



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Merrell
Gage, 1964 May 27

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Merrell Gage on May 25, 1964. The interview took place in Santa Monica Canyon, California, and was conducted by Betty Hoag McGlynn 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

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: This is Betty Lochrie Hoag interviewing Mr. Merrell Gage in his home in Santa Monica Canyon on May 25, 1964. Mr. Gage, I am so happy to be able to interview you because I understand that you were active in the organization of the original [PWAP -Ed.] Art Committee [under Merle Armitage -Ed.] in Los Angeles, [in December of 1932 -Ed.], representing sculpture. And before we talk about it, I'd like to ask you a little bit about your own life and your work [inaudible].

MERRELL GAGE: Mrs. Hoag, I've lived in this canyon for 35 years and built my studio and home here and enjoyed many years of activity here, in sculpture and in teaching. I taught for 33 years at the University of Southern California as head of the sculpture department there and retired in '58. But I have been busier since I retired, from a sculptor's point of view, than at any other time in my life.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: As a sculptor, if you don't mind my saying so, your name is indelibly connected with Lincoln. You're almost Mr. Lincoln, I think, to the whole United States because of all the research you've done on him and the wonderful statues that you've done. I think the thing that made most people conscious of this was the film, which I believe you—the film which was made of you making a head of Lincoln in 1955. Is that right?

MERRELL GAGE: Yes. That was the result of 25 years of lecturing on the—I used to give a demonstrated lecture, modeling and talking about the intimate kind of a biography of Lincoln. When I came back from my last transcontinental lecture tour, I told the university that I would not continue, that I was going to retire from a lecture platform. And they said, Let's make a film. We did. The film was qualified for the Academy. And it won an Oscar as the Best Short Subject of 1955. I had been a Lincoln scholar or student of Lincoln from the time I began sculpture. In fact, before that I had the advantage of working with the great Lincoln-ist and sculptor Gutzon Borglum. My first public commission was a statue of Lincoln, which is now on the state capitol grounds in Topeka, Kansas. It was dedicated in 1918. Since then, I have made many studies of Lincoln. I find it an inexhaustible subject.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: One of the recent ones that you did was done for the Lincoln College in Illinois, which was the first institution to be named after him in 1865, wasn't it?

MERRELL GAGE: Yes, that is correct.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: You did a seated Lincoln in 1960. And some of the other ones are on the Lincoln Savings Building on Hope Street in 1955 [in Los Angeles -Ed.], the bas-relief head of Lincoln. And the Lincoln—

MERRELL GAGE: I just sold them two others for their new buildings.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Oh, really? And for the Lincoln Junior High School in Santa Monica. And I believe that in Kansas on the capital grounds aren't there two of your Lincoln statues.

MERRELL GAGE: The first Lincoln statue is there.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: The first ones you did were there.

MERRELL GAGE: Yeah.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: I see. Besides Lincoln, your work has covered a great many fields. For instance, you did the *Man of Taos* in Belgian marble, which is an Indian. You must have lived in New Mexico for some time, didn't you?

MERRELL GAGE: Yes. We spent several summers, our vacations over in Taos, New Mexico. And I was always interested in the American subjects, in particular the Indian.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: I might add the We here means your wife, Marian Gage, whom you married in 1924, who's an artist in her own right. She does watercolors and, I believe, oils, doesn't she?

MERRELL GAGE: She used to do oils. She was water-coloring painting last few years.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: I was interested in your mentioning having studied with Gutzon Borglum. And I wondered if you know whether he was on any of the federal projects here?

[00:05:12]

MERRELL GAGE: No.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: He might have been here at this time, and I wondered if –

MERRELL GAGE: No. He was in New York at that—at that time.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: On the Times building were you did have some sculpture, they have a big eagle which they think that he did—

MERRELL GAGE: No.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: —which used to be on the top of the building. It's now in the foyer as you enter.

MERRELL GAGE: Oh, that might be.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, it would be quite early, 1876 or so. [1891 is the attribution; it is said to have been done in the Sierra Madres. -Ed.]

MERRELL GAGE: Must have been.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MERRELL GAGE: I never knew it.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Well, it was way up high. I guess no one could see it close until they wrecked the old building. [They laugh.]

MERRELL GAGE: I'm familiar with his work, but I never heard him mention that. Although he always called himself a Californian. You know, he used—he began here in Los Angeles.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Doing his work. He was born in Idaho, I believe.

MERRELL GAGE: Yes. And came down here and had his first studio in Los Angeles. Mrs. General Freeman—Freemont was his patron.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Interesting. Speaking of things being on the top of the Times building, would you mind telling the tape about doing the things on the façade of yours?

MERRELL GAGE: I—

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: I mean the façade of the building [inaudible].

MERRELL GAGE: Yes, that's correct. And it's six stories above the ground. There's three panels, ten feet high. And the subject was the Scribe, and Journalism, and Gutenberg. And they were carved in place after the stone was set.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: In place means with you up there. How often did you—

MERRELL GAGE: We were up there six weeks. One carver and myself carved it.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: You have done so many interesting things and have so many stories to tell. I hope when we get through with the Federal Project we can come back and do you just for yourself for the Archives [laughs].

MERRELL GAGE: [Inaudible.]

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: It's fascinating to come in and see the Kennedy head that you're doing right now.

MERRELL GAGE: Thank you.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: A beautiful thing.

MERRELL GAGE: [Inaudible.]

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: But since we're supposed to concentrate on the area, the government help here, I would like to ask you—or have you tell me some things about it. You were on the first committee that was formed. Can you remember?

MERRELL GAGE: I remember the sculptural accomplishments of that committee more than anything else. The committee was composed of Merle Armitage as chairman, Dalzell Hatfield, Millard Sheets, Arthur Millier, Clarence Hinkle, and one or two others whose names have skipped my mind. Project was commended by Mr. Watson for having accomplished most important sculptural projects. Among them was a monument to the scientist, which is the front of the Griffith Park Observatory. This was a monument some 20 feet high. It was designed by Archie Garner. He did also one of the figures. He was assisted by Roger Noble Burnham, George Stanley, Djey El Djey, and Gordon Newell. Each contributed a figure for the monument.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Isn't it a rather unusual thing to have four people work on one thing and have it hang together?

MERRELL GAGE: Well, that is—was quite a difficulty because the four men had very distinct styles of their own. But they seemed to be able to submerge their personal expression enough to make a fairly harmonious monument out of it.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Did they have to submit the design to you on the committee and—

MERRELL GAGE: Yes.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: —for approval first?

MERRELL GAGE: Yes. They made a sketch model so the committee knew what was going to take place. And then the committee had to finance the materials. All that's poured concrete. It was quite an engineering feat to cast in place. But it was probably the most ambitious of anything that was attempted in this area.

[00:10:06]

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Did they have to give working stage descriptions to the committee? Like mural artists, for instance, had to send in cartoons of their work when they were half-way through. Was there anything the [inaudible]—

MERRELL GAGE: The committee visited the site, or their shop where they were making preliminary models.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MERRELL GAGE: Checked it up every Saturday to see that work was progressing, and harmoniously.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Thank you. I didn't mean to stop your going through—

MERRELL GAGE: That's all right.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: —this list of things. But that's very interesting.

MERRELL GAGE: One of the other important accomplishments of the—was a fountain for Lafayette Park Triangle, on Hoover and Wilshire Boulevards. Henry Lion designed it, assisted by Jason Herron and Sherry Peticolas. It had a 10-foot figure of water and a relief on the pedestal of it. Unfortunately, it was never completed as a fountain. It remains simply a monument.

Later, in the second phase of the work, the De Anza Monument at Riverside was designed by Sherry Peticolas and was carried out in granite. A sculpture in front of the Hollywood Bowl was designed by George Stanley. And the St. Monica statue in Santa Monica was designed by Eugene Morahan. He carried it out and—in poured concrete.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: You said that he was not a native Californian?

MERRELL GAGE: He had lived in California for a number of years before the committee was formed, so he was eligible [Betty Hoag McGlynn laughs] for work as a Californian. He was a distinguished sculptor and had a distinguished career in New York, but lived out here for the last 20 or 30 years of his life.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: You said that after he had done this sculpture that he built a home in Malibu—

MERRELL GAGE: Yes. He moved—

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: —and that he died a few years ago.

MERRELL GAGE: Yes. The Lafayette statue in Lafayette Park was designed by Mr. Foerster. I can't tell you very much more than that about that. But there was many artists working on creative sculpture of their own, some very distinguished artists, including David Edstrom, a Ms. Everett [Miss Eugenia Everett -Ed.], and—skips my mind now after all these thirty-some years. [They laugh.]

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Not surprising. Getting back to how this whole thing was organized in the first place, I read that many people, like yourselves, donated—like yourself, donated your time to begin the art committee. Is that correct?

MERRELL GAGE: Yes, we did. We met every Saturday morning and reviewed the work submitted by various artists and selected that which we felt was worthy. At this time it was a pump priming part of the Depression. They were trying to get money into the hands of the people and get some worthy projects back.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Yeah.

MERRELL GAGE: So, it was not just a relief thing. We had to consider the quality of the artist's production.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: And you were commissioning these things.

MERRELL GAGE: We were commissioning the—

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: You were selecting them [inaudible].

MERRELL GAGE: —practically commissioning these things in the name of the government.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MERRELL GAGE: And the financing was done party by public subscription and part of it by the government. Of course, the artists were paid by the government Project.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: You told me a while ago that was a heartbreaking experience on these Saturdays when sculptors submitted designs which you did not feel could be done, you knew they needed the work. Is that correct?

[00:15:06]

MERRELL GAGE: Yes. That was true. That was the unhappy part of it. But it was offset by the

wonderful response that we got from those who were on the Project and had that opportunity to work consecutively and without fear of hunger or privation—that many of them had suffered for a number of years.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: You said it was a blossoming.

MERRELL GAGE: Yes. They came—blossomed out like a watered plant.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Isn't that wonderful? You—did your committee, I mean, decide what subjects they would use for statues? And how did you go about deciding where things were needed?

MERRELL GAGE: Well, that was part of the project of the committees work was—or at least to pass on the suggestions made by artists. And of course, the theme handed down by the Washington bureau was that it should be something to do with the American scene.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And always using American materials, I believe, too.

MERRELL GAGE: Yes. That was definitely a—get money in circulation.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Mrs. Gage was telling me a while ago that when you were discussing the Project the other night she was remembering times when you'd had the committee up here and had garden parties for them. [They laugh.] Nice aspect of it, that—

MERRELL GAGE: Well, I believe it was the closing days of the committee, I gave one breakfast and had a distinguished group, including Lorado Taft.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Well.

MERRELL GAGE: So, I had them carve their name in the picnic table.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Oh, what fun. You still—

MERRELL GAGE: I had it for many years. Unfortunately, it just decayed. [They laugh.]

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Well, that's too bad. The garden is still lovely, and they must have enjoyed it. All your pieces of sculpture and -

MERRELL GAGE: They enjoyed the pancakes more. [They laugh.]

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: There is a gap in the tap here for a few minutes which occurred when we left the machine going and were looking at some of the pieces of sculpture of Mr. Gage's. [Recorder stops, restarts.] Mr. Gage, do you think that the overall result of the Projects' work was beneficial to the artists in this area?

MERRELL GAGE: It certainly was at the time, and for a few years after that.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: I don't mean just eating, but as far as—

MERRELL GAGE: No. I mean the influence of the art. But the American scene became very unpopular shortly after that. The artists moved more and more towards abstraction and other subjects, so that it was very short-lived in its influence, if it had any.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Something interested me. You were talking about the sculptors submitting their designs and the ones who weren't qualified under the first aspect of this couldn't do any of the work. Then in the second phase, when it was WPA, they did have to take them, didn't they?

MERRELL GAGE: Yes.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: And all of these young people did—do you feel that having a chance to work with more experienced sculptors helped them? Or were they just used as carrying buckets of cement or something? Did they get a chance to design?

MERRELL GAGE: No. Nearly everybody on that first project were accomplished artists.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MERRELL GAGE: And the amateur was rather discouraged. That's what I was say was one of the disagreeable duties of the committee was to tell somebody that he wasn't qualified for this work. Later it became just a relief measure and you'd get on it and they just turned in tons and tons and tons of just very mediocre work until the Project was finally closed down.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: You don't think that that second phase then actually did much good for them—

MERRELL GAGE: It was nothing but a relief.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: —except as an emergency relief? I see.

MERRELL GAGE: And a wasteful type of relief work.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MERRELL GAGE: It would have been almost better just to hand them out the money as a dole—

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:20:05]

MERRELL GAGE: —for what was accomplished.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Did you think they knew it was too?

MERRELL GAGE: Well, I think that's what killed the Project.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: You do? Wow. Well, I certainly have enjoyed talking to you and we appreciate your bringing out all these memories and all of the things about it and sharing them.

MERRELL GAGE: Thank you. I've enjoyed talking to you. And I am sorry that my memory of some of it is not clear. But after thirty-some years it—things get a little bit lost in the—

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Oh, I think—

MERRELL GAGE: —bag of memories.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: —your memory about it has been much better than most people's. And I think it's amazing that you could bring all these names out of the bag. Thank you.

MERRELL GAGE: Well, I was impressed, at the time, with these projects and the people working on them. And so, I guess that's why I still recall the more pleasant aspects of [laughs] it.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: They were very fortunate to have you on that committee to get it started. Thank you so much, Mr. Gage.

MERRELL GAGE: Thank you.

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