



Smithsonian
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Oral history interview with Dorothy Morang,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Dorothy Morang on December 3, 1964. The interview was conducted in Santa Fe, New Mexico by Sylvia Loomis for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

SYLVIA LOOMIS: This is an interview with Mrs. Dorothy Morang, Curator of Fine Arts at the Fine Art Gallery in the Museum of New Mexico in Santa Fe, on December 3, 1964. The interviewer is Mrs. Sylvia Loomis of the Santa Fe office of the Archives of American Art. The subject to be discussed is Mrs. Morang's participation in both the Federal Art and the Federal Music projects during the 1930's. But first, Dorothy, will you tell us where you were born and where you received your art education?

DOROTHY MORANG: I was born in Richmond, Maine, and I had no formal art education, but I had painted from the time I was a child and passed juries in the East and Portland Maine, for at least two shows in the museum there before I came to Santa Fe.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: When did you come?

DOROTHY MORANG: In 1937.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Was there any particular reason?

DOROTHY MORANG: Yes, my husband's health was very bad, and it was recommended that he come to a higher, dryer climate.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, that was Alfred Morang? Well were you painting after you got to Santa Fe?

DOROTHY MORANG: Yes, I started even more seriously. I'd been working quite steadily in Portland, Maine - Alfred and I lived there for about seven years before we came here - and I went on and worked very seriously with some criticism from Alfred and from Raymond Jonson, who was living in Santa Fe then.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, and what were you doing at the time the Federal Art Project came along, do you remember?

DOROTHY MORANG: Just living here and painting and needing money.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, and when did you join the Art Project?

DOROTHY MORANG: In 1940 - my records say that I started work on March 6, 1940.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And that was under the supervision of Vernon Hunter, is that right?

DOROTHY MORANG: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And what type of thing did you do then?

DOROTHY MORANG: Well in order to pass the test to be admitted to the project, Mr. Hunter asked me to do a portrait of Archbishop Lamy from whatever photographs I could find. And he approved of this, so I was admitted as an "artist grade 2" to be an easel painter on the project.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Do you know what happened to that portrait of Archbishop Lamy?

DOROTHY MORANG: I have no idea.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Was Alfred also on the project?

DOROTHY MORANG: No, he was not. He was in Maine before we came out here, but he was spending all of his time writing and painting.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh yes. How long did you do this type of work on the project?

DOROTHY MORANG: I painted on the project only a short time when I was transferred to help tint maps at the National Park Service and a lot of the artists were sent up there to do this. And then I was back easel painting for

a little over a year altogether. However, this was interrupted by some work as Mr. Hunter's secretary. His secretary left the project, and there was no one else around who could type.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh I see. Which secretary was that?

DOROTHY MORANG: I don't remember the name.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: It wasn't Joy Finke?

DOROTHY MORANG: No, it wasn't Joy Finke.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I knew she left at one point.

DOROTHY MORANG: No it wasn't Joy. Then this was also interrupted by three months working on the Food Stamp Project. They canvassed all the projects here for people who could type and would be able to work on this project. It was a crash project. And I helped with that for I think about five months.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Did they change your classifications?

DOROTHY MORANG: No, they just drafted us from various projects.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see, so you still were actually on the record as an artist? That was nice.

DOROTHY MORANG: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: They didn't declassify you or something of the sort.

DOROTHY MORANG: Yes, indeed it was.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: How many paintings did you do?

DOROTHY MORANG: Well it seems that I did twenty-one paintings in -- well, let's see, a year and a few months. Actually I guess it would be only about a year considering the interruptions. There was also a brief period when I was a secretary of the Arsuna School of Fine Arts.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh yes, I meant to ask you about that. I knew there was such a school, but I didn't know whether it had any connection with the WPA Art Project. Would you explain a little bit more about that?

DOROTHY MORANG: Well, all I recall is that they were approved to receive help from the project because it was nonprofit art school. I don't know the ruling in that sort of case, but I was sent there.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And what did you do there?

DOROTHY MORANG: I got their records in order and their files in order and did any secretarial work that was to be done.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see, well were any of the teachers employed by WPA?

DOROTHY MORANG: I don't know that, I don't know.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, I know that they did have art teaching projects in several sections of the country, where the artists were actually employed as art teachers by the WPA.

DOROTHY MORANG: I'm vaguely remembering that they were, or some of them were.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Where was this school located?

DOROTHY MORANG: Camino del Monte Sol.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Do you remember who some of the people were who were associated with that?

DOROTHY MORANG: Ah, let me see. Well Maurice Litzman was teaching piano, and there were two different dancers at different times. I believe Catherine Wenzell was there for a time, and I'm very bad at names, I'm afraid.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Then it was more than just an art school?

DOROTHY MORANG: Yes, there were writing teachers also, and I believe my husband was teaching painting

there, and writing.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well I didn't know that. I thought it was just an art school.

DOROTHY MORANG: No it was quite broad.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: In some other interview that I had, someone was involved in it – I've forgotten who it was –, but I had the impression of its being just art classes. Do you know what happened to these paintings that you did?

DOROTHY MORANG: No, I wish I did because I feel that I went ahead of myself a little, having all that time to paint, because I was supposed to put in six hours a day, which I did, and as a matter of fact, I turned out nearly two paintings a month during the period in which I was painting on the project.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Who was your supervisor?

DOROTHY MORANG: Vernon Hunter.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Did he supervise your technique in any way? Were you allowed to experiment?

DOROTHY MORANG: No, he didn't supervise the technique, but we had to bring things to him and show him, and he didn't exactly make suggestions, but we got the idea whether they were acceptable or not.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see, and was there a time limit on when you had to turn in a painting?

DOROTHY MORANG: No, I don't remember that either. I see by my records, though, that I was working on several things at the time, and sometimes one would be put off and be finished several months after it was started because I was working on other things in the meantime. So apparently there wasn't. But I do remember there was a number set that you had to turn in, I think at least one a month. I think that was it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, then you didn't feel any restriction as far as your being able to paint the sort of thing you wanted to?

DOROTHY MORANG: No, no.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Did you feel that this opportunity to paint under these auspices gave your career a boost?

DOROTHY MORANG: Definitely. I have never made as much progress since, in a year, in technique. No, I felt that I went ahead very fast having all this time to paint. I wish I could have done it since.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well it's pretty hard for any artist to try to earn a living and then paint on the side, I know.

DOROTHY MORANG: Very difficult with a full time job.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Then at what time did you go into the Music Project?

DOROTHY MORANG: Well, I was recertified on December 4, 1941, and started working on the music project as a senior music teacher on January 5, 1942.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Had you had training in music?

DOROTHY MORANG: My principal training was in music. I graduated from the New England Conservatory in Boston.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh I see.

DOROTHY MORANG: As a pianist and a piano teacher.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And what kind of an assignment did you have here?

DOROTHY MORANG: Teaching Music Appreciation at one of the junior high schools and also teaching Music Appreciation classes for high school students here in the Museum.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Do you know how extensive this Music Project was throughout the state or the city?

DOROTHY MORANG: I don't know of any other activity in the Music Project. Yes there was a little orchestra, a little orchestra I believe. Aside from that in my work, I also had piano classes at home. I don't know of anything else in town but I do remember the orchestra. However, my memory's not too good either after all these years.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: No, it's quite a long time ago. Well who was the Supervisor for the music project?

DOROTHY MORANG: Oh my goodness, Isabelle Eckles.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, is that right? I didn't know she did that.

DOROTHY MORANG: Now wait a minute... Yes, she was, I'm sure, the person in charge.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I think she was in charge of the woman's division of some of the WPA projects, but I didn't know that she was that closely connected with the art projects.

DOROTHY MORANG: At this time I'm sure she was the one who persuaded me to transfer to try to get on the Music Project instead of the Art. I don't recall reporting to anyone else. Again my memory isn't reliable.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well so far I haven't talked with anyone that was on the Music Project. I have talked to people that knew something about it, but it has been hard to find anyone that was actually employed on it, so I hoping that you'd be able to give us some broader information, but if it was as restricted as that in Santa Fe, they didn't do very much.

DOROTHY MORANG: I may even be mistaken about that, but I did happen to hear about the orchestra.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: So you know who was in charge of that?

DOROTHY MORANG: I can't remember now.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: It's not too important, but it's interesting to know. Well, then how long were you on this project?

DOROTHY MORANG: Only until the WPA was discontinued, which was that same spring.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh so it wasn't very long?

DOROTHY MORANG: Not very long, about five months.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And do you have the date the project closed down?

DOROTHY MORANG: Well I believe it was around the end of May because I started work at the Museum the first of June, 1942, and as I recall I was not able to even take a working day off. They started me in right away.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, is that right?

DOROTHY MORANG: It must have been at the end of May.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And what kind of work did you do here?

DOROTHY MORANG: The first work I did was in the historic line. We were gathering records of New Mexico men in World War II. And clipping many newspapers and setting up card files of men in the Service.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Do you want to tell us how your work has developed here in the Museum since then? I know you've been in the Art Department for a long time.

DOROTHY MORANG: Well, I've been in a lot of other departments, too. In fact I've had quite a broad experience here. After, as a matter of fact, I was taken off the World War II work briefly for six months to serve as the Curator of the Art Gallery. That was in 1945, and Hester Jones, who was the Curator, was away doing war work, and so I was appointed to be temporary acting Curator. And I worked in Publications for awhile helping to edit and proofread "El Palacio," the Museum publication, and the "Historical Review" and enjoyed that very much, also writing résumés of books and articles for other magazines and reviews of art shows. I did quite a lot of writing while I was with "El Palacio." And after that I worked on the information desk at the Palace of the Governors for a short time, and then I was sent over to the Fine Arts Building to be Reginald Fisher's secretary, and after that - while I was still his secretary - I was working on the project exhibitions, which he has established around the state and the community process, the small concert series which he called New Mexico concerts. And he became very ill, and I handled this for quite awhile, and then I was moved down to my own office in the basement and continued to have traveling shows for several years. And then when our rental sales department was started, it started under somebody else's auspices, or direction, but that was put in my charge after a short time. Up until about a year ago, I was Curator of Traveling exhibitions, was my title. Since then I've been Curator of Fine Arts, which means I have charge of the collection, Fine Arts Collection - cataloging, researching and taking care of it in general. And also acting as registrar - checking in and out all the paintings and all the work of art that come in for exhibition.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, I know you were very helpful to me when I came here before to get information about the art of the WPA days that was in the Museum collection. We managed to find quite a few. We sent the photographs on to Detroit.

DOROTHY MORANG: Perhaps when I've read some more of the old correspondence and records, I may find more for you.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, we're just about down to the end of our gathering of material, and we hope we will be able to write this up for the survey, as that they want all the information by the first of January.

DOROTHY MORANG: That's wonderful. I'd like to tell you a little story that indicated that the Music Project was also important. When I taught at the Harvey Junior High, music appreciation, I was very discouraged because I had thirty boys in my class and there was only two that showed an inkling of interest, the least little bit of interest. But all of fifteen years later, one of those boys who was grown up and married came to me in a restaurant one evening and remarked that he had got so much from that course that I had at Harvey Junior High - he enjoyed it and gained so much from it, and since then one or two others have spoken to me about it, too.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, I know a great deal was accomplished in all of the art projects during that period. Maybe you have some comments that you'd like to make about the effect on the public, as far as art appreciation was concerned. Do you think that was helped by the projects?

DOROTHY MORANG: Yes, I do, I think that a great deal more art was brought before the public because of these projects. Of course, principally, perhaps, the mural paintings and sculptures, architectural sculptures that were done perhaps more than the easel paintings. Yes, I do think so.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Was there any art teaching project besides this Arsuna School in Santa Fe during that period?

DOROTHY MORANG: Not that I was aware of.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well I know that they had some down at the Roswell Art Center. That building was built by WPA funds, and they had art teachers there, and they had quite a center.

DOROTHY MORANG: Yes, I know about that and also Melrose - the little town of Melrose had a very active project.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, besides giving employment to the artist during this difficult period in our history, what effect do you think the projects had on their development?

DOROTHY MORANG: Well if it had the same impetus, if it gave the same impetus to their development as it did mine, I think it must have been exceedingly helpful because, as I said, I think I gained more in a year of steady painting than I have in any five years at least since then.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: But you have kept right on with your painting, haven't you?

DOROTHY MORANG: Oh yes, yes I have.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Because I read about your exhibitions every once in awhile.

DOROTHY MORANG: I have one every now and then.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And you had one in New York, didn't you?

DOROTHY MORANG: Yes, just about a year ago now. It was the last two weeks of November last year.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: What gallery was it in New York?

DOROTHY MORANG: Panora's, a small gallery. PANORA'S, on 63rd Street.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well are there any other comments that you'd like to make about that period in your life? Or maybe you'd like to say something about Alfred Morang?

DOROTHY MORANG: Well about all I could say was Alfred was more of a professional artist than I was, really, when we came here. He had more experience, painted longer, and exhibited more. But he had also taken up writing, and he was very active, as you know, on radio, too, interviewing artists on the radio. He had an interview program for several years. I don't remember how many years. And also ran a column in a little weekly newspaper we had, called "Art in the News." It was in the Santa Fe News. He was extremely active.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Where was his art education?

DOROTHY MORANG: He studied in the East privately with a national academician up in Maine or Massachusetts, mostly.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: You don't remember his name?

DOROTHY MORANG: Henry B. Snell, National Academy, was the teacher he spoke of most often. I think he studied with him when he was up in Maine. He was more of an Impressionistic painter.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, I remember that from his work, and I also remember his radio program, which we all looked forward to, and also his column. But do you think that he influenced your work very much?

DOROTHY MORANG: No, I don't. Quite the opposite, I'm terribly independent, and for several years when I was starting, he kept trying to get me to paint Impressionistically, to put the paint on more heavily in little touches, and I simply couldn't do it, so I didn't. I was very stubborn about it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, well your techniques are so different that I - when you said that you had gotten some advice or criticism from him, I couldn't see the slightest influence in your work of his painting.

DOROTHY MORANG: No there really isn't influence; it was more on general things like composition or balance. I did study, I forgot to say, with Emil Bisttram. It was only a class; it wasn't a private study. I studied dynamic symmetry with him.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh yes, he was one of the artists I interviewed. Did you study in Taos? Did you go up there?

DOROTHY MORANG: Yes, our class went to Taos for criticism of the work we were doing.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, what do you think about the present trend in the field of art?

DOROTHY MORANG: Well, I can't say I think very highly of pop art, for instance. I could see a good deal in Abstract Expressionism. It was an emotional expression certainly - uninhibited emotional expression -, and very often the effect were very beautiful. Pop art, I simply cannot see, and as some critics say, I think, it's intended to be a joke on culture and a ribbing of our culture, so to speak. I think it certainly might fulfill a function there, but I can't imagine it being taken extremely seriously.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: What is the attitude of the present director of the Museum towards pop art, do you know?

DOROTHY MORANG: I don't know, I haven't discussed it with him, and I wouldn't be able to say if I had. I wouldn't give out any of his opinions, I'm afraid.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well there haven't been any exhibitions of that sort here.

DOROTHY MORANG: No.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: So I just wondered if, if there was any, if he had any feeling about it that he had expressed to you.

DOROTHY MORANG: No, I don't think it's a deliberate boycott of that style; it's just that I don't think there's anyone in New Mexico painting that way, and we show quite a lot of New Mexico artists. Of course we get traveling shows from all over the country, too, and we just don't happen to have had any of that kind.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, of course, I suppose it has its historical moment, but let's hope it passes soon.

DOROTHY MORANG: It's bound to.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I think so, too.

DOROTHY MORANG: Of course there has been quite a reaction from Abstract Expressionism to figure painting of a very broad type, using some of the techniques of Abstract Expressionism. I think that's a healthy trend.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes. Well, I think that they're going to come out of this, and perhaps this period of experimentation with things completely wild will bring the artist back to work that has a little more discipline to it, and a little more originality and imagination.

DOROTHY MORANG: Oh, there's bound to be a reaction to it. Of course we have one very great realist, too, Andrew Wyeth, whose work I admire tremendously, although I'm and Abstractionist - a non-objective painter, more accurately.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: He does seem to be the one artist that has survived all this business.

DOROTHY MORANG: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And his work is certainly wonderful.

DOROTHY MORANG: Oh, beautiful work, yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, are there other comments you'd like to make as an artist?

DOROTHY MORANG: I think you've covered the field pretty well. I really can't think of any.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, it's been very helpful and very interesting to have this talk with you, and I'm glad that you had all your career set down on paper so that you could follow it so carefully. Most artists didn't keep notes about it, and so it was hard to find out just when they went from one thing to another.

DOROTHY MORANG: I really don't know how I happened to - it was pure chance probably. I do want to say that I've always been grateful to the WPA for this opportunity to concentrate on painting, which is what I'd like to be doing right now, except that I do love my job here, too.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well thank you very much Dorothy, you've been very helpful.

DOROTHY MORANG: Well thank you, Sylvia.

END OF INTERVIEW

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