



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Ernest Ralph
Norling, 1964 Oct. 30

Contact Information

Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Interview

EN: Ernest Norling

DB: Dorothy Bestor

DB: Now if you want to talk a little bit about the first projects, that will be fine. You were telling of the CCC.

EN: The CCC camp were the first projects we were sent out on and they were very interesting. They were the projects that the government that the boys who were out of work - it was that time of the depression where people were out of work and of course the artists were the first ones that were clipped and they were the last ones to come back. I guess all the creative fields are that way. The artists and the actors and the musicians and we who had been doing commercial work in advertising and the various fields of commercial work, we found that photographers were taking our place because they could get a picture for a few dollars from a photographer where an artist having to work perhaps two or three days to produce a three column ad would have to charge for his time. The work was every interesting. I went out to Parkers Island to the camp which is now Omerand State Park and there were at least 200 boys there and they were building a road up to the top of Mount Constitution. I made sketches of this work that they were doing. They were very interested in anything mechanical. They could take two men on a crosscut saw and saw a log off in five minutes but they would work an hour or two on a power saw to get it going, to ♦ you know how they... But, they were nice boys. We went up on the Hood Canal project and that was much the same. They were road building and improving the area there. And following that came the mural project.

DB: Excuse me one minute. After you made these sketches on the CCC camps, what was done with them? Were they exhibited as such or were they used as a basis for other work of your for murals or what?

EN: No, they were exhibited and they were sent around as interesting exhibits. They had no particular value except it kept everybody busy. The galleries exhibited them and the artists of course had worked on them.

DB: And those are the ones that you aren't sure of the location of now?

EN: I think they are in the files in the city library. At least they had them the last I knew of them. They had them and I don't think they'll destroy them.

DB: Oh, I'm sure they won't destroy them. I'll check down there because the Archives would like to have them microfilmed if possible.

EN: Then we went on the mural project and my first mural was the Post Office at Papalich and I have a reproduction here of the Post Office.

DB: Now, I think it's alright.

EN: The next painting, the painting I did following the CCC project was not murals but easel paintings. There is one that was chosen to go into the Washington representatives office in Washington, D.C. They were logging paintings and this one called the Timber buck was chosen. The White House - they'd built a new wing on it and they had taken several of these CCC paintings and it was one of several chosen for that particular thing. Then the mural project started and my first mural if I remember was the once in Topanish, Washington. Not Topanish, pardon me, it was in...

DB: Prosser?

EN: Prosser, yes, in Prosser, Washington.

DB: Was that one of these?

EN: That was the on showing the train and the mail clerk and the station master, or telegraph operator which was two in one, was distributing the mail and the people of the town were down getting their mail.

DB: Did you choose the subject of that or...

EN: Yes. You chose your own subject all through. The next one was Bremerton mural and it was a logging scene which Bremerton originally was a logging area.

DB: That was this one?

EN: Yeah, that was it.

DB: Wasn't there another Bremerton one in the library of the Bremerton...

EN: Yes. That was not the project. The captain of the Bremerton Navy Guards got interested in this project and he asked me to do one for the library which I did and ... those were the main ones. There were some smaller work that we did, various sketches and things. It came at a good time, because as I say, the artists were looking for work, and some of them had payments on their homes to meet and I know a number of them that lost their homes at that time because they couldn't meet the payments. They were looking every place for work, but you found that among the creative group mainly.

DB: Yes. How long had you been in commercial art before this?

EN: I started commercial art in 1919, right after the First World War.

DB: Was that after you graduated from James Whitman College?

EN: Yes. I got a degree in math and physics, planning to become an architect, but it never materialized. I got so interested in art. There was a young man in Walla-Walla, where the college is of course located, who came one summer with a portfolio full of drawings that he had made at the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts, that wrecked my whole architectural career. I got my degree but I went to Chicago and went to the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts and then I went to Chicago Art Institute later. And then got into the war and after that I got to work on the Seattle Times in the art department and then this young man that came into Walla-Walla came to Ellensberg and the two of us started up a little art project, art service and Frederick Nelson got interested in this type of work I was doing, so they took me over as their artist. I went with the Western Engraving Company, providing that they could use me as their artist. So, I worked seven years doing commercial advertising. This mural project helped me a great deal. I went to Hollywood later, after the - or during- the depression and I got in with a decorator there and the two of us did quite a bit of work. I figured Hollywood was about the only place in the United States where people were actually earning money and spending money and I think I was right because we got work there. The work wasn't highly paid but there \$5 was about as much as \$500 right now. [laughter]

DB: What years were you in Hollywood?

EN: Oh, I went there in the later twenties. Excuse me...when was that? Oh yes, the early thirties it was. We were there seven years and I was doing quite a bit of mural work down there. I got a lot of mural work on the strength of this...

DB: On the strength of the WPA?

EN: Yes. Though it started me on a mural painting career which I ... when I came back to Seattle later and I did a number of murals there, the Student Union building and the National Bank of Commerce - I had two murals on the fifth floor there. I think it was the fifth. It is where their international banking is done...or third floor. Anyway, it is up and I have the one in the Alaska Building and there is one that I did just when I came back from Hollywood out at the swimming pool at Fontleroy and I haven't seen that for years. I imagine that I'm quiet ashamed of it but...[laughter]

DB: What was the subject of that?

EN: Oh, it was just a sort of conglomeration. It was dedicated and the mural was given by Mr. Coleman. You know of the Coleman...?

DB: Kodak?

EN: No, he is with Gandy no, I guess. I've forgotten his first name...a very prominent businessman here and his father had done a great deal of work among the girl's club and the girl scouts and boy scouts and the campfire girls and so forth. It was kind of a conglomerate type of thing.

DB: Would you like this off for a minute?

EN: His name was Mr. Alden and he talked with the various artists. He had called them in and had consulted with them and he picked certain artists for certain projects and I was very fortunate to get in on the murals. There is quite a bit of sketch work on other projects and there were sculptors with sculpture work and various

projects. We used up at that time...

DB: The murals must have taken a lot of research. Did you know about the lumbering industry before hand or did you work this all out?

EN: Is knew pretty well the lumbering industry. I'd work when Is went to high school Is came out to Seattle and worked one summer in the logging camp and Is knew the logging industry fairly well. So Is used the logging scene mainly in my work because it hadn't been overdone and Is felt it should be a project that should be and I'm glad Is did not because it got into - now, instead of the old axle and hand saw and Is don't think it was quite as picturesque as...

DB: No, oh they certainly aren't.

EN: Is felt at the time that that should be preserved. And is did what Is could in memory of it and I'm glad Is did now because Is had a theme that nobody else was using and it represented our industry very much at that time. We were very much of a timber state.

DB: Yes. We were. Did you happen to be the one to do that stylized map of the state of Washington which has motifs from the logging industry?

EN: No. I've seen the map but is didn't do it.

DB: Maybe that was an imitator of yours because it is in somewhat your style. Is just happened to think of it now. When you did the mural you showed me, the railway station mural, that took research didn't it?

EN: Yes.

DB: How long did you spend on that mural? Have you any idea?

EN: No, Is haven't. Is just started in, made the sketches, sent in the sketches, the sketches were approved....

DB: Whom did you send them in to? Mr. Inverarity? He was in charge of some of the work around here.

EN: No, he wasn't in charge of that type of thing at all. Is don't remember if Is sent it to Mr. Alden or whether I sent it back to Washington, D.C. You've seen this haven't you?

DB: Yes. Is have.

EN: This tells who was in charge of that at the time. You're losing valuable time...

DB: That's alright.

EN: Edward Bruce. He was the one Is corresponded wit hat that time. When the sketches were approved, Is just went ahead and painted them. But that shows the general trend. It shows sketches usually in...

DB: Which of your are in there?

EN: Is haven't any there. That was out before Is started. Is was just painting one when that came out.

DB: Oh, Is see.

EN: Is don't know if there were any other sculptor or not, but Is sent - they wrote to me and had me send a painting in for the next book but I've never seen it and Is don't know if it ever came out.

DB: Is wonder. I'll look up and see if there is more work because this sis the only one I've ever seen.

EN: Is should look in the library and see if they printed the second book.

DB: They probably have it in our library here, if it did come out. You didn't have anyone helping you on these murals as Miss Spurgen did on her...

EN: No, no, Is worked alone. Is tried to get someone to help one time but it wasn't successful. You know, he tried to have his own way of expressing. So, Is just discontinued that because it was of no use to me.

DB: Is don't see how anyone could do it, really.

EN: The way Is look at it, it is just like you started a letter and let somebody else finish it, to a persona friend.

DB: Yes, exactly.

EN: You say, "Well tell me about this and tell me about that," and they do buy it isn't your way of doing it. So, you might as well... my mother used to say, " If you want a thing done well, do it yourself." So, you pick your own mural as the best and you do it yourself. That's an interpretation of what you have in mind.

DB: Were you ever in much contact with other artist who were doing WPA and PWA work?

EN: Yes.

DB: Really? Which ones do you remember?

EN: there was Peter Van Daylyn.

DB: Oh, Is don't have him.

EN: He's in California now. And Jacob Elshin, Is believe is one.

DB: Yes. I've talked with him and I'm going to interview him further.

EN: Ken Callahan, of course.

DB: Yes.

EN: And Is can't remember all who was working on that. But, those were the three that Is was quite close in touch with. It was - we were all very excited over the thing because it was a big thing for us. It was post office murals and the government was backing it so we all tried to do our best.

DB: Did you get any reaction that you remember? Either spoken or in letters from the public or the post office officials or...? Newspapers? Was there a feeling of being well received or controversy or...?

EN: No. Not in the federal murals. Is did in that Bremerton mural because Is had a top sergeant leading a bear or something in the...

DB: As Is noticed in the newspaper clippings there were some controversy. The theaters thought it was great and the top brass....

EN: Yeah, oh he was mad. That sergeant was quite put out because Is had lower him to the point where he was leading a bear. Is think it was a bear. [laughter] But that was not a federal project. Is had no...the only reaction Is had was favorable on the project. The one especially that went to the White House. Is got some friendly letters regarding that.

DB: Yes, that was a very nice one from Mrs. Roosevelt.

EN: The whole thing was very encouraging and frankly it tided us over that hiatus where there was practically no work, no work at all. And expense going on just the same you know. Of course, one had the privilege of borrowing from his life insurance, which Is did, and got down to the bottom and then Is began to pick up some work there and gradually build up. It was that period that came when we really needed it and they gave freely. Is know Mr. Bruce said that there is no project in all the government projects that got us as sincere responses as the art projects. They gave us far more than they received as far as...

DB: Yes.

EN: As returns.

DB: Is think that is the consensus.

EN: Because we knew our work was permanent and that it would go on and on and therefore we naturally reacted. We tried to show our best to put out these permanent ads for us.

DB: Yes. It was. How many years were you connected with the project? Do you know? About three?

EN: Is imagine it was around three years.

DB: In reading the magazine articles about the project Is notice a great deal of criticism, that it had to stop as World War II came. Do you feel that ideally the project should have gon eon/

EN: No.

DB: You don't?

EN: No. I think the artists had been tided over and naturally they didn't want to go on on government aid.

DB: Well, not you, but other artists, all artists at some time or another need help.

EN: Well, I think no complaint at all because things were starting to build up then and the artists were getting back to their normal type of work, in commercial work, advertising. I don't know about the musicians or the actors.

DB: I think it took them longer to get on their feet.

EN: I was in Hollywood at the time and they were all doing something, not much, but they were doing something. But, in the far reaches of the Northwest, they were doing nothing and expenses were going up.

DB: Do you feel you were given as much of a free hand as you wanted when you were doing these things?

EN: As far as I was concerned, I was given absolutely a free hand to do a painting and what more could you want? "What size?" "Any size you want." Absolutely wide open.

DB: Wonderful. Were you involved ever in anything of the classes that they had connected with the people during that period?

EN: No.

DB: They had a lot I know at the Baily-Gatgent School.

EN: I wasn't with that group at all.

DB: Do you have any general comments you want to get on the recording about the project?

EN: My only comment is that I think it was a very fine thing. I think it came at the right time. It ended at the right time. It did what they had planned it to do. The artists responded freely and happily, and the only regret was that more artists couldn't have work. There was only a limited amount of work, but aside from that, it was a wonderful project.

DB: Well, thank you very much indeed.

END OF INTERVIEW