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Oral history interview with Louie H. Ewing, 1964 Jan

Contact Information

Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/services/questions
www.aaa.si.edu/

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Louie H. Ewing on January 7, 1964. The interview took place in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and was conducted by Sylvia Glidden Loomis for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's New Deal and the Arts project.

The original transcript was edited. In 2022 the Archives created a more verbatim transcript. Additional information from the original transcript that seemed relevant was added in brackets and given an -Ed. attribution. 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

SYLVIA LOOMIS: When we were interrupted by the telephone ringing, I was just about to say that it happens that Mr. Louie Ewing is the present husband of Vernon Hunter's widow, and he was one of the artists who was involved in the WPA Art Project in New Mexico, so I'm going to ask him a few questions about his experiences on the Projects, too. Are you a Native New Mexican, Mr. Ewing, or—?

LOUIE EWING: No, I'm from Idaho.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And what was your art background?

LOUIE EWING: Well, I went to California and studied at Santa Maria School of Art for a couple of years, and then I trained for commercial art, mainly. I was going to be a big-shot commercial artist, make millions of dollars. [Laughs.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, I see. Did you ever do it?

LOUIE EWING: No. I—[They laugh.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Not yet, not yet. And when did you come to New Mexico?

LOUIE EWING: I came to New Mexico in 1935, and I came here to teach in this [Idola School - Ed.] Remember the—oh, no, yeah, that was before your time.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, I didn't come until '49.

LOUIE EWING: Well, there was an influx of artists and musicians and dancers from New York to San Francisco and all around, and I was invited to teach. I was just out of art school, but I was asked to teach in the crafts and print department. And it was an experimental school. Beniamino Bufano and—well, I can't remember some of the other people, but they were quite well-known.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: That was here in Santa Fe?

LOUIE EWING: No, they came from San Francisco—and that was here, yes, at Mrs. Cassidy's house.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, I didn't know about that.

LOUIE EWING: That whole compound was taken over, and the houses all around there.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

LOUIE EWING: And Bronson Cutting supported it, but he was killed that summer.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, [inaudible].

LOUIE EWING: Yeah, a plane accident. But it was quite an experience just out of art school. And

to talk to these people, be associated with them, was quite an experience.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. What happened to that school?

LOUIE EWING: Well, it folded up that fall. Too many personalities and difficulties. They were going to build a school out on the Rio Grande somewhere. They had some land picked out. But, well, the whole thing just folded up because the personalities didn't get along.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. Well, that must have been just about the time that the WPA Art Project opened in New Mexico. So—and you were employed on that. Did you start work there soon after the Project opened? Or—

LOUIE EWING: No, that was about two years after. I taught my own little school I had during the summers. And then I had various jobs. I worked with the McCrossen Weavers. And I never did any weaving before, but Mr. McCrossen said, You can learn how, so, I said, I can. So, I tried it, and worked a while, and then I taught in a country day school. Thir—let's see, sixth, seventh, and eighth grade. The Breese children, and a group of that type of people. That was a very interesting experience.

And I kind of took everything I could, until finally, everything ran out, and there wasn't any more jobs. So, then, Vernon offered me a chance—because he needed an engraver for this Index of American Design.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, yes, that was [the portfolio of the Santos -Ed.]? [Cross talk.]

LOUIE EWING: Santos—[inaudible] portfolio, yes, the Spanish Colonial thing. And he was short one engraver. So, I did that.

[00:05:07]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Then, was that the only type of thing you did on the Project?

LOUIE EWING: No, then he kind of delegated me as an experimental artist. I was here at home base, and he could talk to me, and when new things came in, like mosaic—and silk screen was just starting out then.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, yes.

LOUIE EWING: And I was one of the first ones to experiment with silk-screen printing. And I remember at first—Eliseo Rodriguez [ph], a Spanish boy, was my helper. And our first print, I think, took us about three days to produce. [Laughs.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUIE EWING: Because [laughs] we made our squeegee to move the paint across the screen out of an auto tire, because there wasn't a squeegee invented then. And then, we used a window-cleaning thing, and that didn't work, because the oil melted the rubber. And finally, the manufacturers of these materials wrote to us—all of us who were experimenting with silk screen, to find out what kind of paint we wanted and what kind of squeegees, and they worked out composition squeegees that wouldn't melt—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, yes.

LOUIE EWING: —with oil. So, I was in on the first of that. And that job, learning about silk screen, opened up a job at the Laboratory of Anthropology with Mr. Chapman, Kenneth Chapman. He had some of the fine old Indian blankets that he wanted printed. I mean—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Reproduced?

LOUIE EWING: Reproduced. Drawings of them reproduced for museums. And we made up a portfolio of those. It took us, oh, about a year, I guess.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: That was a private job, though, wasn't it? Not a WPA job?

LOUIE EWING: No, that was a WPA job.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, it was?

LOUIE EWING: The Laboratory of Anthropology furnished the materials.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, they sponsored it, I see.

LOUIE EWING: They sponsored it, that was one of those things, they sponsored it. And then the WPA paid our salaries. And I had two boys working for me there on that. And that gave me my start of where I could break away from the WPA soon after that, and I had my own business. I was trained in commercial art and, like, business houses would call me to do a job. I could make the drawings and reproduce 'em for 'em without having to go through two, three hands, like engravers and so forth, like that. So, it really worked out very well for me.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. Did you train others in the silk-screen process?

LOUIE EWING: Yes, I trained some of the Indians. I went to the Indian school and trained them. And the best one of the Indians that I trained was Mirabal [ph], who was killed in that invasion of Europe.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, yes. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUIE EWING: And, I don't know, very few of them used it much. They liked to paint directly, and the reproduction business didn't interest them much.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. But you see quite many of them nowadays, of the silk-screen reproductions.

LOUIE EWING: I think that's Chuck Barrows. The Tewa Enterprises do that.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, were you involved with him?

LOUIE EWING: No. Chuck learned that in California, and then he went to—I think, the Metropolitan and worked there under somebody who was reproducing those things, and he worked with him a while. I didn't teach Chuck Barrows.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: [Cross talk.] But that wasn't on WPA?

LOUIE EWING: No.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, I knew that he did the silk screen work, and I just wondered if that was—and he also was on WPA—

LOUIE EWING: Yeah, he did painting. [Cross talk.] Watercolor.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —but did other types of work. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUIE EWING: He wasn't—silk screen.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Were you—well, I'm pretty sure that you were allowed creative freedom under Vernon Hunter? He was your immediate supervisor.

LOUIE EWING: Well, yes. We—he didn't know much about it. In fact, he didn't know anything about it. He just let me study and work it out and fight it out.

[00:10:13]

It was quite a struggle, there, for a while, because we didn't have the material. We didn't know what to ask for. We didn't know what mediums to use. Like, there's an extender base that makes the paint possible to move over the silk, see, but we didn't know about it. We just used straight paint out of the can. [Laughs.] It was gummy, and it was impossible to use. But the manufacturers of—Naz Dar Company, especially, was very helpful that way. And Ramon Shivá.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, yes.

LOUIE EWING: And I worked with him on paint that was—well, for instance, I did the first illustrations in books with silk screen. The first silk-screen paint stood up off the paper, and it was quite impractical to use in a book. It was all right as a print, but not very good. But he concocted a medium where it would go right into the paper like any—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Printer's ink.

LOUIE EWING: Printer's ink, yes. It was a very fine—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And this wasn't—this hadn't been done anywhere in the country?

LOUIE EWING: No, I was the first one to print books. Did several for the Laboratory of Anthropology.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, I've been seeing your prints ever since I've been in Santa Fe, which is 15 years.

LOUIE EWING: Well, and also, the Navajo Museum, Mary Wheelwright, you see. I did several of her books. And we won [a "Fifty Books" -Ed.] award on one of the books. So, that was great.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Show that you've certainly got that problem licked, [laughs] didn't you? Now, after you had completed your work, do you know where any of it was allocated?

LOUIE EWING: My work—I did very little easel painting. The Laboratory of Anthropology, of course, distributed those to libraries, and museums, I suppose. I forgot how—what the edition was, 250 or 500 portfolios of these blankets. And I suppose they went to libraries and museums.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And that was really the major job that you did, then, while you were on the—would you say?

LOUIE EWING: Yeah, that was the—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: That was the big one.

LOUIE EWING: That was the big project.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Then you left soon after that?

LOUIE EWING: Then I left soon after that, yes. I wasn't on very long.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, my—one of the questions here was, What were the major problems you had to contend with as an artist? I suppose in this case, it was just trying to lick your medium, wasn't it?

LOUIE EWING: Well, yeah, I had no problems with Vernon.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: No, well, if he was your supervisor, I understand that. So, how did you feel that you were benefited, other than financially, by the work?

LOUIE EWING: Well, it—it's a big jump from an art school to a professional field, you see. And that gave me a wonderful opportunity to just jump right into the professional field without a terrible lot of competition. Then, by the time I'd had a year or two of this, I was able to hold my own. And—[Cross talk.] [Inaudible.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: So—[inaudible]—so, it really gave you a start, didn't it?

LOUIE EWING: Yeah, that's what it did. And it gave me confidence.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: How do you think the other artists felt about the Project? The ones that you were associated with?

LOUIE EWING: Well, I think I've heard them express—a lot of us think it'd be a wonderful thing to come back.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, really? Well, that was actually my next question. If the government were to subsidize another Art Project, do you think it should be handled in the same way that this one was?

LOUIE EWING: Well, I think it'd be about the only way it could be handled. I couldn't see how it could be handled any better.

[00:15:00]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes. Well, do you have any other comments that you would like to make?

LOUIE EWING: I don't know, I—the only thing, I could just repeat that it was a wonderful chance from getting out of art school to make the transition to professional. And besides making it possible to eat, because you just couldn't get a job anywhere. At that time, it was just impossible. Until finally, it began to ease up a little bit, and I saw my chance, and Vernon told me, he said, You'd better start making prints, before somebody else jumps on it. And I had already been starting—making my own prints to sell, like color prints, besides the commercial work.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes. You did a good many of the Santos in the—[Cross talk.] I remember [inaudible] that impressed me.

LOUIE EWING: That was one of my—the Laboratory then picked up, and they needed memberships. So, that was one of the schemes, to—see Mr. Jim Young took over. And the Rockefellers, I think, were in back of the Laboratory of Anthropology, and their responsibility had stopped at a certain time. So, then, they were in a financial bind, so they built up their memberships by issuing these prints from their collection.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, yes.

LOUIE EWING: And that was a wonderful experience, because I had about three very good artists, like Chapman and Dr. Mera [ph]—well, they were the two real artists, but very carefully examined these drawings and prints. And it forced me to extend myself to make the certain effects that had to be gotten on each one of these different print objects. So, that was a very good training ground, and they really were rough to pass their inspections.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: [Inaudible] their standards were pretty high.

LOUIE EWING: Yes. Well, they had to have it look right, you see, and it really was a challenge, every one of these things.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, it was nice to hear about an artist that really found the Project helpful and gained something from it that was useful, you know, in a professional way from then on in. And I'm very grateful to you for these comments. Thank you very much.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]