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Oral history interview with Elmer Bischoff, 1965 January 20

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Elmer Nelson Bischoff on January 20, 1965. The interview took place in the artist's studio, 2571 Shattuck Avenue, Berkeley, California, and was conducted by Mary Fuller McChesney 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

MARY MCCHESENEY: This is Mary McChesney interviewing Elmer Bischoff, spelled B-I-S-C-H-O-F-F at his studio 2571 Shattuck Avenue in Berkeley. And the date is January 20, 1965. First, I would like to ask you, where were you born?

ELMER BISCHOFF: Here in Berkeley.

MARY MCCHESENEY: In Berkeley, what year was that?

ELMER BISCHOFF: 1916.

MARY MCCHESENEY: And where did you go to art school?

ELMER BISCHOFF: Cal.

MARY MCCHESENEY: The University of California here in Berkeley.

ELMER BISCHOFF: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

MARY MCCHESENEY: How did you first make any contact with any of the government sponsored art projects?

ELMER BISCHOFF: Well, this was in Sacramento, and before the war, I got a job there teaching at the Sacramento High School. Let's see, starting in '39 and was there until—at the high school until '41, when I went into the army. And I was teaching crafts, ceramics and jewelry construction, and was asked to offer a class in ceramics, because they didn't have any equipment for jewelry construction at the center, downtown, second level. And I taught a class there for a while. And I don't recall just how long it was this class went on, a very small group of people involved, mostly housewives. The center didn't have a great deal of money, so the equipment was the barest minimum for equipment. And I don't recall any great thing taking place in that program. There was no great expansion, no world-shaking accomplishment.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Who were the other teachers who were there at the same time? Do you remember any of them?

ELMER BISCHOFF: No, I don't remember the names of the other people. The contact, in those terms, was pretty disjointed. And it seemed to me, my impression thinking back on it, was that the excitement was about drumming up activity, and future activities, and largely social activities in order to stimulate it in the community. And not so much in furthering a set of offerings that were really underway, I never felt that things really got underway. It was always promoting this, to get them underway.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Had the center been in existence very long before you began teaching there? Or was it just getting started?

ELMER BISCHOFF: It was just getting started.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ELMER BISCHOFF: Yes, it was.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Who was the director then, Cunningham, Ben Cunningham?

ELMER BISCHOFF: Yes, and then the person I—I didn't know Ben Cunningham. The person that I—or I don't remember him. Probably was very short contact, if I had any contact at all, Carlton Lehman was the man who came in as director. He had been at the university the year ahead of me, and was, I think, one of the prize students at Cal, a painter. And I was rather startled to see him come up there in Sacramento. He was given this position of director of the center.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So, you worked mainly with him as far as your class was concerned.

ELMER BISCHOFF: Yes, yeah.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Where was the center located at that time?

ELMER BISCHOFF: Well, it was downtown. I can't tell you the streets—

MARY MCCHESENEY: Yeah.

ELMER BISCHOFF: —the exact location. It was an old Victorian building, and I remember it being partitioned up into these rather small spaces. And my recollection was it was sort of cramped, with people [laughs] bumping into one another.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Did they have any other classes? Were they teaching painting, too?

[00:04:52]

ELMER BISCHOFF: Yes, there was—and there were lectures, and meetings of one kind or another.

There were other craft classes, as I recall, going on, being in the natures of handwork classes. But I think the big obstacle to really getting the program underway was the shortage of funds and consequently a shortage of equipment to do anything. And actually, the rooms in this particular building were not adequate as classrooms or as workshops—

MARY MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ELMER BISCHOFF: —and that sort of thing.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Were you teaching in the evening? You were still at the high school.

ELMER BISCHOFF: Oh, yes, yeah.

MARY MCCHESENEY: These would have been evening classes that you had, what, a couple of times a week?

ELMER BISCHOFF: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Once a week, it was.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Once a week?

ELMER BISCHOFF: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY MCCHESENEY: Did you participate in any of the other activities of the Arts Center, like lectures?

ELMER BISCHOFF: Oh, once or twice, I did that, but I tried to shy away from that sort of thing. My involvement with the high school was full-time, and I wanted any of the rest of the time pretty much for my own purposes. But I recall a tremendous sort of community spirit. This struck me as a community thing, I believe it was thought of in those terms. And consequently brought to the fore those with the greatest community spirit, and those that had a great zeal for campaigning, and spreading the word, and organizing people. Getting interest up and organizing people for the sake of collecting funds and promoting this idea. And this would take a tremendous amount of time. And I remember being rather constantly under the pressure of—dragged into this

situation—

MARY MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ELMER BISCHOFF: —and asked to assist in this sort of ringing doorbells thing.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Were you actually on the WPA as an employee there or were you paid some other way? You didn't have to go on relief? Couldn't have—?

ELMER BISCHOFF: No. No. No. No, this was not—I wasn't paid, you mean getting a check from the government?

MARY MCCHESENEY: Yes.

ELMER BISCHOFF: No.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. It went through the Arts Center.

ELMER BISCHOFF: It went through the Arts Center.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Were you there during the time that people like Bufano came up to lecture, or I understand they had a program where they would invite artists—

ELMER BISCHOFF: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY MCCHESENEY: —from the Bay Area to come up and give classes or lectures, and quite a few of them, rather well-known people on the WPA at that time. David Slivka was up there and gave a demonstration of sculpture. Do you remember any of those?

ELMER BISCHOFF: I don't remember those actual appearances. No, but I remember there was this kind of activity going on. I remember Bufano being up there.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. You didn't have any contact with the children's classes that they ran there.

ELMER BISCHOFF: No.

MARY MCCHESENEY: That was supposed to be one of their most successful programs.

ELMER BISCHOFF: Well, I can imagine, you know, I can imagine it would have been. But I don't recall—I suppose the difficulty was that I was just around there on an evening, and this didn't go on for a very long time. I was only teaching there for two years while I was at the high school. And then during the days, I didn't have any contact with this at all. And actually, as I recall the situation, as I say, the main thing was my contact with John Mathews [ph]. He was this spark plug and promoter type of individual and it seemed to me I had more contact with him than I [laughs] had with the Arts Center.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Well, do you mean in community activities, or as a friend, or how—

ELMER BISCHOFF: As a—well, as a friend and as a person who was always talking it up, so to speak, and he singled out individuals to discuss ideas with and attempt then, as I say, to enlist them into this sort of venture. But he saw it, I feel, as largely a matter of community pride, and something that would help Sacramento, and spread art and culture, and those kind of things.

[00:10:05]

MARY MCCHESENEY: Was he painting himself then?

ELMER BISCHOFF: Yes, yeah.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What kind of painting was being done by the artists around Sacramento then?

ELMER BISCHOFF: Well, do you mean what style of painting?

MARY MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Or, what were they interested in? What were their influences?

ELMER BISCHOFF: Well, this area, this was quite a smattering of things that were going on. John Mathews [ph] painted large flower paintings. These are the things that I saw, I remember seeing these things up at his house. And these were the things that really he was proud of, that stood for him, represented his ideas. And these had quite a polished technique, rather smooth paintings. Outspoken in their bigness, sort of over-sized flowers, semi-decorative, and a realistic element in there, too. I think you'd say they had kind of a suggestion of wanting to be modern, but then without any Cubism and without any modern idiom or modern style introduced.

Then, there was a fellow named Teddy Baggleman, who did drawings and I think etchings too, of local scenes in Sacramento. So that was interesting. Selling these mostly as tourist items. And there was a fellow named Ben Aiken, who worked at Winestock-Rubin's department store as a commercial artist up there. And he was very interested in very formal, geometric abstractions. He was probably the best. I think he did the best work up there of many people that I knew. Beautifully designed things, very cool, and very well organized, Cubistic to a great extent. And I think he was fascinated with people like Juan Gris. And who else might—some of Braque's things, but it was Ben who struck me as being the most exciting stuff going on up there.

MARY MCCHESNEY: Ben who?

ELMER BISCHOFF: Ben Aiken.

MARY MCCHESNEY: Oh, Ben Aiken. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ELMER BISCHOFF: Yes.

MARY MCCHESNEY: And what sort of work were you doing?

ELMER BISCHOFF: Well, I was still hung up on Picasso. I was doing large still lifes, so like Picasso. Fascinated, especially with these things that Picasso did during his mid-twenties, *Ram's Head* still life, and the red tablecloth. Do you remember these huge beautiful—

MARY MCCHESNEY: Were there any mural projects being done in Sacramento while you were there? Under government sponsorship or do you remember anything like that?

ELMER BISCHOFF: Not that I was aware of, nothing that I was aware of going on locally.

MARY MCCHESNEY: What sort of work was Carlton Lehman doing?

ELMER BISCHOFF: I never saw any of his work up there. I don't know if he was painting much. I recall his ever speaking of painting, or pointing out other people's work, or being involved in that.

MARY MCCHESNEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ELMER BISCHOFF: On the actual practicing side of things. But these—well then, there was a fellow named Harold Ward, who was a good friend of Ben Aiken's. I didn't know Harold very well. He's another painter who did—and he was teaching there at the—it wasn't a junior college. He wasn't at the same place as John Mathews [ph]. It was a state college and I think he was generally looked upon as being the best artist Sacramento had to offer.

[00:15:01]

He did, I suppose, technically fairly competent scenes, not the Teddy Baggeleman thing, not the state capital and the capital park kind of a thing, but just landscapes and houses out in the countryside. But I suppose you could describe him as thoroughly old-fashioned artist. And—which just about left Ben and myself as the only ones [laughs] that had any interest in, more or less, up to date—or trying more or less up to date styles there.

MARY MCCHESNEY: Did you ever have any exhibitions of your work when you were there? Were there any facilities for exhibitions at the center, or did they have galleries in town?

ELMER BISCHOFF: Uh no, there were no—the Crocker Arts Gallery was the only gallery. Of the course, the Arts Center did have—did put up things from time to time. But no galleries other than the Crocker Gallery, and that was not a very live wire gallery at the time. The Arts Center had the possibilities of really introducing something that was just non-existent there in terms of being current, present-day interests in art with all of these accompanying activities. But I think the shortcoming would be what one would be inclined to expect, social aspects took precedence

over the actual activities themselves. Uh, I don't think that it was the cultural—it made the cultural contribution we hoped for, could be envisioned. I think people were caught up in a tremendous array of peripheral sort of teas, and get-togethers, and lectures, and all of this kind of thing, and were excited by the spirit of the thing, rather than what it actually produced. I suppose the greatest benefit came out of its children's classes, because there's something to put on the road without too much space, too much expensive equipment, and too much prolonged concentration on the development of this thing.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Did they have exhibitions at the Arts Center of the painters who were working in the San Francisco and the Bay Area? Do you remember any of those?

ELMER BISCHOFF: Well to a certain extent, yes, I remember a few of these exhibits. I can't name names of the people that were involved in this.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Did you have any contact yourself with the government art projects in the Bay Area?

ELMER BISCHOFF: No.

MARY MCCHESENEY: As far as knowing people who are working there?

ELMER BISCHOFF: No, none.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Okay.

ELMER BISCHOFF: No, I don't. I—in speaking of that, the people who work down here in those projects knew they were doing this. This was a WPA project, and they were directly cognizant there of the relation with the government venture. And this was not—this didn't seem to be ever true of the art center up there. This was more like a local club that had been organized and is purely a community type of activity, which could have started— which could've been originated on a community basis.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Of course it was partially, the federal government does put up a certain amount of money—

ELMER BISCHOFF: Yeah.

MARY MCCHESENEY: —too. I guess they also, of course, provided some personnel to help organize the arts centers.

ELMER BISCHOFF: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY MCCHESENEY: But this was the only one that got going in California, although they had some plans to start one in Reno, and I think other small towns around.

ELMER BISCHOFF: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY MCCHESENEY: But for some reason or another, it never became very successful in northern California—

ELMER BISCHOFF: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY MCCHESENEY: —although the program was very successful in Oregon, and Washington, and the Southwest, the program of setting up of arts centers.

ELMER BISCHOFF: The setting up of an arts center and carrying on this type of activity.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ELMER BISCHOFF: How long did this last, this one in Sacramento?

MARY MCCHESENEY: I think, over four years, three or four years, I mean not quite four years.

ELMER BISCHOFF: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:20:02]

MARY MCCHESENEY: Of course, the—

ELMER BISCHOFF: Did you say that the beginning of the war or entry into the war terminated it?

MARY MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Although Mathews [ph] feels that a lot of the enthusiasm that they generated to the Arts Center went into the Crocker Museum—

ELMER BISCHOFF: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY MCCHESENEY: —and to keeping a livelier art scene going in Sacramento—

ELMER BISCHOFF: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY MCCHESENEY: —after that period. Do you ever look at any of the work that was done in the WPA around here, the murals, and other things? Do you have any ideas or any impressions of what you would think of the period in American art? What its contribution might or might not have been?

ELMER BISCHOFF: Well, a contribution in terms of furthering a—you mean, an American expression in art or what?

MARY MCCHESENEY: Well, just how you would even think of it in terms of our art history? The work that was done on the WPA, how would you feel it fits in, or it doesn't fit in, or carried on what traditions, or didn't? I was interested in what you said about Sacramento, that there seems to be very little Rivera influence there—

ELMER BISCHOFF: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY MCCHESENEY: —whereas in the Bay Area, it was very, very big.

ELMER BISCHOFF: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY MCCHESENEY: But somehow his influence didn't get up there.

ELMER BISCHOFF: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, being the emphasis is on public work, on work for public buildings, it struck me that there was not the chance to really do the sort of digging and kind of personal investigation in art that would necessarily lead to—would be likely to lead to a furtherance, a deepening of one's ideas or of further revelations. I mean, if you have to do the mural for the post office, it seems to me that the conditions almost preclude any great personal discovery here [laughs] or turning over new—an idea that's new and exciting to you that you'd pursue. I never would see it in terms of it necessarily making any contribution to art. Might make a contribution to the art spirit, and art interest, and have an effect on the consumption of art. It might enhance the status generally in the public's mind of art if they go into the post office and there's something in government buildings that you could find possibly by this, the appearance of the artists' hands, in connection with this. I mean, how much good of that nature it surely results in, I'm not sure. I suppose, but—

MARY MCCHESENEY: Do you think—

ELMER BISCHOFF: —but I've never heard of WPA, of people who've been on those projects speaking of it necessarily in those terms, as being a period of great, oh—or in which it was any great generation of art and [inaudible]. I think they would speak of it in terms much more of the artists' position in society and whether this was beneficial or not. The recognition given those by the government, whether or not this was beneficial and encouraging to art and further art.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ELMER BISCHOFF: Or, on the other hand, whether it tended to throw a wrench [laughs] in the arts because of all the strings attached.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Do you think, yourself, it's a good idea for the government to sponsor art?

ELMER BISCHOFF: Well, now, you mean, like they—one thing the government can and has done is to form exhibits and send them around. I think that's a nice idea.

[00:25:00]

Indirectly, I think government financing of education, which then might include art schools, I think this is an excellent sort of idea. When it comes down to then to more direct assistance, like

commissioning works, well, that's hard to say, because I've had—it would automatically bring to the fore and benefit and certainly this isn't a bad thing. Then the artists are equipped to do that sort of thing, to do the murals, or do the commissions, or do the signs, projects, to embark on and carry out that kind of work. You don't hear much about that now, but I'm sure that it would flush out of the bushes a whole raft [ph] of artists who would get involved.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Have you known many artists who were on the WPA or were on federal projects in New York? I was wondering if you had any thoughts about the difference between the way the federal sponsorship developed in the East and the way it developed in the West.

ELMER BISCHOFF: No, do you mean the difference of attitude about what was expected in art? More liberal attitudes and—

MARY MCCHESENEY: I think it was.

ELMER BISCHOFF: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY MCCHESENEY: In the East Coast, people like Charles Howard, for example, did mural designs—

ELMER BISCHOFF: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY MCCHESENEY: —for projects here that were never accepted, because they were considered too modern.

ELMER BISCHOFF: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY MCCHESENEY: Whereas Gorky actually completed murals in New York.

ELMER BISCHOFF: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY MCCHESENEY: Which were Cubist in any way.

ELMER BISCHOFF: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY MCCHESENEY: I was wondering whether you thought it might have anything to do with the development of the art situation, the difference in the liveliness of it on the East Coast and the West Coast. And also, on the East Coast, Rivera apparently never became the influence that he became out here.

ELMER BISCHOFF: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah, well, it's just hard to conceive of it now, where the first thing you think of when you think of art is a high degree of individuality, of expression. There's no single thing in the air, a great multitude of things in the air and you automatically just think of this tremendous and kind of wonderful diversity of expressions that you expect when you walk into a museum. And in an art magazine, you expect this sort of thing. And it seems to me that in order to produce a public art, one that is admittedly from the outset public, such as a would be done under an art project, you would have to, I think, have more of a fascination, a widespread fascination with a type of expression has existed, or say more or less, coherent range of expression has existed in Mexico. And even, kind of a common set of themes, commonly agreed upon set of themes, that they were deeming a various variation in the expression of Rivera and Rothko, but then there is also quite a feeling in common. You would feel that they're moved more or less by the same general spirit.

And it's this, I think, that would keep these expressions, these public expressions, from being decoration. I think now, when you speak of a mural in a public building, you're much more inclined to think of decoration than when you think of murals that were done in the '30s. [Laughs.] You know, they had a message back then. Ideology of one kind or another that pressed this home. There were some exceptions. You mentioned Gorky, and he was not pressing the message [inaudible]. But in order to get it going in the widespread basis, it would seem to me that those would have to have that kind of a ground.

[00:30:05]

Otherwise, what's to prevent these murals from simply being [laughs] extra huge easel paintings? Why do the mural? And most of the murals that were done under the WPA did have this, did have a point, social and political, didn't they?

MARY MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. That's true. They did.

ELMER BISCHOFF: And there's a good deal of zeal behind, a good deal of passion behind them. Points that these things are never just decoration, educational [laughs] you'd say.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Did you have any further contact with the government project after you left Sacramento?

ELMER BISCHOFF: None. No. No, I suppose if I'd been paid by the government, I would have felt that I was part of the government project, but I didn't feel that. In that I mean, by contrast, I'm sure nothing like these people who were working here at the WPA were at least [inaudible].

MARY MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Do you have any further thoughts about the period?

ELMER BISCHOFF: You mean, in any particular terms or—

MARY MCCHESENEY: Do you think it had anything to do with the, leading up to anything that happened in American art? Do you think there's any relationship between that period and what happened after the war around here?

ELMER BISCHOFF: Well, I think the war made such a tremendous break. I would be more inclined to say that there was a certain revolution coming out of the war, but there was—I know myself, when I came back and just saw things in an entirely different way. And then before the war, it seemed, looking back, it seemed to be that I was unaware of anything beyond local conditions and a local sort of situation. And the war had a tremendous impact, broadening one's horizons, and causing one to reject so much that had been taken for granted or accepted without question prior to the war. I'm much more conscious of a complete break, a discontinuity than a continuity picking up and furthering, and exploiting what went wrong. Another person might feel differently about it. But I—when I came back for example, I knew damn well I didn't want to go back to Sacramento. I didn't know what I was going to do, look for a teaching job, I suppose. But I wasn't going back there in that area. And fortunately, I found a job here. And God, the thought of carrying on business as usual, or the way it had been before the war, was completely out of the question. There was a new feeling in the air and a new attitude. And then where I was, the G.I.s—the G.I. Bill was a terrific thing. They came in with a spirit like you've never seen before. You know, they had a sense of urgency about things, and there was a tremendous idea that was of a different nature, a different kind of idealism that didn't exist before the war. It had much more of a kind of religious bent to it, I guess. Not in the strict sense, but in terms of universal expectations, not always being great for our community [laughs].

MARY MCCHESENEY: You mentioned earlier that when you were working in Sacramento that you were very influenced by Picasso. Did that occur through the university here at Berkeley?

[00:34:58]

ELMER BISCHOFF: Well, yes, to a certain extent, but it occurred largely from seeing that huge Picasso. I think this was '38 or ['39] [inaudible] in San Francisco. They had a big retrospective. This made a tremendous impact. And I doubt if I would have gotten that caught up or worked up [inaudible] exhibition.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Was there any influence of the Surrealists in painting around at that time?

ELMER BISCHOFF: No, none of that, not out here as it was in Europe. Well, the Cubists, Post-Modern, were the most influential.

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

MARY MCCHESENEY: Thank you very much for giving us the time for the interview this morning.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]