



Smithsonian  
*Archives of American Art*

Oral history interview Opal R. Fleckenstein,  
1965 Nov. 19 and 20

**Contact Information**

Reference Department  
Archives of American Art  
Smithsonian Institution  
Washington, D.C. 20560  
[www.aaa.si.edu/askus](http://www.aaa.si.edu/askus)

# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Opal Fleckenstein on November 19 and 20, 1965. The interview took place in Spokane, Washington, and was conducted by Dorothy Bestor for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

## Interview

(Mrs. Fleckenstein was a student of Guy Anderson, Kenneth Downer, and James Fitzgerald at the Spokane Art Center, 1938-1940. She also taught classes there. She has been painting and teaching art ever since, and has since 1949 been an instructor in art at Eastern Washington State College, at Cheney, Washington. She exhibits widely throughout the Northwest)

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: I was writing down here a few things -- when it began, the fact that there had been little in Spokane of anything that could be considered modern, and I myself had had very little training, but had come in contact with modern painting at the Seattle Art Museum and at the University, in Seattle, where I had trained, and at this time the American School of Painting was flourishing, it was the time of the post office murals and a sort of forerunner of modern, it was influenced by modern painting but was not yet modern painting as we know it, and certainly nothing of the Cubist School. At the Spokane Art Center we did quite a bit of painting on the scene, I remember my first paintings were going out and painting areas of Spokane, sometimes the lower part of Spokane which seemed more picturesque, and beneath the bridges. We painted industrial areas and things of this nature. All of us would travel out to, oh, maybe the railroad tracks or out beyond the river, and we'd settle down for painting all day and at this time we were painting with egg tempera --

DOROTHY BESTOR: If we can start over, and you can tell me about how Spokane seemed to you when you came to it just as the Art Center was being founded?

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: I had just come to Spokane, I had been living here just a very short time when I began to hear about the Art Center, that the WPA was going to open an Art Center in Spokane. I was very excited about it because I had had little opportunity to study art, I had attended the University of Washington one summer and had seen the things that they were doing there. Walter Isaacs was head of the department. It was quite a shock to me to find out about Cubist things, I'm afraid that the work I was doing at that time was pretty conservative, it was competent, but conservative. I was in the habit of doing pretty little still-lives and kind of romantic landscapes and I had even done some copy work although I was very dissatisfied with this sort of thing. But then I had attended the University of Washington one summer and found out that I knew almost nothing about painting. After I had come home I had studied some about Van Gogh and Gauguin and there wasn't much in the Coeur d'Alene library where I was living at that time. Then as soon as I came to Spokane I began to read in the papers about the opening of the Art Center, the WPA Art Project in Spokane. I was very excited about it because I hadn't had enough time to study and I was very interested in the new things and oh, halfway afraid perhaps, too, of what was going to happen to me because I wasn't convinced that I really wanted to do modern painting. I think that my students and colleagues would be probably rather surprised at this now because my painting is certainly known as anywhere from abstract to non-objective, and perhaps because I knew what it meant to be a copyist and how deadly that kind of work was, I have been even more vehement in my advocacy of modern creative kind of things. I was skeptical about the WPA, I just didn't really believe that they would give people a chance to paint the way they wanted to and to do things what I was so anxious to learn.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Excuse me one moment. Had you had any contact with any WPA Art Center or art project in Idaho or anywhere else before you came here?

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: There had been nothing. The first that I had ever read that it was happening was after I came to Spokane. There was no WPA Art Center in Coeur d'Alene -- well, in the northern part of Idaho that I know of any time. A number of years later I started teaching modern painting in Coeur d'Alene at the North Idaho Junior College, and even ten to fifteen years after the WPA Art Project had been in Spokane this was still quite a shock to Coeur d'Alene.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh!

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: I think it was a running battle as much as it was teaching. Some of the people that I taught there continued to paint for a number of years. I taught some classes at the Junior College and I have come in contact with some of the students since then, but this was years and years after the WPA Art Project had been closed. I started teaching in Coeur d'Alene in 1944 I think was my first year at the Junior College, and it was a terrific shock, the president of the college found himself defending me most of the time --

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh, really?

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: -- he wasn't really sure that he wanted to defend me, but I was a teacher so he felt compelled.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Who criticized you? Students or their parents, or townspeople?

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: The students and the townspeople and the other faculty members, they were certainly unconvinced that this was the right way. It was radical modernism and it was, oh, under all kinds of suspicion. I was quite frequently criticized as being a Communist, and my tendencies were absolutely the opposite of this and I was appalled that I could be considered a Communist simply because I believed in freedom of art, which seemed, of course, just the opposite of what the Communists were advocating.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes. Your detractors were using guilt by association in a sort of reverse way, weren't they?

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: I think that -- well, it hasn't been too many years since I heard modern artists in Spokane still called communistic in tendency simply because they do things that other people can't understand. And it shows the conservative attitude that we have. I suppose it wasn't any more than it was in other places but we are a little more remote, there are less avenues of communication here than perhaps in Seattle, and certainly not in some of the centers to the east of us, but in general I think this is somewhat a picture of art across the country.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes.

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: When the Art Center began, I remember many of the paintings that were brought in for exhibit were ugly, regional, Realistic School - John Steuart Curry and Thomas Hart Benton and that group, where they did look somewhat strange to us then, and now looking back they look strange to me because they're so realistic --

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes.

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: -- but at the time they had enough of a touch of modernism that they had that style -- well, it was just a curious kind of feeling. And then, of course, there were the first American protest political kinds of painting, too. I think the artists were feeling that the war was coming, they had this feeling although perhaps logically they weren't able to say what was happening to the people but I remember many of the paintings were excessively dark and many of them were brutal in appearance and --

DOROTHY BESTOR: You're speaking now of the paintings that came on the traveling exhibit -- ?

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: The traveling exhibits - the ones that were important, that they felt were from important artists of that era, and then there were the post office murals we had which were quite popular, which seem - well, it's a good thing I suppose that some of them have been painted over, although they would be historically interesting because they were so realistic and they did have this protest quality to them.

DOROTHY BESTOR: A surprising number of them haven't been painted over, you know. As you travel across the country, as we did this summer, you do see quite a number still there, and there are many in Seattle.

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: I remember that they were unhappy, many of the artists were unhappy because the paintings were being painted over, because people felt they were so radical, and now we find them a little difficult to look at because they're so conservative.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Right.

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: And we wonder whether it wasn't painting so much, it was more politics than it was painting.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Or propaganda?

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: Or propaganda. Or painting and politics -- or propaganda and politics together, but certainly not much of painting. All it was, was that it was at least painted with a paintbrush, I suppose that's something, but they had nothing of the flavor of what we expect from paintings today. But I suppose it was a forerunner of modern because at least it was away from the little nudes dancing on the patio in the moonlight, with the romantic sort of theatre backgrounds that we had been accustomed to up until this time.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Would you say that it was your courses at the Spokane Art Center that first made you aware, then, of modern painting, really, and its possibilities?

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: No. I had attended several summers before at the University of Washington summer session and I had seen the students doing Cubist type things at that time, and in the years that followed - I think this was about four or five years before the Spokane Art Center opened - I had gone many times to the Seattle Art Museum and I had become acquainted with the paintings of Picasso, Van Gogh and Gauguin, so I was a little more prepared than some of the others, but I still hadn't felt that modern painting was the kind of thing that I wanted to do. I was still very much unconvinced. But the teachers that we had, the ones who came first to the Art Center, were very gentle, but they were insistent that we do things that were completely original, and to make it impossible for any of the students to do anything else they took us with paintbrushes and paints and what we used for canvas, sometimes it was just board or paper, we would go out to places in Spokane and paint right on the scene, and every artist knows it's very difficult to paint on the scene, there are the ants and the wind and the hot sun and --

DOROTHY BESTOR: And the commentators.

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: And the commentators, and we always had a group that would watch us, that's true, but most of the time we went to areas of Spokane that weren't quite -- well, they weren't the fashionable areas, many times they were down on Trent and it was surprising that the people who saw us there accepted us much easier than the ones who came to the fashionable kinds of preview openings that we had.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh, that's interesting.

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: And they would comment about these things and see how we were doing, and they didn't seem to be as disturbed about it as people who had been well-off, who had been privileged, and particularly ones who had perhaps studied in the East. And I remember there were some people in Spokane who had studied in the East and studied in Europe, and they had a pretty clear cut idea of what art was all about, and they believed it was more or less either copied from the scene or copied in the manner that somebody else had painted before. Of course, I suppose we changed that, we didn't paint the careful little realistic things, but then after a while we were all doing modern in the same kind of a sense, but at least it opened a new avenue, and it put us more in touch with what was going on in the East and had been going on in the East since the Armory show in 1913. It seems incredible that it took this long to really make a dent in what was happening in Spokane.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Well, you know that is amazing, from 1913 to 1938, well twenty-five years.

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: Twenty-five years, and I'm not saying that there weren't some modern people in Spokane -

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh, of course.

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: I know that one of the Greenough girls had traveled abroad and she had a Paul Klee, and I was very fascinated with this. She talked about Klee and Picasso and Matisse and ones that had just been -- well, they were just strange names to me at that time. We painted with egg tempera, they introduced us to egg tempera principally because it was very inexpensive and many of us were quite hard up --

DOROTHY BESTOR: Which of your instructors particularly -- ?

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: Guy Anderson and Kenneth Downer were the ones that insisted on us using egg tempera. And we had to mix our own, and we had a little formula whereby we mixed water and oil and varnish all together, and this was the medium that took the dry color, which we bought at one of the paint stores, and it was very inexpensive. And we would do some of the paint up every morning before the classes. It was all right in the wintertime, we could keep it quite nicely, but in the summertime the egg in this egg tempera would begin to spoil within a day --

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh, dear!

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: And sometimes we'd come into the studio and it was really loud.

DOROTHY BESTOR: You didn't go on with egg tempera after your Art Center training?

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: I did paint with it for a while, but as soon as I could afford it and because my time was limited, with my family, I started painting with oil and watercolor because I found it so much more adaptable, so much easier. It was nice, when we were working with a group, to mix up about a quart of medium and then go around and pour some in a cup for each one; but to mix up one egg with a little oil and varnish and so on, it was quite a chore, it took so much time that I finally abandoned that. There was one very nice thing about the egg tempera, the colors were always matte, they didn't shine like they do with oil, and they were so soft and lovely that I still have some of the paintings and I admire that quality in it. And it did help us to achieve a really modern quality to it also. Besides the things that we painted around Spokane down in Peaceful Valley and along Trent

Avenue and the railroad tracks and the industrial area of Spokane, we also had still-life drawing which, of course in the wintertime why we had weeds and grasses and very common ordinary things. I remember being surprised at the ordinary qualities of things that we painted. And there were classes in life drawing. I don't remember that I ever took life drawing classes at the Art Center, but I do know that they had it. And I was particularly interested in watercolor. As I pointed out to you before, I had one class in watercolor and then later I found myself teaching watercolor not only at the North Idaho Junior College but later at Eastern Washington State College, and I have continued to teach watercolor over the years, although at that time I had had only one official course in watercolor. Of course, I had practiced a great deal on my own. I did stacks and stacks of drawings and paintings which I destroyed, most of them, so it wasn't that this was all my training. I had trained myself a great deal, but it was at least the inspiration for much of what I was able to teach to other people later on. At the very beginning of the Art Center I was -- I continued to be very amazed at what was happening because the people were so full of - the people who were administrating it were so full of life and vitality and I didn't realize how unusual it was then, but these people were all creative people. They were painters and sculptors and really dedicated artists, and I think that this is the most amazing thing about the Art Center, I am sure that this is what made it a success, and if there's any possibility that any of this should come under question again I think that I cannot emphasize too strongly, since I have had twenty years of experience since then, that it is the creative people that can really run an art school, and it should never be administrators or politicians only, they should be people who are practicing because only then and only while the Art Center was run by people who were painting and doing sculpture and ceramics and vitally interested in the arts. As long as we had that kind of people we had a vital program. At the finish, as it began to change and people were not so much interested in painting and teaching at the same time, then the Art Center and the whole program began to lose its vitality.

DOROTHY BESTOR: When you say "people were not so much interested in teaching and painting at the same time" do you mean people on the staff of the Center?

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: Well, that's the way it seemed to me. Some of them were interested in painting and some of them were interested in teaching --

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh, I see.

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: -- but they didn't come together so much.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes.

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: And I don't know that the ones who taught us first were both interested in teaching and painting, but it was almost imperative that they be interested in teaching because that was what earned them their livelihood, and I think they did it very, very well. Whether they were feeling that they were put upon and they would like to be out doing their own painting or not, I imagine that this is true to a certain extent at least, but they certainly did a wonderful job of stressing the creative approach to painting. And I learned much about what I have later used in my classes, for instance, from Guy Anderson and later from Fitzgerald; they were, as has been proved by later history, really tremendously creative and effective people.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes, they must have been. And Kenneth Downer too, would you include him among those?

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: Kenneth Downer was a real revelation to me as an artist and a teacher and as a person.

DOROTHY BESTOR: In what way?

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: Because he was so interested in so many things, interested in things that I had perhaps been interested in before, but I hadn't heard -- well, particularly a man talking about being interested in the things that he was interested in, like fog, I remember one morning we came to the Art Center and he talked about the fog and I can still hear him saying that he liked the fog, and this was a surprise to me because most people said, "Oh, the fog! Here it is foggy again." And they'd go around moping all day because it was foggy or rainy. And I remember he said, "I particularly like the fog because it encloses some things and excludes others. It has a very intimate feeling about it, and it's beautiful. You should really enjoy the fog." And he went on for several minutes discussing what he enjoyed about the fog, and requested us to paint it and then I realized I hadn't really looked at fog, I had looked at trees and rocks and lakes and the more conventional kinds of pictorial things, but here was somebody talking to me about fog. And then I remember that he picked up a handful of nuts and bolts one day and said, "Aren't they beautiful? Aren't they wonderful?" And I thought he was joking at first, but found out then that he really admired these. He said that they had beautiful, wonderful shapes, and he said that he liked mechanic's tools and machinist's tools because they were so precise, and their shapes were so very functional. So in many ways the Art Center enlarged our horizons. I remember we had skeletons sometimes to paint from, portions of dead cows or horses that were found out on the plains, or sometimes a vase was filled with nothing but weeds, and of course the bottles, the bottles that Picasso and Braque had used so freely. And we had still-lifes that were similar to those. So that after we had been painting with that for a while it became more familiar for us to look at the paintings of Braque and Picasso and see what they had been trying to do.

Downer, of course, had come from the East, and he had traveled all over the world at that time and I understand that he has been traveling a great deal since, but it was remarkable. I had met other people who had traveled, but I had never met other people who had traveled and had actually used their eyes to see as Downer had. And he would talk to us about the things he had seen, not only the things in the museums but the kind of visual experience that so many of us miss, and I think unless a person is an artist perhaps he might still be missing it. Some of this I tried to bring to my students. He had taken photographs, but I take photographs and slides, and now recently I've been working with movies -- but always with the idea of trying to bring to people some visual impact, the kind of thing that they miss, and I know they miss it because my students can't draw, just as I could not draw the fog, so they cannot even draw a tree because they haven't looked at a tree, they haven't really looked. I think so many times about the students that I teach, some -- I get discouraged sometimes and think of all the years I have taught and the immense amount of energy that I have put into it, and yet there have been so few who have become artists, but then I also think that in my happier moods perhaps that I have taught a whole group of students how to really see.

DOROTHY BESTOR: You must have.

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: At least they can't come into a class without learning to see some things that they haven't seen before. Not only Guy Anderson, who was such a vivacious kind of person - I suppose "vivacious" is not quite the right word because oftentimes that's applied more to a woman than it is to a man - but perhaps "vital" would be a better word for him because he was very masculine, but not afraid to say that he enjoyed painting and enjoyed art and enjoyed actually just getting to see and think about things that art is concerned with. And then Guy Anderson was one of the first ones also, and Guy Anderson has always been one I have admired a great deal, he was so quiet, so very observing, and so intuitive in his approach, intuitive in his appreciation of people. Guy Anderson had studied with Mark Tobey and Morris Graves and he talked to us a great deal about these two people -- Mark Tobey and Morris Graves --

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh, did he?

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: -- and I actually feel today that I am acquainted with Morris Graves because Guy Anderson had talked about him so much. And because of Guy Anderson I later learned to know Mark Tobey. And Mark Tobey after the Art Center had closed became a great influence on my life, too.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh, really.

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: And the thing that I noticed most and remember forever about these people was that they were so deeply intuitive about what I was trying to do. I didn't have to tell them that I was trying to do such and such. They knew what I was trying to do --

DOROTHY BESTOR: Perhaps that was because you were doing it fairly successfully already?

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: Well, it might be, but I didn't feel that I was doing it successfully. It was a struggle. I was continually searching for new ways of painting, for new ways of expressing myself, and, of course, it was very difficult because no one but Guy Anderson or Mark Tobey and these other people I have mentioned - Downer and Fitzgerald had ever understood anything I was trying to do, so it was so refreshing to have Mark Tobey saying, "I know what you're trying to say, Opal, but this isn't quite the way you want to do it. Now perhaps you should consider this or that, or some other approach "slightly different" than what I had done before. Although I only saw Mark Tobey perhaps about six or eight times, he made a very deep impression on my life and on my way of painting, and whenever I paint I try to remember what Mark Tobey did and how he influenced me and what a deeply philosophical and intuitive person he is.

DOROTHY BESTOR: I feel we should have a little interruption for a moment.

(Interruption)

DOROTHY BESTOR: You were saying you had one awfully interesting story you suddenly remembered about --

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: This was many years after the Art Center had closed. I was teaching in Coeur d'Alene and I was trying to teach modern art and I was coming up against the resistance of all the people. Mr. Keldow, President of the Junior College, who was my employer had face enough to hire me although he didn't really believe in modern painting. He was very skeptical about modern art, but he would stand back of me all the time. The students were pretty skeptical about the whole thing but some of them after a while I was able to convince, - then they'd go home and see the things at home and talk to Momma and Poppa, and I would turn out to be a radical modern artist and under suspicion. This was the kind of atmosphere that I taught in all the time. I had been driving back and forth and riding on the bus and it wasn't very easy I remember one evening after I had been working all day, I was very tired and I got on the bus from Coeur d'Alene to Spokane and it was a very, very snowy evening and the bus had to travel so slow, and a girl came in and sat down beside me. She had been

a student for a while and we got to talking and reminiscing as people do oftentimes on the bus to pass the time when they're a little bored and wishing, you know that the journey were over. I think we were about halfway to Spokane when she said, "Yes," she said, "modern artists -- well, they're just incomprehensible. I'm never quite convinced, I remember when I was going to high school in Lewiston and my English teacher -- " parenthetically here I began having some really surprising thoughts, because my sister was an English teacher in Lewiston, and she said, "My English teacher, she was very good at directing plays and I was in a play and after play practice one night she invited us up to her place for doughnuts and coffee," and this sounded more than ever like my sister, but I kept still, and she said, "Well, she had," - not knowing of course that I was any relation to her at all - the student continued and said, "Oh yes, she had a sister in Spokane, the sister was taking modern art lessons or something, and she had the awfulest picture there I have ever seen." And I said, "What was the picture about?" And she said, "Well, it was a little dark house and in the background were some strange, dark trees and dark clouds and a dark blue river." And I said, "Well, it doesn't sound so strange to me." But I was really beginning to wonder if this could possibly be my painting, because it did sound like some paintings that I had done and I kept thinking and being very careful not to reveal my identity, and I said, "Well, anything else about it?" she said, "Well, the worst part I haven't told you yet, there was a bottle sitting right in the front of the house, and some flowers, and it was the ugliest painting I've ever see, I just hated that painting." And I said, "How many years since you've seen it?" And she said, "Oh, it was about five years ago." And I said, "What was your English teacher's name?" And she said, "Erma Young." And I said, "She's my sister! And that's my painting!"

DOROTHY BESTOR: What did the girl do?

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: Oh, she was so embarrassed but she did laugh a little and I just laughed and laughed until I got hysterical. This is a painting that I had done when Guy Anderson was conducting the art classes and we had gone down to Peaceful Valley in Spokane and it happened to be a painting that Guy Anderson was very, very much impressed with because it had some of the flavor of the realist school and yet it had - it was just a house in Peaceful Valley which may be standing there yet - a rather strange-colored yellow ochre house and the bright yellow flowers that grow wild along the banks of the Spokane River, and a bottle that I happened to find there. And I had particularly liked the painting. I wish I had it now, but somehow, somewhere --

DOROTHY BESTOR: Does your sister still have it?

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: No, it's disappeared. My sister has found that my later, more colorful paintings are more to her liking. She didn't like the painting very well either but, being my sister, she felt a certain kind of loyalty and so she had the painting. But I think that something really strange had happened to the girl. She had said she hated the painting and it was the ugliest thing that she had ever seen and yet she described it to me in detail and hadn't seen it for five years and even at that she had only seen it for -- what? -- for the space of one hour perhaps, and still it had impressed itself on her memory.

DOROTHY BESTOR: That is really extraordinary.

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: So even though people say sometimes that they don't like modern painting, it's surprising how much they can remember about it, at least it's not something that they forget, and that's something.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes. And you think this girl was typical of a certain conservative student mentality you had to work against in high school?

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: Yes. Very much so. And I think it's typical of modern painting. I have people come to me who will say, "Oh, Opal, do you remember that painting that you have?" And then they will go into a minute description of the painting, and I can't remember the painting, I -- it sounds a little bit familiar like -- well, some of my work perhaps but I have no recollection of the painting many times, and they'll say, "Well, that was seven years ago," and they have given me a minute, stroke-by-stroke account of the painting and they wish they had it and yet during that time particularly I never sold a painting, just never sold a painting, and people were simply horrified and yet the very fact that they remember them so clearly shows that -- well, a little success for me but at least something very strong and powerful for modern painting.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes, it certainly does.

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: Not something that you like, not something that's pretty and antsy-pantsy but something that has a vitality, it has some kind of a hold on people, and I tell them that, "Well, you hate it, so that's important. You hate it, that's something."

DOROTHY BESTOR: That's the way I described to you in more detail the big white canvas by Jan Evans with the little black directional arrow than any of the paintings I like in the Northwest Annual.

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: It's the shock of nothingness.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes.

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: We are so expecting painting to be so much, so much, so complex, and so full of so many things that we can't understand, and then perhaps existentially something -- I wouldn't have been able to say a few years ago, perhaps even a few months ago, this is a kind of expression of existential philosophy, the philosophy of nothing, the philosophy of as the Spanish would say, "Nada, nada, nada, nothing, nothing, nothing." And this is the intense kind of reaction that comes when we find some of the things and the values that we have had previously are either falling apart or not standing up to the kind of stresses that modern life puts upon it, and so as a reaction from that, painters do the kind of thing that turns out to be just nothing, because that's what we feel our world is. It's nothing. I'm not really interested in doing that kind of painting. I feel that this is an extreme expression of the tensions and the unhappiness of our time. And as an expression of that time I consider it a vital way of painting perhaps, or not a vital way of painting but at least a legitimate way of painting. I feel that it is perhaps an over emphasis on this mood that we have so recently discovered in ourselves, because up until recent years we have had certain values, we hold these truths to be self-evident - we have said, we believe in mother and home, and God and country, we believe in hard work, we believe in getting up early and going to bed early or late as the case may be, but we have believed in certain things, and now as a reaction to two world wars and to the empirical knowledge of science, we have come suddenly to realize that these truths that we held to be self-evident are no longer self-evident and are no longer perhaps able to stand the stress of our life, and we are in the process of building a new kind of world and a new kind of knowledge and a new kind of value. And we haven't come to it yet, and that's the reason that painters will paint perhaps a canvas that is huge and all white with an arrow that points in a certain direction, an arrow that points in a certain direction because we don't know which way the arrow is pointing today, we don't really know which way we're going. But at least we're coming to some kind of a philosophical crossroad where we're having to examine the things that we have held to be self-evident, and we're having to realize that we're going to have to re-vamp some of the things that we have accepted, taken for granted.

(Interruption)

(Continued the following day, November 20, 1965)

DOROTHY BESTOR: And I think we have both thought of a number of things that we wish we could have gone on with last night, so where are we?

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: Well, this will probably be different. I know the notes that I had written out last night at home, I don't have as many of them now, but perhaps I don't need as many notes to talk with, once I get started on the thing. I think that the WPA did definitely enlarge our horizon. There were so many shows, constantly there were shows, and there were a great many students going through some of them with me a little while, some of them that were there constantly and many of the students I guess have gone on although perhaps -- well, not as many as we always like to think. When such a vital thing is going it seems like there are few of us that can remember the WPA. I can remember a few people in Spokane that were with me at the WPA, but it seems like there always should be more, but then -

DOROTHY BESTOR: Who were some of those?

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: Gladys Guilbert was with me, and I can't remember some of the names right now, which really I know a quite well but --

DOROTHY BESTOR: Elsa Weaver, maybe?

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: Well, yes, of course, she - I don't see her much any more, but I know that the Art Center had quite an effect on her. And then there's some people who are still painting that I just can't say their names right at this particular moment - -

DOROTHY BESTOR: Jane Baldwin, perhaps?

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: Jane Baldwin is one, and a couple of others - Larkin, Mrs. Larkin is still painting in Spokane. But probably there are many others that are in other towns and places that we just don't know about now, and they're still painting and still very much interested in art. One of the things that made it so interesting and so vital was that there was usually a new exhibit every month and I look back now with amusement and think that we had \$7,000,000 worth of Van Gogh paintings hanging in the little -- well, rather inconspicuous little place along Monroe Street, and I know that now it would be utterly impossible to hang a Van Gogh show in a place such as this because they won't hang, won't think of hanging a show of this type without absolute fire protection and police protection and all this, and the things that they went through with when the Van Gogh Show -- I came to Seattle a few years ago -- well, Spokane just didn't have a place to show the Van Gogh show, and we had the paintings hanging there and I remember particularly "Crows over the Cornfield" - Van Gogh's - the dark blue, and how thickly he had applied the dark blue paint of the sky, and although it's unusual to have a glass over it,



at that time it had a glass over it and there was a chip of paint that had fallen off the painting and it was between the glass and the painting down on one corner.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh.

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: And I'm sure that if anything like that would happen today the Van Gogh would immediately be taken from showing, it would be considered too damaged to, too dangerous to show it.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes.

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: And so our attitudes have changed about Van Gogh, even in this short a time.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Was the Van Gogh show well received in Spokane or were people shocked by -- ?

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: I don't think that it was - I don't know that they were so shocked - I don't know whether it was attended very much or not, and I really can't remember how much other people did think about it. I guess I was just so concerned with what I felt about it and I was so delighted at having seen, at having the opportunity to see the things that -- I guess I was just egocentric enough not to care what anyone else was thinking about it. And we had photography, I expect we had a some photography - I remember that we did have the Steichen exhibit of modern photographs. I still feel that they are modern, although his work was completed some time ago. I don't remember that the Art Center did have a photography class, although it was emphasized to us quite a bit. My own interest in photography had come prior to this when I was working in, when I was in high school I had worked in a photographer's shop and he had given me the opportunity to develop the prints, to even develop the negatives for the snapshots and things like this, and I had seen all of the various processes, I had either seen them and was very familiar with them or I had had an opportunity to actually carry them out while I was still in high school. I was very poor in science but my science teacher had asked us to write a paper, so I asked her if it would be all right to write about photography so I wrote about the science involved in photography and I wrote about it not only from its scientific standpoint, that is, the chemicals and the things we used, but I also wrote about it from the standpoint of art and creativity, and the paper was accepted very well and was sent from the high school, the small high school where I went, to the state, and of course not much competition in Idaho in the state either, but I remember that I was highly delighted and felt very honored. My paper was chosen as second one in the state.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Good!

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: And I have continued my interest in photography, and I'm sure that it was here that I first met the modern idea of photography, because I did go out and take pictures of such things as lumber yards and seeing the nice vertical and horizontal lines that I found in the lumber yards. I found it rather difficult to do some of the things, though, that to find the subject matter and the kind of interpretation that I wanted but I'm sure that it had an effort on the photographs that I've taken since, and I have gone on to doing quite a bit of work with it. I have several slide cameras, a Nikon and a Pentax and recently within the last year I've been working with a Bolex 16 mm. camera, and in Mexico took two thousand feet of film, so that I have a full-length color movie, and I will be putting this where it will be available not only to the College but to other schools. I'm having a little difficulty right now getting sound with this, the music and the commentary, so that it can go to my friends and students who are out of town. You had asked earlier how I had met Mark Tobey, and I think, as I stressed before in the earlier portions of this tape, that I felt that Mark Tobey was very influential on my life. Not that I knew him so very long, but that the things he said were so important. Guy Anderson had talked about him so much that I felt that I was well acquainted with him. In 1948 I served as one of the jurors for the Northwest Artists Annual at the Seattle Volunteer Park - -

DOROTHY BESTOR: The Art Museum.

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: At the Art Museum at Volunteer Park. And while I was serving on the jury, Mark Tobey came in, and I think it was Dr. Fuller who introduced us, and I was delighted to have the opportunity to meet him, and I thought that that was probably all it would be, just an opportunity to meet him, but as I looked at the paintings later that day, Mark Tobey came in and talked to me for a few minutes and I told him that I would very much like to have an opportunity to visit with him if ye ever had the time and he said, "Well, certainly, just call me up." And on the way out he said to Kenneth Callahan, "If you have time today bring Opal over to my house this afternoon." And so I went over, that afternoon Kenneth Callahan drove me over to Mark Tobey's place and I was able to see him in his studio, he played the piano for me and he was very generous, he took twenty or thirty of the paintings out that he was going to be showing in New York later in the years and talked to me about each one and told me what he was trying to do, and then later on I came to Seattle several times and brought paintings and whenever I came why Mark Tobey would take me to dinner. I remember being very delighted with this, really happy over the whole situation, and he would take me to dinner at the Edmund Meaney [Hotel], he would talk about painting and about Paris and about Japan, and at that time he gave me a group of the drawings, the life drawings that he had done in Japan, and he had had those reproduced and so I have a set of

those today wrapped in rice paper, and I cherish them very much. He encouraged me a great deal about my painting, and pointed out the things that he thought were most interesting.

DOROTHY BESTOR: What kind of things did he point out?

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: He was especially interested in my watercolors, he said that -I remember that one time he said, "Opal, you're the only person in the Northwest that knows how to do watercolors, that really knows how to do a watercolor." And I was delighted about this and felt that that was the highest praise I could have. Unfortunately, no one else seemed to think that I was the only one that could do a watercolor. Because whenever I sent my things to the Seattle Art Museum, most of the time they were rejected, although one year I did get a prize, my teacher who I had recently met - Glen Wessels, who is now at the University of Washington, but was teaching WSU, was on the jury and I had just recently met him so I don't think that there was any - that he was trying to give a prize to me simply because I was his student - and he did say that he had been influential in selecting my painting for the prize, but --

DOROTHY BESTOR: What kind of watercolor was it?

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: It was a little watercolor very, very free and I had tossed it off rather quickly and I had sent it to Margaret Tompkins (I was still visiting with her and talking with her about my art at that time) and she wrote back and said, "I like your paintings very much, I'm going to put them in a frame and send them to the Seattle Art Museum this fall with your permission." And so she did that for me, which I felt was very generous of her when she was so busy herself.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Very.

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: And later I received the prize. It was -- I looked at it with some chagrin however, it was supposed to be a \$25 prize which really seemed small enough, but when I got it it was an \$18.75 savings bond (If I kept it for ten years I'd have \$25!)

DOROTHY BESTOR: Well, "art endures," and so apparently prizes are supposed to last a while, too!

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: It endures all right, and I look at this with some chagrin also, because in the years that I have been painting that is the only time I have ever had a prize, or even an honorable mention.

DOROTHY BESTOR: I don't think it will remain the only time, to judge by what I've seen of yours on this trip.

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: Well, I don't know, because it seems that always my paintings are just controversial enough that the jury is a little inclined to want to turn them down. I have a predilection for this sort of thing, I think, because I'm sure that I have had more rejection slips than any person in the Northwest.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Let me -- (Interruption) Now, we're on again.

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: I think that my work has been influential in the Northwest. I think that many painters who have not even studied with me have been influenced by the work that I have done, but it has had little official kinds of recognition. I do enjoy a certain amount of prestige in Spokane now, it has been hard-earned, to say the least, I usually can have a show, and I have had shows in the years since the Art Center has closed, I have probably, except for the first maybe five years, I had probably averaged a one-artist showing, oh, at least every two years, and sometimes more, so that I'm sure you can't have that many shows around without influencing someone, somehow maybe to do things differently for all I know, but at any rate having that many shows has been something on the Spokane scene.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Definitely.

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: It keeps me busy and I work not only at painting, I still paint watercolors and oil, and because of the work that I did with Margaret Tompkins I have gone on with ceramics to a certain extent, and still do some ceramic pieces. I have ceramic pieces at the Craft Show this year. And after the Art Center closed I took up weaving and also studied interior design, and for these things I still haven't had any official credit on my transcript --

DOROTHY BESTOR: Don't you do batik, too? Some of the board members of the Art Center were saying you were especially known for your batik.

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: I started working with batik because I saw some batiks from India, I thought they were very beautiful but I didn't like the way they were done, that is for contemporary times, I thought they were beautiful for then, but we have to be able to do something else with it. And then no one else was working with batik, I hadn't even heard the word, there was even some discussion about whether you should say ba-tek' or bat'ik and I'm unalterably opposed to calling it bat'ik because that's the way they pronounce it in Seattle and I

just will not admit that Seattle has any right to tell me how to pronounce the word, so it's ba-tek' in Spokane.

DOROTHY BESTOR: I think it's ba-tek' most every place.

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: It's a one-woman campaign in Spokane to see that it's ba-tek'. I worked with this, and I thought, well, I'm not going to do it with this Shantung, it's just too tedious, I'm going to see if I can work out something else. And every year when I had a little time in the wintertime I'd get out some hot wax and some big brushes and I slopped around with it and made some horrible, terrible mistakes, and each year I'd learn a little bit more, and finally I read that in Mexico they were teaching courses in batik. This was at San Miguel de Allende at the Institute there, and I had hopes of going to the Institute sometime, so I kept thinking about batiks and wishing I could go there, and I couldn't, and so I kept on thinking about batiks and finally we got it worked out to where I was doing them pretty satisfactory, so I thought I had developed it to a place where it was rather interesting but still I had in my mind that San Miguel di Allende was the place to go for batik. So eventually I got to go. I was real delighted. "Oh, now I'll get to find out about batiks," so I went down there and I found the woman who was teaching it - I think her name was Ruby Martin - was doing some very interesting things in batik, but I started working with it and she helped me a little bit but I found that I was also helping her a little bit, and because I had a whole summer with nothing to do but work with art materials I developed the batik to a place where it became even more than a painting, [perhaps because it had to have a certain kind of relationship that started from the very beginning with the hot wax. And I returned to Spokane and did several, oh, maybe fifty or sixty batiks, and I still work at this occasionally, and I enjoyed it very much and in the meantime everybody started catching up with the same kind of thing that I'd been doing. This always interests me, how you can start something and you feel that you're all alone and that nobody has ever done this before, and then you travel across the country to places that you've never even thought about before and you walk into somebody's studio and they're doing a painting that looks like it's come off your own easel, and this is both encouraging and at times discouraging, discouraging when you think that you've done something original and it turns out to be -- well, not very original at all. And it shows that wherever there are artists they're struggling for the same kind of expression, struggling for it - I shouldn't use the word "struggling" perhaps so much but, well, it's interesting and it's always fun while we're trying to do these things, but in our minds it's still a struggle, and maybe we think we're doing something original and it turns out to be -- well, the same kind of thing that another artist is hoping for also. And I've had --

DOROTHY BESTOR: But I think it's still original if it comes from you, if you aren't imitating anything else, that's originality. It's a coincidence if other people in other places are responding to the same needs in similar ways, don't you think really?

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: Yes, I think that this is true. I think the anthropologists have a term for this, they call it parallelism.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes.

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: For instance, we find that people in the past were building temples of a certain kind at a certain time, and then we travel across the world to places where - if there was any communication at all it was of a very, very limited sort, and yet they were doing the same kind of thing. And so it just shows that we're not alone in our aspirations and our hopes that - that we're not alone in our struggle to express ourselves, that there are other people feeling the same way. However alone we may feel at the time, we really should realize that there are others who are feeling just the same. There was an interesting incident that occurred right at the finish of the Art Center. When we knew that things were not going to go on for very long - Pearl Harbor had occurred and I remember that some of the ones at the Center said to me that, "Well, it won't last very long now. This marks the end of it." And it marked the end of a certain kind of enthusiasm that we had had for our work and people began to plan that since they knew that the Center would close, they would have to be doing other things within a very short time. And Jerre Murry was in charge at the Art Center and I remember that a friend and I decided to go out and sketch one day. I had missed a painting class and so the two of us decided to go out to sketch and I've always liked the part of Spokane that's along the Spokane River and we went out and the two of us -- (Interruption)

DOROTHY BESTOR: Now you were saying when we were interrupted that you went out along the Spokane River -

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: We selected a place high above the River to do some sketches simply because it was so beautiful, it wasn't really a very good place to sketch and I knew it because -- well, it just included too many things, we could see the falls and we could see the two bridges and the city off to our left and across the River we could see the little houses that clustered along the Peaceful Valley. We weren't really sketching so much as just enjoying being in this place. It was winter, of course, and it was rather cool and we weren't too much in the mood of sketching but just thinking that some of this might turn into something that we could use for a painting. I remember that the Spokane Monroe Street Bridge was very, very far away, it must have been at least half a

mile away and I took out my charcoal and made two little loops, half circles and then a mark above it and some indication of the city beyond the bridge, it was rising up so beautifully, it's a very beautiful viewpoint in Spokane, and I was just indicating some of these things very briefly, just the briefest kind of a sketch, and we saw a man coming toward us and we felt a little uneasy, I just hated to be in this part of town when the two of us women were alone and this man was striding toward us very, very fast and when he came up he said, "I would like to know what you two women think you are doing out here." And I said, "Well, I'm just making a sketch." And he said, "What is that on that piece of paper?" And I said, "It's the bridge out there. It's the Monroe Street Bridge." And he said, "Don't you have any idea that what you are doing is absolutely illegal and that you could be arrested for this and your drawings confiscated?" I was very amazed at his brusqueness and his aggressiveness, and he brought out a piece of paper that showed that he was employed by the government and he told us that this was his duty to do this and he wanted to take my sketch and all the paper that I had and he wanted to know what my name and my address was, and the name and address of my friend and what we were doing out there and he seemed to be very unwilling to believe that we were art students and that I was simply making a sketch and I said, "Well, it's ridiculous of you to take this paper and I don't really believe that you have any right to take it but I am a loyal American citizen, I have no intention of doing anything else so I'll let you have the piece of paper if you want to." And he said, "Well, you're going to hear more of me later," and I was, of course, very disturbed about this, but I didn't really believe that he would do anything about it because after all I had only two half-circles on the paper to indicated the arches of the bridge and I thought, "He can't be serious, somebody will tell him that this really is ridiculous for him to do this." Because I happened to know that right then on any drugstore counter in Spokane you could pick up photographs that showed a great deal more about what Spokane was like, if a foreign agent or a spy was interested in that sort of thing why here was much more available material and I could surreptitiously have taken a photograph that would have worked much better than my sketch --

DOROTHY BESTOR: Heavens yes!

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: And I never could really believe that he was serious. But the first time I went to the Center I was called into the office of Jerre Murry - and I had never felt that Jerre Murry was really happy at the Center or that he was actually too sympathetic with the things that the artists were doing, and he said, "What's this I hear about you sketching material that is classified and you're not supposed to be doing things like that." And I said, "Why Jerre, --

END OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: SIDE 1

SIDE 2

DOROTHY BESTOR: Well, we had to change the tape at a most suspenseful point. Jerre Murry had just called you in and then what happened?

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: Jerre Murry had called me into the office along with my friend, and was quizzing us about what we were doing at that particular point, and why we were making sketches there and I assured him that I had no intentions of doing anything that was illegal, that I was certain that there were other ways of getting information, that if I did want it, did want to give something to a foreign agent it would be ridiculous for me to try to do it that way, I would get some photographs and I had no intentions of helping anyone anyway. And I said I felt the little man that had taken our paper was being a bit officious but I hoped that Jerre would stand behind me. And he said, "Well, I'll talk to him and see." But they kept my sketch. It was nothing but a piece of newsprint anyhow, but at least they did keep it and that always seemed rather ridiculous to me. And I talked to Jerre once or twice about it afterwards but I didn't hear anything and although they had actually threatened that they were going to call me into the office and that I would have to go down to the FBI and explain myself, nothing further happened about it. But this did show the disintegration of the Art Center and, of course, I never was happy making a sketch after that. It was years, of course the war was going on and things kept getting more and more tense and more and more difficult as the war years rolled along, and it was years before I dared to make a sketch outside because I always was afraid that some little man would be looking over my shoulder again. So I suppose it was then that I learned to memorize what I wanted to paint, I just didn't ever - or if ever I seldom went out with a big sheet of newsprint tacked to a board as I had at that time.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Probably indirectly that made a contribution to your style, it made is as selective and sparse as it is now.

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: Probably it did. I remember in 1948 I had - when I sent the painting to Margaret Tompkins that I mentioned earlier and it did receive the prize, and later on one of my friends who is also an artist came to me and said, "Opal, how did you do that painting?" And I said, "Well, I just painted what I felt like Brown Mountain looks like." That was what the subject of it was, the place out to the southeast of Spokane where the radio towers were at that time, and still are. I said, "Well, I just -- it was a little bit of snow on the hill and it was bleak and the trees were bare of leaves and that was the way I felt about it." And she said, "Didn't you make a

sketch?" And I said, "Oh, yes, I have it here some place, it's some place," and I looked around and I found a few pencil marks that I had made on a little notebook and she said, "Is that all the sketch you used?" And I said, "That's all I had. I didn't have anything more." And she turned away from it in disdain, she couldn't believe that that was all I had used for the painting that had received the prize. The YWCA did eventually take up the work of the Art Center. It was a while, or it seemed at least a while before things got going, at least for me - and whether there were things going on in Spokane that I didn't know about - that might have happened, but at any rate there was a year or two interval between the closing of the Art Center and the time I felt that I would like to take an active part in the YWCA work. I wondered if art would ever get going in Spokane again. I felt very lonely because the people that I had become acquainted with and they seemed to be the only ones really that I knew in Spokane, were now gone and I didn't even correspond with them, and I didn't hear about anything that was happening in the Spokane area or even much in the Seattle area because everybody was spending so much of their time and effort on the war years that it seemed a very bleak and lonely kind of time to me. It wasn't long, however, until Mr. Kildow, President of the North Idaho Junior College, came to me and asked me if I would consider teaching two afternoons a week at the Junior College. That made a thirty-mile drive two times a week and the children were small - I think Joyce, my daughter, was six and my son was two, so two afternoons I would go to the Junior College in Coeur d'Alene and teach an afternoon class. Seven years after the Art Center had closed I was teaching at Eastern Washington State College. Nan Wiley was head of the department there at the time, and she had become acquainted with my work and I was a friend of hers and so without a degree, which seems amazing now since they're counting degrees and credits so very carefully, without a degree and only two years of college I was asked to teach college classes. I could only be an instructor, of course, an acting instructor because every quarter I was there I thought was going to be my last, I not on thought it was going to be my last, I was told emphatically that it was going to be my last. But Nan believed in me and she kept hoping that I would be able to continue. And finally I did finish my two more years of college and went on eventually to get, within another year, to get my master's in education. It's interesting to notice that I had no other formal training other than what had come from the WPA Art Project and the things that I had taught myself and the private lessons I had had. I had very few actual classes in college in art, and yet I'm a college art instructor, which shows that the things that I learned at the Art Center were really in the mainstream of modern painting and the kind of thing that is still being done today, the same kind of teaching that's being done today, although actually I don't suppose the teachers, the ones who were teaching me were college instructors either, and they were not giving me any kind of college credit, of course they --

DOROTHY BESTOR: They were giving you something much better than that.

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: They were doing something that was much better than what was being done in most of the colleges at the time.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes.

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: It was much more up-to-date, much more to the point and much more creative than I would have been able to find anywhere else. The WPA was a highly-creative thing. They had put their stress in the right place and this is the kind of thing that I emphasize so much to my students and the kind of personal intuitive approach that I got from thee people, from Mark Tobey and Guy Anderson and Kenneth Downer and James Fitzgerald and Margaret Tompkins, these were the really influential people in my life at this time and I would like to feel that I'm carrying on the same kind of project that they so successfully indoctrinated me into.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Well, you certainly are. I think your career shows that the Spokane Art Center was one of the ones that really worked, it wasn't just a New Deal theory but it's something that really was a force in your life and in many lives around here.

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: I look at the projects that are coming up that are going to be sponsored by the government and I hope that we will be as fortunate and there is always this danger and I think an artist realizes that even more acutely than anyone else how terribly fragile a situation like this can be, and with the wrong kind of administration and the wrong kind of teachers it can do more harm than it does good, and we've seen it happen so many times that we must be especially careful that what comes out of this remains a -- continues to be a creative thing, that it -- well, actually the Art Center was here -- what? --

DOROTHY BESTOR: Four years.

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: From 1938 to -- ?

DOROTHY BESTOR: 1938 to '42.

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: -- '42 after Pearl Harbor, it closed immediately after Pearl Harbor right even in the same year, in December it was closed. I do look forward to this and to what might be a government sponsorship of art. I think that it's high time we do something about it, because as I travel about in Canada and in Mexico I see that the government has helped the artist in Canada and in Mexico. When I was in Canada teaching at the University

of Saskatchewan for three summers, I found that there were not artists there who hadn't in the past or weren't at the present receiving some government aid, and the government sponsors shows for the artists and paid their expenses and the museums are helped by the government. And the United States is falling far behind, we can't help but fall far behind unless we do have some kind of government sponsorship.

DOROTHY BESTOR: What form do you think it might take, or should take?

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: I would like to see it take the form of grants to artists to study, to study abroad. We have become too smug in our attitude that we know all the answers, and I think the danger becomes even greater as it is recognized that Paris is no longer the art center of the Western World, that New York and Los Angeles and San Francisco are taking the place that Paris, the enviable position that Paris had for so many years. No artist feels that he has to go to Paris to study now. If they go to Paris it's because they want to because it's a foreign country but they no longer feel that this is the art center of the world. This has shifted and as it shifts it becomes even more dangerous, that we get to feeling smug, that we know all the answers, that our artists are the best, and that everybody else is following us. And when an artist or any person travels in a foreign country I think that smugness disappears very quickly because we see immediately that we don't have all the answers, that there are poor people who are uneducated that are perhaps happier than we are, that have been following some of the things that we have been taught to believe are backward and primitive and still we see a value there that we had not thought could exist. We see them progressing in creative lines in ways that the United States has been - well, lacking.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Are you thinking of your travels in Mexico and what you've seen there perhaps?

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: Very much so. We have felt so smug because our health is so good, we have such high standards of health, we don't have the gutters running through the streets and we don't have children dying of whooping cough, and I do think this is admirable, it is highly admirable, and yet I can't look at the people in Mexico without realizing that they have something that we don't have. They have an intuitive feeling for people, they have an intuitive feeling for happiness, in spite of poverty and in spite of disease and in spite of trouble such as we have never know, yet the people are happier and they're more gentle.

DOROTHY BESTOR: You think this is reflected in their art?

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: And it is reflected in their art. I have stood in a courtyard painting a church and painting it very, very abstractly and there wasn't anything there to remind me actually of the church at the time I was doing this painting except the colors, the color relationship arranged across a huge canvas, and a man came up behind me driving a burro and he stopped and he said a few words that he know that I would understand, "Es muy bonito, Senorita." It's very beautiful. It is very beautiful." Well, all I had was some colors on the canvas, and I was standing looking at the church, and he stood behind me then for twenty minutes while I painted and the burro grazed on the grass, what few nibbles of grass it could get in the courtyard and he stood there silently but every time I turned he was looking intently at what I was doing and then he would look at me and smile, "Es muy bonito, Senorita." We don't have that kind of sympathy for the arts here.

DOROTHY BESTOR: No, we don't.

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: From a man, from a farmer, a farmer here would be too busy, or he would be too scornful, or it's not making money so what good is it?

DOROTHY BESTOR: Or he'd say, "I had a sister who used to paint once."

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: And that's just one example of many of the things that I felt in Mexico. I feel that they're sympathetic with art and perhaps it is our materialistic advantages that we have, the cars and the radios and the refrigerators and the nice houses. I love these things, too, but I can't help but regret that if with getting these things we miss some of the more fundamental pleasures because when I come back to the States, although I love my home and I love my friends and I love Spokane, still crossing the border coming back is a distinct shock because people deal with you more harshly and more summarily, that is, "I want your money, I want your time," and then we're through, as soon as the money crosses the counter, well, this is the end of our relationship, and they're ready to turn away to wait on somebody else. And this is not true in Mexico. They'll spend any amount of time, and they're interested in what kind of a person you are. And this is an elusive kind of thing. In saying it even I hesitate to say it but I know it's true because other Americans feel it even as I feel it, perhaps not so much, because I study it and think about it and mull it over this way, because I know it's not just something that I'm pointing out to other people because I know that I'm also guilty of this. I try to counteract it and especially with my students, I try to let them feel that whatever time I have is theirs if they want to take it, and that I can sit quietly and listen to whatever they say for however long they want to talk. I try to make them feel that if this interview comes to an end it's because they wish to terminate it and not because I'm anxious to be away. And perhaps that's one of the biggest lessons I've learned from Mexico, that I should be able as a teacher and friend to devote myself wholeheartedly to whoever I'm in contact with at the time because, after all,

these are the important things, and I think that we lose sight of this in our effort to make money, to be successful, to do this or to do that, to get this done and that done, a materialistic kind of approach. We lose sight of the fact that people, our family, our friends these are the really important thing and we are just diverting the stream if we fail to realize it. And Mexico has been very helpful this way.

DOROTHY BESTOR: You have an important point.

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: Perhaps my art has taught me this, perhaps the psychology and philosophy courses I've taken, perhaps it was that I not only want to be a good artist but I want to be a good teacher, and too, I think my emphasis has shifted. I said a little while ago rather wistfully, I suppose, that I had only received one rather minor prize and yet I know, too, that my emphasis has shifted because I'm not really so interested in having prizes, and I have taken steps to see that this is not true. I don't exhibit my work very often in competitive shows. I feel that after the years that I have been studying and the work that I have done, that it is rather beneath my dignity to enter my paintings in a competitive show, that I have studied art for some thirty or forty years and studied it as diligently as I am able with as much thought and attention as I can give to it and then I put my paintings into a show and have my paintings rejected while someone who has taken up art only recently, perhaps someone - I don't want to say that that person has done that - but someone like the white painting with the arrow in it, and they can receive a prize and mine are turned down. This seems beneath not only my dignity but beneath the dignity of all artists who have studied and have worked that they be subjected to juried shows, juried by people who have had perhaps by comparison little training and little understanding. I know that the juried show is a dangerous thing and that not only my paintings but all my friends have this difficulty, too. I don't know what the answer is, I have made my own answer to it, of course, but I'm in a privileged relationship here --

DOROTHY BESTOR: You certainly are.

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: - because I have established my reputation so strongly in Spokane that I just say, "I have some paintings. Do you have a place you'd like to exhibit them?" And they say, "Fine! When do you want it?" And I'm very grateful for this and so I feel that the juried show is no longer my necessity, but then I think about my young friends and I feel that others who have studied a certain length of time should not have to have this either, and they don't always have the opportunity to go to someone who has a wall in a public place like a library and say, "I want to have a show," and they'll turn over the walls to them, this doesn't happen for others as well, as easily as it does for me.

DOROTHY BESTOR: True.

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: So we still have many things to be concerned about, although modern art is more accepted, art has been accepted to the place where some people can gracefully ignore it. We still haven't solved the problems and I think places to show, where artists are really appreciated, is on the things --

DOROTHY BESTOR: Where a government program can do something like that.

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: And I think the government program can do a great deal for this, and it can give artists grants so that we can go to foreign countries and realize that we have much to learn besides reiterating the fact that we are a leading nation, that we have more refrigerators, cars, etcetera; these are not the really important things about life. This isn't where we live.

DOROTHY BESTOR: A very, very good point indeed. Thank you, Mrs. Fleckenstein.

OPAL FLECKENSTEIN: You are welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW

Last updated... September 19, 2002