



Smithsonian
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Oral history interview with Edward Chavez,
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Transcript

Interview

JOSEPH TROVATO: It is nice to be visiting with you again, Mr. Chavez. I recall our meeting at Syracuse when you were one of the jurors of the New York State Exhibition, of the New York State Exposition in 1962, was it, or '63?

EDWARD CHAVEZ: '62.

JOSEPH TROVATO: '62, yes. Suppose we begin from the beginning and I'll ask you first of all, where were you born?

EDWARD CHAVEZ: I was born in New Mexico, in Wagonmound, New Mexico, specifically, which sounds like a rather unreal place, but it does exist. I was born there and then later the family moved to Colorado, so actually . . . my boyhood . . . I grew up in Colorado.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Colorado?

EDWARD CHAVEZ: Yes.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Now where did you study art and how early did you begin this interest?

EDWARD CHAVEZ: As a matter of fact, just yesterday . . . Very curiously, when you called, I was thinking back about when I actually started working and it was rather a sudden beginning. I have been painting since 1937, '36 rather, and it was the year after I graduated from high school and immediately went to work for Frank Mechau, who was then working on the . . . I believe at that time the Treasury Relief Art Project. If I remember right. And then from there I transferred over. I got on the projects as soon as I was legally able to and then later on was transferred over. I got on the projects as soon as I was legally able to and then later on was transferred from there to WPA.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, then, you were in on the project from the beginning?

EDWARD CHAVEZ: I was in at the very beginning of it, yes.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, I think I have you down as having painted . . . as having done two Post Office murals: A Center, Texas, Post Office and a Geneva, Nebraska, Post Office. Is that right?

EDWARD CHAVEZ: That's right. (Also Glenwood Springs, Colorado, Post Office and West High School, Denver, Colorado.)

JOSEPH TROVATO: Now can you tell us something about the nature of these murals? Of course, you were just out of school as you have just said . . . ?

EDWARD CHAVEZ: I was, yes, literally just beginning to paint.

JOSEPH TROVATO: What influence did you . . . do the murals show? They must have some basis of . . . ?

EDWARD CHAVEZ: Well, the direct influence is . . . in terms of my own painting . . . happened at the time to be closely related to the trend painting generally in America at that time (this refers to the American scene painting) and that is Bruegel being one of my principal influences. Not that Bruegel was an influence on American painting generally. And the work was related in a sense in style to the Bruegel style of painting and I imagine I was influenced a good deal by Mr. Mechau -- Frank Mechau -- who also was quite a lover of . . . admirer of Bruegel's work and his work was influenced by Bruegel. Sort of a mutual admiration for Bruegel in general

JOSEPH TROVATO: So this project, or the two murals, were done under the Public Works of Art Project?

EDWARD CHAVEZ: That's right.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Then you said that you later went on the WPA when that came into being?

EDWARD CHAVEZ: Now I'm a little vague. Wasn't the PWAP a section of the WPA? I mean, wasn't that the art section, the art area of the WPA? If I'm not mistaken.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, the WPA came later; I should have the date in my head, perhaps at '35, and that was more strictly a relief project.

EDWARD CHAVEZ: Oh, yes, I see. I remember that the beginning was what was known as the Treasury Relief Project, TRAP, and then there was a PWAP, which I thought was WPA, or vice versa. I don't know which is which.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, now, when you went on the WPA project, did you have to apply for . . . did you have to show relief eligibility?

EDWARD CHAVEZ: No. That's the reason I'm trying to recall what the status was in terms of the project. It merely . . . as I recall, I don't think that was involved in it at all. You had to be a working artist, a so-called professional artists. I remember that you had to submit work and credentials, supposedly to prove that you were a professional artist. And those were the only requirements that I recall.

JOSEPH TROVATO: And you turned in pictures every so often?

EDWARD CHAVEZ: I turned in pictures every so often. Well, the projects apparently varied from state to state.

JOSEPH TROVATO: This would be . . . ?

EDWARD CHAVEZ: This was in Colorado.

JOSEPH TROVATO: But was this an easel project, easel painting?

EDWARD CHAVEZ: Yes, this was an easel painting project originally, yes.

JOSEPH TROVATO: In Colorado?

EDWARD CHAVEZ: In Colorado, yes. And in Colorado the administration was somewhat different, I understand, than it was here in that we were able to work individually, independently in our own studios. In other words, we had no ties to anyone except to, I think it was every month, submit the work that we did. It was reviewed and then a certain amount of work was selected.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Were you free to do work in your own way?

EDWARD CHAVEZ: We . . . yes. The marvelous thing about this . . . wherever I hear discussions about Federal support of art and the limitations, my experience was that I had more freedom, possibly more freedom, than one does now with coping with the galleries and dealers, and so forth. Complete freedom in what we could do. Complete freedom in what I was able to do and also the fellow painters that I knew at the time.

JOSEPH TROVATO: How long were you on this project then at Colorado?

EDWARD CHAVEZ: Well, I'm a little vague on the dates. Altogether . . . I began in . . . '37 I think was the first official . . . and I stopped on the project . . . I did my last mural in 1939 or '40, just before the war broke out and I . . . as a matter of fact went into the army immediately after having completed one of the projects I was doing, in 1941.

JOSEPH TROVATO: So that you did . . . well, I mentioned earlier that there are two murals: the one at Center, Texas, Post Office, and one at Geneva, Nebraska. Are there other murals?

EDWARD CHAVEZ: Yes, I was trying to think which other ones. There was one in Glenwood Springs, Colorado. I did two for a high school, South Denver High School, I believe it was. I think there was one other which I don't remember at the moment.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Now, were these done as a result of a competition?

EDWARD CHAVEZ: This was . . . yes. The murals were a competition. They were submitted. It was one of the competitions in which you submitted sketches and they were juried and then they awarded the murals. The murals were as a result of the competition.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see. Will you tell us how do you evaluate this experience in relation to yourself, to your own development as an artist? Or then you can go on to a broader evaluation

and consider it in relation to American art as a whole in the way it developed.

EDWARD CHAVEZ: Well, I . . . I felt very good about my experience with the project painting days. I feel it was important. I have certain reservations and criticisms, perhaps, about its influence and about what the influence was on the painter, on the artist rather, but altogether, generally I feel it was a very good experience, marvelous experience for the artist. Basically, I think, principally, in the contact that one had with the audience for which one was painting, or in other words, there was a more direct influence between the audience and the artist and we're beginning to get back to that now. The feeling that you have to communicate with your environment. Pop art, for example, is a direct, I think, a direct outcome of this. I do not mean that Pop art is a direct outcome of the projects, but that Pop art indicates a desire for more direct communication. They want to get back to the real things. And in a sense that was what that experience was to me. You felt a direct tie to the people who were experiencing your work.

JOSEPH TROVATO: You mentioned a little earlier in connection with the murals, or your murals, that in the very beginning when you were fresh out of school you had some admiration for Pieter Bruegel. Now what I see on your walls here in your studio is surely a far cry from Pieter Bruegel and the one in front of me, which I think is a very beautiful painting, is definitely an abstraction. How long have you been working in this direction?

EDWARD CHAVEZ: Well, of course, it's been a gradual development or evolution, I prefer to call it, because as I review my work . . . whenever people come to see my paintings and they haven't seen them for a period of years, they come and make a similar comment on the difference between the work I'm doing now, or the wide bridge between what I'm doing now and what I was doing at the time, or a few years back. Actually, it's been a gradual evolution over a period of many years. So there was no immediate beginning that I can think of except possible after the second World War. The interval, the four-year interval of the World War did create a bridge in the direction of my work. And I think immediately after coming out of the army it began to evolve into more abstract work and of course now very abstract.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, of course that was the case with American art in general.

EDWARD CHAVEZ: That's right.

JOSEPH TROVATO: It was in the air! It was a trend that developed quite rapidly.

EDWARD CHAVEZ: It developed rapidly in terms of the general direction of American art, yes.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Toward abstraction.

EDWARD CHAVEZ: Yes. And in my case personally it was more gradual than that, but it did evolve into a very abstract work. I would like to add, however, Joe, that I don't feel that this bridge, so-called bridge, between the influence of, let's say of Bruegel and other work at the time influenced by Bruegel, and the work that I do now is such a wide one after all, really, except in superficial terms. I think that Bruegel actually is as abstract as anything I'm doing now. You know, in terms of real basic aesthetics of painting, and so forth. So that the bridge was really one of subject matter, perhaps, more than anything else, and superficial style.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, of course, Bruegel derived his symbols, his motives, from, you know, from the life around him, from nature, from the life around him.

EDWARD CHAVEZ: Yes, well, that

JOSEPH TROVATO: What do your motives come from?

EDWARD CHAVEZ: Well, that was the thing that we were talking about before, that it was . . . that I mentioned before, that the subject matter was what was similar to Bruegel's. He was a so-called genre painter and the painting I was doing at the time, and American painters were doing on the projects, was also American painting specifically, and it was influenced by the life around you and the painting that I'm doing now, although it is abstract in style, is also based on my personal experiences with nature, not with people specifically, but with nature, including people, so that it's an experience that I have come in contact with, a real experience, then it's transferred into abstract terms for me. So it's perhaps a very personal statement in terms of paint and canvas, but the original experience is still, originally, pretty much the same as it was at that time and as I think it was with Bruegel.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see. This record of the Thirties that the Archives of American Art is doing will be . . . will provide a wonderful picture of the government's role in art as it was done in the past, and I can imagine that should the government ever undertake sponsorship along these lines that this information that you are giving us and that many artists and administrators are giving us will prove most helpful. Let me ask you, would you favor having the government enter in once more into art sponsorship?

EDWARD CHAVEZ: Very definitely so. As I suggested before, I had reservations, certain reservations about the project in those days in relation to the artist, and I have reservations now about the possibilities that might arise, adverse possibilities that might arise in a case like that, but I think generally it's a . . . they should, I think definitely . . . the government should recognize the artist's part in the cultural society and do something about it. I wouldn't even begin to suggest how it should be administered because I'm not an administrator and wouldn't know how to go about it, but I think there should be government recognition and that the government should take part in the general picture of American art and the artist. The role is one . . . I don't know what role it should be, but there should be a sponsorship of some sort of American painting and art generally.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Of course, when we consider the picture of art today, compared to what it was in the Thirties . . . well, I think that what I started to say before we were interrupted by the telephone was that in the Thirties there were comparatively few opportunities for artists. There were fewer galleries, there were fewer collectors and even, well, museums and art centers that have . . . that have developed all over the country in recent years. Today we have . . . this picture has just about reversed itself.

EDWARD CHAVEZ: Yes.

JOSEPH TROVATO: And the competition for the serious artist must be a tremendous one these days.

EDWARD CHAVEZ: Joe, I don't quite understand. Are you saying that there's no . . . that there might not be a need for government sponsorship in that the artist is more . . . there's more opportunity for him at the moment, or are you . . . are you suggesting something of this sort?

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, that's what . . . yes, what I had in mind.

EDWARD CHAVEZ: Yes. Well, I don't think it's a question of . . . here's one crux of the matter. It isn't the matter of support for the individual artist as it was in the project days where it was in a sense a question of the need of the artist in a practical sense. So it . . . regardless . . . even though there is more acceptance of art, more galleries, more dealers, that still doesn't negate the fact that there should be an acceptance and recognition officially of American art.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see.

EDWARD CHAVEZ: In other words, there are two different areas.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yes.

EDWARD CHAVEZ: It isn't a question of the need of the individual artist economically, but of the need to recognize the cultural contribution that the artist makes to our country, to America.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yes. I think you're making your point very well. I want to thank you very much for giving us your thoughts and ideas and recollections on this subject and we are most appreciative that you have given me all of this time.

EDWARD CHAVEZ: Well, I'm always very glad to talk about the project days. I have a very good feeling about them.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Than you very much again.

[END OF INTERVIEW]