there?

William Hesthal: I think you've mentioned people like Clay Spohn. You mentioned two of them. I think you have them all, the ones you mentioned a moment ago. I've forgotten...

Mary Fuller McChesney: Reuben Kadish?

William Hesthal: Reuben Kadish was one. Oh, and a chap who was rather good, and he disappeared afterwards. He did a mural at the State College when they were on Eight Street out there. He was a Synchronist, or at least associated with the Synchronist movement. So you know who I'm talking about? He did a mural out there in the foyer to an auditorium. He worked with rather prismatic colors.

Mary Fuller McChesney: Hiler?

William Hesthal: Oh no, not Hiler. He was a very reticent chap. He didn't mix. You know who I mean, I think...

Robert McChesney: You've had his name...

William Hesthal: Yes, I'm sure you must have run into him. I think it's one of the best things that was done...

Robert McChesney: Yes, you remember it.

William Hesthal: He had a Paris background. What was his name? I have a feeling he had an Irish kind of name.

Mary Fuller McChesney: He did a mural at State College?

William Hesthal: Yes. Reuben did one there, too. You know that, of course.

Mary Fuller McChesney: Yes. And do you remember where this man's mural was at State College?

William Hesthal: As I remember, it was in an entrance hall, and I think the wall was circular. It wasn't a pure circle, but at least it was a curved area that he worked on, if I remember correctly.

Mary Fuller McChesney: Was it an abstract mural?

William Hesthal: No. The color was abstract, but the draftsmanship was rather academic. Do you picture his style now? It was Synchronist. It broke down - Prismatic colors were used, but the drawing was rather academic, quite figurative and sophisticated.

Robert McChesney: Yes. I know who you're talking about.

William Hesthal: I have one of those memories. If I don't think about it, I might think of it. It's frightful in a lecture when you run into something you know perfectly well and can't remember it.

Robert McChesney: Yes.

William Hesthal: You say your wife has interviewed him or run into his name? You suggested that she had some record of him.

Robert McChesney: Yes.

William Hesthal: Are there no records whatsoever of payrolls or things of this kind?

Robert McChesney: They all disappeared.

William Hesthal: Shocking.

Mary Fuller McChesney: It's rather peculiar.

William Hesthal: What happened to all the things that were done? Disappeared, too?

Robert McChesney: Well, a lot of it was allocated, and you still find a lot of them around.

William Hesthal: We have a lot of prints, most of them not very good. We got a Kuniyoshi out of it, and a Hiler that is rather amusing. That's about all that has any value to it. It was long before my time here, but I suspect

we have a record of what we have, even if we don't use it. I mean, it would take a little digging to get it as WPA out of the general catalogues, because there's no WPA classification per se. I mean, it's catalogued on a lithograph, or as a painting, or an etching.

Robert McChesney: Ferbrache found quite a bit of stuff in the Museum of Art in San Francisco, didn't he?

Mary Fuller McChesney: Yes.

William Hesthal: I think that might be good. I mean, if you're going deeper into this thing. It would mean a considerable amount of work. I mean, to pick it out of the general catalogue, as it were, because I don't think any museum has a note on the catalogue card that will say from the WPA. It won't be indexed under WPA per se.

Mary Fuller McChesney: How long were you on the project in San Francisco?

William Hesthal: I can't remember. I think I was on and off, and that kind of thing, so it's difficult to reconstruct it, you know, as a sum of time.

Mary Fuller McChesney: You did actually design a mural and then execute it?

William Hesthal: Yes, somewhere there are designs and cartoons. I did innumerable ones. There was a full-size cartoon and innumerable drawings and studies and so on.

Mary Fuller McChesney: Was this done through a competition, or were you just asked to do the mural?

William Hesthal: I think there were several working on it, and it ended up that I was asked to do this one. I think at the same time, Maxine Albro was working on one for some place in Oakland, which did get done, I think. I don't know. I've forgotten where that was. It was a public school. And I think the Bruton Sisters did an intarsia for the same place, if this gives you any clues. Did you run into them?

Mary Fuller McChesney: Yes, they've been interviewed, and Maxine, too. She did one for the State College entrance, but I didn't know she did one in Oakland.

William Hesthal: Well, she did some - yes - that's right. And what was that nice Italian man who was a craftsman and a mosaicist? He was a very interesting figure.

Robert McChesney: Yes, I heard a lot about him.

Mary Fuller McChesney: Yes.

Robert McChesney: Don't look at me when it comes to names.

William Hesthal: Yes, well that's my problem, as you can tell by now. Well, I mean, to recall something like that WPA period, and I think most artists feel that it's not the proudest moment of their lives, let's face it.

Mary Fuller McChesney: Why do you say that?

William Hesthal: I think perhaps it was in the air. I think by the nature of the project, most of it was thought of as something for the public and whether it was a deliberate or unconscious adjustment to the situation or not, I think it was part of what they did. I mean, I think it entered into what an artist did. I think, in some way, it was a restriction which consciously or unconsciously kept a good many artists from trying things they might otherwise have tried. In a way, as soon as it was over, not only individuals but the whole art picture exploded, and I think a valuable period ensued.

Mary Fuller McChesney: Do you think that beside the negative aspect of WPA, it had anything positive about it?

William Hesthal: Oh, sure. I mean there's no period that doesn't have good art, but - it would take a historian to evaluate this. In a sense we're terribly close to it, in a historical sense, so it's hard to say.

Mary Fuller McChesney: Well, many people, artists, I've talked to mention the fact that they felt very restricted because of the subject matter that was given, assigned to them when they were doing a mural commission.

William Hesthal: I think that was true, but of course no one forced them to go into WPA. It was a time when money was terribly important. It was better than working for a living, I guess.

Robert McChesney: I think most of the artists knew, too, that it actually saved their careers as artists. If it hadn't been for this, they might have been something else. They might have been forced into some other profession...

William Hesthal: Yes, that's true.

Robert McChesney: They couldn't make a living at it at the time. Most of these people couldn't make a living as artists.

William Hesthal: Oh no. Artists had a hard time, and the whole economic situation was very bad.

Robert McChesney: An artist was even worse off than the rest of the people.

William Hesthal: The younger artists have no idea how bad it was.

Mary Fuller McChesney: Do you think it might be a good idea for the government of the United States to sponsor the arts again in any way?

William Hesthal: I think it's important that the government recognize that the arts exist. Nowhere except perhaps the Renaissance and a few great periods in the history of the world has government sponsorship brought forth great work, but I think it's very important that it be officially recognized. I mean, officially sponsored, but I don't think a WPA project is the answer to making a great period in art. This is a personal opinion. France since the fifteenth century practically has officially sponsored the arts, and it's been usually in opposition to the official sponsorship that great art has been produced.

Mary Fuller McChesney: Do you think there might be some other way to organize some kind of sponsorship which would avoid the difficulties the WPA project ran into? The reason I ask this is that several artists have talked about the possibility, and they thought it might be a good idea for the government to set up some sort of competitive sponsorship.

William Hesthal: It surely wouldn't do any harm. I mean, after all, great art isn't made to order. It could occur, but... I think that when the government is involved, by its very nature, it has to think in terms of what the population will digest, and the lag between what's significant in any of the arts and what's understood generally, I think, is quite enormous. For that reason I think it's unlikely - I mean it could happen, but it's unlikely that great work would be forthcoming in a competition. But who knows? It could be, but it seems to me unlikely.

Mary Fuller McChesney: Have you seen any of the WPA work done in the eastern part of the United States on the project? I was wondering if you could compare it with the work from here?

William Hesthal: In reproduction mostly. I probably have seen some.

Mary Fuller McChesney: I wonder if you'd been aware of any regional differences in the production from the West to the East Coast?

William Hesthal: Oh, I suppose there were differences, but it makes me think of Victor Arnautoff. He was a slicker at these competitions. I mean, his murals are all over the U.S., so I don't know about the regional differences.

Mary Fuller McChesney: How many murals did he do anyway?

William Hesthal: Oh, he must have done a half dozen or so.

Robert McChesney: Really? Was this the WPA of TRAP?

William Hesthal: That was afterwards, a competition business, post offices.

Mary Fuller McChesney: Treasury Department.

William Hesthal: Treasury Department project.

Mary Fuller McChesney: I didn't know he had done that many, though.

William Hesthal: Well, it seems to me he was always working on it.

Mary Fuller McChesney: Well, Jose Moya Del Pino did a great many.

William Hesthal: Yes. Who was the chap that did ceramics as well afterwards, the German or Austrian fellow?

Mary Fuller McChesney: Franz Bergmann?

William Hesthal: Franz Bergmann, yes.

Mary Fuller McChesney: Are there any WPA murals here in Santa Barbara that you know of?

William Hesthal: I don't recollect any that are still in existence. There must have been at one time.

Robert McChesney: Nothing in the post office?

William Hesthal: No, at least I haven't seen any if there are. I go there so seldom.

Mary Fuller McChesney: Did you have any contact yourself in San Francisco or the Bay Area with any other mural projects?

William Hesthal: No. I knew Bill Gaskin quite well. He was a very dear close friend of mine, so I was aware of a great many things that were going on, but no official contact. I talked to a great many people.

Mary Fuller McChesney: You didn't design any others yourself?

William Hesthal: No, I didn't.

Mary Fuller McChesney: Do you have any other thoughts about the period in relation to American artists and American art?

William Hesthal: Well, I think you mentioned the real significant thing it did. It pulled a great many artists through a very tough period and enabled them to go on with their careers. This must be a very incoherent interview.

Mary Fuller McChesney: During the time you were at the Coit Tower, were there any demonstrations or protests?

William Hesthal: Oh, Zakheim painted something controversial - What did he do? A hammer and sickle, I think, on a Bull Durham tobacco sack.

Robert McChesney: Oh, is that what it was?

William Hesthal: It didn't amount to anything as far as I remember. I remember it was at the time of the Spanish War.

Mary Fuller McChesney: There was quite a bit of controversy about opening up the Coit Tower. Actually the Park Commission held up the opening.

William Hesthal: Oh, did they? I don't remember that. Maybe I was for it. Maybe I had my reasons for it. I think this may have been in retrospect maybe more important than I thought then. I remember the Artists Union and all that kind of thing. Remember the poet...

Mary Fuller and Robert McChesney: Rexroth?

William Hesthal: Kenneth Rexroth was involved.

Robert McChesney: That was the Artists and Writers Union.

William Hesthal: Yes, Artists and Writers. Oh, I did do another design for a mural incidentally. Something for the auditorium. Is it Polk Hall or Laughlin Hall? Laughlin Hall... you know there's one on each side...

Mary Fuller McChesney: Polk Hall? Where is that?

William Hesthal: In the auditorium. There are three. It's one of the three. There's a main room, the Pacific Auditorium. You know, those big rooms on each side.

Mary Fuller McChesney: Do you remember what the design was?

William Hesthal: Something about the history of California. Nothing small or modest about our projects in those days.

Mary Fuller McChesney: Was this to be a mosaic or fresco?

William Hesthal: No, it was to be painted. That was an enormous thing. I can't even remember the end of it.

Mary Fuller McChesney: Was there much contact as far as you recall between the Artists project and the Writers project in San Francisco?

William Hesthal: Well, you know as individuals there was. I don't think there was any official contact. As I remember it, we were all milling about. We saw each other all the time.

Mary Fuller McChesney: There was never any collaboration, though, as far as any projects?

William Hesthal: Well, in that Artists and Writers Union – who’s the stout fellow that died... Dr. Sharp. Do you remember him? He was quite active at the time.

Robert McChesney: Dr. Sharp?

William Hesthal: Yes, he was stout.

Robert McChesney: Oh, Ray Strong was on the project.

William Hesthal: Yes, Ray Strong. He may be here in Santa Barbara now. Or up north again. He seems to come and go.

Mary Fuller McChesney: Who was this Dr. Sharp you mentioned? Is he an artist, too?

William Hesthal: No, he was an intellectual, shall we say. He was a very brilliant man. He later had a big government job, something to do with the State Bureau of Statistics. He wasn’t a phony. He was a knowledgeable man and an idealistic man who was involved in this.

Mary Fuller McChesney: This is the Artists-Writers Union?

William Hesthal: Yes.

Robert McChesney: I don’t remember that at all. I guess that was before my time.

William Hesthal: In whose studio did we have those meetings there in on Montgomery Street? Was it Piazzoni’s studio?

Robert McChesney: When I first became acquainted with the Artist Union, that was after they had split from the writers.

William Hesthal: Oh, this was before. I quit later. These were the organizational meetings, as I remember, and I think they were in Piazzoni’s studio. It was in that building anyway where Piazzoni had his.

Robert McChesney: The Artists Union itself, I think, met in Ray Strong’s studio.

William Hesthal: I probably didn’t go to those. I became disenchanted with it before then.

Mary Fuller McChesney: It never had much influence on the course of the project though?

William Hesthal: No. Well, wasn’t it at the time of “Of Thee I Sing” and all that kind of thing?

Mary Fuller McChesney: Well, curiously enough, in New York, they were extremely influential, the Artists-Writers Union in relation to the actual running of the project. Apparently that didn’t happen out here. Maybe there weren’t enough artists out here. There were 5,000 people in New York City on the projects.

William Hesthal: I really don’t know why it wasn’t more effective out here. Oh, in a sense it was effective because it turned in to Artists Equity, didn’t it eventually? This probably was the nucleus in the area. I remember people involved in that went on to Equity.

Robert McChesney: I imagine some of those people who were active in the Artists Union were active in Equity.

William Hesthal: Yes. It’s too bad this is necessary. This should all be in the records, you know.

Mary Fuller McChesney: Do you think we’ve covered it?

William Hesthal: As far as I’m concerned, yes.

Mary Fuller McChesney: Thank you very much for giving us the time for this interview.

END OF INTERVIEW

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