



Smithsonian
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Oral history interview with Ethel
Magafan, 1964 Nov. 5

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Ethel Magafan on November 5, 1964. The interview took place in Woodstock, New York, and was conducted by Joseph S. Trovato for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's New Deal and the Arts project.

This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose. The original transcript was edited. In 2022 the Archives retranscribed the original audio and attempted to create a verbatim transcript. Additional information from the original transcript has been added in brackets and given an -Ed. attribution.

Interview

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: This interview is taking place in the studio of Ethel Magafan at Woodstock, New York, November 5, 1964. Miss Magafan, it is always a pleasure to meet artists. I feel very much at home with them, and particularly, meeting here in your studio and surrounded by your work. This makes it most pleasant. Last night, when I called you on the phone for this appointment, and when I explained what it was all about, I remember your first words, I think, were, "Oh, those were the good old days." And so, I imagine that you have—that you will have a good deal to tell us of your enthusiasms of those days.

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

I noticed, Miss Magafan, that you have—that you have brought out some of your papers, and this is just fine, because it will give us something to work on. This letter from Edward Rowan, dated April 23, 1937—it is the Treasury Department Procurement Division, Washington. It's in connection with one of the competitions that you entered, and from the sound of this, he speaks most highly of your entry. Now, was this one of your first murals that you took part in?

ETHEL MAGAFAN: Yes, this was the first competition for murals I ever tried for and it was an open, national mural competition. And I was very excited about trying for it, and I must say, I needed the money, so that was one big reason, and I was very interested in doing murals, also. But I was rather naïve, and I chose a subject matter—it was for Lawrence, Kansas—and I chose a subject matter of the Lawrence Massacre that occurred during—just at the end of the Civil War, and it was a very bloody, tragic event in this town. I thought it was a dramatic subject, so I proceeded to make mural sketches. And what happened—the Washington jury wanted to give me the commission, but the local jury said that the people felt too sad about this event, and they didn't want to come into the post office and see this event. However, Edward Rowan told me that because they did think my design was very excellent, that they would recommend me for another mural, and I did get another mural from this. I got one for the Nebraska post office.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: I see. For the Nebraska post office, I think you have a number of the sketches here.

ETHEL MAGAFAN: Well, I—these are the photographs of the finished murals that I have here.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: I see.

ETHEL MAGAFAN: But when I got the Nebraska—this was a commission, then, and I decided to use a different subject matter. So, I went to Nebraska and they—it was in August, and they were threshing the wheat. So, I thought I would do something that the people would like to see. Something they were familiar with, and nothing bloody again.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: Uh-huh [affirmative]. I guess you learned your lesson from your—

[Cross talk.]

ETHEL MAGAFAN: Yes, I certainly did. I thought—

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: —first—though your design is a most—is a strong design, has a very strong pattern, and it reads very well. As you said, unfortunately, the subject was something that the people of that area wanted to forget about.

ETHEL MAGAFAN: Yes. Well, I certainly understand now, because I would want to forget it, too.

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: Yes. Miss Magafan, how many murals did you execute under the Section of Fine Arts?

ETHEL MAGAFAN: I executed the—and installed six murals, altogether.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: Could you tell us where they are located?

ETHEL MAGAFAN: The—well, as I mentioned before, the first one was the Auburn, Nebraska post office. And the subject I did for them was the wheat threshing. Then, after that, I received the commission for the Wynne, Arkansas post office. And again, I went to the town, met some of the people, looked at the landscape, and then tried to choose something that the people were familiar with. And I found out, that's what they like. They wanted something that they knew. And this time, I chose the cotton pickers, because that country was cotton country. Wynne, Arkansas is cotton country, and I chose that subject matter, and I found it very exciting to do.

[00:05:12]

And I spent several days there, just going out in the fields and sketching, and then went back to my studio to work. Oh, then, the [laughs]—one after that came Madill, Oklahoma post office. And this time, I chose a historical subject, and it was a prairie fire. You see, I got back to something [laughs] violent again.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: Yes.

ETHEL MAGAFAN: It—I thought it was a very exciting material and I enjoyed doing that mural very much. Then, from that, then I did the large mural for the board room of the Social Security building in Washington, D.C. This time, it was in collaboration with my twin sister, Jenne Magafan. And they awarded us the commission jointly. And the reason that they offered it jointly was we had tried for the competition for the cafeteria, and there were, oh, I think, 10 panels. And we didn't get the job, but we got the runner-up.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: I see.

ETHEL MAGAFAN: So, then, we got the one big mural, and we did it together.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: I see.

ETHEL MAGAFAN: That was the one we did together.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: So that—in all, then—

ETHEL MAGAFAN: There's six altogether.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: You are credited with six murals.

ETHEL MAGAFAN: Yes. Yes. And then, from that—shall I tell you the others [laughs]?

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: Oh, please, yes, yes, by all means.

ETHEL MAGAFAN: Then there was the South Denver, Colorado post office, and I did the theme of—called *The Horse Corral*, rounding up the horses and—

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: Yes. And this was also under the Section of Fine Arts.

ETHEL MAGAFAN: Yes, this is all under the Section of Fine Arts. And then, my last mural was for the Recorder of Deeds building. And this time, they specified the subject matter, and they wanted the Battle of New Orleans, Andrew Jackson. Well, I guess I got back to where I

started from [laughs].

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: Well, from 1937, which was the date of your first mural—

ETHEL MAGAFAN: Yes.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: —this takes us to when? To about—

ETHEL MAGAFAN: '43. '43.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: To '43? Well, this is just about, what, the end—

[Cross talk.]

ETHEL MAGAFAN: This was the—

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: —of the—

ETHEL MAGAFAN: I think, just about the—

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: —of the Project.

ETHEL MAGAFAN: Yes, the end of the Project, yes.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: It is easy to see that you were most keen about this work that you were doing and that it must have meant a great deal to you. Did this keep up—or did you keep up this spirit throughout the whole time?

ETHEL MAGAFAN: Yes, I certainly did. I loved to do—work on the murals. I never found it dull in any way. I was always excited each time I'd get a new commission. It was just a real thrilling thing to go to the town and think of—look around for what subjects I'd choose—

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ETHEL MAGAFAN: —and then to work on the mural. And I still have that enthusiasm. When I think about it, I get back the same enthusiasm for mural painting.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: And there's another letter that I think is over there that speaks of, most favorably, the connection with one of your sketches that you submitted. Now, which one—which post office sketch was that?

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: This was the competition for the South Denver post office, and Boardman Robinson was on the jury for that, and I won the mural. And I have this letter from Rowan who quotes Robinson as saying, "It is quite the finest treatment of the subject I have seen." So, I can tell you this was a big thrill because I had a great deal of respect for Boardman Robinson, and it was a real thrill to have him say that about my work.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: Before I forget, I think I had better ask you at this point if you would tell us something about your background. Where were you born, Miss Magafan?

ETHEL MAGAFAN: I was born in Chicago, Illinois but I really feel like I belong in Colorado because my family moved to Colorado when we were three years old. We—I say we because it was my twin sister and myself. And I lived there and studied in Colorado Springs [at the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center -Ed.], and Denver.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: And who were some of your teachers?

ETHEL MAGAFAN: Well, the teacher I studied with the longest was Frank Mechau. He had just returned from Paris when I was in high school [he came to my high school to speak -Ed.], and that's how we first—my sister and I first Frank Mechau. And we began studying with him, and he was working on murals, and he got us started on murals. And he taught us an awful lot about mural designing and got us very enthusiastic about it. [We assisted him on the murals he was working on which included a 100-foot fresco. -Ed.] And he did many murals for the Project.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: How long have you lived here at Woodstock?

ETHEL MAGAFAN: Well, I came here 1946 and I've lived here ever since. I came here for just

the summer, and haven't left [laughs].

[00:10:02]

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: Do you live here all year round?

ETHEL MAGAFAN: Yes, all year round. Winter and summer. Except, in the summertime, I go off sketching out west. Back to my—the country I love so much. And I go sketching and camping. This year my husband and I [and our eight-year-old daughter Jenne -Ed.] went for eight weeks and camped out all the time.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: You have a wonderful site here on this mountainside; it must be beautiful in summer as I'm sure it is in winter. But is it—do you find it hard to get up and down the hill?

ETHEL MAGAFAN: Well, we get up and down. Sometimes it's a little trouble, but not bad. The—we get snow tires, and chains, and once in a while—great while, we're snowed in, and can't get down the mountain. But then it's kind of fun. And we always ensure we have enough food in the house.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: And if you can't get down the mountain, then I suppose that that might give you more chance to paint here in your studio. Does it work that way for you?

ETHEL MAGAFAN: [Laughs.] Well, we get quite a lot of time up here, anyway, because we're pretty isolated, but it is a nice—great feeling to be feeling that you're snowed in. But it can never last very long, because the snowplow always comes out and opens the road [laughs] for us. And we can always ski down for our mail that we pick up at the bottom of the hill.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: Would you call yourself, chiefly, a painter of landscape, or not? What—

ETHEL MAGAFAN: Well, I guess I'd call myself that now. However, when I did the murals, I was figurative. I worked, as you can see in these sketches, there were horses and [inaudible] [mainly of people and animals -Ed.].

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: That's right.

ETHEL MAGAFAN: The only landscape that I did do—oh, I think this might be kind of funny to tell you, was when we got the—my twin and I got the commission for the Recorder—I mean, for the board room of the Social Security building, and they wrote asking us to be very careful with the subject matter we chose, because they didn't want to distract from the business of the room. And my sister and I always laughed about it, and they said—they're afraid maybe we were going to show up with a bunch of nudes [Joseph S. Trovato laughs] and the men will never concentrate on their work [laughs]. So, then, we chose a mountain landscape, something that would be quiet and still, that they could enjoy. But that's the one landscape that I did do for murals, and the rest of them were, as I told you, wheat threshing, and cotton picking—didn't have too much landscape; the figures dominated them.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: Yes.

ETHEL MAGAFAN: But now, I do the mountain landscapes or woods landscapes more than anything else.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: Yes. And I imagine that it comes from your surroundings here, chiefly, would you say?

ETHEL MAGAFAN: Well, I do some from here, but I go out West. And when I go out West every summer I do the sketching for my winter's painting.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: I see.

ETHEL MAGAFAN: And I've been doing this now, oh, for about 12 [18 -Ed.] years. Every summer we go out and take our camping gear and go out there. And I sketch every day and I come back with maybe 40, 50 sketches. But they're studies for the—

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: Yes.

ETHEL MAGAFAN: —paintings. I don't paint when I'm out there, but I make drawings and

studies for what I want to do when I come back. Sometimes I don't use a sketch for two or three years and it takes that long for me to decide exactly what I want to do with—

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: Uh-huh [affirmative].

ETHEL MAGAFAN: —some certain subject or how I want to handle it.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: Do you—pretty much, once you set yourself on an idea, do you find yourself that you will carry this out, or do you switch from one idea to another?

ETHEL MAGAFAN: You mean, on the same canvas, or—

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: Yes, on the same canvas.

ETHEL MAGAFAN: Well, no, no. [My paintings begin with a feeling that comes to me when I think about a place that I have seen and loved and where I have made many studies. As a result of all of the sketches I have done of a certain place which had special meaning for me, I am able to go on to my own intimate expression of it. The essential memory is vivid. After time passes, I remember the vital qualities and can better capture the essence of my subject. Then I am painting from memory alone and my feeling about a place remembered. - Ed.]

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: Do you have a gallery in New York?

ETHEL MAGAFAN: Yes, I'm with the Jacques Seligman Gallery in New York City.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: And have you been with them—

ETHEL MAGAFAN: Yes, I've been with them—

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: —very long?

ETHEL MAGAFAN: Yes, I've been with them, oh, I don't know exactly how many years, but—oh, at least eight. [I've been with them for 10 years. -Ed.]

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: Yes. [Recorder stops, restarts.] I noticed from some of the canvas—I mean, some of the works that I—that are here in your studio, that quite a few of them seem to be done on Masonite. Is this your chief support that you use?

ETHEL MAGAFAN: Yes. I like the Masonite and I like to size it with a gesso, and then I paint with egg tempera. That's—the egg is my medium.

[00:15:00]

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: I see.

ETHEL MAGAFAN: And I did my murals the same way. They were all done in egg tempera. And I chose this medium—it's very durable; it's—and—also, when you install a mural, you don't want any shine on the mural.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: Right.

ETHEL MAGAFAN: It's sometimes very distracting, so this is a matte surface, and—

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: Yes. Well, this accounts—

ETHEL MAGAFAN: Yes.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: —for the matte surface of the art—

ETHEL MAGAFAN: And I like the matte surface very much.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: —of your paintings.

ETHEL MAGAFAN: Yes. So, I haven't picked up any of the modern techniques—or not techniques, but the mediums, but I've stuck to this egg tempera since I've been painting.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: Well, I don't see any reason why you should take on some of the

newer mediums that are—that have been developed recently if what you do use is sufficient to—for you to paint in your own way.

ETHEL MAGAFAN: Yes.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: That's the important thing [laughs], isn't it?

ETHEL MAGAFAN: Yes, and I figure if it was good enough for the old Italians, it's good enough for me [laughs]. This—the egg tempera is the medium the early Italians used, and it's a—it is really marvelous. If you've ever noticed how an egg will stick to a plate, it's very difficult to get off. Well, I tell you, this egg—the whole egg mixed with varnish and stand oil [makes a very strong binder -Ed.], when that dries, then I mix it with my dry color.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: Yes.

ETHEL MAGAFAN: When that dries—I've had old paintings, once in a while, that I would like to destroy, and I try to scrape them off, and I can't get them off [laughs]. [It is only with great effort that I am able to remove some of the paint. The paint becomes very hard a permanent. -Ed.]

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: Uh- huh [affirmative].

ETHEL MAGAFAN: That's how hard they become.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: Uh-huh [affirmative].

ETHEL MAGAFAN: And I've had paintings for years, and years, and years, and they've never cracked, they—nothing happens to them; it's a marvelous medium [and it suits me -Ed.].

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: Well, I think that what I like about the medium is the fast-drying quality is one, and the matte surface—

ETHEL MAGAFAN: Yes.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: —that it produces.

ETHEL MAGAFAN: Yes.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: I'm sort of partial to, you know, such qualities.

ETHEL MAGAFAN: Yes. The fast drying is what I like so much about it too. [You can't paint over almost immediately. -Ed.] We doing all right? [Inaudible.]

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: To get back to our subject, the photograph of the mural that I have before me, [*Andrew Jackson and*] *the Battle of New Orleans*, a mural in Recorder of Deeds building, Washington, D.C. that was done in 1943, according to its date.

ETHEL MAGAFAN: Yes.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: Now, this must have required quite a bit of research on your part for information as to the dress and the—well, the uniforms, the kind of guns that, you know, were used, and the so forth. Did it involve a good deal of research?

ETHEL MAGAFAN: Yes, it certainly did, [because I did not want to make any mistakes. If a mural is depicting a historical scene I think it should be accurate in relation to the costumes and equipment of that period. This meant very many hours in the libraries. -Ed.]

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: Was this mural done on location, on the spot? Or was it done elsewhere?

ETHEL MAGAFAN: No, it was not done on the spot. I did it in my studio, and it was done on canvas. But I always went to the place where the—building where the mural was to be and looked at the architecture, and the coloring, and the lighting, and all that, and made careful notations of the building. And then, I worked in my studio, because I have—you're less disturbed in your studio than if you're—like, this was in the main foyer of the Recorder of Deeds building, and it would be very hectic to try to paint, I feel, with people watching and bothering you.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: Yes—

ETHEL MAGAFAN: The mural was done on linen canvas and then later on, it was installed by pasting it on the wall with a lead white and the spar varnish.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: I see.

ETHEL MAGAFAN: They found—

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: And also, in egg tempera, that—

ETHEL MAGAFAN: Painted in egg—the canvas in—

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: —the medium that you used all along?

ETHEL MAGAFAN: Yes, everyone was egg tempera. Dozens of eggs. [They laugh.] [Inaudible.]

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: I have in front of me a photograph of a mural sketch and it doesn't give the subject. What was the subject of this mural?

ETHEL MAGAFAN: This was the subject of the wheat threshing.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: Of the wheat threshing, yes.

ETHEL MAGAFAN: Yes, using the old combine threshers.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: So, this was the preliminary sketch that you submitted and—

ETHEL MAGAFAN: Yes, that's—

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: —upon which, then, you received—you were awarded a commission to —

ETHEL MAGAFAN: Yes.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: —carry on. Will you tell us, what would be the next step?

ETHEL MAGAFAN: Well, after receiving the commission, then I make this sketch. And it's a scale two inches to the foot.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: I see.

ETHEL MAGAFAN: And I have to do a complete—you have to do complete color sketch and then submit it to the Section of Fine Arts for approval.

[00:20:02]

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: I see.

ETHEL MAGAFAN: And then, upon approval, then you would receive your first third payment. Then—from then on, you proceed with the cartoon, or the full-scale drawing of the mural.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: I see.

ETHEL MAGAFAN: And that has to be approved, also, before you can go to the next step of finishing the mural.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: I see.

ETHEL MAGAFAN: So, there were three steps that—and each step had to be approved before you received your payment.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: And you received a payment for each step?

ETHEL MAGAFAN: Yes.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: After the completion of each step, is that right?

ETHEL MAGAFAN: Yes, it was usually divided into three—

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: Stages.

ETHEL MAGAFAN: Three stages, yes.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: Yes.

ETHEL MAGAFAN: And each time, you're very happy to get the check, I'll tell you [laughs].

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: What is this [inaudible]?

ETHEL MAGAFAN: —assignment.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: According to this letter, again from Edward Rowan, this was your first mural of—July 23, 1937, is the date of the letter. For the Auburn, Nebraska post office—

ETHEL MAGAFAN: Post office.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: —mural. According to this, you received a total of \$620 in the three installments, I see here. Now, this must have been a tremendous amount in those days, was it not?

ETHEL MAGAFAN: Well, it certainly was. Believe me, when I think back about it, it was terrific. Now, \$620 doesn't seem like very much money, does it? [Laughs.] It was a lot of work for that, too, believe me.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: Well, I can imagine.

ETHEL MAGAFAN: But it was wonderful to get. It kept so many artists painting, and eating, and I tell you, I think it was a great thing that happened to the artists.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: Did you install your own murals, or was this part of the job done by somebody else?

ETHEL MAGAFAN: No, I always saw to the installation myself. And my twin sister, who was a painter, also, and had mural commissions, was married to Edward Chavez who also had mural commissions. So, we had a deal between the three of us that when either one—any one of us would have a mural to install, we would go and help the other person. So—

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: You'd pitch in.

ETHEL MAGAFAN: —the three of us, we pitched in. So, we would go, no matter how far away it was, we'd get in the old station wagon and take our equipment and go and install the mural ourselves.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: Oh, that's wonderful.

ETHEL MAGAFAN: And my sister had—Jenne—my twin sister, Jenne, had—has painted about six murals, too, for the Project, for the Treasury Department.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: Very interesting. [Recorder stops, restarts.] Do you think, Miss Magafan, that this was a fine thing for the American artist? This thing—I mean by this thing, the Federal Art Projects, and this whole experience?

ETHEL MAGAFAN: Yes. Well, I certainly do think it was a wonderful thing for the artists, and I wish we could have a little more of that going on right now, because first thing, it does bring the painting to the public, in post offices and places where they see the work, whereas people might not go into museums. But also, for the artist, it was so good to have the encouragement and have the—which we all needed the money—but the encouragement to go on painting, because I think a lot of artists would have had to drop out and get jobs, and you can't be doing something else, you should be painting if you're going to be an artist and devote your life to it.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: So, you feel that it enabled many artists to continue working at that time?

ETHEL MAGAFAN: Yes, I certainly do think it did. I know it did me. I don't know what I would have done without it, because I don't know how I would have lived.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: I see.

ETHEL MAGAFAN: And then also, I think it's a terrific record to have. If you—I'm sure, if you followed the careers of many of these artists that began on this, then you would see that they developed into fine artists and continued their profession.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: Well, that is very true.

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

ETHEL MAGAFAN: [Inaudible] this.

JOSEPH S. TROVATO: Oh. [Inaudible.] [Recorder stops, restarts.] Miss Magafan, this has been a great pleasure for me, to be meeting with you here in your studio and discussing this whole general subject. And we want to thank you very much for your contribution to this most important record. Thank you very much.

ETHEL MAGAFAN: You're quite welcome. [Recorder stops, restarts.] It was a pleasure to meet you and to talk to you about the good old days.

[00:25:00]

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]