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Oral history interview with Margery Magnani,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Margery Magnani on July 7, 1965. The interview took place in San Francisco, CA, and was conducted by Mary McChesney for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

MARY MCCHESENEY This is Mary McChesney interviewing Margery Magnani who lives at 82 Fifth Avenue, San Francisco, California, and the date is July 7, 1965. I'd like to ask you first, Mrs. Magnani, where were you born?

MARGERIE MAGNANI I was born in Montreal, Canada.

MARY MCCHESENEY And what year was that?

MARGERIE MAGNANI 1918.

MARY MCCHESENEY And where did you receive your art training?

MARGERIE MAGNANI I really didn't receive very much art training. I'm more or less self-taught, I guess, or I came to it late. I never intended to be in this field, and here I am. I did go to some art schools after a while. I went to Chouinard in Los Angeles. I went to the Schaeffer School here in San Francisco, and I took courses here and there, but I had no really formal art training.

MARY MCCHESENEY How did you first make any contact with the government sponsored art project?

MARGERIE MAGNANI When I was living in Los Angeles, I worked on NYA down there and this was in - it must have been 1942, probably, and I worked there for - I don't really know - I think it was about a year, maybe it was a little under a year. I think it was called the craft project, and I worked there until the project was closed, because well, they closed all of the NYA. They closed it all one afternoon in a couple of hours. I think it was '42. Anyhow, Enid Schmidt was the supervisor of this project. She had been a supervisor of the craft project on WPA in San Francisco before she came to Los Angeles. And I met her when she came to Los Angeles and I was the assistant supervisor on that project. And when the NYA closed she said, "Why don't you try to get a job in San Francisco on the craft project of the WPA?" Which had been her old job and which she didn't want. So that's how I came back here and applied for the job there and got it as, I guess the assistant supervisor.

MARY MCCHESENEY Who was the supervisor?

MARGERIE MAGNANI Johnny, John Magnani was the supervisor of the craft project at that time. At that time it was quite separate from the art project. Later the two more or less merged, but at this time he was supervisor of the craft project, the whole project. Although he was a ceramist, he was handling all of it.

MARY MCCHESENEY What crafts did they include in the craft project?

MARGERIE MAGNANI Ceramics; weaving, which is what I was in charge of; and woodworking. I think that was all. Woodworking included a lot of things. They made toys for underprivileged children, and made signs for various city parks and so forth. But the ceramics and weaving projects at that time were working mostly making things for Army and Navy projects, at least in large part.

MARY MCCHESENEY What sort of things were you doing for the Army and Navy? Do you remember?

MARGERIE MAGNANI Yes, because I have a few samples of some of these things. We were doing draperies for the enlisted men's club, you know, the recreation hall or something at Fort Ord, and we did drapery material for the Oakland Naval Airport or some such thing in Oakland and one in Alameda. There were something like 95 people on that weaving project alone, 95 women, and we really turned out an enormous amount of work. As I look back on it now from the view of just turning out material, an enormous quantity of stuff was made. 95 people was the height of it, and, you know, this varied and changed, but on the whole there were at least 70, 75 people there most of the time.

MARY MCCHESENEY You must have had a very large establishment. Where were your headquarters?

MARGERIE MAGNANI We were on Folsom Street, 2156 Folsom, does that sound right? It's a number that just came to me, but it was Folsom. It was above the pickle factory, a pickle factory on Folsom somewhere around 16th and 17th, something like that. And we had the whole top floor which was a huge loft. And we were there for a

long time. They had been there quite a while before I got there and we stayed for a very long time. There were all kinds of funny things that happened because we did a lot of dyeing in the weaving part of the project and we had two huge 75-gallon tanks where we dyed our own yarn and every once in a while when things went wrong, the dye water would leak through to the pickle factory and these people would come upstairs, you know, just screaming their heads off because all of a sudden there was red and blue water trickling down to the pickle factory. But it was a good building for our purposes.

MARY MCCHESENEY What sort of yarns were you using?

MARGERY MAGNANI We used inexpensive yarn, or tried to, and did. I think we used mostly cottons, some rayon material. The whole project was supported in great part by the City and County of San Francisco, and except for the Army and Navy things that we were doing, the City supplied us with most of the materials and they were, on the whole, pretty generous. As time went on and we were more involved in the war and so forth in the early years, '43 and '44, materials were hard to get and we used a lot of surplus material and scrap material. We used to get old Army and Navy uniforms that the Army had discarded and cut them up into strips and braid rugs and so forth. This was a way of keeping a lot of people working. They were really very handsome. I have often wondered where they all are now. I'd love to see how they've held up over the years.

MARY MCCHESENEY When the city supplied materials to you, did the finished project then go to the City?

MARGERY MAGNANI It went to the City, yes. Oh, yes. Frank Conway was the man at City Hall with whom we dealt most often, who sort of held the pursestrings. And we did the weaving end of it. We wove for different places. Well, one place was the old Juvenile Court Building, which was on Otis Street at that time. It was an old building in bad condition and they were trying to kind of do something to rejuvenate it and redecorate it in part and we did a lot of draperies for that building. We did a lot of material for the Venereal Disease Clinic and I've forgotten where they were - somewhere off Third Street - and Dr. Koch. I'm amazed that I can remember these names. I can hardly remember my own name most of the time - Dr. Richard Koch was head of that Venereal Disease Clinic at the time. We did a lot of materials for that building, which was kind of new. And we did some work for the Housing Authority for some new buildings, administration buildings and so forth that were going up. One was the Sunnyvale Housing Project office, you know, out in South San Francisco. And there were other places. I don't altogether remember them. With the Army materials that we got, we were braiding rugs and doing these kinds of things for Fort Baker and Fort Cronkite. The rugs went into whatever buildings they had there and they were handsome.

MARY MCCHESENEY Were they designed or just made up?

MARGERY MAGNANI They were not really just up to a point, because we would take the material which was khaki in color to begin with and dye it and there was a limit to what colors we could get out of it. I know that we did a beautiful dark red and dark green and some kind of brown and with this we pretty much did the best we could. They weren't carefully designed. They kind of evolved as they went along, but they were nice in shape. We did a lot of large rugs and oval rugs. Of the women who were working, many of them were very old, and some hadn't worked much with their hands, but all of them had sewn and so this was something that came much more easily to them than weaving, you know. With little training they would cut these strips and sew them together and then braid them.

MARY MCCHESENEY And then the final braids were sewn together too?

MARGERY MAGNANI Yes. They were sewn together, and they were put together in different shapes too, you know, in order to get them large enough.

MARY MCCHESENEY Was all that sewing done by hand?

MARGERY MAGNANI Yes, all of it, every inch of it. We had one sewing machine in the whole project. We had a lot of looms. Most of them had been made by WPA and I don't know when exactly, but before I got there. They were good looms. They were heavy, you know, home-made looms, kind of primitive but they worked well and they held up well.

MARY MCCHESENEY Did most of the people who came onto your project know anything about weaving, or did you have to build it up from scratch?

MARGERY MAGNANI No. Nobody knew anything about weaving. They had to be taught, and some of them were very good actually. They were divided up into whatever they did best because we really turned out a lot of material and some people did only warping. Some people did only dyeing, and others did the actual weaving, and many of them worked on finishing. There was a marvelous Chinese woman there who was in charge of finishing fabrics and, oh, she was wonderful. Her name was Lee. This is all I can remember. This is all I think I ever knew of her name. She herself sewed beautifully and she lined all the draperies - or at least got other

people to do it, and worked out ways of stretching fabrics ahead of time, you know, by hanging them over large poles for a long period of time before they were lined so that by the time they were hung in buildings, they were really finished professionally and well-finished, and I imagine they held up very well.

MARY MCCHESENEY What kind of people did you have coming onto the project?

MARGERIE MAGNANI Coming on the project?

MARY MCCHESENEY Of the workers. Were they artists?

MARGERIE MAGNANI No, not really. I don't remember too many of them. Many of them were older women. Mostly they were older women, not in too good health, not too well, but once they were given work to do and got interested and involved in what they were doing, they kind of came to again. There were some younger people who did that kind of heavier, physical work, mostly the dyeing of material. We used to dye almost twenty to twenty-five pounds of yarn a day in that place. Everything that came in was bought in white or natural and everything was dyed, which meant that the yarn all had to be skeined first, because most of it was bought uncombed. All that had to be prepared for dyeing, and then dyed, all by hand. This was a huge job. When I think of it now - where I am working and most people who are working in this field are doing small quantities of dyeing at a time, you know, a pound or two, and this is about all - when I think of dyeing twenty-five pounds a day, day in and day out, I know that we did a lot of work. We had two wonderful copper-lined tanks and a boiler to heat the water and they used to dye over sticks. There was a man in San Francisco, a man who was a dyer, who is now retired, his name is Zafus. I don't know if anyone has ever mentioned him before, but I think he's gone back to Greece. He was a Greek, and he had the only really good dyeing establishment in the City then and since then and it was called the Atlas Dye Works. He helped us set up this dyeing thing in the first place by helping us to figure out what equipment we'd need, and so forth and so on, and actually taught me everything that I knew, which I in turn taught to these women who were working and they got so good that they matched colors really accurately which is pretty hard to do. There's always a difference in a dye lot but the work that was done was really very good.

MARY MCCHESENEY What kind of materials were you using for the coloring?

MARGERIE MAGNANI We were using chemical dyes. I remember mostly National Dyes - "National" being the name of a dye maker. Yes, I think they were altogether National dyes. I'm not sure any more.

MARY MCCHESENEY They came already prepared?

MARGERIE MAGNANI Yes - they came in powder form and had to be mixed. And, yes, that's another thing that was interesting in that we had only red, yellow and blue and we mixed everything from this, you know. We did a lot of very tricky beiges and greys and difficult colors from, you know, the three primary colors. It was quite an achievement. A lot has been developed since then in dyes but none of these were available then. And I'm amazed when I think about what was done on that project. It was marvelous stuff.

MARY MCCHESENEY What sort of drapery material were you making? And who designed it?

MARGERIE MAGNANI The designing of it was always a little complicated. I designed some of it. We would work from samples there just as, you know, you would in any kind of fabric house and we'd make up designs depending on what the job was. Mostly on the City jobs, you know, for city buildings and so forth I designed the stuff. We'd make samples and submit samples and make changes according to what they wanted and so forth and so on. On the Army and Navy stuff, I know that Beck Young designed part of these materials. The ones that went to Fort Ord I think he designed, and the ones that were at the Alameda Naval Air Base somebody else designed. I'm not sure but it might have been George Harris. I'm not sure, because he was interested in fabric designing anyhow. He had designed a lot of tapestries and had worked in that field. And I know that they pretty much designed them, maybe not entirely, but at least to the extent that they had established the colors that were being used and so forth and so on. I don't know just what you mean by "what kinds of drapery..."

MARY MCCHESENEY I meant were the types of weaving that you were doing then different from the type of weaving that's being done now, and if so, what did it look like? Was it sort of rough? Did you use a lot of different materials in it?

MARGERIE MAGNANI No, it wasn't. It was very different from today. This is over twenty years ago, you know. Weaving was a much tamer medium than it is today and in today's terms it was probably fairly dull from the point of view of design, but it was good, safe, well-done material. We were very limited in materials because it was during the war. There wasn't very much available, and we had to consider the cost very carefully. So that, as I remember the, most of the interest in the materials came from the color and from the dyeing with some variation in texture and so forth, and kind of nice stripes and nice proportions of things but not far out or exciting things in today's terms. But then nobody was doing this kind of thing then, you know. Weaving was very much a

two-dimensional medium then and has changed so much but only in the last few years.

MARY MCCHESENEY I was just wondering whether that was about the time that Dorothy Liebes was doing the work with some sort of shiny, artificial material woven into the cloth. I remember seeing that a long time ago and I was wondering if you used that too?

MARGERIE MAGNANI Metals and things like that? Yes. But, you see this was, I think, just before that period. She was working in textiles, weaving, yes, and she certainly had her influence. But the materials, the metals and things with which she's become so much associated came later than that. They came after the war because those were aluminum-coated threads and they weren't available, none of that was available. The business of getting, you know, bright areas and shiny areas and so forth, all had to come out of the design, out of the color of the materials and the materials themselves. We had very little aid in the way of that kind of glamorous things to work with. We certainly didn't have those. And in that context we did very well, I think. You know, working really mostly with string and the very simplest kinds of yarns.

MARY MCCHESENEY You mentioned that the weaving project continued into the war period. How long did it last? Do you remember what year it closed?

MARGERIE MAGNANI Yes. We moved from that Folsom Street building. We were always being threatened with closing down because, you know, we were more and more involved in the war, and more and more people were being employed and we lost a lot of people kind of suddenly to the war effort. It was lost from our point of view but in actual fact this was the intention, that people would find employment and so forth. Many of them did, and the project kind of closed down. It didn't close down, but dwindled in size along about, I suppose, '44. I'm not too sure of the date. Johnny left the project and went to work in the shipyard, and many others did at that time. I'm not too sure whether we had moved before or after that. I think we moved before he left for the shipyard, but anyhow the project was moved to Columbus Avenue, 950 Columbus, and was in some way then combined with the Art Project. And this is awfully vague in my mind except that I know that we spent a great deal of time battling the Art Project and I know that we were, I think kind of under their wing rather than, as we had been before, you know, very much on our own. We were responsible to the City and so forth, but not to the Art Project. And then after we moved to Columbus Avenue, we were, I think, a part of the Art Project at that time. And when Johnny left and went to the shipyard, for some months I was in charge of what was left of that project, all of it. There was practically nothing. There was very little ceramics done but there was quite a bit of woodworking still being done and a fair amount of weaving. And I think that it must have closed in either late '44 or early '45. I'm not too sure, but sometime in there. At the same time that the Art Project, which was then on Jackson Street somewhere, closed, you know. It closed because there were no more people who needed employment in this way.

MARY MCCHESENEY Did you do any silk screen work on the weaving project?

MARGERIE MAGNANI No, we didn't. It was done on the Art Project, and, you know, a lot of it was done there, very good work. But not on the crafts project at all.

MARY MCCHESENEY No silkscreening of material, I meant?

MARGERIE MAGNANI Yes. None at all. This must have all been done on the Art Project. And I don't know who was doing it but I know an awful lot of good materials were turned out at that period. A lot of people started working in silk screen then. But it was not by the crafts project.

MARY MCCHESENEY And what about tapestry? Did you do any of that?

MARGERIE MAGNANI Yes, we did do some. There were two or three women who were working in tapestry, as part of the Art Project again. One of them was Mildred Palmer, who has died, but they worked separately. They had very large looms, like six foot wide looms, and I don't remember where they were all of the time except that I remember once having gone to visit the place where they were working which was on Powell Street where the cable car barn was. I'm not too sure how long they were there. They weren't under my jurisdiction anyhow. But they were doing some pretty interesting things. They had some lovely materials I remember but I don't know where they came from, or how they got them. And I don't know where the finished tapestries ever went. I've never heard about them.

MARY MCCHESENEY Do you remember if they were doing the same thing as they did in Oakland where some of the artists on the Art Project would design the tapestries and then have them made by the tapestry workshop?

MARGERIE MAGNANI Probably they were but I don't know who, unless George Harris. I imagine that he did design some of these because I know that he did quite a lot of tapestry design so he probably did. But I don't know very much about that.

MARY MCCHESENEY When we were talking about the ceramic project a bit earlier, you mentioned John Magnani who was later your husband --

MARGERY MAGNANI Yes.

MARY MCCHESENEY -- and was head of the ceramic project?

MARGERY MAGNANI Yes.

MARY MCCHESENEY Where was that located in San Francisco? In the same building?

MARGERY MAGNANI Yes, in the same building on Folsom Street and then later on at 950 Columbus.

MARY MCCHESENEY How many people did they have on their project, do you remember?

MARGERY MAGNANI No, I don't. But a lot, an awful lot of people were working in ceramics and they did a lot of very good things. There were a lot of pots made. Ash trays and various utilitarian things were made for city offices, mostly for City Hall, as I remember it. There was some sculpture being fired that was probably done in other places. Sargent Johnson did some of these things but they were fired there, as I remember it, on the crafts project, in the ceramics department. I've forgotten how many kilns there were but I know one was very large, and I do remember that Sargent Johnson was doing large animals for playgrounds. For housing project playgrounds where they were intended to be used as, you know, part of an outdoor playground. And they were made in clay and the firing and all was done on the ceramics project.

MARY MCCHESENEY The kiln then was large enough to take a piece, say, three, or three-and-a-half, or four feet?

MARGERY MAGNANI Yes. Yes, easily. I'm not sure of all this but I think that they had made the kilns that they used on the project, you know. They were made there. And I remember hearing afterwards that they were still the best kilns that you could get. You know, you couldn't buy a kiln as good as some of these that had been made. I knew less than nothing about ceramics at that time. I don't know very much about it now, but I've learned a lot since then. That's what I don't remember very much about it because I didn't have very much to do with it, and also didn't know enough about it. I wish I had because there were some very good things going on. They made their own glazes, as I remember. And it was interesting work, good work. Then every Christmas - or I don't know how many Christmases, two or three anyhow that I know of - a woman who worked on the newspaper, the San Francisco News, it was then - the Scripps-Howard paper, I can't remember her name but she wrote some kind of a, oh, like a kind of "advice to people" column or a combination of that and a sob sister column. Anyhow, she somehow got together money, and I don't know where she got it. It came through the paper in some way and was used to make toys for poor children. She would provide the money for the materials well in advance of Christmas each year and the project was very busy, the ceramics and the woodworking part of it, making these toys, some of them out of wood, some out of ceramics, and a combination of the two materials. I don't have any of them. I wish I did because some of the things that were done were really, really good. These were designed by artists, you know, and they were good toys, not ugly toys, and not all the stuff that's on the market. I remember hobby horses that were made there and really some wonderful things. There were some dolls and so forth. The weaving end of it really didn't have anything to do with that but the woodworking and ceramics did. They turned out quantities of these things every year.

MARY MCCHESENEY How were they distributed, do you remember.

MARGERY MAGNANI She did this through the newspaper. This was really a marvelous idea and a marvelous project and if I could remember her name you would probably know her. You know, it's not Dorothy Dix but she wrote under a name that, at that time, was familiar to everybody. All I remember is that truckloads of things were taken out of there, you know, and distributed just before Christmas. They did an awful lot of good work, you know, the WPA. Tremendous.

MARY MCCHESENEY How long had your husband, John Magnani, been the head of the ceramics department? Did he start the project?

MARGERY MAGNANI Yes, I think he did. And I think he must have been there, let's see - he must have left in '44. He was probably there 4 years. I really don't know when this started, the crafts project, but I would think around 1940 or '41. And as far as I know, he was there from the beginning I'm quite sure.

MARY MCCHESENEY Could you tell us something about his background? Where was he born?

MARGERY MAGNANI He was born in Coney Island, which he used to keep a deep, dark secret, more or less, or else make jokes about it. Actually he was brought up in New York, in the City of New York. His father was a plasterer, you know, who did ornamental plaster work, Italian; his mother was Austrian. His family moved here

when he was around seven or eight years old, something like that. He worked for many years here. He went to school, to high school here, and he went to the University of California here for two years, I think. He worked mostly in casting, plaster casting, for his father, and through his father. At that time, you know, a lot of ornamental plaster was being done in all the buildings. He worked on the Palace of Fine Arts of the 1915 San Francisco Exposition for instance, when it was originally built. And he worked for some years for a sculpture here, Edgar Walter. You've probably heard of him. And then came the depression and nobody had any work and so forth and so on, and finally he worked on WPA.

MARY MCCHESENEY Had he done ceramics before?

MARGERY MAGNANI Mhmm. He had done quite a bit of ceramics, you know, for casting plaster into ceramics. It was a kind of natural. It followed more or less naturally from that. And he had done ceramics but I think mostly on his own, you know. He hadn't, that I know of, worked in ceramics for anybody in particular. Later he did. He became interested particularly in the technical aspect of it - in developing clay bodies and so forth and so on and did a lot of work in that field.

MARY MCCHESENEY Was most of the work that was done in the WPA ceramic department cast or was it thrown?

MARGERY MAGNANI No, most of it was cast because most of it, you know, had to be repeated. It was really a production setup more than - just as the weaving was - for small pieces and samples and so forth. The original pieces were thrown, naturally, but from that almost all of it was done in molds. You know the plaster mold was made from the clay piece. I wonder sometimes what happened to all those molds, where they are. I have no idea. I suppose they were broken up when the project was closed, which is too bad.

MARY MCCHESENEY Did they ever do dinnerware, or were they doing mostly individual vases and ash trays?

MARGERY MAGNANI They didn't do any dinnerware that I know of. They were doing mostly, you know, pots, vases really, ash trays, this kind of thing and some sculpture, some casting of sculpture and firing of it.

MARY MCCHESENEY You mentioned earlier that Sargent Johnson was a sculptor who did some animals that were handled through the ceramic department.

MARGERY MAGNANI Yes.

MARY MCCHESENEY Were there other sculptors whose names you remember who were doing ceramic work then? Did they ever do any casting for Bufano?

MARGERY MAGNANI I don't think so. I know that John did a lot of casting for Bufano at one time but this was before WPA.

MARY MCCHESENEY Oh!

MARGERY MAGNANI And I don't remember their doing any casting for Bufano. Sargent Johnson, at that time, in these two or three years, was working - I've forgotten the name of the street and all but he had a separate studio and he was working on panels that went to George Washington High School. Did he tell you this, or did you come across this somewhere?

MARY MCCHESENEY Yes, Sargent said he had taken over that project after Bufano was fired.

MARGERY MAGNANI It's odd and it always makes me angry because they are very often attributed to Bufano, and they were done by Sargent. These were huge things that lined the football field out there. They're still there, of course, and I think they're still very nice. Oh, I know who also was working - Hiler. Hilaire Hiler was also working at that time. I don't know if he was working with Sargent in the same studio or what, but he was part of the Art Project I know, and he was doing panels for Aquatic Park that are out there now. And I'm not sure whether these were - I don't know what they are - whether they were fired. Were they glaze over enamel? I think some of them were. But I don't know who did this, who did the firing of this and so forth.

MARY MCCHESENEY Oh! There's one large tile mural on the back of the Aquatic Park Building. Is that the one you're speaking of? It was never completed.

MARGERY MAGNANI Yes, that was Hiler's, wasn't it?

MARY MCCHESENEY Sargent Johnson's, I think.

MARGERY MAGNANI I'm not sure.

MARY MCCHESENEY I think Sargent may have designed it.

MARGERY MAGNANI Maybe. Perhaps.

MARY MCCHESENEY And there was one other craft project in San Francisco, the woodworking. Do you remember who was the head of that?

MARGERY MAGNANI Well, you know John was the head of the whole thing and then there were foremen who were in charge of the actual, you know, production of what was happening. And there was an old man, Frank Neiberding - this is total recall - Frank Neiberding. I never could dream I could remember his name. He was a pretty old man then, so I don't suppose he's still alive, but he was in charge, I think, of the woodworking. I mean he was on WPA as a foreman, as I remember, and I've really forgotten the things that they did in wood. I do remember the signs for the Recreation Department and the park department. Those signs are still being used, you know. That say whatever the name of the playground is, and so forth. These were all hand carved of wood and everybody on the project worked on them. There were fewer people on the woodworking end of it than there were on the ceramics and weaving, as I remember. And I know they did the toys that we mentioned.

MARY MCCHESENEY Was their shop in the same building?

MARGERY MAGNANI Yes. The three craft media were together in one building and stayed that way when we moved to Columbus Avenue. Although it was a much cutdown number, they were still there, and still working.

MARY MCCHESENEY Were they all men in the woodworking department?

MARGERY MAGNANI Yes, as far as I remember, they were all men. I remember that they had pretty good equipment too, which I knew nothing about. I remember how frightened I was of the whole business after I found myself in charge of it and, you know, I'd worry about the accidents that happened. There weren't many but there were some and, you know, what you do with people who cut their finger off and so on. You know, you manage. You get them somewhere. It all works out but I knew so little, still know so little about woodworking and power tools and so forth that it was kind of frightening responsibility, at any rate.

MARY MCCHESENEY Were they making any furniture there?

MARGERY MAGNANI They probably were but I don't know what. I don't remember what or for where. I don't really know. I'm sure that Frank Conway, the City Hall man, you know, who was involved with this crafts project - if you haven't talked to him - and you probably haven't - would know a lot about all this. He's still working for City Hall. He's now - I don't know. He may be Head of Purchasing or something like this. He has a fairly big job. And the other man to whom we were responsible and who would come around and look things over and in some way give us supplies and so forth, I can't think of his name but he was, until a year or so ago head of the Department of Public Works here. Do you know his name? He just retired a year or two ago. Now, eventually I might think of it. You would probably know his name if you heard it because he, you know, is one of the City Hall officials.

MARY MCCHESENEY In the ceramics department did they have men and women?

MARGERY MAGNANI Yes. Oh, yes, they had both men and women. Quite a few women, I think. But in the weaving part of it I don't remember any men at all. I don't think there were any. I think they were all women altogether. I was young then and it was a very big undertaking because I hadn't had any experience in handling groups of people and when I looked at these people, I felt much younger even than I was because they were all old enough to be my mother, most of them, mother or grandmother. And although I had done a lot of weaving of my own and a lot of designing of fabrics, and had worked for various people, I had done all of this on a very small or relatively small scale, working for designers and so forth. So then to be suddenly faced with, you know, 70, 75 women was a very big experience, but it worked out pretty well. In Los Angeles on NYA the situation was quite different because this was the National Youth Administration and they were all young people employed there. On WPA the whole atmosphere was different. In many ways it was kind of harder on NYA because they were young people who didn't, by any means, want to be there or to be doing what they were doing. So there were other problems of handling them. Whereas here on WPA, I think that most people were very pleased in many ways to be there.

MARY MCCHESENEY Did you have any connection with the sewing project of the WPA.

MARGERY MAGNANI No. None whatsoever. I don't know much about it.

MARY MCCHESENEY I mean, people weren't transferred to you from that project? I was wondering about that.

MARGERY MAGNANI I don't think so. Not particularly, no. Not that I remember.

MARY MCCHESENEY What sort of an effect do you think being on the government art project, the craft project,

had on your own career as an artist and designer?

MARGERY MAGNANI Oh, well, I don't know. It's very difficult. When I think about my own connection with all this, I don't know where it started because I had never intended going into this field at all. I was a French Lit major at college and I was one of the few people who knew exactly what she was going to do, where and when, you know. Everything was set and planned. And then by a series of flukes and accidents I found myself in this field of weaving and so forth, having been offered a job when I got out of college. One thing led to another and so, you know, I found myself in all of this quite by accident. I applied for the NYA job because I was mad at the people I was working for who were, I thought, or I felt at that point, taking great advantage of me. I wanted out and I applied for the NYA job just, you know, kind of for the hell of it. Just to see what would happen. And when somebody called me up one night and said, "You know, if you wanted work, you're hired." I nearly dropped dead. It never really occurred to me that I'd be hired and so forth. So having done that and gone from there to WPA, by the time I was finished with WPA, I was very much in this kind of atmosphere. So this is what my interest was, you know, working in production and teaching people and so forth and so on. When WPA closed, I continued in a similar situation because I went to work for the Recreation Department and for the Housing Authority, both of whom had supported WPA. When the WPA project was closed, Josephine Randall, who was head of the Recreation Department at that time, wanted very much to get a hold of the looms, you know. She didn't want them just to be stored or be lost and so forth. I don't know what financial arrangements were made but she managed to get almost all of the WPA looms, and set them up on Pine and Van Ness in a building that they rented. We continued to use them and the Recreation Department hired me to run that weaving project, which was quite a different thing from WPA in that people were weaving there because it was kind of adult education and recreation and so forth. The Recreation Department didn't have enough money to support it all so part of it was paid by the Housing Authority, and we set up some of the looms in the Sunnyvale Housing Project.

(Interruption for phone call)

MARY MCCHESENEY We were just talking about the way the project closed and how the looms went over to the Recreation Department.

MARGERY MAGNANI Yes.

MARY MCCHESENEY And you went to work then for them...

MARGERY MAGNANI Yes, both the Recreation Department and the Housing Department took them over and took over the materials that were left, you know. These were both City projects, and the City had supported these crafts projects, so this was a kind of logical move from one thing to the other. I can't think of the name of the man who was then head - maybe still is - Jack somebody or other - of the Housing Project. I think he's still head of it now. And between him and Miss Randall, you know, they kind of divided the loot and divided my salary and continued this, which I thought was kind of good. Although it was on a wholly different basis, they were really interested enough in it. Miss Randall, who was then getting on in years, had the idea that eventually she would retire from this job as superintendent of the Recreation Department - she'd been there for years and years - and then she was going to take up weaving and so forth for her own old age. And I think this had a great deal to do with her wanting these looms and wanting to continue this and so forth. It never really came to pass but nevertheless the idea was good. That Recreation Department project continued until 1947 and then it closed. The weaving end of it closed.

MARY MCCHESENEY Even though the craft projects didn't have any direct relationship to the Art Project until later, you must have known many of the artists who were on the Art Project because I was looking around at some of the work that you have. You have a painting of George Harris' here.

MARGERY MAGNANI Yes. We have several. We have some others - I don't know if they're lithographs or etchings. We have two upstairs. This painting is George Harris' which we bought from him some time after the WPA, but nevertheless, this is how we originally knew him. Have you talked to him? Because he's important.

MARY MCCHESENEY No, I haven't.

MARGERY MAGNANI He's available. He's at Montavo, I think, isn't he?

MARY MCCHESENEY Yes. Stanford.

MARGERY MAGNANI And Stanford.

MARY MCCHESENEY Yes.

MARGERY MAGNANI I know he got his doctorate at Stanford. Yes, there was George Harris and Sargent Johnson and Bufano and Bob Howard and Charles Howard. I suppose many more that I knew, but many of them I have

lost tract of now.

MARY MCCHESENEY Some of the WPA artists were connected with the Fair at Treasure Island. Did the weaving project have anything to do with that at all?

MARGERIE MAGNANI No, it didn't, not at all. In '39 this was?

MARY MCCHESENEY Yes.

MARGERIE MAGNANI I wonder if it even existed then, and I don't think it did. But now that you mention that, John worked on the Fair. This was before I knew him but I have heard about the year, or whatever time was spent in working on the Fair. What a wonderful time this was and so forth, and I don't know if he was on WPA then. I suppose he was. He must have worked at the Fair or may have, but I don't know exactly what he was doing but I know that many of them were working there. I didn't know any of these people then. Because at that time I was living in Los Angeles and this was quite a bit before I started.

MARY MCCHESENEY What do you think of the art work that was produced on the WPA Art Project in San Francisco?

MARGERIE MAGNANI Oh, I think there were wonderful things produced then. I think this was a really important period, you know, in art history. For the first time people were able to work under, in quotation marks, "ideal" conditions because they were provided with a place to work and materials and time. This is the way art can be produced, and it was produced in that period. Specifically, I don't know exactly the names of people who kind of grew out of that period, but there were many of them. I always think of Gorky, for instance, as having kind of started - not started - but developed in that period. And many others. I think it was a marvelous period. It was an idea and when you think of the size of it and the scope of it, it was wonderfully well carried out, I think.

MARY MCCHESENEY Do you think it would be a good idea for the government in the United States to sponsor the arts again?

MARGERIE MAGNANI Oh, I do! I surely do! And I think that maybe we're coming to it, aren't we, in one form or another? Through grants and, you know, art is popular today. You know, large companies and industry and so forth, as well as government, I think, will eventually spend a lot of money on it. They are in some countries and I hope they do here. It's a natural way of handling it, it seems to me. And I think the success of the WPA and what was done on it proved this over and over again.

MARY MCCHESENEY If they did sponsor the art again in the United States, do you think there are any ways in which it could be improved?

MARGERIE MAGNANI You mean the running of it? Or how to do it, and so forth?

MARY MCCHESENEY Well, in general. Either way.

MARGERIE MAGNANI Oh, I suppose there are ways. I wouldn't know, really, how to set up something like this, but I think in principle, it is the way to work it. It has to do, I suppose, with, you know, incorporating art in all that's being built and designed and made and so forth, but this is coming to pass more and more. Everywhere you go the artist is finally somewhat recognized as a part of what's being made today. I don't know how it could be set up because I'm not oriented in that direction. I'm not practical enough and I'm not, perhaps, experienced enough, but I'm sure that it could be done and could be well-handled. The WPA was under very difficult circumstances in that there were, you know, certain kinds of restrictions. There was certainly a limited amount of money and so forth and so on, but it still worked. The artist wants a place to work. That's all. Time to do it, and a way of eating while he's doing it, or supporting his family, or whatever.

MARY MCCHESENEY Were most of the artists who were friends of yours on the WPA satisfied with the way the project was handled?

MARGERIE MAGNANI Oh, well, you know there were endless little bits of arguments and fights and so forth and so on, some of which were funny, and many of them were maddening, but I think, you know, on the large scale and on the whole, yes, they were satisfied. Look at the things that were produced in that time - written, painted, made - you know - in the crafts and so forth, a tremendous amount of stuff.

MARY MCCHESENEY Did you have any contact with any of the other projects, such as the writing project, or theatre groups?

MARGERIE MAGNANI I didn't. But his is only because I think, in a way, I kind of isolated myself on that weaving project because it was a big job for me at the time. It was all I could do to keep it going, and so forth. And also I had personal problems having to do with moving back to San Francisco, which was my home, and so forth. And

so I did this and not much else, so I really don't know much about it. Once in a while I see things that were written during that time, or I hear of theatre things that were done then, and I'm amazed all over again at how much was produced, you know. How much really did come out of this. This was a very energetic and very vital force that was working here, I think.

MARY MCCHESENEY Do you think it only could have occurred in the kind of period that it did? Apparently you don't, or you wouldn't have said the government should sponsor the arts again - but I was wondering if there was any kind of connection between the way the WPA operated and the depression of the time? Or were you very much aware of the fact that the depression was going on?

MARGERIE MAGNANI Well, I was in school, you know, during most of the depression and I, like everybody else or I suppose like everybody else during those years, was only interested in myself. We, at least, didn't know very much about the world in general. I personally didn't suffer a great deal from the depression so I wasn't nearly as aware of things as I probably should have been, or as I think a child today - not that I was a child - but a young person would be today. I think today college kids and so forth, are much more hep and much more aware of what's going on in the world, for all the obvious reasons of quick communication and so forth. But I wonder myself sometimes whether this could only have happened as a result of the depression, and I don't know. Today's world is so completely different from that. We've forgotten so much of it, you know. We're concerned today with buying the most expensive of everything and spending the most money, and so forth, rather than the business of getting down to how even to eat, and so forth. Well, when you are down to this, it's probably simpler for a project such as this to be effective than it would be now. It would have to be set up with an entirely different atmosphere, I guess. The artist, I don't think is struggling to the same extent today by any means, you know, but goodness knows, he was then. He was, I'm sure, worse off than - well, if possible, most of the people.

MARY MCCHESENEY Do you have any other general thoughts about the WPA, or about that period?

MARGERIE MAGNANI I don't know. I wish that I had written down a lot of things at that time. You don't know when you're going through something, and also you think of it in such personal terms. Of course, the whole world at that time was in many ways much more concerned with the real things having to do with living than they are today. At least I think so. And we were all very much more involved in, you know, what we were doing, what we were producing, causes, all of that, you know. Everybody was sort of rarin' to go. Today's world is quite different.

MARY MCCHESENEY Thank you very much for giving us the time for the interview this afternoon.

END OF INTERVIEW

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