



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Tyrus
Wong, 1965 January 30

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Transcript

Preface

Note: Only the second part of this interview was successfully recorded.

Interview

Ruth Kim Wong, Wong's wife, is also present.

BETTY HOAG: This is Betty Lochrie Hoag, on January 30, 1965, interviewing Tyrus Wong. This is Part 2. When our other tape ran out, you were telling me about your work at Warner's, and Disneyland before that.

TYRUS WONG: Yes.

BETTY HOAG: And I was just getting ready to ask you whether you had done any teaching yourself.

TYRUS WONG: No, although I had a lot of people ask me, because I would like to give lessons in art, but I'm just no good at teaching at all. I feel that I'm still learning myself so much.

BETTY HOAG: That's a wonderful spirit for an artist to have.

TYRUS WONG: And also my work at the studio and also the Christmas cards takes up most of my time.

BETTY HOAG: Yes, and then your wife was just telling me about this film that you made that is shown around at all grade schools and U.C.L.A. and various places.

TYRUS WONG: Yes, that's right. This film was put out by Elliott O'Hara. He's a watercolorist; I think he's back East or somewhere.

BETTY HOAG: Elliott O'Hara?

TYRUS WONG: Yes, and this film has been channeled around quite a bit to different schools and so forth.

BETTY HOAG: And you say that it is owned by Encyclopedia Britannica?

TYRUS WONG: Is that right, owned by Encyclopedia Britannica?

RUTH KIM WONG: I'm not sure. I know that he sold the rights to . . . , but I'm not sure.

BETTY HOAG: It's interesting that you brought up the fact that you think they own it because I was interviewing Mr. Haines yesterday and he was telling me about having pictures in a show put on back at M.I.T. and it was a show of paintings of Western artists bought by Encyclopedia Britannica. Mr. Wright was in it, and C.S. Price and, oh, a lot of our Western people we have

TYRUS WONG: Is that right?

BETTY HOAG: And I didn't know the Britannica owned any paintings at all, so they must have American art

TYRUS WONG: Yes.

BETTY HOAG: What? You say this film is demonstrating . . . ?

TYRUS WONG: Yes, the technique of painting, Oriental painting, I mean, like this, like Kobata, demonstrating how the Japanese handle, and how I handle and how the Chinese, and also Joe Jones, an American artist back East, he demonstrated the technique of American painting.

BETTY HOAG: That must be very interesting for the children.

TYRUS WONG: Yes, yes, they're all laughing about it when they see it.

BETTY HOAG: Because I don't know about it, I'm just curious. Do the Chinese and Japanese share in common the Zen idea of the idea coming from your heart . . . ?

TYRUS WONG: Yes, yes.

BETTY HOAG: . . . and your thought through the arm, and through the brush, and on to the canvas?

TYRUS WONG: Yes, I think the basic philosophy in painting is very much the same.

BETTY HOAG: The Japanese got it, of course, from the Chinese a long time ago.

TYRUS WONG: Yes, it's very much the same, I mean my painting is just basic, very simply element down practically to just a significant element, very simple.

BETTY HOAG: They're very beautiful, I know that. You've also done quite a lot of illustrating on the side. You've illustrated several books.

TYRUS WONG: No, I illustrated one book and, you know, like Coronet magazine, I had a page in there years ago, a sort of typical Americana scene, you know. I always believed a certain town there'll be a hundred houses, something like that, you know, so I had this tracing in there about a hundred houses for typical American scene, and so forth.

BETTY HOAG: Then you did the cover for California Arts and Architecture . . .

TYRUS WONG: Oh, yes.

BETTY HOAG: . . . and I tried to look that up and the copy in the library someone had stolen the cover so I figured that it must have been a very nice painting.

TYRUS WONG: No, I think it's a monkey.

BETTY HOAG: That's right. It said it was named "The Monkey."

TYRUS WONG: Yes, it's a monkey. It seems to me I have one somewhere. And then this is a book "The footprints of a Dragon" is a

BETTY HOAG: Yes, 1949, I have Oh, isn't that a beautiful dust jacket!

TYRUS WONG: Yes, this is done in pen and ink, which actually this isn't my medium. I would like to do it in brush and ink, you know, but they thought it was a little bit too expensive to reproduce, I had to do it in pen and ink. Anyway, the jacket cost too much

BETTY HOAG: The jacket is perfectly beautiful. It's the story of the Chinese and Pacific Railway.

TYRUS WONG: That's right.

BETTY HOAG: Oh, the building in California

TYRUS WONG: You know that . . . I think it mentioned something about, yes

BETTY HOAG: Across the Sierras?

TYRUS WONG: Yes, that's right.

BETTY HOAG: Oh, that would be a fascinating book to read, too. That must have entailed a lot of very interesting research.

TYRUS WONG: Yes and authors went into quite a bit of research on that, I mean, it's really quite authentic except the characters, they aren't real characters. I mean just gave them Chinese names, and so forth, things like building a railroad.

BETTY HOAG: At this time you were an illustrator, it says, for Republic Studio.

TYRUS WONG: Yes, at that time I was over at Republic Studio.

BETTY HOAG: And your exclusively-designed pottery plates have a worldwide market. Now, you didn't tell me that, either.

TYRUS WONG: Yes, that was the Greenfield Pottery, Gabriel Pottery in Pasadena. Of course, since then they're not in business any more. I did a lot of hand-painted pottery for them in those days and they were all over, selling all over, in every state, you know.

BETTY HOAG: Now that was about . . . in the 40's, wasn't it? I remember there was

TYRUS WONG: Yes, in the 40's I believe, yes.

BETTY HOAG: I can remember they were some of the first painted pottery

TYRUS WONG: There are some of mine over here, you know, some of these. This, this, this, and this are mine, the rest are theirs. Yes, I had these four.

BETTY HOAG: If we can borrow this to be microfilmed too, I'll indicate which were . . . because

TYRUS WONG: Yes, these four.

BETTY HOAG: The bamboo one was especially popular; I've eaten at many people's houses off of your china.

TYRUS WONG: Yes, that had . . . it had more texture to it, you know, somehow, and that was a very popular one, that bamboo one.

BETTY HOAG: Just for the records on the tape, I want to say who published this book that you have illustrated. The Author was Vanya Oakes (V A N Y A O A K E S) "Footprints of the Dragon," John C. Winston Company, Philadelphia and Toronto. I think it's '49, just a minute . . . yes, 1949. We have a record of that, because it's the kind of thing I won't borrow because anyone could get it from the library. If they have the name of it on the tape, then they'll know. And you also did illustrations for the Western Art Review magazine, didn't you?

TYRUS WONG: Oh, Western Art? Oh, yes, that little magazine that they gave out -- I don't know if it's still in circulation or not -- in little grocery stores, they gave it free

BETTY HOAG: Oh, yes.

TYRUS WONG: I don't know if it's still in circulation or not. Let me see, I'll show you

BETTY HOAG: I have some of those in my files at home. [INTERRUPTION TO LOOK AT THINGS]

BETTY HOAG: . . . some of the Western families and showed me on one cover -- there were several different covers that were used during the year 1950 -- and I'll indicate on the microfilm the one that is his. It's a beautiful Chinese tree and people at a table under it. And the other full page "Haunted House" picture for a Hallowe'en cover. Mr. Wong, you also did covers for the Los Angeles Times Home Section in 1954 and '55, too?

TYRUS WONG: Yes.

BETTY HOAG: Have you any of those?

TYRUS WONG: Let me see. Let me see. Where do you get all this information?

BETTY HOAG: Little bits and pieces. Oh, you asked about where I knew about that all-Western show at the Stendahl, and it was the Los Angeles Times in 1939 I guess that told about it.

TYRUS WONG: Oh, it was the Times?

BETTY HOAG: Yes, I just found that in here. Lovely cover. This is the Los Angeles home . . . ?

TYRUS WONG: That's right, the Los Angeles home

BETTY HOAG: It's very beautiful; the colors are just so nice.

TYRUS WONG: And then this one has an article about different artists out here, you know, Surasawa, and so forth.

BETTY HOAG: Yes. Was Surasawa on the Project, or was he . . . ? Do you remember?

TYRUS WONG: Surasawa, gee, I don't remember. I think he must be younger, you know

BETTY HOAG: I think he is, too.

TYRUS WONG: I mean, don't quote me on that, that you could find out from him.

BETTY HOAG: ???

TYRUS WONG: Yes, see, I did all

BETTY HOAG: Dorothy Jeakins, of course, worked too at the time.

TYRUS WONG: Yes, Dorothy Jeakins

BETTY HOAG: She was very young, I think.

TYRUS WONG: Yes. This

BETTY HOAG: We'd love to borrow that, if we may, and let them microfilm it also. And there's something else that you haven't mentioned, that you did the text and illustrations for "Watercolor Portraiture" in 1949. That sounds like one of those books on illustrating, how to draw. Was it?

TYRUS WONG: Oh, it's this one here. "Watercolor Portraits."

BETTY HOAG: Oh, I see. Walker, Short and O'Hara are the authors. Beebe Florry Walker, Dorothy Short and Elliott O'Hara. And the publishers are G. Putnam Sons, New York, 1949. And your illustration is on page 94; it's "The Beggar," a beautiful thing.

RUTH KIM WONG: That was burned in a fire

BETTY HOAG: It was burned in a fire?

TYRUS WONG: Yes.

BETTY HOAG: What a shame!

RUTH KIM WONG: show. [inaudible]

BETTY HOAG: A show of your works, or was it your studio that burned?

TYRUS WONG: No, it was a friend of mine had a place, so I just put it there to exhibit and the place got burned.

BETTY HOAG: Oh, what a shame!

TYRUS WONG: And that was one of them. Here are some of the . . . this is an etching of the . . . What year is that catalogue? What catalogue is that?

BETTY HOAG: "First International Exhibition of Etchings and Engravings at the At Institute of Chicago, 1932." Oh, this was very early, this is before the Project.

TYRUS WONG: Before the Project even, 1932. This is just an ad showing the plate of an ad. That's an ad.

BETTY HOAG: I remember when these ads came out in Mademoiselle and Living for April-May 1949. Did they get the flowers from your garden to show the set?

RUTH KIM WONG: No.

BETTY HOAG: They could have, it's so beautiful.

RUTH KIM WONG: No, it was done

BETTY HOAG: I see. That was Modern Bride in the spring of 1952 . . . get these all out Mr. Feitelson loaned me this to look at too, I still have it at home and haven't got around to reading it -- this World's Fair book.

TYRUS WONG: Well, this one is my painting and this one won an award for the Foundation of Western Art Annual Award.

BETTY HOAG: Isn't that nice!

TYRUS WONG: That's a long time ago.

BETTY HOAG: The reproduction in the paper doesn't begin to come out as well as the one in the magazine. Look at all the detail of your drapery here is so beautiful and that's just lost in the other picture. And then I have this Bedouin (?) or whatever they pronounce the college

TYRUS WONG: This is Cala Verde. Oh, Cala Verde, we had a group of

BETTY HOAG: Independent . . . ?

TYRUS WONG: I think Berganti

BETTY HOAG: Oh, Nick Berganti

TYRUS WONG: Yes, Nick Berganti, yes, he's in the Project.

BETTY HOAG: Oh, you mentioned losing some things by fire. I guess he lost most of his collection in a fire a couple of years ago. That was a terrible thing.

TYRUS WONG: A couple of years ago? Is that right?

BETTY HOAG: And Hideo . . . ?

TYRUS WONG: Dati.

BETTY HOAG: Dati. I've been trying; I wrote him

TYRUS WONG: He's in New York, you know.

BETTY HOAG: Oh, that's right. Dorothy Jeakins gave me his name and I sent it to the Archives for a person and she gave me the name of another friend of theirs

TYRUS WONG: Benji Okubo?

BETTY HOAG: Yes. And I've written him and haven't heard a thing from him.

TYRUS WONG: Yes. Okubo, he doesn't paint too much now, a little bit, but he spends most of his time doing landscape designing. In fact, this great big rock out there, you know

BETTY HOAG: Yes, I

TYRUS WONG: He and I have been moving it, a hundred pounds -- four hundred pounds

BETTY HOAG: Good heavens!

TYRUS WONG: Yes, we move it; he's doing landscape designing. He does a beautiful job; he's very, very good at it. So that's what he's doing.

BETTY HOAG: I guess I'll write him another letter and hope he'll let me come and see him because I do want to talk to him.

TYRUS WONG: Yes, he's very interesting. See, this is 1934, the Art Institute of Chicago, a print, etching

BETTY HOAG: Oh, I'm so delighted that you have saved all these catalogues.

TYRUS WONG: Representing China landscapes

BETTY HOAG: Yes. Very good.

TYRUS WONG: That's 1934.

BETTY HOAG: I have a small list of your exhibits and awards. I'm just going to run through some of them, but there are so many more I know that anyone could look them up. You've had work in the Honolulu Academy, in the Santa Barbara Museum, in Los Angeles Art . . .

TYRUS WONG: Yes, I had etchings there.

BETTY HOAG: . . . etchings; and Pennsylvania Academy of Fine arts, California Water Color Society, Butler Institute, World's Fair in New York, which you just mentioned, American Water Color Society, Denver Art Museum, California State Fair, the Oakland Museum You just go through the museums and you've shown at some of their shows and gotten many awards for them. I would like to get back to the Project period, which I'm supposed to be concentrating on, and ask you about some of it in detail. You were probably just out of school when it started, when the Depression came?

TYRUS WONG: Yes, yes, I'd say I was out of school. And I'm glad we had such a thing as the Art Project at that time, believe me. That was a great help to all the artists, musicians

BETTY HOAG: Yes. You did a lot of watercolors for

TYRUS WONG: Mostly watercolor and some lithography.

BETTY HOAG: I see.

TYRUS WONG: Lithographs are put in the library and you can draw it out like a book, but the paintings, I don't know, I guess they put in various public buildings.

BETTY HOAG: Yes. You have a letter here from Santa Monica Library in which they tell about buying one for the reference room, and they went to places like that. There were exhibitions in the Los Angeles Museum at that time of the work, too, and I know that you had yours exhibited several times. I found them in the old catalogues there. For instance, in 1939 you had -- I'm sure I'm pronouncing it wrong, but it's "Sooshiek Searching for his Friend." . . .

TYRUS WONG: Yes.

BETTY HOAG: . . . and Cheongtikoon (?)

TYRUS WONG: How do you spell it?

BETTY HOAG: Here, they're typed at the top there.

TYRUS WONG: Oh yes, yes.

BETTY HOAG: And what is the third one called?

TYRUS WONG: Wahcung (?), it's a lithograph.

BETTY HOAG: Are these historical characters?

TYRUS WONG: Yes, sort of a legend. Wahcung is almost like -- what is that? Prometheus? Is that it, a Greek . . . ?

BETTY HOAG: Prometheus Bound? Where he tried . . . ?

TYRUS WONG: . . . god of fire?

BETTY HOAG: Yes.

TYRUS WONG: Well, Wahcung is something like a Chinese legend for the god of fire, you know, and so forth. These are lithographs, figures.

BETTY HOAG: Yes, they sound like very interesting things. Someone said that they often had a man who was in charge of a travel library go down to MacArthur Park and take orders for pictures. It was sort of an open air library, you could rent a book there just of an hour while you were sitting in the park at noon. Did you know about that as part of your Project?

TYRUS WONG: No.

BETTY HOAG: And then they had the lithographs, of course, in the library itself and people could check them out.

TYRUS WONG: I didn't know that.

BETTY HOAG: It was very interesting. You didn't have your own block at the time?

TYRUS WONG: No, we were all using the stones. I remember when the drawing was all finished then they'd run it off, you know, and that's it. And then we were supposed to turn in . . . I think I turned in one a week or something, or one in two weeks.

BETTY HOAG: Yes. They had professional printers who did the actual printing?

TYRUS WONG: Yes. There was one old man there by the name, I think, of Nahr. I think the wife probably could tell you. I know there's a young fellow by the name of Carl Winter . . .

BETTY HOAG: Carl Winter?

TYRUS WONG: Yes. [C A R L.] Carl Winter, he was one of the . . . a wonderful printer, and I think there was an old man by the name of Mr. Nahr, or whatever his name was. He was . . .

BETTY HOAG: Mr. Nahr?

TYRUS WONG: Yes, I think Mr. Wright probably can tell you.

BETTY HOAG: He doesn't remember very many of the names.

TYRUS WONG: He doesn't?

BETTY HOAG: No.

TYRUS WONG: I think it was something like that; he's an older man, too. But Carl Winters is a younger man; he's the one who did the lifting of the stone and so forth, you know, the stone weighs a hundred pounds.

BETTY HOAG: Oh, do they really?

TYRUS WONG: Yes, and you have to be able to lift them, and he'd do all the lifting.

BETTY HOAG: About how many prints do you make from one?

TYRUS WONG: Gee, I don't know. I had no control over that; that's completely on the Project.

BETTY HOAG: Oh, I see. I was just going to ask if the artist himself got any back for his own use?

TYRUS WONG: Yes, I think I got a few. At that time I think I had about half a dozen.

BETTY HOAG: I see. So you were able to keep those and sell them if you wanted to?

TYRUS WONG: Yes, that's right.

BETTY HOAG: That must have been something that helped in days like that.

TYRUS WONG: Oh, yes. I think I had about half a dozen. Of course, painting or watercolor . . .

BETTY HOAG: And you did about one painting a month to turn it?

TYRUS WONG: No, I would say one in two weeks.

BETTY HOAG: Oh, that often!

TYRUS WONG: Yes, one in two weeks.

BETTY HOAG: And, Mr. Wong, were you on the Project the whole period? The whole time it was in existence? Do you remember?

TYRUS WONG: I don't remember. I don't think I was there during the whole time.

BETTY HOAG: You were there when Mr. Wright was in charge?

TYRUS WONG: Yes.

BETTY HOAG: And Mr. Feitelson?

TYRUS WONG: Yes.

BETTY HOAG: And then Mr. McGarren, too?

TYRUS WONG: Mr. McGarren I think came a little later.

BETTY HOAG: Yes, I think he did.

TYRUS WONG: At that time I think I was out, although I remember Mr. McGarren. It's so long ago I really can't remember too much.

BETTY HOAG: Incidentally, you spoke of having one of the paintings in the Santa Monica Library. That's where they have a lot of Mr. Wright's murals, you know.

TYRUS WONG: Yes. That wasn't done under the WPA Project, I believe.

BETTY HOAG: Yes, it was. And they're all quite excited because they're building a new library there and I don't know what they're going to do, but Mr. Wright hopes that maybe he can get one panel back that has a portrait of his father on it.

TYRUS WONG: Yes, that's right.

BETTY HOAG: It would be nice if he could have that.

TYRUS WONG: Yes. I have a catalogue of that somewhere.

BETTY HOAG: Yes. The library loaned us that to be microfilmed. It was very nice of them; we did get that.

TYRUS WONG: Yes, he did a lot of work on that in the

BETTY HOAG: Yes. Did you do any other work on the Project that you can remember, or was that about the extent of it?

TYRUS WONG: I think that was about the extent of the watercolor and the lithograph.

BETTY HOAG: You mentioned knowing Dorothy Jeakins and several of these other people on it, and I wonder, can you tell me any stories, or anything of interest about it that you remember? These are things that

TYRUS WONG: Gee, I don't remember because I did painting at home, you know.

BETTY HOAG: Oh, you weren't doing it at the center?

TYRUS WONG: No, no. I did it at home and then when it was finished I brought it over there. Although the lithographs I did over there, you know, just like regular hours. I'd go over there at a certain hour and do it so many hours and go home. I worked my lithographs over there; I remember, on Seventh Street, I recall

BETTY HOAG: Yes, near Wilshire and . . .

TYRUS WONG: Yes, on top of the building there, the second floor.

BETTY HOAG: on the table that was shown at the Los Angeles County Museum, and the Home Savings & Loan bought it

TYRUS WONG: Yes.

BETTY HOAG: They gave the purchase prize.

TYRUS WONG: Yes, that's why they own the painting.

BETTY HOAG: It's 1954.

TYRUS WONG: It's called "The Sea."

BETTY HOAG: Yes.

TYRUS WONG: My "Sea Gull."

BETTY HOAG: It's very beautiful.

TYRUS WONG: And this one here, the driftwood

BETTY HOAG: Oh, isn't that lovely!

TYRUS WONG: The driftwood is owned by the Los Angeles Museum, that's in 1955.

BETTY HOAG: Well, I'll have to look for that, too, when it opens and I get to see more of them. Are these both watercolors?

TYRUS WONG: Yes, they're opaque watercolor, almost look like oil, but they're not.

BETTY HOAG: Yes, they do, I wondered

TYRUS WONG: It isn't transparent, it's opaque color. In fact, I love it. It seems to me it's quite thick painting a lot with casein.

BETTY HOAG: Have you tried any work with that new successor to oil that they keep talking about? It's one of the miracle epoxies of some kind

TYRUS WONG: You mean some sort of a medium?

BETTY HOAG: It's supposed to paint like an oil, you can paint over things, but it gives the effect of watercolor, they say.

TYRUS WONG: Oh!

BETTY HOAG: I just wondered . . . I'm trying to find out if any of the artists have used it, and like it or not.

TYRUS WONG: No, I haven't used that, no. I do very, very few oils, mostly I do like this. I like this medium because it dries quickly, when you work over on top of oil you have to wait although a lot of people, all different, depending on a lot of people like white paint wet and thick, and so forth, but in my case I like this so I can, you know, work on top of it. So that's why I prefer this medium very much because it seems to suit my needs.

BETTY HOAG: You certainly get beautiful effects with it. They're lovely. Have you saved the designs for your Christmas cards? Any of those, too, I think would be interesting to have on microfilm.

TYRUS WONG: Do you want the original or the one . . . ?

BETTY HOAG: Yes, or the cards themselves.

TYRUS WONG: Oh, yes, I have some

BETTY HOAG: I think it would be nice to show them.

TYRUS WONG: I have some, yes. I can give you some of the samples, yes.

BETTY HOAG: I have some that I saved of my Christmas cards but they're stored away and I have to get them out. I don't know that I can find them in time to get them on the microfilm.

TYRUS WONG: Yes, I have some. Do you have to have it today?

BETTY HOAG: I was going to take the things today and take everything in later this week.

TYRUS WONG: I can give you some.

BETTY HOAG: Good. as a representative group of them

TYRUS WONG: Oh, I see, I can Maybe you'll be interested in this, this is something about the Federal Art

BETTY HOAG: Oh, good!

TYRUS WONG: Let's see, I'll go and see what I can find.

BETTY HOAG: What is it? Duk, Mr. Wong? In this picture, Wong's Duk?

TYRUS WONG: Oh Duk! The translation in Chinese is a scholar.

BETTY HOAG: I see.

TYRUS WONG: Biontuk (?) is a fisherman; to is a wood-gatherer; and then a flower, and duk is a scholar. It's a whole combination like the four seasons; you can paint that, you know.

BETTY HOAG: With a favorite character?

TYRUS WONG: Yes.

BETTY HOAG: I wanted to ask you one question when I saw your October cover for the home living, or . . . ?

TYRUS WONG: You mean the home magazine?

BETTY HOAG: Yes, the home magazine with the haunted house; it made me think of

TYRUS WONG: Oh, you mean the Western Family?

BETTY HOAG: Yes.

TYRUS WONG: Yes, what about it? You mean the magazine has something to do with my painting?

BETTY HOAG: Your cover makes me think of a funny story that Mr. Stevens told me about Lohans and haunted houses. Do you remember the ceramic heads that Al King made?

TYRUS WONG: Yes.

BETTY HOAG: The Oriental ones that came over the museum?

TYRUS WONG: Yes.

BETTY HOAG: Well, on one of the other tapes, Mr. Stevens told me about Mr. King having these things set up with a light inside of them at a Hallowe'en party his mother was giving and telling a ghost story, and right at the critical point he had turned the light on and these things glowed, you know. They were made of porcelain; they were just beautiful with this light inside, and this frightened the whole party to death. When I saw that "Haunted House: and you mentioned Lohans and I began to see these things.

TYRUS WONG: Speaking of Al King, did you interview him?

BETTY HOAG: Oh, my yes! And his wife, Louise Esteverry.

TYRUS WONG: Yes, Louise

BETTY HOAG: And Mr. King and I only got about the beginning of the Project, on the murals in Long Beach, and we have I don't know how much more taping to do, because they were so active on it. He was in charge of the whole thing, I think.

TYRUS WONG: Oh, he did some wonderful ceramics.

BETTY HOAG: Yes.

RUTH KIM WONG: Did he do something for the church?

TYRUS WONG: Chinese Methodist church? Oh, I think he planned the color scheme for that.

BETTY HOAG: And that leads me to another question I was going to ask you. Did you do any mural work at all?

TYRUS WONG: Yes, I did some wall decoration.

BETTY HOAG: You did! Good! Tell me about it.

TYRUS WONG: Well, I did one down in Chinatown, on in New Chinatown -- "The Dragon" -- it still stands today.

BETTY HOAG: Is it exterior mural?

TYRUS WONG: Yes, yes. It's just painted with oil paint. Gee, that's over 20 years ago.

BETTY HOAG: Well, for goodness sake! Is it by that central court?

TYRUS WONG: The central court, you know, at the end, you know, the Restaurant Colipo!

BETTY HOAG: General Lee?

TYRUS WONG: No, no, down further, by the gate, down by the gate on Broadway. General Lee is facing a fountain, right?

BETTY HOAG: Right.

TYRUS WONG: All right

BETTY HOAG: Stand in front of General Lee and look down Broadway

TYRUS WONG: Yes, looking down toward Broadway, then that mural is right on top of that building called the Leepo, in the cover of a building. They call it Leepo--Lee, and then Po -- called the Leepo Restaurant.

BETTY HOAG: Well, I certainly will look for it next time I go down.

TYRUS WONG: Yes, and I painted that over 20 years ago.

RUTH KIM WONG: It looks very good on the building, and the new owner is

TYRUS WONG: They're putting neon signs right next door to it, you know.

BETTY HOAG: Oh no, what a shame!

RUTH KIM WONG: They put a donkey

TYRUS WONG: They put a donkey with Leepo sitting on it and it just ruined the whole thing, but then, what can you do?

BETTY HOAG: Incidentally, isn't it about New Year's time again for that celebration, or have I missed it?

RUTH KIM WONG: Yes.

TYRUS WONG: It's next Tuesday.

BETTY HOAG: Next Tuesday. It's not Archives, but I'll put it down. We saw it last year for the first time and that wonderful dragon they have

TYRUS WONG: Oh, yes.

RUTH KIM WONG: I'm not sure it's going to be out Tuesday.

TYRUS WONG: They probably won't be out till about Thursday.

RUTH KIM WONG: don't bring it out till the weekend

TYRUS WONG: Yes. weekend because of tourists. It'll probably be about Saturday. I think they really will be raising Cain down there.

RUTH KIM WONG: . . .

BETTY HOAG: Well, this dragon, of course, was not done for the Project.

TYRUS WONG: No.

BETTY HOAG: It had nothing to do with that?

TYRUS WONG: No.

BETTY HOAG: Do you know someone named J. Fong down there?

TYRUS WONG: Yes, yes.

BETTY HOAG: Do you know how I can get ahold of . . . I don't even know if it's a man or a woman.

TYRUS WONG: It's a man.

BETTY HOAG: It is. People keep saying to ask down there but I don't know whom to ask, you know.

TYRUS WONG: And later on he turned in to be a singer, a Chinese singer, a night club singer, yes. I understand he's in San Francisco now. I haven't seen him for years, but I heard that he's in San Francisco. Yes.

BETTY HOAG: I wonder where I could reach him there, if I go up to tape anybody.

TYRUS WONG: Gee, I don't know.

BETTY HOAG: You wouldn't know where . . . ?

TYRUS WONG: No, I haven't seen him for years. I heard that he's up in San Francisco but . . .

RUTH KIM WONG: He is originally from Arizona.

BETTY HOAG: From Arizona?

RUTH KIM WONG: [Inaudible]

TYRUS WONG: J. Fong

BETTY HOAG: Well, he did a lot of work on the Project. I've run across his name several times. I thought he was someone I really should keep after, you know.

TYRUS WONG: And then wall decoration. Let's see, that . . . and also I did the former Hancock house, you know, the Hancock

BETTY HOAG: Hancock Park? the Hancock Oil?

TYRUS WONG: The man used to have a radio program. He's sponsor, you know, of the Hancock Quartet.

RUTH KIM WONG: He is the Hancock

BETTY HOAG: Yes, he is the Mr. Hancock. I did a mural for his dining room, his dining room is as big as this house.

BETTY HOAG: In Bel Air or some place?

TYRUS WONG: No. Up in LaBraya, at the end of LaBraya.

BETTY HOAG: Was it a landscape?

TYRUS WONG: Yes, a landscape.

BETTY HOAG: Much like your cards, or something?

TYRUS WONG: Yes, Oriental landscape. That was done years ago.

RUTH KIM WONG: He did a mural for Frank Buck.

TYRUS WONG: Yes, Buck

BETTY HOAG: Oh, "Bring 'em back alive?"

TYRUS WONG: Yes, "Bring 'em back alive" Buck, yes.

RUTH KIM WONG: [Inaudible]

TYRUS WONG: Yes. I did Well, the story was: I got this job through the school, through Otis, you know, and then he wanted somebody to paint a mural for his bar. So naturally, being he's a hunter, so I thought I'd paint a whole bunch of monkeys, you know, hanging, their tails reaching on the bar, and he had a python skin all around the bar, I remember . . .

BETTY HOAG: Real python skin?

TYRUS WONG: And zebra skins for the seats, and so forth, bar stools and what not. I remember I painted all these monkeys hanging on there and then when it was all finished I asked him to come and take a look for his approval. And he looked at it and he said: "It looks very nice, very nice, Mr. Wong, but, tell me, I've seen hundreds and hundreds of species of monkeys. What type is this?" I was completely dumfounded! I said, "It is completely out of my head; I don't know what species it is." So I couldn't argue what kind of specie it was, because, I mean, what do I know about monkeys? It was just shape of a monkey; I didn't specify what specie of monkey it was.

BETTY HOAG: Oh, that's so funny!

TYRUS WONG: I think that the funniest story Of course, this had nothing to do with the Project -- that's years and years ago when I was just starting out, before I went to the art school, even. My father always thought the art profession was wonderful because, you know, to a Chinese it isn't backbreaking labor, it's just something to do with you hands, and so forth, would be wonderful. He thought that was ideal, so he always tried to encourage me to take up painting.

BETTY HOAG: Oh, that's interesting.

TYRUS WONG: I had no idea there was such a thing as an art school existing when I was a kid, so I don't know anything about it except he saw one day one of these so-called pop type painters sitting on a window doing an automobile, you know. He thought it was great. He thought, oh, gee, look at this man. He can turn this out in about 5 minutes; that's terrific. You ought to take lessons from him. So he asked me to take lessons from him, so I did take some lessons from him and I timed myself. I could paint one in about 10 minutes. So he thought I was really great.

BETTY HOAG: You had achieved it.

TYRUS WONG: Yes, I had achieved it in 10 minutes. That man, he can do fine work, but after all you're a student, you can do it in 10 minutes.

BETTY HOAG: You were only 12 years old?

TYRUS WONG: So later on the word gets around Chinatown that I was doing painting. And then there was this fellow, this man was working for a bank and to my father -- he works in a bank for some reason -- he thought if we work in a bank he must be loaded with money. I mean he thought working in a bank, he was a banker or something like that. But evidently he was just a teller or something like that. So anyway, he said, "He wants you to paint a picture. Why don't you go down and see him?" So I said, "Okay." I went down to see the man and he was a real dignified man. He said, "Well, sit down, I want to talk to you about this painting. See behind this couch here? I want you to do a painting about six by three, and of course I want a landscape, you know, with water, and mountains and so forth." I said, "That's fine." So I started to leave and he said, "Wait a minute." So he pulled out of his pocket and gave me a list of things. And it had a house and people in it, and this and that and so forth,

and birds and flowers and a million things you don't know what to do, you know. So, anyway, I go back and check my list and my father went down to one of these, I think, Army and Navy stores and got some of these paints You know, we didn't know anything about paints in tubes -- we but this paint in small cans and I painted this thing, and it took me about a couple of months to do this painting.

BETTY HOAG: Was it on a plaster wall?

TYRUS WONG: No, it was on a piece of canvas, or a piece of duck canvas, you know. We went to the Army & Navy for a piece of canvas. I had to put about six coats on it, and it was just like sandpaper, you know, the thing absorbing like a blotter. So anyway, finally it's all finished and my father said, "Say, that looks pretty good because you've got a lot of stuff in it. Let's check the list." So we checked it with the list and it's all there; there's a house, there are shingles on the roof, and then there's . . . I see there's a wash pan, and a woman out there feeding the chickens, and then there's a Model T Ford, and a man chopping wood, and then there's a plow -- I remember the plow, I didn't know how to draw a plow so I picked up a Sears catalogue, and found a plow and copied that, and birds flying in the sky, and plows, and daisies, and then a donkey, and just millions of things. And my father said, "Gee, there's no reason why he shouldn't like that." And then we got a friend to help carry this painting down there.

BETTY HOAG: All done and

TYRUS WONG: Yes, all done and ready to hang. So we bring the painting in and the first thing he asked me was, "Let me have the list I gave you." So I gave him the list and he checked it over. "Yes, I see you've got a house there, and you've got water, you've got a boy fishing, yes, yes, and you've got birds" He checked everything. "Yes, I think you've got everything. Very good." So he said, "One thing wrong with it." I said, "What's the matter?" He said, "Way up in the corner behind the cloud there you should have put an airplane in there." I said, "An airplane!" He said, "Yes." So we both carted the painting back and put an airplane in it, you know, during World War I I remember I even painted that in . And then I brought it back. He said, "Ah, now that completes the picture, that's very, very good. I like that." And do you know how much he paid me? Five dollars!

BETTY HOAG: Oh, no, the poor little boy. How awful!

TYRUS WONG: Yes. Five dollars. And my father said, "Oh, don't feel bad; this might lead into something else after all."

BETTY HOAG: It probably did, as a matter of fact.

TYRUS WONG: Yes, it did. I think I had to paint three of the afterwards. I was so sick so that was one of my first commissions. I thought that was a

BETTY HOAG: Mr. Wong, I think it speaks very well for Otis At that you came in that way and came out as you did for the Project.

TYRUS WONG: Five dollars! That was way before art school even.

BETTY HOAG: It reminds me, one of the questions I want to be sure to ask you whether there were any artists in your family at all that you know of?

TYRUS WONG: Well, my wife has a very deep appreciation of art.

RUTH KIM WONG: [Inaudible]

BETTY HOAG: I just wonder if you inherited your creative ability or . . . ?

TYRUS WONG: No, no, except my father wanted me to be

BETTY HOAG: He encouraged you.

TYRUS WONG: Encouraged me. He doesn't know anything about it he saw a spaghetti ad in those days he thought it was terrific, even now, he saw the steam coming out -- "Oh, gee, if you can paint like that, it's really something."

RUTH KIM WONG: He did paint something in art school he was ashamed to show anyone.

TYRUS WONG: Yes, I painted . . . also they went to the art school. They asked someone to paint an ad on Hollywood Boulevard years ago. They wanted an artist to paint an ad; they were advertising a woman's brassiere. This I didn't know a darn thing about, you know.

BETTY HOAG: What about the Sears catalogue? Did you get it out again?

TYRUS WONG: Well, I went down to see this man and he said, "Do you know what a brassiere is?" So I needed a job so I said, "Oh, yes, sure." I really knew nothing about the thing, you know. Actually I didn't know women wore such a thing as a brassiere. "Well, anyway, this brassiere is a little bit different." I said, "Is that so?" "Yes, this brassiere has a name; it's called "Her Secret," and I want this ad to be different. I want black background painted in white paint, and I want it up there to say "For Comfort," and down there to say 'Her Secret' brassiere and so forth. So I want you to do that." So I made a drawing of it and they paid me \$25 for it, and then they had a guy duplicate it and I remember my father was quite proud. "Gee, son, I didn't know that you could do that, that I would see something on top of a building right in the center of Hollywood Boulevard, that brassiere."

BETTY HOAG: How old were you then?

TYRUS WONG: Oh, I was still in art school. I think I must have been about 13 years old or something like that, 14, something around there.

RUTH KIM WONG: And you were telling how the secretary came out and modeled it.

TYRUS WONG: Oh, yes, after he had explained the brassiere, he said, "I have a hunch you don't know what I'm telling about." I said, "Yes, I do." He said, "No, it seems to me you don't; let me show you." So his secretary, she must have been about 50 some odd years old this woman. He said, "Would you please demonstrate for Mr. Wong." And then she looked at me; she was fully dressed, and she put the brassiere over her dress . . .

BETTY HOAG: And you still didn't know . . . ?

TYRUS WONG: She put that on just like a football player!

BETTY HOAG: Oh, I think that's the strangest indoctrination to art that I ever heard of.

TYRUS WONG: I got \$25 for that; that wasn't bad. I thought that was better than that great big painting with everything in it.

BETTY HOAG: Twenty-five cents per object, or 10 cents per object.

TYRUS WONG: For \$5, yes.

BETTY HOAG: You wife was telling me that she thinks, or someone said, that Belmont High School has one of your paintings in the principal's office.

TYRUS WONG: Yes, I think that was a Project thing -- was that a Project painting?

RUTH KIM WONG: in principal's office or somewhere in school.

TYRUS WONG: Oh! You mentioned about this California Art & Architecture, here's a

BETTY HOAG: Oh, there's the cover.

TYRUS WONG: Yes. That's the cover and I think inside is an article

BETTY HOAG: What species is this monkey?

TYRUS WONG: I think Mr. Wright had an article in there

BETTY HOAG: Oh!

TYRUS WONG: I think Stanton Wright has an article in there.

RUTH KIM WONG: [Inaudible]

TYRUS WONG: Yes.

BETTY HOAG: Well, unless you can think of something more on the Project period, I think that I haven't any more questions.

TYRUS WONG: I don't remember except there's a fellow by the name of Jerry Murray. Do you know . . . ?

BETTY HOAG: He's somebody I'm supposed to look up. Mr. Tong gave me his address and I just haven't gotten around to it.

TYRUS WONG: Yes. Jerry Murray, he was on the Project.

BETTY HOAG: I think he teaches at Otis, or Chouinard, or something, doesn't he?

TYRUS WONG: At one time, probably, I don't know now. I haven't seen him in years; I don't know where to even look for him.

BETTY HOAG: I have his address that Mr. Tong gave me, but I just haven't had time to look him up.

RUTH KIM WONG: [Inaudible]

TYRUS WONG: Oh, yes, Dunwell was on the Project.

BETTY HOAG: Who is that?

TYRUS WONG: LaVerne Dunwell, he was on the Project.

BETTY HOAG: What a funny name! LaVerne Dunwell.

RUTH KIM WONG: [Inaudible]

TYRUS WONG: Steven LaVerne Dunwell.

BETTY HOAG: Steven LaVerne D U N W E L L. Is he still around?

TYRUS WONG: He lives in Balboa.

RUTH KIM WONG: Balboa Island.

TYRUS WONG: He's with North American Aircraft doing some sort of a job.

BETTY HOAG: Now, was he an easel artist?

TYRUS WONG: No, I think he was doing something . . .

BETTY HOAG: I don't even have his name.

TYRUS WONG: It seems to me . . . I'm not too sure but before you go to see him, I would call and ask him . . . It seems to me he did, but it has been so long ago.

BETTY HOAG: I'll write him a note care of North American, and . . .

TYRUS WONG: Oh, we've got his address.

RUTH KIM WONG: 205 Coral Avenue, Balboa Island.

BETTY HOAG: Is that California?

RUTH KIM WONG: California.

BETTY HOAG: Thank you very much.

TYRUS WONG: You might write and ask him . . .

BETTY HOAG: Yes, I will.

TYRUS WONG: I could be wrong.

BETTY HOAG: Charles Davis lives someplace down there and I have to see him.

TYRUS WONG: Yes, that's right. Chuck Davis, and also Don Smith.

BETTY HOAG: I don't know him. Smith?

TYRUS WONG: S M I T H.

RUTH KIM WONG: [Inaudible]

TYRUS WONG: Charles Painter. I don't know whether he was on the Project or not.

BETTY HOAG: Was Smith an easel artist?

TYRUS WONG: Yes, I think he does oil painting.

BETTY HOAG: And where do you think he would be?

TYRUS WONG: Gee, I don't know.

RUTH KIM WONG: George Stanley . . .

TYRUS WONG: Oh, George Stanley.

BETTY HOAG: Yes, he's another one I have to look up.

TYRUS WONG: He lives right up here not very far from here, as a matter of fact

BETTY HOAG: I wish I'd known it before I came over.

TYRUS WONG: Yes, George is . . . he did a lot. I'm glad you mentioned him.

BETTY HOAG: Maybe when I bring your things back I can go see him if he's in this area.

TYRUS WONG: Yes.

RUTH KIM WONG: [Inaudible]

BETTY HOAG: Oh, good!

TYRUS WONG: You know where the Shell station is?

BETTY HOAG: Yes.

TYRUS WONG: you make a right hand turn and go to the top of the hill. That's where

BETTY HOAG: Oh, yes.

TYRUS WONG: He's very interesting. He did a lot of He did the Hollywood Bowl entrance, I think that was done on the WPA Project.

BETTY HOAG: It certainly was. that Music and Dance and Drama three of them.

TYRUS WONG: Yes, he did all those.

BETTY HOAG: And at Griffith Park he was in charge of

TYRUS WONG: At Griffith Park he did one of the, I think it was Gordon Newell -- I think he was one of the artists that did that. Also, he did that little Oscar for the Motion Picture Academy Awards, the Oscar, you know, he did that.

BETTY HOAG: Yes.

TYRUS WONG: I think he was only paid \$50 for it.

BETTY HOAG: on the Project?

TYRUS WONG: As I recall now, this Benji Okubo you mentioned that Dorothy gave you the name, I don't think he was on the Project.

BETTY HOAG: Oh, indeed he was. I keep running into his name and people keep mentioning

him and

TYRUS WONG: Yes?

BETTY HOAG: Yes, in fact Miss Jeakins told me about she and Benji and Hideo had lunch every day in the patio of the building.

TYRUS WONG: Benji was on the Project.

RUTH KIM WONG: just before we were married

BETTY HOAG: I think he was.

TYRUS WONG: I know Dati wasn't

BETTY HOAG: Well, maybe he wasn't; maybe that's why he hasn't answered my letter. It could be, you know, if he wasn't, he may have just thought, well . . . I'll check it anyway before I write him again. Mr. Wong, and Mrs. Wong, too, I should have said for the tape that you were in part of this because we've got your voice. Thank you for your help. Thank you so much for the interview.

TYRUS WONG: Thank you.

BETTY HOAG: I appreciate it. I really enjoyed it.

TYRUS WONG: Well, thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW