



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Atlee B.
Ayres, 1965 May 13

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Atlee Ayres on May 13, 1965. The interview took place in San Antonio, Texas, and was conducted by Sylvia Loomis 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. The original audio recording was transcribed in the mid-1960s. In July 2021, the audio was reconciled with the transcript. Because of the poor sound quality of the original recording, we relied on the original transcript to fill in words and sentences that were hard to understand in the recording. The transcript has been lightly edited for readability. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

ATLEE AYRES: I wish I had recorded a name.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, maybe it'll come to you.

ATLEE AYERS: You want me to—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: This is an interview with Mr. Atlee B. Ayres, architect, at his office in San Antonio, Texas on May 13, 1965. The interviewer is Mrs. Sylvia Loomis of the Santa Fe office of the Archives of American Art. And the subject to be discussed is Mr. Ayres association with the Public Works of Art Project of Texas Region 12 in 1934 and 1935. But first, Mr. Ayres, would you tell us a little about yourself? Where you were born and educated?

ATLEE AYRES: I was born in Hillsboro, Ohio in 1873. And my father moved to Texas when I was about eight years old. And we went to Houston, and I lived there until 1887. And we moved to San Antonio. But prior to my architectural education, why I had some drawing lessons in Houston. And after that, I went on to New York, and study at Metropolitan School of Art. And I went there during the day. And in the evening, I went to The Art Students League and studied under Mr. Levy. And on Sunday, with Frank Vincent DuMond, I took painting lessons. In architecture school, I won the first prize. I lived in New York quite a while and then we—I came back home and went to Mexico—Mexico City for several years, worked for different architects there. And then later on, we went abroad and toured Europe and Constantinople. And then, I've been back at times, and I've been around the world in South America. I've visited numerous wonderful art galleries, both in Italy – the Pitti Palace there, the gallery there. And London, Paris, and Vienna. And we've been in all of the cities and South American galleries. And have had a pretty good review of art in traveling.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see you have quite an art library, too.

ATLEE AYRES: Oh yes. I have a very fine library. We have over 1,000 volumes on architectural types and all.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: You said you had some that went back to the 17th century?

ATLEE AYRES: Oh yes, I have two volumes here. One is on Italian and one is native, both published in the 17th century. Now, I've had charge of different art exhibits here at times. And whoever it was from Washington who came down here, appointed me to take charge of this gathering of pictures. And after reviewing them, I selected probably 15 or 20. And the better ones, we gave to the different schools. And the largest picture of the group is one about four by five, or five by five, that we have given to Witte Museum in our city here. Now, we—I'm sure that having those pictures exhibited at that time and awarding them to different schools had a stimulating effect on art because the work that is done now is of very high type, it's beautiful work—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well now—could we back just a minute. Do you remember how you became involved in this? Who it was that asked you to take part in this—to serve on this committee of Region 12?

ATLEE AYRES: Well now, I don't remember the representative from Washington's name.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And were you in San Antonio?

ATLEE AYRES: Oh yes. I was in San Antonio.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, did you get together with other art leaders in the state?

[00:05:04]

ATLEE AYRES: Oh yes, I called in—I had meetings.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

ATLEE AYRES: And called into a meeting and then I want to be sure about it—I wanted to get the better ones who painted.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Now, was this throughout the state or just in—

ATLEE AYRES: Oh no, just locally. Just locally.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —just in San Antonio?

ATLEE AYRES: Just local artists.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Then you selected certain artists?

ATLEE AYRES: Yes. I selected the best for the exhibits.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: But how did you select the artists? Or did you just—

ATLEE AYRES: Oh, I knew them.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: You knew them?

ATLEE AYRES: Well, I'd had charged of different exhibits before.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

ATLEE AYRES: And I was very well versed in just who to get in touch with.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And then you asked them to do these paintings?

ATLEE AYRES: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

ATLEE AYRES: Each one did a subject. And then, we placed them in the better institutions here.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes. How many artists were involved? Do you remember?

ATLEE AYRES: Well, I think they're about 15 or 20.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: 15? All from San Antonio—

ATLEE AYRES: As I say, it's had a very stimulating effect in the development of art here because the works being done here now is very noteworthy, very splendid.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes. Now this was the—do you remember the dates on this?

ATLEE AYRES: The date was 1930, between 1930 and 1940.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And there was first the Public Works of Art project, that was in 1934?

ATLEE AYRES: Yes, yes it was.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well then, it went from that in 1935 to the WPA, Federal Art Project?

ATLEE AYRES: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Now was—

ATLEE AYRES: I didn't participate it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: You didn't in that?

ATLEE AYRES: No.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Do you know anything about what happened in San Antonio? Was there a Federal Art Project in San Antonio? Do you know? A WPA?

ATLEE AYRES: No, I don't recall them. No, I don't know.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, I couldn't find any evidence in Houston, that there was one there.

ATLEE AYRES: No, I don't think there was.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So, I'm trying to—at this point, I don't have any information that there was any in Texas at all.

ATLEE AYRES: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: But even though it did participate in the Public Works of Art Project with which you are associated.

ATLEE AYRES: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, what—you said that you thought it stimulated the art?

ATLEE AYRES: Oh, very much so. Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: In what way?

ATLEE AYRES: Well people [inaudible] are just awakening to the beauty of color and art—stimulated—wonderful things.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: You mean the public as well as artist?

ATLEE AYRES: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: There was more—

ATLEE AYRES: Now, you might say, like my son, in my son's case. He hadn't taken up art work at all, he and his wife both. And seeing me paint, just in our family at early age has been stimulating with them. You know, we've had different art exhibits here during our expedition. We've had different exhibitions, and I have been in charge of them. And as I say, what is being done now is very outstanding.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Where were these things exhibited in the early days? Around in the 30s?

ATLEE AYRES: In the downtown, different auditoriums.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Auditoriums?

ATLEE AYRES: Different halls.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: You didn't have a regular fine arts museum?

ATLEE AYRES: No.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: No.

ATLEE AYRES: No, we didn't have at that time.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Now, I understand that the main one in San Antonio is the McNay now?

ATLEE AYRES: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Would you tell something about the history of that?

ATLEE AYRES: Well, Mrs. McNay came here from Ohio—from Marion, Ohio. And she built this home, Spanish home, very large home with a patio and quite attractive. And she was very enthusiastic about art. And she gave it to the city. She donated her property to the city. And they have various art—various galleries, upstairs and down, that feature her home. And she acquired very splendid pictures from various sources.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Weren't you the architect for that building?

ATLEE AYRES: Yes, we were the architects.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I thought that you were.

ATLEE AYRES: It was quite a typical home here.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And what year did she donate it to the city?

ATLEE AYRES: That's been about 20 years ago.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: 20 years?

ATLEE AYRES: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And were any of these works of art that were done under the Public Works of Art Project?

ATLEE AYRES: No.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: None of those were in there?

ATLEE AYRES: No, they didn't. They didn't rank high enough for that.

[00:10:02]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes. What were some of the buildings where these paintings went from the Public Works of Art Project?

ATLEE AYRES: They went to the Jefferson High School, different high schools here.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes. And any other that you remember?

ATLEE AYRES: Well, I couldn't [inaudible] offhand.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: No? I see.

ATLEE AYRES: I know Jefferson is our largest high school here. And the others were given to the better grade schools.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: This project lasted about a year. Is that correct?

ATLEE AYRES: Yes. Yes, it did.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And so, I imagine that the—do you know how many paintings the artists did during that period?

ATLEE AYRES: Oh, I'd imagine they prepared probably 50 pictures, and we had quite an array of pictures.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And what did you do with the ones that you—

ATLEE AYRES: They took them back.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: They took them back?

ATLEE AYRES: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. So, you just selected the ones that were best from the—

ATLEE AYRES: The best of the lot.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes. What other art galleries or museums are there in San Antonio now?

ATLEE AYRES: We have the McNay and the Witte Museum. And then they have one in Villita, downtown.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, yes.

ATLEE AYRES: And I think that's the extent of them.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Now, there is one building that I saw yesterday afternoon. The theater building in Villita.

ATLEE AYRES: Oh, yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And I saw a sign there. It said—

ATLEE AYRES: Open air theater.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —yes, the open-air theater.

ATLEE AYRES: On the river.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: That it was built by the Work Project Administration. Do you know anything about that?

ATLEE AYRES: No, I don't know more than the—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: The fact that they did. You don't know the architect or—?

ATLEE AYRES: No.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, that was such an unusual open-air theater—

ATLEE AYRES: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —with the grass seats.

ATLEE AYRES: No, I don't remember who did that.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Do you remember any other activities of the WPA in Houston?

ATLEE AYRES: No. No, I don't.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, I thought that was very interesting, very charming theater and the way that it was constructed.

ATLEE AYRES: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, what have you done since that time? Of course, it's a long—I mean some of the—

ATLEE AYRES: In the way of painting or architecture?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, both. Some of your outstanding projects.

ATLEE AYRES: We have a very outstanding venue over on Broadway. The USAA, it's a \$10 million insurance company for the government. It's all government insurance service. They have an automobile and health insurance too. It's a white marble building. And our firm designed the transit (ph) tower. Let's see, the Randolph Field Administration Building I designed. and that's a building that's been commented on a good deal. [Inaudible] towers, 35-story building downtown. And, oh, we've had—I think the most outstanding work here is being identified.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I understand you also remodeled the Menger Hotel in the state.

ATLEE AYRES: Oh yes, the Menger Hotel. That was built about 100 years ago. And it was

first used as a government barracks. And then they had an old brewery in there. An old German brewery. And it's quite historical, you might say. And they have a very lovely patio and you may lounge in the patio. And then they have a pool at the back of the hotel.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, I was impressed by how well you remodeled that to keep it in scale with the old part of the building.

ATLEE AYRES: Oh, yes. Oh, we had to do that, yeah.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And to also keep it in harmony with The Alamo—

ATLEE AYRES: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —which is right almost next door to it. Well, what—you said that you felt that this Public Works of Art Project helped to stimulate—

ATLEE AYRES: No question in that.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —the interest in art. About how many artists are there now in San Antonio compared at that time?

ATLEE AYRES: I don't know. I couldn't say. My son could tell you better. Oh, I couldn't say. I'm just awfully sorry. They had an exhibit here recently. And he could tell you the names of some of them. I don't notice—don't recall better ones.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, I just want to get an idea—

ATLEE AYRES: It's right in there.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —of how it had grown. The interest in art had grown—

ATLEE AYRES: Yes. It's grown. Aren't we?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —since those years.

[00:15:02]

ATLEE AYRES: Yes. And it's also attributed to the people traveling, people going abroad, and going through the galleries. You know, when you go abroad, the first thing you do is they take you around to various galleries and you begin to take a—you realize that art means a wonderful lot. Now, we planned a home in Oklahoma City for a man named Frank Buttram. And he had a very wonderful collection of pictures. And his gallery is about 30 by 60. And very tall ceilings and he has, oh, a very fine collection. Frank Buttram, Oklahoma City.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Is there an art school in San Antonio?

ATLEE AYRES: An art school? Yes. Out at the McNay.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, really? They're connected with—

ATLEE AYRES: Yes, they have an art school there.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: They do?

ATLEE AYRES: Yes. And they're very good instructors too.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Fine. You said you had no association with the other parts of the state when you did this work?

ATLEE AYRES: No. Oh, no, just local.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: All right. But do you know how it was set up in the rest of the state? Did they do a similar thing?

ATLEE AYRES: Oh, I presume in other cities. I—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And did you have a committee that worked with you?

ATLEE AYRES: No. Mm-mmm [negative]. I did it all myself.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: You did it yourself?

ATLEE AYRES: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, I think that's the way they set up these regional committees. So, that there are one—

ATLEE AYRES: And I might say that my wife and I have put on very fine Mexican shows there at the auditorium. Our auditorium, we were the architects of that. And they have a stage, is 75 feet wide and 50 feet deep, it's quite large. And we'd put on a very fine show. I've had natural trees on the stage. And I've designed the stage scenery. And we've designed the costumes. And we'd go around in the homes before the performance, month or two before their performance and check on their current costumes, and we'd pick out the— advocate to color they'd use. No, I'm sure I don't have the picture. May have it at home; have big picture of that performance. We had over 200 people. All Mexicans. All Mexicans. See, I lived in Mexico City for a couple years and I acquired quite a hobby about gathering Mexican things. I have quite a museum on the third floor.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Is that right?

ATLEE AYRES: I might take you by and show you that.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well I'd love to see it if I could. What kind of performance was it?

ATLEE AYRES: Oh, Mexican—Mexican dancing.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Dancing? I see. Dancing and singing.

ATLEE AYRES: We had dancing. We had bull fight. We had all kinds of things—dancing. Now, we put it on at different times. I was a president of a San Antonio Fiesta. The first president of the Fiesta here. I was president for six years. And I've had, during that time, contact with the Mexican people, and they're putting on performances every year.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Did they do that at that open-air theater?

ATLEE AYRES: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: They did?

ATLEE AYRES: [Inaudible] some of it there. That was built afterwards.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, I see.

ATLEE AYRES: No, our performances were always very large affairs. See, I had over 200 people and then that big 75-foot-wide stage. Actually, I designed the sets, there were no drops. They were all built - houses - and big trees on the stage and everything. Oh, a very lovely thing.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I was very much impressed by the setting of that open-air theater.

ATLEE AYRES: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And with a [inaudible; cross talk] going right in front it.

ATLEE AYRES: This—we have—[inaudible] one of the best you could find in the country. We had very fine dancers and everything.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Wonderful. Well, did you have—

ATLEE AYRES: And Mrs. McNay, by the way, had an old ox cart with solid wood wheels. And she loaned it to us, and we had burros pull that ox cart on the stage with us.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: How many years were those that you were in charge of it?

ATLEE AYRES: Oh, I'm going to get my wife to take you by our home and she'll show you. I don't remember right now. But I was a president, the first president, in 1911. And I had it for

six and a half years.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Did they at that time, have these floats going up and down the river?

ATLEE AYRES: No.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: That was later.

ATLEE AYRES: No.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I heard about that. That they have sort of a carnival.

[00:20:01]

ATLEE AYRES: You know, our river here created quite a background for San Antonio. We have had—been having these performances around the river in connection with the Fiesta. And just recently, they had the river deepened and widened, and it's quite colorful and all. And they have this stage in Villita. [Inaudible] And they have Mexican orchestras there and it's very colorful and nice. It's just unfortunate that something isn't going on there now that you could see.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I understand, you had the Fiesta just a few days ago? Is that right?

ATLEE AYRES: Yeah.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Just in April?

ATLEE AYRES: We had it in the 21st of April.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: April. Yes, that's what I heard. How was this accomplished by widening the river and beautifying it?

ATLEE AYRES: Well, they couldn't widen it very much. I just think the—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Deepened it?

ATLEE AYRES: —[inaudible] accumulation out up to the walks. And then, they deepened it. I think they deepened it about three feet. And—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, how was that accomplished? Was it private?

ATLEE AYRES: They had dredges there. Dredges—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: No, I mean, was it the city government did that—

ATLEE AYRES: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —or was it the —

ATLEE AYRES: The city.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: They did?

ATLEE AYRES: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, there must have been a good deal of pressure from the interested public, wasn't—

ATLEE AYRES: Oh yes. You know, all these people all realized it. And I had different architects come down, Mr. Grylls from Detroit come down here for one winter. The firm up there, there was three of them, I forget—he was one of the principal ones. Grylls, Mr. Grylls, G-R-I-LL-S. And a different one - one architect from Boston. I forget now what his name was. It's been quite a while ago. And he commented on our river being a wonderful asset to the city. Very picturesque. And so that, in later years, why they built the walks along the river and then the theater, and then having the boats to go up and down there.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, in Santa Fe, we also have a little river too. It's much smaller than this one. And we've had such a time trying to get the city government to take any interest in it,

but they finally are. They're finally—

ATLEE AYRES: No, they were trying to finance for the city and [inaudible; cross talk] edge.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: By the city itself. Well, that's nice. It must be—it's good that it recognizes these picturesque parts [phone ringing] because it does make such a difference in the city to have these things developed. But it's quite a struggle—

ATLEE AYRES: Now our missions here are something that have created quite a lot—of course, The Alamo and the first, second, third, and fourth mission. The fourth mission they—is one of the most attractive, is Mission San Jose. That is the one with a picture window. And they have the Rose Window there and it's carved out with wrought iron grill and a lot of Baroque carving, and all. It's very—pretty, very handsome.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I wish I could stay long enough so that I could see some more of these things.

ATLEE AYRES: Oh, it's too bad you couldn't run out there and see it. What time are you leaving?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, my plane leaves at 7:35 tonight, but I have to leave about an hour before that, so that I have until about 6:30 after my next appointment.

ATLEE AYRES: Well, you can see now if we can finish up. My wife, I hope, will be able to take you at the—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, that would be very kind. Yes. Well, let's see if there are any other questions that I'd like to ask you. Because you have—

ATLEE AYRES: You know, what I'd say, we had a large art exhibit at the Midwinter Fair, that was about 1894, [189]5. And I had charge of it. And then, had another exhibit downtown in one of the large halls, and I also had charge of that. And we've always had a lot of people clamoring to exhibit their pictures. But it's like the usual home talent why they haven't had an opportunity to see a good work. And that's something that—this work, for them, was very stimulating because they saw better work that people tried and did better type and all that. And then, since our art galleries have been established, that's been a great big wonderful happening.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Would you have any idea why they did not have a Federal Art Project here? The WPA?

ATLEE AYRES: No, I don't know

SYLVIA LOOMIS: You don't know why?

ATLEE AYRES: No.

[00:25:05]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, I was just sort of curious. It's the first. I've been—I've covered Colorado and Arizona and New Mexico. And all of those, they have quite an extensive—

ATLEE AYRES: No. I don't recall now. Mrs. McNay in her gallery, she had marvelous and they have now, of course, wonderful pictures there.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes. But there must have been unemployed artists in this region, and of course the WPA—

ATLEE AYRES: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, years ago, they didn't have anything.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, they didn't?

ATLEE AYRES: I mean, they have a man with a name of Onderdonk.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: What was that name?

ATLEE AYRES: Onderdonk, O-N-D-E-R—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: D-O-N-K.

ATLEE AYRES: Yes. And he and his son, both were the most outstanding men we had here at that time. And as I say, the ones we have now, Robert knows them very well. I don't know— [inaudible]—her work is most outstanding and of course it's a modern type.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, let's see. It's the artist during that period that we are particularly interested in. But of course, we are also interested in seeing what has developed since that. So that we have sort of the history of the development of art in a particular community. And in great many cases, it was these Federal Art Projects—

ATLEE AYRES: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —that helped to stimulate an interest in it.

ATLEE AYRES: That's been a stimulating effect.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: To develop the artists themselves and develop appreciation of art in the community.

ATLEE AYRES: You know, it's just like people going abroad, they don't have any conception of wonderful architecture or art, they have to go abroad to see it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

ATLEE AYRES: Unless you go to New York to the Metropolitan or someplace like that.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, I guess—

ATLEE AYRES: You know, I went to school in the basement of the Metropolitan Museum. And we used to go upstairs every day to go through the galleries, and see the different art models, see, they have replicas of the various—Parthenon, The Arch of Titus, and Constantine, and all different things of that kind. And I had rather unusual experience in the architectural class. That's a two-year term. They had a competition for an entrance to the Museum of National History, an entrance. So, they had—our school had about 30 or 40 in it. They had the instructors from the Columbia come over there. And Professor Ware, William R. Ware, he was the critic. And so, we had about 30 or 40 in our school. And at the end of this two-year term, we had this competition. Well, there was a young German boy that everybody thought was going to clean up on the award. And the critics came over from Columbia and said, "Now you boys go out in the park." At that time, the front buildings weren't extended and the building was set back and they had a big rock wall in the front. They said, "You boys go out in the park and spend a little time and we'll judge these things." So we got out there and I suggested we find four-leaf clovers, and the boys said, "All right." It was about eight of us there and we begin looking for them. I found four. And we got back into school. They told me that I'd won the first prize.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, that would indicate that the four-leaf clover is lucky, isn't it?

ATLEE AYRES: It was just my lucky day. It wasn't the 13th.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. What was the school of architecture that you studied with, did you say?

ATLEE AYRES: The Metropolitan School of Art.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And that was architectural—

ATLEE AYRES: And I went to the Art Students League at night, I lived on 83rd Street and walked from there down 57th, and we walked back in the snow most of the time. And then in summertime, I worked for different ones. I worked for a large advertising concern—the O.J. Guth [ph] company And they did picture work all over the country with their advertising. And I would paint pictures along the elevated train, of Garfield, [inaudible], things like that. I did the picture work And then I did work up at the Madison Square Garden. They have their exhibits during the summer, and I did work in the exhibits there for them.

[00:30:18]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: These drawings that you made for the Museum of Natural History, are those the present—

ATLEE AYRES: No, it wasn't the Natural History.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: What was that?

ATLEE AYRES: It was the Metropolitan Museum.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, but I thought you said that one way you got the award.

ATLEE AYRES: Well, that is it. In the Metropolitan Museum.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, for the entrance there?

ATLEE AYRES: The Metropolitan—in the School of Architecture.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, I know. But I thought the assignment you said was in the Museum of Natural History for the entrance to it?

ATLEE AYRES: No. The design—the theme was an entrance to a Natural History Museum.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Was it the one in New York?

ATLEE AYRES: Oh, no.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, I see.

ATLEE AYRES: No, no. They just formulate their own design.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see, just for any.

ATLEE AYRES: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: 'Cause I'm acquainted with the Museum of Natural History—

ATLEE AYRES: Now, in the summer in New York, we used to go up the river and have this place at Rockwood Lake. I studied with Frank—an artist from—both of them had been in Paris, and they did very splendid work. And one fellow that was quite unusual was Gustave Verbeek. His parents were missionaries in Japan. And he drew a series of pictures for the *New York Herald* every week. And he's very unusual. Then Mr. Hamilton, Edgar T. Hamilton, both of them had, as I say, in Beaux-Arts in Paris, and they were very splendid.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Did you study in Paris?

ATLEE AYRES: No. I've been to Paris seven times in different—I was in the Louvre the day the Mona Lisa was stolen.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh really?

ATLEE AYRES: We were in there, it was stolen about four o'clock in the afternoon.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Gracious.

ATLEE AYRES: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. They didn't look through our bags when we went out so I felt relieved.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I'd think so. When was that?

ATLEE AYRES: Oh, that was—I don't know the date it was stolen.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, unless you have—do you have any comments you'd like to make about those early days? [Cross talk.] This is extremely interesting.

ATLEE AYRES: Well, I'm going to tell you something that has little bearing on art. We were in Paris one time, and we went to a little hotel, and they had very good food there. And I had some duck that was, oh, marvelous. It seemed beyond words. And the next day, I was across the river, across from the Louvre, buying a lot of architectural photographs. And I looked at

my watch and found that it was about 12 o'clock and told my wife we'd have to go back to the hotel, Hotel Normandy. And this fellow said, "No, you don't have to go back. You go where art students always go. They go up here in a little place. They have long tables and benches and you'll have to wedge your way in there." So, I got up there to the place, and it was pretty well crowded. And when a woman came over there, I couldn't speak French. That duck was on my mind. I thought about nothing, but that wonderful duck. And I asked her if she spoke English; she said, "No," and shook her finger. And I looked over the menu of course, couldn't understand it. So then, I got a pencil and drew—pardon me, if I—can I draw on the back of this?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Not on that, that's a [inaudible], I think.

ATLEE AYRES: I drew a duck on there. And now this is absolutely right. I drew that duck like that. And she said, "No," she took the pencil again. She cut it off and brought me some chicken.

[They laugh.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, that's—

ATLEE AYRES: So, it's a bad drawing—that's what my talent [inaudible].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: You're able to communicate even if you didn't get a duck.

ATLEE AYRES: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, are there other stories you'd like to tell us?

ATLEE AYRES: No, I don't know.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: These are extremely interesting.

ATLEE AYRES: I don't know. I know, of course, of a lot of different incidents happening. I just couldn't tell you off-hand. My, it's too bad you don't have time to go to Mexico City.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I'd like to.

ATLEE AYRES: Oh my, it's very colorful down there. I live there and in Guadalajara both.

[00:35:03]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I've been in several places in Mexico, but I've never gotten quite that far south.

ATLEE AYRES: You know in Guadalajara one time, I used to go to bull fights, there wasn't anything else to do. And there was a bull got up in the audience and run the people all around. And finally, they got some soldiers up there with ropes and pull that bull on two sides. And another fellow came and stabbed him, and they got rid of him that way.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: It must have been exciting. What did you do in Mexico City?

ATLEE AYRES: I worked for architects.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: You worked for architects there?

ATLEE AYRES: Yeah.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: That must have been—you were in on some of the early modern architecture there?

ATLEE AYRES: Oh no. They don't have.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Not at that time?

ATLEE AYRES: No. San Miguel is where my son and his wife go every year, with [Dong Kingman], a Chinese artist. And he's been down different times. You know who I mean? That Chinese artist that's in New York; everybody knows him.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Sorry. I know San Miguel. That's quite an artist colony.

ATLEE AYRES: Well, they go there. Robert will tell you the name of this Chinaman. Everybody knows him, he's very well-known.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. Well, I won't take up any more of your time.

ATLEE AYRES: Now, I see—well, don't bother about that. What would you like to do now?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, could do you—suppose your son could come in and tell me something about the—

ATLEE AYRES: Oh, Mrs. Bruhn [ph], call Robert, please.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, while we're waiting for Mr. Robert Ayres, would you tell us something about your book that you published, Mr. Atlee Ayers?

ATLEE AYRES: You know, I published a book in—what was that—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: 1926.

ATLEE AYRES: In 1926 on Mexican Architecture. I had a car and drove all over Mexico and south of various places and the book was published by Helbrun, William Helbrun in New York. And one of the volumes is in the Fifth Avenue Library. And it pertains to the different churches principally, and some residences.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, that window, mm-hmm [affirmative].

ATLEE AYRES: So, after that, I went abroad. I went to Spain with the intention of publishing a book on provincial Spanish homes. But due to the inclement weather, why, I was very much disappointed, I couldn't get anything. But Spanish site is what we tried to develop in San Antonio a great deal. Mrs. McNay's home, where the art gallery is, is a Spanish type or Mediterranean type.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see this is domestic, civil, and ecclesiastical architecture.

ATLEE AYRES: Yeah. It's principally ecclesiastical.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Now where was it that you went and inquired about this book? About a book on Mexican architecture?

ATLEE AYRES: In the Fifth Avenue Library.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: In New York?

ATLEE AYRES: Yeah, in New York.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Tell what happened.

ATLEE AYRES: Oh, I went in. And it was about 12 o'clock at night, we were walking by. My wife was with me and I walked into the gallery that has the architectural books. And asked anything on Mexican architecture. He said, "Yes. We have a book here by a man named Ayers." I said, "I'm the one that did it."

SYLVIA LOOMIS: You just wanted to see if there was some other book on it.

ATLEE AYRES: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Maybe we can get Mr.—

ATLEE AYRES: Robert?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, this is Mr. Robert Ayres who was the son and associate of Atlee B. Ayers—

ATLEE AYRES: He's a partner.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Partner. And he is acquainted with what is going on in the fine arts field in

San Antonio today. I wonder if you'd tell us, Mr. Ayers, some of the outstanding artist.

ROBERT AYERS: Yes, we have a quite a few artists in San Antonio who are doing very fine work. We have probably more artists here for the size of city that most cities around the country. Some of our outstanding artists are, one a Mrs. Margaret Putman. And we have Mr. Bill Bristow, who is a teacher at Trinity University. In fact, they have several very fine teachers there. We have Miss Amy Lee Freeman, who also does fine work. In fact, we have so many I would be afraid to attempt to—

[00:40:05]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Just a few of the outstanding.

ROBERT AYERS: Yes.

ATLEE AYRES: Tell her about Kingman, Robert.

ROBERT AYERS: Well, there isn't much to tell about him, Pop, he takes—

ATLEE AYRES: Well, I know, but about your group going down to San Miguel.

ROBERT AYRES: For the past three or four years, a number of us have been going to Mexico, visiting various places such as San Miguel, Guanajuato, Patzcuaro. And we've been there going as a workshop with Dong Kingman as well Mr. Millard Sheets. We've gone for the past two years with Sheets. Two years prior to that, with Kingman. It's been very interesting, and we have had with us some very fine painters. They are from all parts of United States. Most of them are teachers. Some of them have art schools. And it's been a very interesting experience.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: How many on this group approximately?

ROBERT AYRES: Each year they have approximately 38 to 40.

ATLEE AYRES: It's been very stimulating, isn't it?

ROBERT AYRES: Yes, it's been very fun because these men are very capable. This summer, Kingman is taking group to Mexico. And this fall, Millard Sheets is taking a group to Greece. In both cases, there will be about, let's say a number of painters.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Do you know Mr. Leeper, John Leeper?

ROBERT AYERS: I know Mr. John Leeper very well.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: He is the director of the McNay.

ROBERT AYERS: He's the director of McNay Art Institute. And has been doing a very fine job since he has been here.

ATLEE AYRES: Now you're going to Greece to study art more or less [inaudible]—

ROBERT AYRES: Well, we're going there to paint.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And now, there was one other question I wanted to ask you. And that was about any other Federal Art Projects there in San Antonio?

ROBERT AYERS: I don't know any other Federal Art Projects in San Antonio. In fact, the only one that I know of was done a number of years ago. And I believe it was during the period of the WPA. And I'm positive that they had a competition for these murals which were to have been placed in our federal building.

ATLEE AYRES: Down in the federal—in the post office.

ROBERT AYERS: Yes, it's there.

ATLEE AYRES: Yes. It's [inaudible; cross talk].

ROBERT AYERS. I've forgotten who did the work, but it has been done. And it's fairly well done.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: It might have been during under the sponsorship of the Treasury Department. They also had these competitions during the same time.

ROBERT AYERS: It may have been. I know we have one of our local painters who was very much interested in getting that work. In fact, the one who did get it, I think he was a chap who had a studio here for a number of years and passed on. A rather gray-haired tall fellow, but I don't recall his name. But he did do some very nice work.

ATLEE AYRES: But I was saying that all the paintings and exhibits had a very stimulating effect on people here. They developed pictures that they didn't before.

[Cross talk.]

ROBERT AYERS: Well, as an example, the last watercolor show which they had at the Witte Museum which was a local show, had 630 or [6]40 entries. And out of that, I think were chosen about 70 or 80. And then we have our—in fact, I think we had it last week or maybe this weekend, the River Art Show. In other words, on both banks of the river, they display for a half a mile and—

ATLEE AYRES: They pile them up against the seats, see, they have a terrace—

ROBERT AYERS: Saturdays and Sundays.

[Cross talk.]

ATLEE AYRES: It's quite interesting to see it all in rows and rows.

ROBERT AYERS: They sell them as well as displaying them. But it's very picturesque, the river is, and it's a wonderful place to show them.

[00:45:03]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I should think so. How many artists would you say were here during the 1930s?

ATLEE AYRES: About over 100.

ROBERT AYERS: During the 1930s there were too many. You mean professional artist?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

ROBERT AYERS: I don't think there were over five or six professional artists.

ATLEE AYRES: Now, this lady that Robert read the name off there. Her work is—oh my God.

ROBERT AYERS: Margaret Putman is really quite good.

ATLEE AYRES: Would she have anything at the Witte now, Robert?

ROBERT AYERS: I don't think she—

ATLEE AYRES: [Inaudible]

ROBERT AYERS: They may have borrowed one of hers. But I know that this little art gallery out at the North Start Mall has one. I think if you had time, she'd be very happy to come and get you and show you something.

ATLEE AYRES: The trouble is Mrs. Loomis is leaving this afternoon.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I have to go late this afternoon.

ROBERT AYERS: Margaret might bring some other down to your room probably or something like that.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, maybe we can arrange something of that sort.

ROBERT AYERS: I can see if I can get in touch with her if you call me a little later on.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I do want very much to go to the McNay Institute. That's important.

ROBERT AYERS: That I think is very, very important to do.

ATLEE AYRES: There's a chance my wife may be able to take you out there.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, I'd be very grateful.

ROBERT AYRES: They have some very fine pictures there. They've been given a lot of fine pictures and, of course, they bought them. We've had people in town who—

ATLEE AYRES: I was telling about Buttram, too, in Oklahoma City.

ROBERT AYRES: Yes. Well, a number of people. There's a number of people that has some very fine pictures too. There are a lot of people here who are very art conscious.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes. Well, I'm—glad to find out about the—what's going on at the present time and your father has told me about the old days. So, that these covers San Antonio, but I'm sure you —

ROBERT AYERS: Well, there is also an art class at McNay, which McNay has it on the grounds. But they have nothing to do with the financing of it or anything.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

ROBERT AYERS: And they have some very sizable classes there. And they bring down an artist of the year, as they call him, from New York. I went out there one year which was about four years ago, and they have one of the top eight abstract painters in America down to—I teach for six weeks there. Stamos?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Stamos. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT AYERS: About that same time his picture appeared in the *Life* magazine along with the other seven, and they called them the eight top painters. So, I guess, he was. And that's the type of thing they do out there. They have very large classes. And of course, there are number of other art schools here too. There's lots of enthusiasm over painting.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, it's a town that would be conducive to it out there because there's a creative atmosphere and the charm about it.

ATLEE AYRES: You know, it's too bad you're not here longer because my son designed a very beautiful home for Ms. Brown. And she's a very prominent worker in the art—McNay [inaudible], she's on the board.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I wish I could. Maybe, I'll come back again for a vacation.

ATLEE AYRES: This is a million-dollar home here. One of the finest in the country.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, thank you Mr. Robert Ayers. I know you're very busy, it's nice of you too—

ROBERT AYERS: I was very happy to be able to—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —bring this little story up to date.

ROBERT AYERS: —have been able to give you a little information, anyway.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Thank you very much.

ROBERT AYERS: Thank you.

ATLEE AYRES: I'm going to take that paper and can I get a name on that too? Or maybe write them out.

ROBERT AYERS: Let me type in my office.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: All right. That will be fine.

ROBERT AYERS: Thank you.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, thank you too Mr. Atlee Ayers.

ATLEE AYRES: I appreciate it. Now, next on the program is—it is now 20 minutes after 11.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And I'm supposed to be back at the hotel at 11:30. So, I will thank you very much for this.

ATLEE AYRES: Well, I'd be very happy to give a resume of what I have been interested in and what my experience has been.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes. Your interest is the interest of San Antonio. I can see that.

ATLEE AYRES: Oh, yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Thank you very much.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]