



Smithsonian
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Oral history interview with Doris Emrick Lee,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Doris Lee on November 4, 1964. The interview took place in Woodstock, New York, and was conducted by Joseph Trovato for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

JOSEPH TROVATO: Miss Lee, it is awfully good of you to be giving us your time for a few words on your recollections in connection with the murals that you did back in the thirties. I know from Mr. Blanch, who told me a few minutes ago, or as a matter of fact, yesterday when we talked over the phone, that you'll be leaving for Florida tomorrow and I really hesitated in coming down and imposing upon you in this way but you said come along and so here I am. Miss Lee, first of all you might tell us where you were born and where you studied and then we will get on to your mural projects.

DORIS LEE: I was born in Illinois and I graduated from Rockford College in Illinois. After that I went to Europe for a year and studied painting. My father always thought it was very important to have what he called a general education so that I, in getting a liberal arts degree, couldn't do as much painting as I wanted to although I always painted a great deal as a child. I always made the family place cards and little things like that. I was always liking to paint. And after I studied in Europe, I then came back here and was in San Francisco and Kansas City two different years where I studied some at the Art Institute of Kansas City and also at the California School of Fine Arts. After that I came to Woodstock. In Woodstock I painted for a couple of years, exhibiting my work in the Woodstock Gallery. One day in 1935, (I was still quite young), the same day I received word that I'd won the Logan Prize at the Chicago Art Institute and also that I had won the commission to do murals from the Treasury Department in Washington. It was really very staggering to me, and very exciting. I had a studio, (while I always had a house here in Woodstock) that I went to in New York in the winters at 30 East 14th St. Kenneth Hayes Miller was there, Alec Brook, Emil Ganso and a great many other painters had studios there. And it was a good thing I had this very large studio because that was where I did the Treasury Department Murals. At first I was invited to send sketches. I think they invited a certain number of people and it was from that, those people who had been invited, that the awards were given. The Federal Post Office was just being built I believe and here was to be two large murals on each floor. The subject that they gave me was the rural delivery in America. And my background was suited to this because I was living very close to a little town in New York called Bearsville and I'd also been born in a small town near the Mississippi River in Illinois. So I made my pencil drawings and then, after that, I made the color drawings and after that, the large cartoons which I did at 30 East 14th St. At each stage they were sent to Washington and okayed for the next step. The one mural was the outdoors, the rural delivery you know in an outside mailbox with the cornfields. The other one was in a very small general store with the post office at one side. I think that I finished these in about '37.

JOSEPH TROVATO: 1937?

DORIS LEE: I think so. They were installed then. They were done on canvas and I don't, I can't recall which floor it is but anyway they are there and I often have little cards and letters from people who've been there.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Have you seen them recently?

DORIS LEE: No, I haven't. But Olin Dows was in Woodstock last summer and he had a great many of the slides. They weren't complete at all but I went to hear him talk about this Treasury Project and I was amazed to see them on the screen.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Can you tell us what was the general style that you followed at that time?

DORIS LEE: Well, these were just sort of...I don't know..., a frank style. They were...I'm not a very realistic painter but they were just sort of forthright you know with the subject matter. That's the only way I can describe them. After I graduated from college, I studied in Europe with Andre' Lhate and I was painting abstractly at that time and when I came back to this country I felt that nature and the things around were interesting and I did pictures of events and things around me.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, now this was your Washington D.C. Post Office mural of which there were two from what you have just told us. And then there was another in Summerville, Georgia Post Office. Did that follow? Was this your second mural?

DORIS LEE: Yes. And that one was for this post office in Georgia so I studied the things about Georgia (in driving south, I have been through Georgia many times)...it was mostly the Georgia streams, I think there were the

peach trees and all sorts of things of Georgia. Anyway it was very amusing during that time because people from Summerville would come to my studio in New York and the mayor and a lawyer and so on. And we had a great good time. I mean they would come and see how it was going and we'd all go out and have lunch. Very nice time. Very nice people.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Do you feel, Miss Lee, that this experience, this work, this mural work, served you in good stead in relation to your own work that was to follow?

DORIS LEE: Oh yes! I thought it was very wonderful. Of course I have done since, a ninety foot screen design for Oklahoma and for the Rogers and Hammerstein plays. I did many large things but they were the first ones, the ones in the post office. And of course I think when you do a mural you think a little differently than when you do easel painting. I had done easel painting and lithographs and book illustrations and that sort of thing. But it was a very great experience and we were all busy and trying to do the very best we could.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Did you take part in any of the easel projects?

DORIS LEE: No I didn't. I didn't take part in anything except the Treasury.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see.

DORIS LEE: I was quite young and I was married, many of my friends, you know, so desperately needed this support and I didn't at that time, but I wish I had because I think it did everyone such a lot of good, they were beautiful projects. It was a beautiful thing to be associated with.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Who were some of the artists with whom you were associated at that time?

DORIS LEE: Well...as I say in this New York Studio building, I knew Stuart Davis and Ganso and let me see, the Zoraks, Kunyoshi, Stewart Edie, Paul Burlin, Bradley Tomlin, etc. New York in the middle thirties was a very much smaller place as far as artists were concerned and one usually knew almost everyone who was professionally painting.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Were you aware at that time of the, of the, well some of the more abstract tendencies that were going on? I believe that the abstract artists' group was formed about that time, was it not?

DORIS LEE: Well, yes, I knew Gorky very well and as I say I knew Stuart Davis. When I first came back from study in Europe I painted in an abstract way and then I felt the need of drawing, and getting my material more from things around me.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I'm just fascinated with your house and its setting. How long have you lived here? I think you mentioned this but I'm afraid it skipped me.

DORIS LEE: I lived in the house next door which was a farm house, a big old Victorian house. I liked that very much but it became impractical. It was a house with lots of room but not very good studio room, so we decided, Arnold and I, that it would be nice to have a house where our orchard was, with a lovely view of the mountains. We drew the plans up and tried to make the house as simple as possible with as much wall space and as much light as possible with large studio areas and clerestory ventilation. Many times since I have thought we were very much smarter than we knew because in having that clerestory the house keeps almost air conditioned all the time. Also it is more or less fire proof, which was one reason for building the structure. At either end of the house we each have a large separate studio, bedroom and bath. And they're separated by the living area so that we are able to work in private.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well you have a wonderful space. It's just a delight to be here. Mr. Blanch had already commented on some of the wonderful objects that you have, that are here in this room. Perhaps you might add to it just a little because there are so many wonderful things here.

DORIS LEE: We both enjoy traveling very much. I was sent down to Mexico by Life Magazine to make drawings and we saw all the beautiful Pre-Columbian things and we collected those and we traveled around this country and collected some Indian things and early American things. I don't know thy, but it's a difficult thing to pass by an old beautiful bottle on the beach or an old broken piece of iron or artifact...we really have too many things, they clutter up our house a little bit. But I think most artists are that way. You see very strange things in artists' houses. Some of them are of great value and some of them are just things that they like the texture of, and so on. I also think that being painters we particularly collect sculpture. I guess maybe because our walls are so filled up with paintings but... we have some beautiful Chinese and Greek pieces that we love very much.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Miss Lee, I want to thank you very much for giving us your recollections of your experiences in connection with your government post office murals of the thirties. Thank you very much.

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