



Smithsonian  
*Archives of American Art*

Oral history interview with Donald Totten,  
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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Donald Cecil Totten on May 28, 1964. The interview took place in Los Angeles, California, and was conducted by Betty Hoag for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

## Interview

BETTY HOAG: Mr. Totten, it's very fine of you to give this time for a tape because you were so active with the Project during the period in which the Archives is interested and you have been an artist actively working since then. In fact right now I'm interrupting you and keeping you from crating (i.e. packing) some of your paintings that are going to Santa Barbara to be exhibited in June and July I understand. Is that right?

DONALD TOTTEN: That's right.

BETTY HOAG: I'd like to ask a little about your life before we get on with talking about the projects. Where and when were you born?

DONALD TOTTEN: I was born in Vermillion, South Dakota, in 1903 and I lived in Vermillion during the early part of my life, up until the senior year in high school. Then I came to Long Beach where I graduated from Poly (Polytechnic) High. Consequently I went to SC for one year and was drawing all over my notebooks. Nobody had ever heard of an artist in South Dakota, and I had this urge. I convinced my family that I should be a journalist or something like that. I had cartooning in the back of my head. So, during the middle of my freshman year I transferred to the journalism department. After a full year at SC I found out that college wasn't for me at that time. Colleges in those days didn't offer the art courses that they do now. So, I convinced my family that in order for me to better my artistic training I'd better get in an art school. I still had the idea that perhaps I'd become a cartoonist. I only had to be exposed to seeing painters around (it took me about two or three months) before I dropped the commercial art and I've been a fine arts artist ever since. Of course my father was right, I undoubtedly could have made better money at almost anything else.

BETTY HOAG: But you couldn't have been happy.

DONALD TOTTEN: I had a lot of fun, this is right.

BETTY HOAG: Did you go to any art schools?

DONALD TOTTEN: Yes. I went to Otis and I went there for about three years. And I studied Roscoe Schraeder and Edouard Vysekal. Those two I remember in particular and I learned a lot from them. After that I left art school and painted on my own for some time, but it wasn't until the middle of the late twenties that I heard about the Los Angeles Art Students League. You may have heard of this place?

BETTY HOAG: Yes, I have.

DONALD TOTTEN: Mr. McDonald Wright was teaching there at that time and I don't know whether or not you've heard of Henry Clausen, who also worked on the Project as a salesman?

BETTY HOAG: Yes. He's in Colorado now.

DONALD TOTTEN: Yes. He's one of the first ones who brought me down to the League and introduced me to the bunch down there. This was to me like a fresh wind because at this time Wright, and not very long after this Lorser Feitelson, came to town and they brought the gospel from Europe, the gospel of modern painting. Of course I was completely sold on the League.

BETTY HOAG: This was when it was down on Spring Street up above the burlesque shows wasn't it?

DONALD TOTTEN: Well it was up above the old Lycium Theatre. The Old Lycium Theatre, if you are at all familiar with early Los Angeles History, at one time was quite a pretentious play house. They had box seats there and so forth. And at the time that I worked at the league it had degenerated not so much to a burlesque in this place (They were over on Main Street), but it had become a nickel show. You could see a good movie for a nickel in there. Sleep all day if you wanted to. Right next to it also in the same building was a Liberty Cafe. You've probably heard about that. This wasn't too far from where the "Times Building" is now, and many of the reporters would come in there and get a beer and sandwiches and it was a great place to sit around and talk.

BETTY HOAG: Quite a bohemian atmosphere!

DONALD TOTTEN: It was. And this was directly below where the League was. This old Lycium Building had many studios in it that had skylights. Some of them had been used for photographers studios and one thing and another. The particular studio that was used for the League was a very fine studio. It was spacious and quite light. It had skylights in there. This was where we painted the mural I worked on with Jim Redmond for the Project.

BETTY HOAG: Oh yes. Was this for the Compton Post Office?

DONALD TOTTEN: That was the Compton Post Office. That was the first job that I had with the Art Project and that part of the Art Project was called the Treasury Art Project at that time.

BETTY HOAG: This was a commissioned project?

DONALD TOTTEN: Yes. And we worked through a Mr. Roufberg (Fernard) who had his office in the Los Angeles County Museum.

BETTY HOAG: Yes. You say you worked on them there in the studio so they must have been oil on canvas that you put in place afterwards?

DONALD TOTTEN: Yes. They were painted on a very fine grade of linen. One thing that the Project did was to get us the best material. In order to save money we primed it ourselves. The linen, I think, came from New York. It was a very fine grade, and the kind of priming that we used on the linen was similar to the Block's method of priming, which was the use of a great deal of kerosene with white lead. Actually, we didn't use straight white lead. We used a combination of lead titanium and zinc called LTZ; and we didn't prime the canvas previously with glue size, as I'm doing now and as many artists did at that time. We were using kerosene which was used by some Europeans, and worked, of course, very well. We stuck it to the wall later on with a combination of white lead paste and Venice turpentine which, as you know, is a very sticky kind of varnish.

BETTY HOAG: How many other people were helping with this particular mural or were there just the two of you?

DONALD TOTTEN: There was one other fellow helping. His name was Val Costello. He was an older man and he had been an early painter in Los Angeles and had been associated with the Frank Wiggins Trade School teaching lettering.

BETTY HOAG: How was it divided? Did you do the design or did Mr. Redmond?

DONALD TOTTEN: Mr. Redmond. It was his design throughout. I was an apprentice on this job.

BETTY HOAG: A color consultant as it were?

DONALD TOTTEN: No, I was just a helper and I filled in areas of color. Oh, Jim knew that I could draw; I'd been drawing with him. He'd send me out to make studies, and I painted millions of leaves: practically all the bushes in the mural, I painted. The main figures, Jim took care of. So, I would say it was his mural. This was one of the things I liked about the Project. It was something like the training the old masters had. I was simply as an apprentice, and I did all the odd jobs. I did carpenter work, and one thing and another, and learned by being around the stuff. I think this is one of the things I miss in teaching in colleges today. I wish that more of the youngsters could have the opportunity to live, eat and breath paint from morning to night as we did so that it becomes a part of you.

BETTY HOAG: Then apprenticeship is one of the wonderful things that came out of the Arts Project? Because there are many young people who ...

DONALD TOTTEN: This is true. We had specialists there from all over the world actually. The man who helped to put the mural up was Joe Sutter. Have you met him?

BETTY HOAG: No, I haven't.

DONALD TOTTEN: He is still around I guess. The last I heard he was working for Stendahl in the Stendahl Galleries. He was doing some restoring of the Mexican artifacts and Romanesque things. He is a fine craftsman. He knows how to guild and carve. He was trained in Munich in the guild over there. There were specialists in almost any field you could imagine because everybody was on the Art Project in these days.

BETTY HOAG: Yes. Where had Jimmy Redmond studied? Do you know? He's probably older than you.

DONALD TOTTEN: He was a little bit older than I and he studied mainly with Mr. Wright at the League. I studied with Mr. Wright and then subsequently with Mr. Redmond. When Mr. Redmond went to Montana with Stevie, as you know, I took over the classes at the League. Jim turned the League over to me.

BETTY HOAG: Getting back to the Compton mural for just a moment.

DONALD TOTTEN: Yes.

BETTY HOAG: I haven't seen it. Would you mind telling me what the subject was?

DONALD TOTTEN: Yes. The subject was "Early California" and I have some pictures which I'll show you. Is it all right to talk about the pictures?

BETTY HOAG: Yes, of course it is. I hope that we'll get pictures of it for the Archives.

DONALD TOTTEN: This is a picture of F.L. Stevens. (Totten indicated scenes on photograph)

BETTY HOAG: Oh really!

DONALD TOTTEN: He's old now.

BETTY HOAG: On the horse?

DONALD TOTTEN: Yes, on the horse and of course Jim posed him on a chair. The subject was the history of early California, particularly the Los Angeles area. This, I believe, was Portola. Jim made many studies of the mountains and the foliage around here and he tried to use indigenous foliage of oaks and sycamore trees, the different things that grow here naturally, for these costumes he went to the museum to study the Spanish costumes and put in quite a lot of research on this.

BETTY HOAG: That's interesting. It has a very California-landscape feel.

DONALD TOTTEN: Here is Father Serra and here are some Indian children, and then just a little vignette with a couple of oxen.

BETTY HOAG: Is that a window behind the shade, Mr. Totten?

DONALD TOTTEN: Yes. This is painted right around the spaces. As a matter of fact, we had to do it in sections. Some of these were individual canvases. When we didn't have a long space we would put them on and then we'd put a piece in here and paint some of this on the wall. We did quite a bit of work in the post office afterwards. So the whole thing is joined nicely. As a matter of fact the top, the wood part and everything, was painted to go together.

BETTY HOAG: A beautiful mural.

DONALD TOTTEN: I think he did a terrific job there. Now here is one I posed for ...

BETTY HOAG: Oh, the man under the tree is you?

DONALD TOTTEN: Yes. This is me and this is a sycamore and I think that either ... Jim and I both made drawings for this and these are oak trees. As I say these are all studies of the natural California growth. A lot of this is my work. I did a lot of these bushes and so forth.

BETTY HOAG: Who is the man leading the cattle to the left? Anyone in particular?

DONALD TOTTEN: I don't think that's anyone in particular. Nor this either. Here you see the women pounding out their tortillas and so forth.

BETTY HOAG: Is the grill work in the windows a later addition or was it a Mexican type of building in the first place?

DONALD TOTTEN: This was the way the post office was built. It was sort of California style. This one I think came out very nice, tonally. Of course this is an early California sport, the fight between the bull and the bear.

BETTY HOAG: Oh yes.

DONALD TOTTEN: Which was actually more the California sport than the bull fight as we know it now.

BETTY HOAG: What is the predominate color in the mural? Do you remember? Brown and green?

DONALD TOTTEN: No, it's pretty polychromatic. It has a wide range of color.

BETTY HOAG: What mission do you have on the side where the yucca is with the children? Do you remember?

DONALD TOTTEN: That doesn't represent any particular mission. It's just a generalization. Many of those features all the missions have in common...

BETTY HOAG: Oh.

DONALD TOTTEN: Here is Val Costello posing for this. I believe that this is the de Anza Expedition. You probably have heard of de Anza who made the trek up from Mexico leading his army?

BETTY HOAG: Costello was the second Monk from the right?

DONALD TOTTEN: Yes, this is de Anza in front, I believe. My memory might be faulty there. I think I have the right character.

BETTY HOAG: Was he a rather heavy-set man?

DONALD TOTTEN: Yes, he was kind of heavy-set.

BETTY HOAG: Very lovely. I'm so glad you had these pictures.

DONALD TOTTEN: You are free to take those if you want to try and get them microfilmed.

BETTY HOAG: Do you remember what year that was done?

DONALD TOTTEN: Gee, I don't exactly, no.

BETTY HOAG: We can check it easily enough: it's probably on the painting. What was the next one that you did for the Project?

DONALD TOTTEN: I believe that the next one that I did was this one I did for myself and it went into the Grant School. I don't know whether I mentioned this one to you or not.

BETTY HOAG: No, you didn't. What do you mean..."for yourself?" Mr. Totten?

DONALD TOTTEN: Well, I mean on my own; not working under Jim. I did this entirely on my own. It was a smaller mural, about eight feet high and four feet wide, I guess.

BETTY HOAG: Oh, this is the "Brunhild" one that I read about. I didn't know what it was.

DONALD TOTTEN: Yes.

BETTY HOAG: Where did it go? In the foyer of the school?

DONALD TOTTEN: Well, I think it was in one of their classrooms. It was a school for exceptionally gifted children. As a matter of fact I met a boy over in Pasadena last year who had gone to that school and remembered those murals.

BETTY HOAG: They are very imaginative! I'm sure he would.

DONALD TOTTEN: Well, the woman who had a great deal to do with getting them gave them to the school as a gift. I'm sorry I don't remember her name. Might be that there is a record of that.

BETTY HOAG: I'll ask at the Grant school. They probably have that.

DONALD TOTTEN: So I had a certain amount of choice. It had to illustrate scenes from the Nibelung Ring that they were giving at the school. The one is Sigfried forging the magic sword with the dwarf Mime down there. And the other one is Brunhild in the fire with Wotan standing by her side the Valkyrie flying through the sky.

BETTY HOAG: They're wonderful!

DONALD TOTTEN: And the horses were kind of blue. They looked rather ethereal in there.

BETTY HOAG: I'm sure the children must have loved them.

DONALD TOTTEN: Well, I don't know - that school isn't any more, and I don't know where the mural is.

BETTY HOAG: Oh, the school has been destroyed?

DONALD TOTTEN: I think so, and as far as where the mural is I don't know. A lot of these murals were lost. For

instance Mr. Murry's ... I don't know where it is. I think some of them were even destroyed. I don't know about this one. The last I heard it - someone had seen it in Bakersfield or something like that. But this is only hearsay.

BETTY HOAG: You mean they took all the canvases off and put them on another building in Bakersfield do you think?

DONALD TOTTEN: In this case, this wasn't attached to the wall. It was in a frame.

BETTY HOAG: I see.

DONALD TOTTEN: And that could have been moved.

BETTY HOAG: What street was the Grant School on? Do you remember?

DONALD TOTTEN: No, I'm sorry, I don't.

BETTY HOAG: The Board of Education should have a record of that, too.

DONALD TOTTEN: As I remember, it wasn't far from the Cal Tech.

BETTY HOAG: You mentioned Murry. Who was this?

DONALD TOTTEN: Jerre Murry?

BETTY HOAG: Jerre Murry, where was his mural?

DONALD TOTTEN: Jerre did a lot of easel painting for the Project and the one mural that I remember in particular was the one that he did for the Bureau of Water and Power, here in Los Angeles. I had a telephone call not too long ago from someone who was there at that time and wanted to find out if he could find those murals. And if not, to get them painted again. I don't know whether he followed it up, but that was the last I heard of that. Mr. Murry hadn't heard from him yet either.

BETTY HOAG: They have a big new building haven't they?

DONALD TOTTEN: I think this man wanted to get them for that, and of course you know how political things are. Maybe he ran into a stone wall there. But he did like the murals and wanted to get them back.

BETTY HOAG: Have you seen Mr. Murry? Is he still about?

DONALD TOTTEN: Oh yes. I see him. As a matter of fact he is working at the same high school where I do. I do other teaching besides my college work. I teach at Inglewood Adult High School and Mr. Murry has a class over there.

BETTY HOAG: Thank you for telling me that. I'll contact him too.

DONALD TOTTEN: I can give you his address and telephone number. He's a good friend of mine. I see him quite often. Here is a picture of me doing an easel painting on the project.

BETTY HOAG: I didn't know you did easel painting.

DONALD TOTTEN: Well yes. A few in between. This I think I did for them also.

BETTY HOAG: Santa Monica Beach...?

DONALD TOTTEN: Just a beach I guess. And this I think was done on the Project. This was one of Mr. Date's. It's very typical of his work.

BETTY HOAG: That's Hideo Date?

DONALD TOTTEN: Date.

BETTY HOAG: Date. I have in my records that he and Mr. Wright did a school on Terminal Island and Mr. Wright couldn't remember where Terminal Island was. It isn't on the map of California anymore. Do you know anything about that?

DONALD TOTTEN: Well, Terminal Island is right down here at San Pedro and they have a bridge going from Pedro over to the Island now. There used to be ferry transportation only but there is a toll bridge there now. Whether or not the ferry still works, I don't know. There used to be quite a Japanese fishing colony over there, and they

had a Shinto temple. I think this school had some connection with the Shinto school. I worked on that mural myself; as well as Date; Mr. Wright did too. Date had to go to the East so this was completed out here under Mr. Wright's direction.

BETTY HOAG: How many murals were there? How many sections in the mural? Do you remember at all?

DONALD TOTTEN: The only one I remember was a large mural that had to do with that story of the sun goddess going into hiding and being lured out by dancing. I think Lawrence Binyon mentions that story in his "Wisdom of the Far East." It depicts this legend. It is done quite in the traditional Japanese style but I'd been working with Mr. Wright and Mr. Redmond at the league and so doing a lot of this came quite naturally to me.

BETTY HOAG: Where did Mr. Date come from do you know?

DONALD TOTTEN: Yes, he's from Japan.

BETTY HOAG: Oh.

DONALD TOTTEN: He's from the old country; he's not a Nesi.

BETTY HOAG: Was he teaching at the school?

DONALD TOTTEN: No, he studied under Mr. Wright.

BETTY HOAG: You mean privately, not at the Artists League.

DONALD TOTTEN: No. He used to come and draw down at the League. That is mainly what that was, a drawing class.

BETTY HOAG: It wasn't really a school.

DONALD TOTTEN: Well, not in that sense. We had models, but it wasn't really a school in academic sense. It was much freer than that, much like the French school.

BETTY HOAG: Do you know what has happened to Date?

DONALD TOTTEN: The last I heard was of his having gone to New York. And I heard one time that he had gone to Europe, and I think he's back. You might get in touch with Benji Okubo. Benji might know . Do you have Benji's address?

BETTY HOAG: No. I haven't been able to find it.

DONALD TOTTEN: I have his telephone number too.

BETTY HOAG: Thank you very much. Is the picture of the painting that you have here one from that school?

DONALD TOTTEN: No. This is one of his watercolors. You can see how exquisitely perfect he was in the way he handled watercolors. It may have been done for the project. He may have done some easel paintings for the Project.

BETTY HOAG: It is a very beautiful picture. After this thing was over, did he go on with easel painting or did he do any more mural work? Do you remember?

DONALD TOTTEN: I don't know. I think he mostly was doing easel paintings. As a matter of fact, the mural work that he did was kind of the exception with him. I don't think that he was as interested in keeping on that scale as some of the rest of us. I'm still painting big paintings as you see. And Lorser (Feitelson) is still painting large paintings. We never got away from this.

BETTY HOAG: You think it's a direct influence then on the Project.

DONALD TOTTEN: I don't think there is any question with me. I mean, I got used to working large and I like to paint murals. If I have to paint my own murals, this is what I do. You might think of them as "portable murals." Well, it doesn't conflict with what's being done today in many areas anyway. You see many large paintings, but his halfway coincides with what we wanted to do anyway.

BETTY HOAG: None of you had done any before the Project?

DONALD TOTTEN: You mean large paintings?

BETTY HOAG: Yes, large paintings or murals.

DONALD TOTTEN: I had never worked on a mural before. I've done several since. Did I show you any of these? This is a picture from a mural that I did in Oakland and here is an article about it. That's just a small ... (indicating photographs)

BETTY HOAG: Looks like a Methodist Church.

DONALD TOTTEN: Yes. I don't know whether I have any pictures of that or not.

BETTY HOAG: It looks a little like a Gauguin.

DONALD TOTTEN: Yes, a lot of people mention that. I think that this particular part does because of the subject matter. The church wanted me to do a map first. You've seen the map they had at the World's Fair up there (in San Francisco) which was done by Covarrubias, as you know.

BETTY HOAG: Yes.

DONALD TOTTEN: They wanted that. I was used to doing big figures, so I had got sort of used to the technique of working with a committee. You don't try and change them too soon. You go up there and have conferences with them and finally you convince them that that's what they want.

BETTY HOAG: I see.

DONALD TOTTEN: This is the way it worked for me. So finally they figured that they wanted to have figures in there. So, I had figures from every part of the Pacific Basin, not only Polynesians, but Melanesians, and Beruvians, and Eskimos and all the way around, doing one particular thing. This happens to be the Polynesian one which did come out looking like a Gauguin.

BETTY HOAG: Was this in their meeting hall or ... ?

DONALD TOTTEN: This was in the youth Center.

BETTY HOAG: Is it still in existence?

DONALD TOTTEN: I think so.

BETTY HOAG: Do you have more pictures of it?

DONALD TOTTEN: I don't know. I should have it. Here are some other Holliston Avenue murals which I did for the same preacher before that. He got interested in murals after he heard I was on the Project. He had me doing murals all over the place.

BETTY HOAG: This work was a direct result of the project then? That is interesting.

DONALD TOTTEN: Yes. I don't think I have other pictures of that mural. I should, but I don't know what has become of them. I did a lot of square footage there.

BETTY HOAG: Yes. Where were these other ones?

DONALD TOTTEN: Those are on cement in the Holliston Avenue Church in Pasadena and those are people in the church. Then those are also in a play room. This preacher had the idea that he wanted to fix up a play room. Of those two girls assisting me, one of them was an art major at Cal, and this is the first mural she'd ever worked on. The next year she went to Europe on a scholarship.

BETTY HOAG: You were able to help further this idea of apprenticeship.

DONALD TOTTEN: A little bit, yes.

BETTY HOAG: Immediately after the Projects period, weren't you?

DONALD TOTTEN: A little bit. And I've shown you the one from Manual Arts, did I not?

BETTY HOAG: I've seen the ones at Manual Arts, but not the pictures. I wish you would tell me about those.

DONALD TOTTEN: Well, the subject matter was the "History of Science," starting in on the one end from the cave man going on with fire, then the Mayan planter. There were a lot of portraits in that too. Of course we had to go to the library to get photographs as much as we could, like of Darwin and Newton and so forth, and combine this



sort of thing with posing models. There is a lot of synthesis in working out this kind of a mural.

BETTY HOAG: When we are through with the tape I'd like you to tell me who these are and I'll mark them when I get a photograph for them. I thought it was quite interesting what you told me about wishing you had George Washington Carver in it.

DONALD TOTTEN: I think it would have been - Yes - I'll mention that again. This school has completely changed racially. It's almost one hundred percent Negro school now. Wasn't that the impression you got over there?

BETTY HOAG: Yes, yes.

DONALD TOTTEN: And yet the mural is one hundred percent white ... outside of the caveman. About the only dark person in there is the witch doctor who is brewing some herbs over a fire. If I'd known that the school was going to change this much. (Or of course if a mural were painted today) Probably it would have been done entirely differently. Most certainly we'd have had somebody like George Washington Carver or some other Negro scientists in there.

BETTY HOAG: Someone whom the Negro children could really be proud of ...

DONALD TOTTEN: Why sure.

BETTY HOAG: They certainly are proud of their mural. When I came in there was a lot of excitement about opening the gymnasium and showing it to me. A young boy took me around and told me how dreadful it was the somebody had marked names on it. And it was, of course, but ...

DONALD TOTTEN: It's the natural thing to do.

BETTY HOAG: He felt very badly about it.

DONALD TOTTEN: I wonder why it didn't happen before this! I was out there several years ago and it hadn't happened at that time and I was surprised.

BETTY HOAG: Do they ask you to come back and touch it up when it does?

DONALD TOTTEN: No, the only time I was ever called back was one time when they found out that the "stick'um" was coming off and I had to stick them back to the wall. This time I told them how to do it. It may be that they've got some of that done. I called upon my own when I heard that you were coming over and asked if the mural was still up. At the same time I talked to him, he said that there were some painters working on the place and I told them to use white lead paste that that would hold it down.

BETTY HOAG: Well it did, it was all very much intact, very nice.

DONALD TOTTEN: Did it need cleaning?

BETTY HOAG: I didn't think so, no.

DONALD TOTTEN: It's remarkable if it doesn't because it's been a long time. incidently, I want to put in a plug for my friend Roy Pottinger. Those are Pottinger paints and he's still a big manufacturer here in town and in my opinion he makes the finest paint in the United States.

BETTY HOAG: Pottinger. That's one for the tape.

DONALD TOTTEN: Well, he should be on the tape because it's true. I mean, I'm absolutely sold. In these things I made for this exhibit I've used Pottinger paint and he hasn't changed his prices at all since then. It's the cheapest paint, but the reason I know it's good is because on the Project they used Pottinger paints, and Jimmy Redmon and I made tests on it. One of the tests made was the old standard test of covering up half a panel and leaving it out in the sunlight. We did this with Pottinger paints and many different brands of paint of the finest grades. Then the other test is what we call the "reduction test." You take one part of white paint and then put more parts of white with the paint to see how far the pigment will go. Well, we found out that in many cases we would have to add ten parts of white to the Pottinger to get the same tint as only one part of white would do with some of the other brands, pretty good brands. The only brand that we found out that really at this time held up with Pottinger at all was the European Block's which is one of the finest kinds of paint. Not too long ago I asked Roy, "Well, Roy, how do you sell your paints so cheap?" He's not any businessman, he should be an artist. He said, "Well, I don't like to raise the price too much." I said, "Are you still giving the same quality?" He said, "Yeh, I haven't altered that." So these are terrific paints and I would like to see that man make more out of it. Maybe telling about it on the tape will help to spread the word.

BETTY HOAG: I hope a lot of people hear about it. Were these paints used, I wonder, on any of Mr. Wright's murals?

DONALD TOTTEN: I don't know whether he used Pottinger paints or not but I know that Mr. Wright would recommend them.

BETTY HOAG: I know that he was in direct charge when you did this one at Manual Arts. Did he have anything to do with the design or anything else? Or did anyone else help you?

DONALD TOTTEN: Well, I had the job of doing a lot of "cleaning up" work on the Project. Now I don't want to claim the Manual Arts was mine all the way through because originally Jimmy Redmond had that job. It was given to him and all he had when he left there were some pencil sketches, no color at all. So I worked out the color design and all this, but originally the idea of the way of presenting things (Newton and all the different ones) was Jimmy's idea, and I was just the one who executed it. Then I finished the one by Date and Jimmy, oh yes, there was another one that was designed by Fletcher Martin. He had to leave town so Jerre Murry and I helped finish that one.

BETTY HOAG: Which one was that Mr. Totten?

DONALD TOTTEN: That I think was Boise, Idaho.

BETTY HOAG: Oh, it was on canvas and shipped up there?

DONALD TOTTEN: Yes.

BETTY HOAG: Have you ever seen it installed?

DONALD TOTTEN: No, never did. But that was quite involved, I fell heir to quite a few of these different jobs. This one from the Grant School Pasadena is the only one that was completely mine all the way through. No, these designs were ours as far as ... No, Mr. Wright didn't do them. I think the fact that both Jimmy and I had studied with Mr. Wright certainly was a relationship probably more of a relationship at that time than there would be now because we of course we thought a great deal of Mr. Wright, and I still do.

BETTY HOAG: Well, there certainly was a relationship in the concept of idea and the one of Mr. Wright's in the Santa Monica Library. It also has a series of figures representing the different developments.

DONALD TOTTEN: Yes.

BETTY HOAG: I wanted to ask you about the petrachrome mural in the Washington High School here on Denker Avenue. What part did you have in that?

DONALD TOTTEN: I worked on several of those murals. This particular one was designed by Helen Lundeberg. The part that I played with the petrachromes was not the designing, but I had to do with the mixing of color. If you looked at it you noticed that the material is similar to the Terrezzo that you see in theatre marquees. The main difference there is, of course, we have lifted it up and made it a mural. Although this was done with Terrezzo we eliminated the cloisonne metal lines. So this was the main difference in the process there. The way that we did those; we had platforms of masonite which were laid out and they were painted white and then the design (there were cartoons made of the design) was traced on there. The lines, instead of being made by the metal, were made with pieces of plasticine. You know this plasticine clay with oil in it? We had it about a quarter of an inch thick. Most of the lines were about a quarter of an inch thick tapering down at the ends. Then we poured the large areas in between so that these would dam up the areas in the same way that the cloisonne line would have. We would have to wait for those areas to dry, and then we would dig out the other, then mix up a finer mixture of cement and pour it in for the lines.

BETTY HOAG: It was a very tedious process actually for such a huge wall.

DONALD TOTTEN: Tedious, but it was quite permanent and quite beautiful.

BETTY HOAG: Very beautiful.

DONALD TOTTEN: And those things have kept a wax-like surface; they look just like marble. I can still hear the pounding over there. In order to get the cement to settle right we had rubber mallets that we'd pound this with. It sounded like Indian drums in order to agitate this so it would settle down and be even there.

BETTY HOAG: How many of you were working on that part of the assignment?

DONALD TOTTEN: A large crew did it.

BETTY HOAG: Ten or fifty or how many?

DONALD TOTTEN: Well, I would say maybe ten or fifteen at a time. But I was the only one doing the particular thing I did. My job was to take the sketch (which would be done in either caslin oil or something like that) and transfer it in terms of this material. It wouldn't be as simple as you might think because the finished thing would be a combination of medusa cement (which is white) and dry color and colored rocks. We would import colored rocks from many places like Montana and Italy and so forth: certain kinds of green (I can still remember verdillite green) and so forth. You may know the names of some of these rocks which would come in different sizes and different textures. Then we had a number of samples. It almost looked like a chemists lab with all the samples lying around which had been poured before.

BETTY HOAG: For what effect you wanted to achieve you mean?

DONALD TOTTEN: That's right. It wasn't as simple as just mixing this stuff up wet because it would dry a different color than when it was wet. And it would look different when you got the rocks in there and it was polished. So we had to do quite a lot of research and save all our samples so we'd know what they'd do the next time. And Mr. Wright, I appreciate, had a lot of faith in that he made me the color man on this job. I've learned a lot from it, of course. You can apply many things that you learn from doing oil painting. For instance, one time I remember there was a certain kind of green that I had an awfully hard time matching until I realized that you could get a green like this by mixing yellow and black. It was the only way I could arrive at this green because it was this kind of a mixture. From certain kinds of rocks you get many kinds of colors. Your experience in painting, does serve you in good stead.

BETTY HOAG: Where had all those rocks been ground? Was there one particular place that took care of that?

DONALD TOTTEN: No, they ordered them from different places.

BETTY HOAG: They came all ground up besides? Because they must have used the same size flecks for all the different ...

DONALD TOTTEN: No, it varied in sizes.

BETTY HOAG: Oh did it?

DONALD TOTTEN: Some of it was larger than others because the texture was quite important. As to where their sources of supply were, I don't want to stick my neck out and say exactly where it came from. Undoubtedly they did have firms here in town where they could order rock. Some of it, as I say, came from various areas, even Africa and Italy and local places here, and so forth.

BETTY HOAG: What gives it such a high polish?

DONALD TOTTEN: We had a polisher there which was a rotary machine. These rotary machines are very expensive and this is one thing that you do for a long time until you get it just right. Because when it's just poured on there, it's all rocks and it's not smooth at all. So they'd have to do that for days, polish it down to the right sheen. Then of course afterwards if you let it get mat, it doesn't look nearly as good as if you wet it wax it. These things look beautiful, you just wet it down with water.

BETTY HOAG: The same as you do for a floor, actually ...

DONALD TOTTEN: It is exactly the same. Yes.

BETTY HOAG: In area and size how big were these when they put them up on the wall? There must have been several sections in this thing.

DONALD TOTTEN: They had several sections, and they also cast angle-irons in the back, in the casting of it, which were used to put them up on the wall. Many times this application of these panels is a little like you would hang up pieces of marble. Sometimes on this angle-iron you would wrap plaster with hemp and so forth around it. You'd get something in the wall to take it so that it would really hold on there solid. Incidentally, while we are talking about this, there is another wall that I worked on in the same way (Helen Lundeberg also designed it) which is out in Centinella Park in Ingelwood. It's a long wall, right out in the open in the park.

BETTY HOAG: Oh, really? And it was done for the Project?

DONALD TOTTEN: Yes, for the Project. It's all about transportation. It's on Florence Ave, I think. It's on Florence in the direction of Ingelwood. I'm sorry I can't tell you exactly where it is.

BETTY HOAG: I'll find it on my way home today. I'll go by it.

DONALD TOTTEN: That would be west of Crenshaw.

BETTY HOAG: Was the situation the same with that, that Miss Lundeberg designed and you were in charge of color ... ?

DONALD TOTTEN: Yes. And of course there were many, many workman that worked on it. I don't want to take all the credit. This was just my particular angle there.

BETTY HOAG: Do you remember the names of any of the other artists? Particularly in either one of these?

DONALD TOTTEN: Well, Bob Boag had a lot to do with the material itself. As a matter of fact Bob Boag had a great deal to do with the installation of mosaics too. This whole department which had to do with the physical handling of cement and tile and so forth was under the direction of Bob Boag. I was under him too. Bob has had a long history. I don't know whether he's in Paris right now or not. Have you heard about Boag?

BETTY HOAG: Mr. Brigante' said he thought he was in Paris.

DONALD TOTTEN: During the two World Wars he spent some time in North Africa. He worked there as an architect or an architectural designer, I believe, and also in France. He is very familiar with the old Roman and the Medieval monuments of various kinds. He has a profound knowledge of cement and different things.

BETTY HOAG: Does he work as an artist today or as a tile contractor?

DONALD TOTTEN: No, I think that he is simply working on his own as an artist as far as I know. I really don't know what he is doing. He went to Paris because he wanted to be there...

BETTY HOAG: Oh, I see.

DONALD TOTTEN: ... more than anything else. What he's doing we don't know.

BETTY HOAG: Probably Albert King will be able to tell me.

DONALD TOTTEN: Al can tell you a great deal more about the Projects than I can because Al was one of the subdirectors I think.

BETTY HOAG: He was in charge of all tile mosaic installations, which included Long Beach.

DONALD TOTTEN: Yes. And another man that I wanted to mention here who ties in would be the sculptor Donald Hord.

BETTY HOAG: Yes. He is in Europe and won't be back until the middle of June.

DONALD TOTTEN: Yes, I got a letter from him not long ago because I wanted to take a field trip down there with the Marymount girls to see a sculptor at work. Another one I might mention here is Eugenia Everett. Have you heard of her?

BETTY HOAG: Yes, she is in San Diego isn't she?

DONALD TOTTEN: No, I think she lives at Ojai. If you are ever up at Ojai that would be a nice visit for you to go over to her studio because she is still working in sculpture and ceramics.

BETTY HOAG: I'm going to see Miss Jason Herron next week.

DONALD TOTTEN: Oh.

BETTY HOAG: I'll go on over. It's just a few miles away.

DONALD TOTTEN: Where does Jason Herron live now?

BETTY HOAG: She's in Ventura.

DONALD TOTTEN: Oh, is she?

BETTY HOAG: She had part of which one of these projects, do you remember?

DONALD TOTTEN: Jason Herron?

BETTY HOAG: No. Miss Everett.

DONALD TOTTEN: Oh. Well, as far as I know, she was working on her own. This is another thing that I wanted to tell you about. The Project had two parts as a rule. Many of the artists worked alone in their own studio. They simply brought things in occasionally. Much of Jerre Murry's work was like this, he simply painted easel pictures and brought them in. A great deal of Eugenia Everett's work was like this. She was a sculptress but I think almost all of her work was done in her own studio. Then there were others who worked right there on particular projects which were lined up for schools or institutions of various kinds. Later on we were all working in one building over there on Western Avenue. It was just like a great big family.

BETTY HOAG: Was this for the WPA you mean?

DONALD TOTTEN: Yeh.

BETTY HOAG: I didn't realize that.

DONALD TOTTEN: Oh yes. There at the last, as much as possible, everybody was housed in this one building. There were still some artists working in studios, but much more of this, as it went on.

BETTY HOAG: This was just before the war.

DONALD TOTTEN: This was before the war.

BETTY HOAG: Why had they all come in one place? Had the Federal Government asked them to be there or did they just naturally congregate and want to be together?

DONALD TOTTEN: I don't know. I don't know. I don't think I particularly wanted to be there. Although I am glad I did. I got to know a lot of these artists, and it's good to know people. You get sort of in your own little rut otherwise and you never know what the rest of the world is all about.

BETTY HOAG: I'm sure then that you are one of those who feels that the Project in the long run was a wonderful thing, besides just feeding the people who needed it at the time?

DONALD TOTTEN: Oh yes. That's right and I think that Mr. Wright and Mr. Feitelson were very fine in the jobs that they had. They certainly took a lot of time from their own painting to do the kind of work that they did. My own thinking, of course, my life at the League is tied up with the Project a great deal because many of the same ones went over there. Like Al King and Jimmy who were up at the League when I first went there; and then Mr. Wright became the director and we did things at the league for the project. So there was a definite connection there.

BETTY HOAG: You mentioned two men on the telephone. I wondered if they had anything to do with the projects? You mentioned Ed Emory and Joe Funk.

DONALD TOTTEN: Joe, as far as I know was mainly interested in print-making and I think he still is. He works in graphics and of course this was a branch of the Project.

BETTY HOAG: There were many lithographs made.

DONALD TOTTEN: That's right. As far as what he did, I don't know, other than that. I know he is a very fine craftsman, a very fine artist. Ed is a fine artist too. Right now he is working as the framer for Flax's. If you have a chance to drop by and see him ...

BETTY HOAG: On Lindbrook in Westwood?

DONALD TOTTEN: Yes. And I think he worked on different things on the Project. I think he worked on the petrachromes and I think he did some work on the outside, I don't want to say too much; you had better talk to him about that.

BETTY HOAG: I'll talk to him. Mr. Totten, do you remember about any of the exhibits that were held to show the public works being done?

DONALD TOTTEN: I'm sure that occasionally they had exhibits of the easel painting and things that had been done on the outside by the various artists. Besides that, they had exhibits not only for the general public but also for the artists on the project, which you might call educational.

BETTY HOAG: Oh really?

DONALD TOTTEN: Yes. And I think this was one of the best functions of the Project. For instance, you'd take a subject like "Gothic." And there would be enlarged photographs of different kinds of Gothic art, not only from the

period ordinarily called gothic but even more contemporary things or things going back even farther which would have this character of them.

BETTY HOAG: To show the roots?

DONALD TOTTEN: The roots or maybe Baroque which would be something else. They had several of those. I think those were some of the best. They did some pioneering in this area too where they would use printing on the walls more or less like the museums do not, where they would edit the thing. You wouldn't have to have a speaker, you would just go around and look at the picture and there would be a nice little legend underneath it saying what it was all about.

BETTY HOAG: Sort of continuity for a whole program?

DONALD TOTTEN: Yeh.

BETTY HOAG: Where were these held?

DONALD TOTTEN: I remember one place where they had those on 7th Street. At one time they had this building - I don't know whether I mentioned this or not before - which was a four or five story building on the 7th Street opposite Westlake Park. On the lower floor occasionally they would give these exhibits which were educational and I think very good. Besides this, Mr. Wright and Mr. Feitelson were very good with the artists in that they would occasionally have meetings or group sessions where we could discuss various features of design and art history and so forth. It was very educational for us. Another thing that I think that the Project has certainly done for me and I would like to see it continued, is the idea of giving us a feeling of continuity. My own feeling today is that there is getting to be more or less a contempt for the idea of craft.

BETTY HOAG: Yes.

DONALD TOTTEN: And handling whatever materials that you use well, so much of the accent is because, I guess, of the age of just doing the thing for its value in the doing it itself; regardless of what it's going to be like after you leave it.

BETTY HOAG: Yes.

DONALD TOTTEN: But, I feel that the Project had given us a little direction in the other way, where in a sense it has tied us up a little more with the past. As I emphasized even the look of the thing as it is being done being good because it's well done and ... done to last.

BETTY HOAG: That is one thing. The other one you mentioned (which I think is very impressive) is the idea of apprenticeship, which you certainly have been able to pass on. You've done so much teaching yourself since the Project days. Will you tell me some of the places that you have been and are teaching?

DONALD TOTTEN: Well one place where I taught for a long time since the project was Barnsdall Arts and Crafts. Do you know where that is?

BETTY HOAG: Yes I do.

DONALD TOTTEN: And I was up there for over ten years. I had classes in drawing and painting and design and Miss Agnes De la Barr was the director. I'm pretty sure that she had something to do with the Project. She was around at that time and I believe that there were even some Project classes up at Barnsdall Arts and Crafts. It would not be a bad idea for you to go see her and ask some questions about that. I taught there, and of course I taught at the Art Student's League after Mr. Redmond went to Montana. I taught there for a short time. Then I turned that over to a Japanese fellow named Benjy Okubo. I don't know whether or not he was on the Project. He's an important artist around town. I'm teaching at Marymount College right now, and I had a class in Art History at UCLA last fall (that would be almost a year ago not.) Oh, I have private classes, and teach at Inglewood High in adult-education. I'm shopping around all over the place.

BETTY HOAG: You certainly have a busy schedule because I know you also do a lot of exhibiting.

DONALD TOTTEN: I'm doing a lot of painting. Luckily I've been able to space it so that I have plenty of time to do the other. Of course there aren't too many things that painters can do, outside of teaching or lecturing or laying bricks or something like that you can't make too much money selling paintings, at least I can't.

BETTY HOAG: It seems to me you are keeping very busy doing it and you certainly paint some beautiful things. I hope we'll get some pictures of your things for the Archives, some of your recent things too.

DONALD TOTTEN: Sometime I'll send some reproductions to you. Perhaps I can get some in color or something

like that. Are you saving any color shots or slides?

BETTY HOAG: I don't know about color. The Archives haven't told me.

DONALD TOTTEN: I make slides occasionally. I probably will get some of those things in duplicates. So, if you want them I'll be able to send you some.

BETTY HOAG: I'm sure they would appreciate it very much. Thank you so much for taking so much of your afternoon and being so much help.

DONALD TOTTEN: I'm glad to help you and if anything else occurs be sure and give me a ring and maybe I can think of something else. Off hand I can't. I think I've given you a pretty good run down ...

BETTY HOAG: I think we've quite covered the field. Thank you again.

DONALD TOTTEN: You bet.

END OF INTERVIEW

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