



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Christine
Jeannette Abel, 1965 June 5

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Christine Abel on June 5th, 1965. The interview took place in Montecito, California, and was conducted by Betty Lochrie Hoag McGlynn for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's New Deal and the Arts project.

The original transcript was edited. In 2021 the Archives created a more verbatim transcript. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: [Laughs] it really isn't— this is Betty Lochrie Hoag on June 5, 1965, interviewing Christina Jeannette Abel—

CHRISTINE ABEL: Christine.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Christine, and that's spelled C-H-R-I-S-T-I-N-E, Jeanette J-E-A double N, E, double T-E, and she's commonly called Jean, J-E-A-N. Abel is A-B-E-L, in her home in Montecito, California—

CHRISTINE ABEL: On Butterfly Lane.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: —on Butterfly Lane—it's a wonderful name [laughs] goes with your garden. It's just so beautiful.

CHRISTINE ABEL: Yes.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Ms. Abel has been one of the leading art teachers in California for many years. She's a very fine artist herself in the field of painting and sculpture. She does not officially belong in my interviews of artists of the Federal Arts period because she was not on any of the projects. However, I think of her as a periphery artist because she had some most interesting experiences with people who were connected with the project and in doing some work, which I'm going to ask her about later. First, I want to ask you very briefly about your life. Would you mind telling us where you were born and your birthday if you care to for the tape and where you were educated?

CHRISTINE ABEL: I was born in Colusa County—

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: I'm sorry—Polusia?

CHRISTINE ABEL: Colusa. C-O-L-U-S-A.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Thank you.

CHRISTINE ABEL: Colusa County, California, on a ranch.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: A cattle ranch?

CHRISTINE ABEL: No.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: A wheat ranch.

CHRISTINE ABEL: A wheat ranch.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Yes, you told me that. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

CHRISTINE ABEL: —on November 21, [1889].

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: And you've already told me, Miss Abel, that you came from a very artistic family. I know that you have a brother who is a very fine dancer and your family, were all interested in art. So, at a very early age, you decided you wanted to be an artist,

didn't you?

CHRISTINE ABEL: That's right. The age of six.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: [Laughs] and your family moved to San Francisco.

CHRISTINE ABEL: Our family moved to San Francisco and later to Oakland. I was in—entering the high school, and the earthquake and fire in San Francisco came, and our family then moved up to Colusa, California, the county seat of Colusa County. And then I graduated there from high school, and then we returned to San Francisco where I entered the old Mark Hopkins, which was then known as the San Francisco Institute of Art in California School of Design, where I received my diploma.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: And at that time you—

CHRISTINE ABEL: That was affiliated with the University of California.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Oh, I see. And was it there that you had Armin Hansen as a teacher?

CHRISTINE ABEL: No.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: That was later.

CHRISTINE ABEL: That was—during that time—during the summer, I studied with Armin Hansen in Monterey. Ms. Forbes and I went to Monterey—

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: And that's Helen K. Forbes?

CHRISTINE ABEL: Helen K.—Helen Katherine Forbes.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Helen Katherine, and she was on the San Francisco project later. I want to bring this in.

CHRISTINE ABEL: Yes.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: And you worked with him?

CHRISTINE ABEL: And I worked with him two summers.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: And—I'm sorry, the man we talked about last night—Xavier Martínez.

CHRISTINE ABEL: Oh, Xavier Martínez.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: —you worked with—

CHRISTINE ABEL: I work for him later.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: I see.

CHRISTINE ABEL: After I returned from my work in the Army Base Hospital for some years.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Well, I'm racing your story then. I thought it was at this first time—

CHRISTINE ABEL: No.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: —he was one of the foremost California painters and a wonderful man.

CHRISTINE ABEL: Yes, definitely, outstanding artist and bohemian.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: And you had planned to go into just the painting field, and I know that—

CHRISTINE ABEL: Just sculpturing.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Sculpturing, I see.

CHRISTINE ABEL: —and I was invited by Helen to go on a sketching tour from one afternoon, and at the end of the day, my sketch—everybody said, You have a sense of color. And I didn't believe that I had any sense of color until that moment. I had seen the very sensitive values that you find in clay, but I had no idea that I had any gift in color until then, and I just went wild with delight.

[00:05:30]

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: And however, it was at the time that you were with Mr. Hansen and Ms. Forbes that you decided to go into teaching. Wasn't it they wanted you to stay in the sculpture or painting field and instead you went into teaching?

CHRISTINE ABEL: Because of the war.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Yes, and right after the war, you did teach in the hospital in Texas?

CHRISTINE ABEL: No, after the war—yes, after the war, I went to Fort Sam Houston - Base hospital number one Fort Sam Houston, Texas and was there for a year and found that I love to teach.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: And I wish we had time on the tape and we don't for you to tell me what you did about this wonderful work with the soldiers. It was almost therapy work—

CHRISTINE ABEL: It was.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: —and made you realize how important the teaching was, too, and you came back.

CHRISTINE ABEL: While I was there, I had—I asked to go into the psychiatric ward, and I was, for six months, with the psychiatric ward—

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Oh, you were?

CHRISTINE ABEL: Teaching the patients.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: [inaudible] And when you came back, you were offered the supervisor-ship of the Visalia [ph] School in teaching, and how long were you there?

CHRISTINE ABEL: I was there a year and a half. So actually, I have taught 36 and a half years.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: My goodness. Oh, where have you taught since then? Glendale?

CHRISTINE ABEL: Glendale. The high school and the college and during the Second World War. The junior high—that was my war work.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: And you've not taught any other place. One of the people I wanted particularly to ask you about on the tape was Fletcher Martin—was one of your students. This must have been at Visalia [ph]. Was that correct?

CHRISTINE ABEL: Fletcher Martin. I was teaching in the afternoons after high school at Stickney in Pasadena. That was the architect school and this idea just for the joy of doing it.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: For heaven's sake.

CHRISTINE ABEL: And I took several of my students for—and gave them scholarships. And then I had a very nice class there, and it was at that time that Fletcher Martin wandered in with his portfolio and showed it to me. And I said that I thought that the school would give him a scholarship, which they did.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: He was in need of one at the time, I gather.

CHRISTINE ABEL: Yes, I think he must have been.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: You said this was his first scholarship, and it's really what started him probably on his own career.

CHRISTINE ABEL: I think it was. Now, I have no way of knowing that it was his first. He may

have had others.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Well, that is interesting. And you made another reference to him, which I thought was interesting and the whole story was—in fact, I want to refer the tape back to the story that Arthur Millier told me a couple of weeks ago about Siqueiros being in Los Angeles and about the outside fresco, which was done on Olvera Street, and Miss Abel was one of the young artists who sat around watching Siqueiros do that mural.

CHRISTINE ABEL: Well, I was in his class.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Oh, he was giving a class?

CHRISTINE ABEL: He had a class of 30.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Well, tell us about it because I didn't get this part.

CHRISTINE ABEL: He had a class of 30, and there were, I think, only two women in this class. I came into it a little bit late from my vacation, and my first lesson with him was to be invited up on to the scaffold while he was painting one of the soldiers—

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Oh, really? [Laughs.]

[00:10:00]

CHRISTINE ABEL: —with a gun pointed toward the center of this composition. And let's see—what other—

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Was this a class where you paid to go into it? Was it a private class?

CHRISTINE ABEL: Yes, private class, yes. And then after this class was over and the mural was completed, we were invited to form a bloc of painters, which we all thought was a wonderful thing, and we all agreed what could be nicer?

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: A kind of union, you mean?

CHRISTINE ABEL: Well, we didn't think of it as a union. We thought of it as a group who got together and worked together.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Yeah.

CHRISTINE ABEL: And then we were invited to the home of one of the pupils, and at that day—in that evening, we got better acquainted and Siqueiros had a number of his woodblocks there, and I acquired one of them called the lockout. The next meeting was held at another home, outside, and instead of Mr. Siqueiros himself conducting this meeting—he was an exceedingly charming man—he had a woman take his chair from the John Reid of Hollywood, and she—she began to tell us how so we knew, and—

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: About painting or art? Or about life, I mean—

CHRISTINE ABEL: About anything.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: About anything?

CHRISTINE ABEL: Yes, that we probably had no convictions. That we were intolerant and many other negative assertions. And then she proceeded to question each one of us as if we were little children. She asked—one of her first questions—was, what would you do with this art knowledge you—this technique knowledge you have received it, and she went around to each individual and I don't recall what they said, but I recall what I said because of my lifelong interest in our Indians in the Southwest and my appreciation of their beautiful design and their dances and their color, I said, "I would like to make a mural of the Indians wherever I could find a wall." That was wonderful.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: [Laughs.] The underprivileged [ph.] Indians.[Laughs.]

CHRISTINE ABEL: Then the next question that went around was, what are your convictions? And I remember my answer was, when she came to me, I have very definite convictions, and

she said, "What are they?" And I said, "They're religious." And she threw up her hands, and at this moment, Fletcher Martin, this tall, handsome young man, leaped to his feet and said, "Now, who's intolerant?" [Betty Hoag McGlynn laughs] And we all stalked out, and that ended the bloc of painters.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: [Laughs.] Thank you so much for telling this wonderful story.

CHRISTINE ABEL: Well, I'm wondering if I should tell it.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: I think it's very interesting. It fits right in with the most familiar—

CHRISTINE ABEL: [inaudible] [Nobody could put the finger on me for (ph)] anything, could they?

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: No, not for things of the past.

CHRISTINE ABEL: I'm not telling anything I shouldn't have.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: No, and actually, what happened when the mural was finished and it was subversive against this country—

CHRISTINE ABEL: Oh, oh yes.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: —the thing was whitewashed and Siqueiros was put in jail and, I think, run out of the country.

CHRISTINE ABEL: Yes, he had to flee from the country immediately after.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: And it seemed like, as they say, a dirty trick for all of you artists who were paying to have instruction to be doing—

CHRISTINE ABEL: To [use us as subversive agents (ph).]

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Yes, when this was not the feeling of the artist working.

CHRISTINE ABEL: Not at all, why we had no—we were all so innocent at that time, y—anything of this kind was going on.

[00:15:02]

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Who were some of the other artists on it? Do you remember?

CHRISTINE ABEL: No, I don't remember a single one. I may have it in the—I have it—

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Oh, good.

CHRISTINE ABEL: I have it down here. Now, do we leave this?

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: We can leave it or we can get it afterwards.

CHRISTINE ABEL: I think we can get it afterwards.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: I know that F. Tolles Chamberlin, I believe, was one.

CHRISTINE ABEL: Yes, F. Tolles Chamberlin was a delightful man. I used to go and draw in his class every now and then. He was one of our very fine teachers.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Was—another one I wanted to—a man I cannot find is Charles Kessler [ph]. He did work in the library.

CHRISTINE ABEL: Kessler?

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Kessler, and I just wondered if you knew where he was.

CHRISTINE ABEL: Kessler—

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: He was a project artist.

CHRISTINE ABEL: There's Wong, Tyrus Wong.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Oh, I've done Mr. Wong, yes.

CHRISTINE ABEL: I had the pleasure of buying one of his watercolors for our college.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: That must have been a hard thing to decide. They're so beautiful.

CHRISTINE ABEL: Beautiful one.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: I would love to own one. He's a very fine man.

CHRISTINE ABEL: Yes.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: When the Federal Arts Project was in existence, you had no need of asking for financial aid because you had your teaching job in Glendale, but you were out on a project in unofficial capacity because Helen Forbes, who we've mentioned, was a friend of yours, had the commission for the Monroe Post—the Monroe California Post Office—

CHRISTINE ABEL: Monrovia.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Monrovia, and when our old VIA post office—and she requested that you be put on as an assistant to her, which you did, right?

CHRISTINE ABEL: I assisted her, and I started out—she gave me my first assignment to—on one of the grizzly bear. And there were two of these great big creatures and she was working on one and I on the other, and after a little while, she said, No, you aren't to work on this. You are to do the manzanita trunks—the manzanita trees. And that was because my brushstrokes were a little bit more vigorous than the ones that she was using. And I don't know whether I—shall put this in the tape., but she used to call that particular bear Jean's Rump.—[They laugh.] Because I had done—the rump of the bear—[cross talk; inaudible]

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: A very bold rump.

CHRISTINE ABEL: Then my assignment was to do these vertical manzanita trunks, and she gave me a rigger brush, which is a brush with hair about an inch and a half long, and I parted these on the palm of my hand until every hair was separate. And then we were up on the scaffolding and where it was [inaudible] , and I had to start with the brush absolutely lined up with the edge of the trunk of the tree and go to the other side and lift it without one single drag.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Oh my god.

CHRISTINE ABEL: That was to be done all the way down and then again, it was to be turned, and this was done at least three times.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: This was to give a cross hatching effect to the texture—

CHRISTINE ABEL: Cross hatching and a luminosity that could be gotten no other way—

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Isn't that interesting?

CHRISTINE ABEL: —and it's true egg tempera technique. Miss Forbes used only the yolk of the egg in her technique. And then she invited me up to Susanville where she did the post office up there. I wasn't able to leave in time. She went ahead and really the mural was finished. When I got to Susanville, there was a little tiny patch she left. She said, "Now, that's yours, and you've got to do that," so that I could be included on that.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Oh, isn't that fun. Well, did you do any work with her on the Noah's Ark mural in Fleishhacker Zoo?

CHRISTINE ABEL: No, no.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Nor the fair on Treasure Island?

CHRISTINE ABEL: She—Dorothy Puccinelli did half of that—Fleishhacker—

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Fleishhacker.

CHRISTINE ABEL: Fleishhacker Zoo, Mothers Room [*sic* - Building] egg tempera mural.

Dorothy Puccinelli and Helen Forbes.

[00:20:02]

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: And you never received any reimbursement for the work you did with her?

CHRISTINE ABEL: No.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: It was just as a friend?

CHRISTINE ABEL: Oh no, it was just as a friend.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Did she have any other professional assistance on the Monrovia Post Office?

CHRISTINE ABEL: [inaudible] It was rather small. It isn't a large mural.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Do remember any other events that happened during the time you were working on it at all? Anything to throw light on the project, the feeling that Miss Forbes had since she isn't with us anymore to tell us. I just wondered if you might remember.

CHRISTINE ABEL: Well, she kept urging me to do these, but of course, I had no time. She gave me a—the book, which outlines—I didn't—I have that somewhere, may be of interest to you—

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Oh, I hope we can borrow it for microfilming.

CHRISTINE ABEL: Yes.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Along with the photographs.

CHRISTINE ABEL: But I'll have to look it up.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Was this a book on egg tempera?

CHRISTINE ABEL: No, this was the outlining all the post offices, every one, and the areas, the sizes of the spaces to be painted so that you can think—

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Oh, I have seen one of those.

CHRISTINE ABEL: Well, I have one somewhere. She gave that to me to try—trying to urge me to become interested.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Did she urge you too because she thought it was such a great experience to have it—

CHRISTINE ABEL: Yeah, she wanted me to have the experience—

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Of doing that mural?

CHRISTINE ABEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: I think it was a marvelous thing for artists of this country that they did have this chance, don't you?

CHRISTINE ABEL: Oh, I think it was a wonderful thing. Of course, I think many walls are spoiled.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Well, they couldn't all be good.

CHRISTINE ABEL: No [laughs], but it was wonderful, and the artists advance was a very fine thing, I really do think that many of them came and evolved out of it—

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Yeah—

CHRISTINE ABEL: —and became important.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Did you have any other students who were on the project that you remember?

CHRISTINE ABEL: I had no students on the project—

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Fletcher Martin was the only one— [cross talk; inaudible]

CHRISTINE ABEL: —they were too young.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: I see, I didn't get my time sequence right.

CHRISTINE ABEL: Yes, Fletcher Martin was—he was long out of the school. I think he was off at the Navy. He came out of the Navy. I'm not sure of that..

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: I see. He had been in, doing war sketches [inaudible].

CHRISTINE ABEL: Yeah, well, that's when he showed up at the Stickney [ph.] Art School, which is now no more.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Miss Abel, I certainly appreciate your taking time to let me have this tape this morning. It's been interesting, and I just—

CHRISTINE ABEL: It's been—

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: —wish you qualified for doing more of your life because you've told me so many interesting things, but that the Archives are going to be very happy for this.

CHRISTINE ABEL: Thank you.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]