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Oral history interview with Helen and Margaret Bruton, 1964 December 4

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Helen Bruton and Margaret Bruton on December 4, 1964. The interview was conducted at the Bruton's home at 871 Cass Street, Monterey, California by Lewis Ferbrache for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

LF: Lewis Ferbrache
HB: Helen Bruton
MB: Margaret Bruton

LF: Lewis Ferbrache interviewing Miss Margaret Bruton and Miss Helen Bruton at their home, 871 Cass Street, Monterey, California, December 4, 1964. Miss Margaret Bruton, I believe you told me that you were born in Brooklyn, New York. Could you then tell about your Alameda, California school training in art?

MB: Well, I was born in Brooklyn, but I went to school in Alameda, California. All my schooling was in Alameda, except when I went to art school, that was in San Francisco, at what was then the Mark Hopkins. I was there for about a year and then I –

LF: Mark Hopkins School of Design, now the San Francisco Art Institute?

MB: Yes. I won a scholarship for the Art Students League in New York so I went there and was studying there for quite a while. I studied with Robert Henri at the Art Students League.

LF: Do you remember what year this would be, just for the record?

MB: Well, it was about 1917, I think, it was just before the war –

LF: Who were your teachers at the Mark Hopkins School of Design? That would be interesting.

MB: Well, Frank Van Sloan is the one I remember best, that seemed to make the most impression.

LF: Were you studying drawing and/or oil painting as well, or watercolor?

MB: Mostly drawing. In New York, I did some painting, and after I got out of art school, I did some painting. Then I got interested in various techniques, and painting was just put on the shelf for quite a long while. In fast, I haven’t done any painting recently at all.

LF: But you did go on with your art work in the 1920s?

MB: Yes.

LF: Were you here in the San Francisco Bay area?

MB: Well, I came down to Monterey, California, really because I wanted to study with Armin Hansen.

LF: That was about what year?

MB: Well, it was about 1922 I think, and we stayed in Monterey for quite a number of years, but our home was still in Alameda and we went back and forth. During the war, in 1944, we came down here permanently and gave up our home in Alameda and have been here ever since.

LF: Fine. Miss Helen Bruton, would you do the same for me – you were born in Alameda, California?

HB: Yes, I was born in Alameda, and for some reason, I don’t know exactly what was wrong with me, my mother didn’t send me to school till I was eight years old. I was very tall, so I don’t know how that affected my later career or character, but anyway the earliest art work that I can remember in school was being permitted to draw Christmas wreaths on the blackboard in colored crayon. And that set me up practically for art. I think my teacher was doing that to compensate. Anyway, I went through grammar and high school and I didn’t really know, feel very much that I knew what I wanted to do. So I went onto the University of California for a year. Margaret was in the East at art school, and Esther also, the three of us, studying art. I think that was during the war, it was during the First World War. I didn’t feel that I was getting anywhere at the University. I didn’t know enough, I didn’t have any plans, so I stopped, gave up after a year, and took a secretarial course, of all things, and then

did some war work, making use of that. But as soon as the war was over I went back East and went to the Art Students League and studied. That was my first formal attempt at studying art. I studied with Alexander Calder's father, Sterling Calder, at the Art Students League in the modeling class for and then the next year he was not at the League. Another very familiar sculptor to people in the San Francisco Bay Area was Leo Lentelli. They both had done quite a lot of work on the Panama-Pacific Exposition in San Francisco in 1915. I put in another year there at the Art Students League and then that was the extent practically of my art instruction until a number of years later I went back and spent another winter in New York studying with Boardman Robinson in his drawing class. But I never studied painting and I don't feel that I could be considered a painter in any sense. But we were always interested in trying new techniques, and we tried etching for a while in that early period. Margaret, of course, was painting. But when one would start something we would all do the same thing, we'd all be doing etching for a while. But that wasn't too satisfying because it was very technical and I got awfully bored with keeping track of the prints and making the prints and everything. By the time I would get a plate scratched it would be practically ruined anyway; I'd make so many proofs and really mess it up generally.

LF: Were all three of you sisters exhibiting locally at the time?

HB: We had an exhibition of drawings and etchings, I think.

MB: Yes.

LF: Where? In Beatrice Judd Ryan's gallery? The Beaux Arts?

HB: Yes, we exhibited at the Beaux Arts.

MB: And in the San Francisco Art Association Annuals.

LF: And the Oakland Art Museum shows?

HB: I think you had a show.

MB: Yes, I exhibited. In fact, I was the guest of honor at one of the Museum's shows. You know when they would have an exhibition, instead of giving a price, they would announce that one of the artists was guest of honor; and the next year, the guest of honor was allowed a one-man show, and I think I did that.

LF: What did you have in your one-man show, for the record?

MF: There were paintings ---

LF: Portraits/ Landscapes?

HB: Was that after living in Virginia City, Nevada?

MB: Yes.

HB: It was after the Virginia City period. Marge didn't say anything about Virginia City. But in the early 30s we were up there in what we call the Virginia City period.

MB: – that's before Lucius Beebe, you know, when it was really at a very interesting stage.

LF: When it was still a ghost town, more or less:

MB: Yes.

LF: Not a tourist --

HB: No, it was still, you could buy a house if you wanted to, just pull it down for firewood, for $25, but if you wanted a real substantial house you might have to pay $150 or $200. We didn't buy one unfortunately. But we had a wonderful time. It was a very fertile period, we were there for about five or six months.

LF: All busy doing different things?

HB: Yes, we were all more or less working out things. And except for Marge we haven't done very much with that work. It's salted away in our archives. Some day it'll perhaps be brought to the light, but it was a very interesting---

LF: Sculpture? Etchings?

HB: No, mostly – Esther was doing – Margaret was painting.

MB: Drawing –

HB: I was doing drawing, and Esther made some –

MB: Watercolors.

HB: And some lithographs, I think. She was trying a little experimenting in lithography. I was trying to think – when you try to figure back and make a consecutive buildup of things – I have blank spots that I need to fill in. In the 20s we were here in Monterey, and I had only come back from art school thinking I was going to be a polite lady sculptress. I had a very interesting old studio over on Pacific Street which had been used by William Chase when he was here and about every visiting artist seemed to land in this funny old building. It should really have been preserved for the archives here in Monterey because it was the oldest – it was one of these little houses that came over in pre-fabricated sections from Australia, and the timbers –

LF: The 49ers built it?

HB: There were ironwood beams that were about this big, I remember looking under it one time, but it was torn down, and there's a city parking lot there now. It's next to the old –

MB: Serrano Adobe.

HB: Serrano Adobe, yes.

LF: Did William Chase use it for a summer class?

HB: He was just there probably – or else to paint, I don't know.

LF: He did have a summer class here about 1913 or 1914.

HB: That was before our time, but we just heard about it. And others had used it. Well, then, I had to move because the landlady was going to tear it down. And I think it was about then that I went to New York to study with Boardman Robinson. In fact, it was that time.

LF: This is still in the 1920s?

HB: Yes. And I hadn't really accomplished anything very much in the way of sculpture, I must say. I still like to fiddle around and squeeze things out of clay, though, and I hope to do more.

LF: You were in Virginia City, the three of you, and then you, Margaret, had a one-man show at the Oakland Art Museum. Do you remember what year that would be? It would be very interesting for the Oakland Art Museum Records.

HB: Well, it was in the early 30s. We were in Virginia City in 1932.

MB: Yes. I can't say exactly –

HB: What was the name of the Gay's friend who was the director for so many years at the Oakland Art Museum?

LF: William Clapp?

HB: Yes! Clapp was there.

MB: Yes, he was the one.

LF: He'd been director for thirty years or more.

HB: I can't remember that we ever had a group show until way late when he had the first show at Gump's, or did we?

MB: We had a show at the Beaux Art, or whether it was the Beaux Arts – it was the Beaux Arts Gallery. Who was running it I can't say.

HB: Now things begin to come back to me. I was wandering – around the first part of the depression, sound 1929, and 1930, you and Esther went to New Mexico and were painting in New Mexico, you did a lot of painting in Taos.

MB: Yes.

HB: And Esther, too, but I didn't go with them. I was living up in the old Montgomery block in San Francisco. Then I went to Los Angeles and got myself a job at Gladding McBean in their tile-drafting department. They were frightfully busy and they had a great big job. They didn't have a person that could really do it to their satisfaction, so they hired me to design a series of portrait panels that would be made up in terra cotta, that are now in the Mudd Memorial Library in the University of Southern California.

LF: Did it have a theme to it, a subject?

HB: It was in the philosophy building. I remember the dean's name was Ralph Fluelling. It must have been the philosophy library because it was strictly portraits of philosophers. There were twenty-two panels for the twenty-two philosophers. The job had already been started. I think they had gotten as far as Confucius. I don't know whether there was anyone earlier than that, but I came in at the Greek period and I had quite a series of Greeks to do, which incidentally I enjoyed very much. And then it came on up through the centuries to Spinoza, and some of the English philosophers. Finally, I don't think it got any farther than Emerson, but it got harder and harder for me; because I don't know why, but I felt much more at home with the Greeks, and by the time I got to Emerson, I was really bogged down.

LF: These were all individual tile portraits?

HB: I had to furnish a drawing, and the color theme, of course, was very simple and was already worked out because the execution of the tiles themselves was done by Mexican girls working in the factory, who were very good. I never saw them in the actual process of doing it. They were done on big twelve-inch tiles and very limited color scheme. Some of them were the natural biscuit, a very nice warm terra cotta color that ran through them all and held them together – and of course the limited color scheme held them together, too. I just mention that because I'm trying to think of what happened as I go along.

LF: Surely.

HB: That's the only way I can pin things down.

LF: If you happen to think of something we can always go back.

HB: Oh yes, now we're off again! I finished that work for them and came back up here. The family had returned to Alameda. They had come back from New Mexico and I came back from the south. The next summer Esther and I spent up in the mountains above St. Helena, California, preparing some etchings and drawings really with the intention of going to New York and breaking into the illustration game. We decided that we wanted to do illustrating. They were doing very nice books then, with very – some of the publishers were putting out handsome editions with etchings or lithographs or woodcuts.

LF: Like a limited editions club or something like that?

HB: Yes. Or even – but it was just at the time of the depression that we hit New York. It was the year they were selling apples on the streets there. So we trudged around, and trudged around, with our portfolios and we knew the name of every art director in every publishing house. They had certain times when they would see people and their work, and they were awfully nice to us, and I know that had we just been interested enough to stick to it, that it was a matter of time that we could have done it. But we got tired of wearing out shoe leather. Esther did a few magazine illustrations, and I think I did some magazine illustrations too, for the old *Forum*. She decided she would rather go hungry in San Francisco than in New York. So I stuck it out a little while longer, then I came back too. It must have been not long after that that we went up to Virginia City. Oh, then – I was wondering how we got started on mosaic. Because it was in the early 30s that we started with the mosaic, and that was how I sort of got on that tack which I have been on more or less ever since --- except for the war when we were all doing war work.

LF: Well, maybe I could recall a date for you by looking in this thesis by Osborne.

HB: Look up the Mother House at Fleishhacker Zoo in San Francisco.

MB: That was 1933.

LF: Right. Now according to the records from the De Young Museum, many of the artists in San Francisco were called together at the Museum in December of 1933.

HB: That was it, that was the start.

LF: To bring possible designs for public buildings, under the Public Works of Art Project.

HB: That's it.

LF: Dr. Heil was regional director, I believe, and there was a Dr. Mack, a stockbroker, who was his assistant.

HB: Harold Mack. He lives down here now.

LF: Oh, does he?

HB: Yes.

LF: Do you remember someone by the name of Minifred? I'm trying to think of the last name. It's her records of his records that I've seen at the De Young. Well anyway, you artists met at the De Young Museum and, I suppose, submitted designs or an idea?

HB: I don't think that first time, but now it begins to come back. I don't think we were prepared with designs at that time, but it was a matter of moving pretty fast to produce something.

LF: Did the three of you have ideas?

HB: I don't know how it happened that – did you, Margaret, go over to the De Young at that time? How did it happen that it came to be that I had to knuckle down and come up with a design? Anyway, it was, and that was when – we'd more or less talk the thing together. It was Margaret who suggested that since the panels were exterior panels out on a loggia, that it would be nice to do them in mosaic.

LF: Were the three of you assigned this job, or did you sort of select it yourself?

HB: I think I was the only one that was officially on the payroll, as you would say, and afterward, we divided that in three, so we didn't exactly get wealthy over it, but we thought that was the fairest way to do it. And then, of course, we had Len Meuman, he was assigned to us as an assistant, and he, of course, was on the payroll of the PWA, the same as I was.

LF: PWA.

HB: The PWA, Public Works of Art, yes.

MB: He wasn't on that job.

LF: I have him listed on the De Young records as your assistant.

HB: I think he was, Marge. He was, and he went on with me. In fact, he was, and there were two assigned, and this second man, I cannot recall his name. He lived in Oakland and he was only with us a very short time. It made me nervous because I wasn't used to delegating work and having them – not knowing very much about mosaic myself – so I ended up with just Len. I think he was put on something else, the second one. That's why it's hard for me to remember his name.

LF: Just for the record, did Dr. Heil assign you to this work, or did you pick the site yourself, or how did it come about that you went to the Fleishhacker Zoo's Mother House?

HB: I think they had certain things –

MB: I think the space was simply given to us.

HB: I think it was given to us.

LF: Assigned to you.

HB & MB: Yes.

HB: Yes. Or it might be that we were given a little leeway as to the space and w chose to do that space.

LF: You chose the subject yourself?

HB: Helen Forbes and Dorothy Puccinelli were working inside, on the panels in the big room in the interior. You have that information?

LF: Yes.

HB: I think the outside panels appealed to us, the space appealed to us.

LF: Now I have it here, in the thesis, that there were two panels, one of St. Francis, and one of children and their

animal friends, each thirteen feet long by six feet wide. Would that be correct?

HB: Yes, that's it. The spaces had an arched top; they weren't strictly rectangular, I man, they were arched shapes and fitted the character of the building, which was Spanish. We had an assistant – that's not down there. He was very important. His name was Antonio, Anthony Falcier.

LF: How do you spell that?

HB: I think that he was not officially on the – it would be Antonio I suppose, or Anthony.

LF: And the last name?

HB: F-A-L-C-I-E-R.

MB: E.

HB: No, there's not an E on it.

MB: F-A-L-C-I-E-R-E.

HB: It might be "E" sometimes, but not on his. He actually wasn't brought into the picture until it came to mounting the mosaics on the wall, but he gave us invaluable help in actually telling us the rudimentary steps of doing the thing in mosaic, because except for some little experiments that I had made, like a bird pool or a little thing like that, I hadn't done anything big in mosaic.

LF: Was this in small tessarae, or larger?

HB: No, it wasn't. Getting Venetian mosaic, or what they call "smalti,'' was unheard of then, you see; in fact, nobody did anything in mosaic at all.

LF: Unlike the Powerhouse murals?

HB: I think that thing was one of the first mosaics that was actually used in an architectural way in the West. I really do. I think that was the first that I know of, except there were very early ones that were done in marble, like in the medallion on the floor of the big hallway down at the Ferry Building in San Francisco, the state seal of California. And Falcier did that.

LF: Very interesting.

HB: He was a real dyed-in-the-wool Italian mosaic worker who came to this country – (phone interruption)

LF: All right, Margaret and Helen, about the Fleishhacker Mother's House mosaics – you were mentioning Anthony Falcier and how you learned from him.

HB: Yes, he was actually, at the time, a tile-setter in Alameda, but he was a thoroughly-trained mosaicist from his early days in the old country. He used to tell us how he came over here. He came over here to work on the courthouse in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, which evidently had a mosaic top. And then he came out to San Francisco, to join a group of Italian workmen who were doing the mosaics down at San Simeon for the Hearst Castle. Since then, we ran across another man who worked in that same crew, several in fact. In fact, I think there was one on the WPA whose name I can't remember. But if it hadn't been for Mr. Falcier, I don't know what we would have done, because he gave us pointers that we would have been quite helpless without. About how to set up the drawing, how to reverse it, how to divide it in sections in such a way that when the actual mosaic was mounted on the wall – which was an operation that began from the bottom and worked up –the section that you were mounting was square enough in shape so that it didn't sag or settle too badly at one side or another, and begin to throw the thing out of wack. Because everybody that saw us working always had the same expression. ""Oh, that's just like working a jig-saw puzzle.'' Well, it was a little like a jig-saw puzzle on a big scale.

LF: What were the sizes of these tiles, did you say?

HB: Well, the material that we used – as I said we couldn't get any – there was no such thing as getting "smalti," which is hand-cut Venetian enamel material. We used for the material some commercial tile that was manufactured at that time in San Jose, California, by a small tile outfit called Solon & Schennell, or the S&S Tile Company. They made a beautiful commercial tile, too beautiful to be very successful as commercial tile, because they couldn't really satisfy the jobbers, who insisted on a perfect match to every lot of tile, which they had catalogued by number. There was so much variation in their tile that there was a great deal of waste from a practical commercial standpoint. And the tile that we used was mostly that tile that was what they would call a

second, because of the variation. We had names for these tile colors, one was called St. Francis, and St. Francis varied in color all the way from deep Mars violet to a fawn color almost, or a strong ochre color, warm ochre, but it was the same glaze, depending on where it was put in the kiln it would come – that would be the range of shades.

LF: Different shading?

HB: Yes. And it was very, very strong, very good body to the tile, except that it was so tough that before we could even cut it up in smaller pieces, use any kind of tools on it, we had to have the thickness reduced by about half. And the way we did that was, we took it to a marble works over in Berkeley, over in Emeryville, really, on the waterfront there in the industrial section, and they would mount the tile on slabs of marble set in plaster of Paris, glazed side protected of course, with the bottom side up, and rub about half of it off. Then it would come in a workable thickness. And poor Len sawed it, used to saw it in strips of about three-quarters to an inch in width. And from then on we could cut it into any size we wanted, with some good strong tile nippers. Except that there was a difficulty in setting it up, finally because of the very absorbent terra cotta back, which drew the water out. When the cement coat was put on the back of the tile, it sucked the water out unless the terra cotta was dampened beforehand. So we always had the problem, when it came to mounting it on the wall finally, of dampening the back without making it so damp that the surface, which was eventually to be the fact of the decoration, would be still kept dry enough to hold on to the paper. And we did. It just made it a little bit more complicated in the process. But it was in the mounting that Mr. Falcier was so valuable. He'd come over with us from Alameda every day. I think it took us about almost a week for each one – five days for each panel. And he'd actually mix the concrete, the mortar. Esther was helping me on that. I don't know where Marge was, and Len, I don't remember Len being there. It is funny, but he must not have been with us when we were actually working with Falcier. But anyway, Mr. Falcier would mount a certain amount face out – you see the paper would still be stuck on the face – and each day we'd move up so much. We might set eight or nine pieces, depending on the way the design built up, the sections built up.

LF: You would have your cartoons to go by, I would imagine?

HB: Yes.

LF: Did all three of your get together on the selection of the subject matter, the topics? Did you talk it over between the three of you?

HB: Oh, I suppose we did.

LF: Or what it suggested by the City or --?

HB: I think it was, not – as a matter of fact, I think that particular thing was pretty much my job of designing. Somebody else, probably Esther or Margaret might have suggested the subject matter actually, but I remember it was a matter of – I remember hardly doing more than one sketch of that, especially St. Francis. I think I put it down and that was it. Of course, there was more work put on it as you got to getting it full size, but I think that first sketch, which was rather unusual for me because the more work I did the more fooling around that I do in design, and maybe not really improving it.

LF: You had to submit the design or the sketches to Dr. Heil or someone in his office?

HB: Yes, and then of course, you'd bring in a sketch and a proposal of what material was to be used.

LF: Did you estimate your time and what you needed?

HB: Oh no, you couldn't possibly, because we'd never done such a thing before. But I don't remember that it took, I'm afraid that I couldn't say exactly how many months it took, whether we were two months on it, or three months, or whether – considering both the panels, we might have been perhaps three months.

LF: This was the first work done in the building?

HB: I think Helen Forbes and Dorothy Puccinelli were working at the same time. In fact, I know they were. But we were not there anything like – that project continued for a long, long time, but of course we didn't actually have to work out there at the building until it came to installing the panels.

LF: I see. Where did you do your work then?

HB: At home in Alameda.

LF: In Alameda, that's interesting.

HB: That was the house that we'd always lived in, and we had a wonderful big studio in the top floor, the whole top floor with great big dormer windows on three sides.

LF: And you completed the mosaic murals in the house and had them moved?

HB: They were in sections, you see. We did it on the floor. We laid it out on the floor as we completed it section by section. One thing that made this particular material still more complicated was that the color was only on the fact. So we used to have to lay it out roughly on the face so we could see what we had done, what we had before us. But, of course, when it came to mounting it, the mounting paper, the heavy paper on which it was mounted and transported, had to be put over the face. So when it was laid out on the floor, then we mounted paper over the face so it all disappeared. In other words, it was completely covered up and dismantled. And we had to get the paper off the back and clean it up so that the mortar could go directly on the back.

LF: This is the Fleishhacker Zoo Mother House? In other words, it was a sort of resting place, and so on, for mothers and their children visiting the Zoo? Is that correct?

HB: Yes. It was a memorial given by Mr. Herbert Fleishhacker, as I understand it, given in memory of his mother, Delia, because it says across the face of it, "To the memory of Delia Fleishhacker." And I remember Mr. and Mrs. Fleishhacker came over one day to see it. They wanted to see it while it was still on the floor to see that there was not going to be anything offensive slipped in, and they had to climb three flights of stairs to get up to it, but they did it.

LF: This was when it was being installed or -- ?

HB: Just before, when it was completely laid out.

LF: In your house?

HB: At home in Alameda, yes, because they wouldn't see it again until it was all on the wall, so that was something they had to do, if they wanted to see it.

LF: I've never seen this because naturally a man can't go in to see –

HB: No, but this is on the outside.

LF: It's on the outside? I thought it was on the inside.

HB: Oh no, it's –

LF: It doesn't say here in the thesis where it was located so –

MB: It's right on the outside of the building.

HB: I have a number of other photographs that will give you a better idea. That doesn't give you an idea of the outside. (Interruption to look at photographs).

LF: You were talking about the mosaics, Miss Helen Bruton, on the outside of the Fleishhacker Zoo Mother's Rest House. I had thought they were inside, but they are outside. They have stood up against the weather, have they?

HB: They just seem to be exactly the same as they were. That was one of the things I was interested in. The other day I looked at them hard, to see what was going on and I can't see that there's been any deterioration at all. Of course, they're not actually exposed to the weather. It's a loggia, they're at either end of a long loggia perhaps sixty feet long, and you can turn from one to the other which makes it –

LF: You believe this was finished then probably in the late spring of 1934?

HB: Yes, yes, I would say that very definitely because I think we have a little tile with the date on it. It's there on the panels.

LF: I believe the PWA projects ended about June, 1934, didn't they? And then you went on to some other?

HB: I think you probably know more about it than I do, because I can't remember when the transition took place from PWA to WPA, whether there was a gap, I think that there was. Do you have in your notes there any dates for the job that Florence Swift and I did out at the University on the old powerhouses?

LF: I have the date of the mosaics at the University of California Art Gallery at the old powerhouse as 1936.

HB: Well, that's right, and I think I was not on the project steadily. I mean, when we finished the Fleishhacker things, I know I was not on it. I went on it when it became the WPA, which might have been in 1935 – that transition.

LF: Yes, it began about then.

HB: I wouldn't have been aware of it, but I know when we came to do the University job…

LF: Do you recall anything of any of you three sisters in between the Zoo job and the University job? You didn't do any drawings or easel work?

HB: I can't remember whether the Golden State Hotel – no, definitely, no.

LF: Or any portable things?

HB: I might possibly have done that Golden State job, a commercial work, in 1935. Can you remember whether I did – I think I did it either right after this Fleishhacker Zoo one or after the University one. I know that each year I did one job there for a period, and then there was a gap. And then we got interested in the San Francisco Fair job. We wasted a lot of time on the designing of the Fair job, I know it might have been in '37 we started thinking about it. It was executed in '38 because the Fair opened in early '39, and it had to be up.

LF: I'm just trying to establish a chronological account. So the next job that you worked on, would be the powerhouse mosaics?

HB: Esther did the – when did she do the Fairmont? It was around that time.

LF: You did have these commercial jobs, then in between, like the Golden State Hotel and the Fairmont Hotel?

HB: Yes, there were some commercial jobs in there.

LF: And did all three of you work on these commercial jobs together?

HB: No. We didn't often collaborate actually, but one would always be sort of standing by, to help if necessary. Marge always would help me if I needed her and visa versa. And the same way with Esther, but Esther had her own very special techniques. She didn't really work very much in mosaic, and so, when she had a sizeable job she'd either do it entirely herself, or else I know Marge would be a great help to her if she needed, for instance, if there was some special thing like laying gold leaf in any quantity. The job that she did for the Fairmont was done on large panels that were completely gold leafed - and Esther went to great pains to make a connection with some professional gold leaders. The gold leafers did such a terrible job on the first day, and wasted so much gold leaf that she realized she couldn't possibly cope with them and she fired them. Margaret and another friend of ours took on the job, and did a very workman-like job of it, in half the time, I'm sure, and half the gold leaf. So that's the way, I mean, things kind of worked out that way.

LF: Margaret, did you do any work in this period after the Fleishhacker?

MB: Oh, nothing important. I was just experimenting doing small things.

LF: So the next Federal Arts job would then be, among the three of you, the net one to come up, that is, would be the power house, which you, Helen, worked on?

HB: Yes, and I can't remember when the little Fresno – I think the Fresno Post Office job came after the University.

LF: Fine. Then if we could continue with the powerhouse. Now I've seen them. As I understand it, this is an old brick building that had been the power supply for the University of California on the campus in Berkeley.

HB: Yes.

LF: And on the outside of the old brick building there are two large mosaic panels. One was done by you, Helen, and the other one by Florence Alston Swift.

HB: Yes.

LF: One concerns art – maybe you can refresh my memory – and the other, drama or --?

HB: Florence Swift's panel was music and –

MB: Dancing.

HB: No, mine was sculpture and dancing, or art and dancing; and Florence's was music and drama, somebody reading something, wasn't that it?

LF: We have some color slide of these at the Museum, I've forgotten.

HB: Panting and music were Florence Swift's and sculpture and dancing were the subjects I had, the larger of the two panels. They were on either side of the outside door. They were just naturally recessed, the brickwork, the architectural design provided these two recessed panels. It's a very handsome building; it's the last surviving brick building of the original University buildings. There was originally – I don't even remember when all of them were intact – but there was North Hall, South Hall –

LF: Bacon Hall.

HB: Bacon. There were four on the original campus there. I remember North Hall still existed in my time, and Bacon Hall, but now they're all gone I think, but the power house. And I don't know whether they were all designed by John Galen Howard, who was Robert Howard's father, or not. I used Robert Howard as a model. I don't know whether everybody knows that or not, but I think anybody who knew him might recognize him.

LF: Which figure is that one?

HB: The sculptor.

LF: Oh, the one of the sculptor in the mosaic panel?

HB: Yes. And the three dancing figures are just out of my head, so to speak. I mean, I didn't make portraits, but I really tried a little bit to make a portrait of Bob Howard, as I felt that had significance in relation to the building.

LF: I believe Glenn Wessels was the East Bay WPA supervisor at this time. Did you work under his supervision?

HB: Well, I can't remember so much Glenn Wessels as Mr. Neuhaus, Eugene Neuhaus.

LF: Oh, I see. The professor of art history at the University?

HB: Yes, and yet I don't think Mr. Neuhaus actually had anything to say very much in what would go there and what would not. It might have been Glenn Wessels. I think Florence Swift had much more to do with promoting this project than I did. I think that – and possibly Mr. Neuhaus might have also—but that doesn't mean that Glenn Wessels didn't have the final jurisdiction as far as the WPA went. Because I don't remember having any contact more or less with Mr. Neuhaus except at that time. So I think it must have been in relation to that project.

LF: Do you remember your assistants? Was one by the name of Douglas Connelly, or something like that? I have somewhere in my notes an assistant beginning with Douglas….

HB: Isn't Len Meumam there too? Wasn't he there too?

LF: He's the only one whose name I have and I found that out from the fact that we were having an exhibition of this artist's work in December in the Oakland Art Museum that he was as assistant on the powerhouse mosaics. I'm trying to recall –

MB: I think he might have been working with Florence.

HB: I think he might have been working with Florence. I don't remember that name. But I do know that some place on the building is a list of everybody that worked on it on the outside. I think they made a little plaque of some kind and it's fastened near the lintel of the door or – I think you'll find that there. I haven't looked to see, but I have a recollection of someone's doing that.

LF: Did you work outside on this, or did you work at home?

HB: No, I did that at home also.

LF: On your own panel? And Mrs. Swift worked at home on her panel?

HB: Yes, she had a studio in Berkeley at that time. We collaborated on the colors, of course, as best we could, and that was made of the same material as the Fleishhacker one, the rubbed down tile that was reduced in thickness and then cut up. I have pictures of that, and I have pictures of myself working on that Imogene Cunningham book. I'm awfully sorry, I could get them out for you if you'd like to see them.

LF: Well, I have seen the panels.

HB: You probably have seen them.

LF: Glenn Wessels took me there one day. I was having lunch with him and interviewing him, and during the lunch hour we walked down to see the powerhouse and later I came back and took some colored photographs.

HB: There was a period there when they both got quite covered over with ivy. I was wondering if there were still covered over.

LF: No, they're all clear.

HB: They were almost completely covered over one time I saw them.

LF: I thought at the time they were rather Byzantine in the style of the figures and the faces.

HB: Well, I think that if any style was ever – it would have been Byzantine we were aiming for, although the building had a more or less Romanesque feeling that would have fitted it.

LF: The Romans did use brick, didn't they?

HB: Yes, the simple arches, and then this – I don't know the architectural name for that little finish to the top of the panel, which I thought was awfully nice – that was Romanesque, it was what you might call 1890 Romanesque, it would be about that time, I guess.

LF: Glenn told me that the University plans to tear down the old powerhouse.

HB: Yes.

LF: So I've asked him to keep an eye on the mosaic murals. We hope to them for the Oakland Art Museum when they are torn down.

HB: Oh, it would be very hard to get them out, though.

LF: Don't you think they can be taken out in sections? Be moved in sections somehow? You were the one of the two that worked on them. Is it possible?

HB: They're placed directly, you know, against the brick. I don't remember that there was any reinforcing wire or anything, but if there were reinforcing wire it would have made it even more difficult, but I think it was right directly against the brick. Oh, I think it would be awfully hard.

LF: Do you think it would be too difficult?

HB: Oh, I think so. I think so. That's just something that –

LF: Because we would like to save it.

HB: Well, I know sometimes it does seem too bad, but –

LF: Well, we're going to try our best anyway.

HB – they undoubtedly will pull it down, and yet it seems a pity that they don't save that one building, as a record of that original brick era, that will be completely gone. I'm not thinking so much of the mosaics as – it used to be before they put a structure in front of it that has something to do with the *Daily Californian* now, there's a building now in front that has not a very happy effect on the whole approach to the old powerhouse, or the museum, as they like to call it now. It's pretty close to it. It used to be as you walked down that lovely, long, green slope and you saw this building, it was very pretty.

LF: Through a wooded glen.

HB: And maybe it doesn't look right there any more, I don't know.

LF: Well, still people enjoy it, there's still space around it so that you can see the mosaics, there are a few trees away from it.

HB: Yes. And it's a very solid building. And you would think that they might do some renovating or alterations to the inside that could make it quite effective even as an art gallery. It's not very good now, I must say, it's still like a powerhouse.

LF: It does have a high ceiling and it's a large area.

HB: I know it.

LF: But Hans Hofmann has given money to the University, plus a collection of his paintings, for the new museum gallery which will be built across the street on Bancroft Way and College Avenue.

HB: Goodness, they're certainly spreading out.

LF: Do you recall any particularly interesting things that happened while you were making this mosaic?

HB: Well, I only recall that it was always a bit of a strain, and yet lots of fun too, when you came to actually putting it up. You know, it divided itself in periods. Some of it was painful and some of it was very enjoyable. But, it was also nice to work outside, and of course here again, Mr. Falcier was of great assistance. We couldn't have gotten along without him. And he was employed for the installation by the WPA. I don't know how many weeks it was – two weeks? Or three weeks? Or a month? But I'm sure there must be a record of his brief work there with us. Oh, we couldn't have gotten along without him.

LF: He worked only on the installation?

HB: On the installation, yes.

LF: Perhaps he also worked on the State College installations, on the outside of that building?

HB: I don't think so.

LF: You don't think so.

MB: I don't think he had anything to do with that.

HB: Maxine –

LF: Maxine Albro?

HB: No, I don't think he did have anything to do with it, the installation at State College, but there was this other Italian who had worked at San Simeon with Mr. – your friend at the tile works who had the shop on Union Street. His name begins with a "P."

MB: Pellegrini.

HB: Mr. Pellegrini, and Falcier and this third Italian, there were more as well, but the third one – whose name I can't recall –was on the WPA for a long time.

LF: It wouldn't be Duccini, who worked with Marian Simpson – Gaetano Duccini?

MB: I don't think so.

HB: No.

LF: He did the marble work for her.

HB: The opus sectile?

LF: Yes.

HB: No, I don't think that was the name. I'd recognize the name if I heard it. But for some reason, that name didn't get itself planted well enough in my head, I can't bring it to mind.

LF: Well, did this powerhouse mosaic work take longer than the Fleishhacker one?

HB: No, I don't think so. It's hard for me to remember just how long it was. There was only the one panel, you see.

LF: The only data I have is 1936 and it doesn't give the months or anything. Evidently it was dedicated toward the end of 1936.

HB: I think there's a date on that also, some place, on the outside of the building in connection with the names of the people who worked on it.

LF: Did you think that you and Mrs. Swift thought up the subject matter, or was it proposed by some of the officials of the University, or the WPA?

HB: I don't remember having much to say about the subject matter. It was more or less decided, I think, by Mrs. Swift, and maybe by Mr. Neuhaus, again who was head of the art department at that time.

LF: The building was being used as an art gallery even then? Is that right?

HB: I don't think so.

LF: It wasn't?

HB: No, I don't think there was anything there.

LF: Just an empty ...

HB: Just a nice-looking building with two nice spaces.

LF: Two spaces to use, yes.

HB: That was their – I think that's was started that.

LF: That's what I understand, artists and supervisors were going around looking for –

HB: Looking for spaces, that was the idea. In fact, that was a fixed habit that lasted for quite a while after that. I remember noticing to look for spaces, I've forgotten to do that now. I'd say, "there's a nice space.'' Sometimes I think they went too far in the right direction though, that some spaces might have been better left plain.

LF: So then the net project you went to was the competition for a contract for the Post Office at Fresno, California. Is that correct?

HB: I think that must have come after, definitely. I think that might have been in, it must have been in late '37 or early '38. It must have been '37 because I'm pretty sure that in '38 we were working a good part of that year, about nine months anyway, in the actual fabrication of that Fair job, which was very large. But it was on a much broader kind of – the handling was much broader, so that although it was enormous as far as murals go, it went comparatively fast.

LF: But the Fresno Post Office relief sculptures – is that the correct term?

HB: Yes, it would be. They were in terra cotta.

LF: One is a little boy, as I recall the photograph you were showing me ---

HB: There are two little children –

LF: – by a mailbox. The other is a little girl –

HB: -- a little girl by a mailbox. And they were executed in clay, and then a mold was made. There was a plasterer, and they were fabricated in Alameda at the old Clark Pottery Works, down in the west end of Alameda. They did a very nice job of them, I must say. And molds were made from the clay, then terra cotta shapes were made, and they were fired, then were made in terra cotta with a glaze that was sympathetic to the building itself. I rather think that the building itself was a terra cotta job.

LF: A brand new post office, was it?

HB: Yes, it was a new post office in Fresno. Do you remember in those depression years, the Federal government tried to make a great many new pots offices all over the country, and there was nearly always provision made for decoration of some kind?

LF: Good. That's what we need today, too.

HB: Yes. It really was. I think that was a wonderful idea, and I think there must be some very interesting ones I've never seen.

LF: There's hundreds of these post offices that have been decorated.

HB: Yes, and they made a practice of using, if possible, talent that was as nearly local as they could get.

LF: Some of our artists went down to Texas. Bernard Zakheim told me he did two in Texas.

HB: I wonder if there's been a collection of the post office murals, of the work that was done in those post offices, that's been more or less gathered together.

LF: It would be interesting to do, wouldn't it? To do a book of photographs?

HB: Yes, just the post offices.

LF: Yes. Richard O'Hanlon did a wood carving for one down the Valley here.

HB: Yes. Helen Forbes did one in Susanville.

LF: Suzanne Scheuer did one in the Berkeley Post Office, a sort of oil fresco mural.

HB: I haven't seen that one. And of course Anton Refregier did one, but I guess that was later.

LF: That was the last one of the government projects, Rincon Annex Post Office in San Francisco, with Robert McChesney as his assistant. Plans were started before the war, but never really began until after the war, in 1946.

HB: Well, I think it would be wonderful if they had something similar to that old WPA, because, although there is a great deal that isn't of much value done, and lots of stumbling around in art, and lots of near misses, there's enough even though it's a very small percentage – there's enough done under such a project, and under the stimulus of such a project, to make it really very worthwhile.

LF: Well, at least it gave artists some employment, particularly the beginning artists who had a chance to gain experience and a good many of them became well-known later, because they would perhaps, you see, have given up their art work if it wasn't for the government projects, don't you think?

HB: I think so. And I think so many young artists were so thrilled at the opportunity to just get their teeth into a real project, you know, that they were very earnest and very sincere about it. I feel sure most of them were. There may have been some boondogglers, but I feel that by far the greater proportion were enthusiastic over the opportunity that it gave them.

LF: Margaret you've been so quiet. Is there something you would like to say about the projects in those days?

MB: No, I think that – I agree with what Helen said about continuing the projects. I think that a lot of the artists today don't have an incentive to do something creative, they make little things, but without any real object in view.

LF: Do you think perhaps the government should have some sort of a project for artists, or at least, for artists to decorate federal buildings – and perhaps decorate the state and county and city buildings?

MB: Oh, I think so.

LF: Give the artists an opportunity to do something?

MB: I think it would be wonderful.

LF: Something monumental, shall we say, or something lasting?

MB: Definitely.

HB: It's very ticklish, though. It wouldn't be an easy thing to sustain. Fashion in art seems to carry so much weight here in this country, and the trend that it's taken is so subjective in its mood. I mean artists nowadays – sometimes you feel that it's been reduced to such complete anarchy that it would be very difficult to use it. How would they use it? If it's to be used architecturally there has to be some kind of rapport between the architectural thing and the artist. And yet I think it could be done. I think exciting things are being done even now in Europe, and there's no reason why they couldn't be done here with some encouragement. By younger artists, by artists who feel more in tune with the modern approach to things. I don't somehow feel that I could ever do it. But I know that there are people that could, young people that could, and I think that it would be wonderful. I've seen such exciting things done in mosaic lately, and in Europe, beautiful things with mosaic. I think it would be fine.

LF: So then the net thing that you three sisters did go on again, was not on WPA, but was for the Golden Gate Exposition in San Francisco Bay in 1939?

HB: Yes.

LF: Actually you began in 1937 to work on relief sculpture?

HB: Well, we began probably I think in late 1937. We were first approached about it and we spend weeks and months not only experimenting and finally arriving at a medium, but also fooling around with the designs. I remember when the architect, Mr. Pflueger, first approached us about it, there were to be two of these monumental murals. Unfortunately, we started thinking about the east wall first; each one was 144 feet long by 57 feet high.

LF: On the outside of some buildings?

HB: No, in the courtyard, in the Court Pacifica. Ralph Stackpole's big statue of Pacifica was the axis for a series of courts and on either side of Pacifica was to be these enormous murals. One was to represent the countries of the East, and one to represent the countries of the West. We unfortunately started thinking about the East. Then one day after I don't know how many months had gone by and we were more or less committed to the job, and Mr. Pflueger assured us that it was our job, he came over one day and said, "They've cut out my East wall.'' He was in a terrible state and we professed to be very sad about it, but we were really much relieved because it meant that there would be only one wall 144 feet by 57 feet to cope with, and that was really all that we could possibly cope with. It was much better, because that opened an axis at 90 degrees to the Pacifica in another direction, and it opened up a whole design for the Fair. I think it was much better, and I think he, too, realized afterward that it was. So we combined the subject matter, as you see there in the photograph, it shows the East is on one side of the big figures and the West is on the other. These are the countries of the western shores of the Pacific, and from the left toward the center, the Eastern peoples. But I think actually it took about nine months and we had a couple of helpers, we had a wonderful place to work, and we had a wonderful time.

LF: All three of you worked together on this?

HB: Yes, all three of us worked together on that, finally. We'd box the design back and forth and round about until we didn't know who had done what. And the actual material was interesting in the way we worked it out because it gave the appearance of a relief or sculpture but it was made of a fairly lightweight material. The wall wasn't designed for a great, massive, stiff plaster wall surface. There was a basic module, as they might say nowadays, of a four feet by eight fee plywood outdoor plywood panel and the relief was gained by this very thick masonite material that came all the way up to two inches thick. We used it sometimes an inch thick, sometimes two inches and sometimes we could laminate it up in these great big scale figures to about four inches in parts. Working out the technical parts was really awfully interesting. In fact, to my way of thinking, that was the most fun doing that, the most interesting job I think that I've done. Of course, it was destroyed when the war came along, they just took it all down. The Navy took over the area, and everybody thought it was very sad, but I never missed it. We were given an opportunity to take it ourselves if we wanted it, but we couldn't imagine what we would do with it unless we built a house of it or something. We had to turn it down. I don't think it's too bad that those things don't last. They're made for a certain purpose and they get a little sad-looking afterward, like the old murals in the San Francisco Public Library, Frank Vincent Dumond's murals in the San Francisco Library, they're dreary now, it would have been better - they're from the old 1915 Fair – it would have been better if they'd gone along with the rest of them. Even the old Fine Arts Building of the Fair of 1915, heaven forbid.

LF: Is there anything else that you two would like to say about he PWA-WPA art, either people that you know --?

HB: Well, we were going to speak about August Gay.

LF: Yes.

HB: And you were going to – because I think that August Gay (deceased), who was definitely in connection with the Monterey period was about the most talented person here, and I think that if you see Bruce Aris that he'll say the same thing. There was another very interesting painter and a great friend of ours here at the time of our early Monterey period – Clayton Price ….Price as he always signed his name.

LF: Oh!

HB: But I don't think Price was ever on the WPA.

MB: He was, up north.

LF: He was on the project in Portland.

HB: Oh, he was, of course, yes. But that was after he left Monterey.

LF: He wasn't on it down here?

HB: No. But, of course, he left a wonderful contribution up there in Portland. I remember seeing a lot of his work.

LF: He was one of the first, one of the earliest West Coast abstract artists, I believe on the government projects.

HB: Well, he was.

LF: Originally he'd been a cowboy and doing Western subjects.

HB: We have several nice paintings of Price's we'll show you. Actually, I think that Price got from the WPA, and gave more to the WPA than, I think anybody in this whole country. He was in heaven. All he asked was enough canvas and enough paints to be able to just paint continuously and hard and fast and furiously. And he did. And of the paintings, I think he was only too delighted that they were going to the WPA, I mean he had no personal feeling about wanting to keep them or anything. But he was given all the paint, good paint, and good canvas, good material to work with that he could use, he really made marvelous use of them. I think he should be canonized as the artist of the WPA days.

LF: But he originally was a resident of Monterey?

MB: Yes.

LF: For how many years?

HB: All through the 20s. And that was the period – we were here in Monterey from about 1922 to 1929, and that's what I consider the golden age of Monterey from my standpoint, because it was so lovely and there was such an interesting group of artists here at the time. It was a very stimulating period. Of course, Armin Hansen had a class and a lot of the younger people gravitated around his class, but there were others. There was Price, and Gay, and the other people who were painting on their own, and I was on the fringe, sculpting, supposedly. Those groups I am sure exist today, younger groups all over the country. But they're really quite wonderful and people that can be a part of them are very fortunate. We miss that very much now here, because it's all changed, of course, and we're very much older, but we do miss the contact with people who are thinking along the same lines, who like to talk art, and do it. Of course, there are many in Carmel, as you know, I guess more artists than there ever were, over there.

LF: I understand there are forty art galleries in this area all trying to make a living.

HB: I know it. Well, hope springs eternal.

LF: Probably several hundred artists.

HB: Oh, I guess so. It's just crawling with artists now, but I'm afraid that we're a little like Rip Van Winkle, we've sort of lost touch with it, we don't really seem to have much contact with it. For so many years we've done work that's more or less architectural in its use, either murals or semi-architectural –

LF: Yes, building decoration.

HB: Or for architects. And since the war, when we finally got back here to Monterey and settled permanently, and got back to working, I've been working in mosaic in smaller ways, we've had several exhibitions. And Margaret got into this terrazzo technique which she used too much in tables I feel. I always felt that she did too many. She would make a work of art of a table, but just because it was a table, they'd say, "Oh well, you make tables.'' And that makes me very sad because I don't' think – I mean it's too bad, but she liked to do it, and she does what she likes to do.

LF: Is this table one of yours? I like that.

HB: She has very few left. She's made hundreds.

MB: Well, I was so pleased to think that people wanted to buy these things that I made. Nobody had been anxious to buy my paintings, and when I started in making these terrazzo tables, everybody wanted them. But I kept going, but I really had to stop because it's very slow work, and heavy work, so I had to put an end to the tables.

HB: Well, then you did that terrazzo mural down in Los Angeles that was really very good.

MB: Oh, yes.

HB: She put a terrible lot of creative feeling into the design of the table, but then it would still be a table, and they'd say, "Oh, you make the tables.''

LF: What was the mosaic you did in Los Angeles?

MB: It was terrazzo, it was in a bank...The savings... (Looking for photographs of it).

HB: Oh, that drawer with those photographs in it, it’s such a mess! I think it’s in one of those books – portfolio –

MB: Well, I think it is too.

LF: Thank you, Miss Margaret and Miss Helen Bruton for your time. This concludes the end of the tape.

END OF INTERVIEW

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