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Oral history interview with Marion Greenwood, 1964 Jan. 31

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Marion Greenwood on January 31, 1964. The interview took place in Woodstock, NY, and was conducted by Dorothy Seckler for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

DOROTHY SECKLER: The central focus of our interview this evening will be on the period that Miss Greenwood spent in Mexico doing a series of important murals. Marion, I understand that at the time you went to Mexico you were already a professional artist. You had spent some time at Yaddo, you had studied in Paris, you had been out in the West and had drawn and painted American Indians there. How had you become interested in going to Mexico, and what had you intended when you first went to do paintings there?

MARION GREENWOOD: I was very aware of the things that were happening at that time in Mexico. I think all of the artists and writers were at that period.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Artists were very aware of the murals that were being painted in Mexico, Rivera's and Orozco's. They were being talked about a good bit then, and I suppose it fitted in with the general social ferment in circles here in New York, too.

MARION GREENWOOD: Well, that's it. I had a chance to go with two writers that I had met in Yaddo and everybody was talking about, and I had seen, reproductions, and in fact I had seen, Rivera's frescos. At any rate, I was dying to get there and to look and sketch and paint. And so we drove all the way down, and the trip was marvelous because, in those days, when you drove, it was very, very primitive. And the scenery was marvelous, and seeing the Indians working in the fields -- I was just so overcome with enthusiasm. I just never felt that way again, I guess. Because, after all, I was very young.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Where did you go first in Mexico?

MARION GREENWOOD: We went straight to Mexico City. We had some introductions to Pablo O'Higgins, a very famous American artist that had become—in fact he is, a Mexican citizen. He stayed there, did loads of murals and had worked with Rivera, who at that time wasn't in Mexico City. So I met him and Leopoldo Mendez and Alfredo Zalce and this whole group, and they advised me to go to Taxco. At that time, it hadn't been spoiled by the tourists, and it was lovely -- looked like El Greco's Toledo. We rented this lovely place, and I was a guest of these two writers. I'd sketch every day in the market place, and finally I asked this hotel, Taxqueña, if they'd let me experiment in fresco on the wall for nothing, because I wanted to do it. Pablo gave me the formula of wet plaster and trained the plasterer for me because my Spanish wasn't very good. We got this little Indian plasterer to plaster the walls and I made my big cartoon, my mural cartoon, from all the sketches and I finally painted this fresco with all the tourists watching me. But it was quite successful even though it was my first attempt. With a little post card of my mural, I showed it to my friends back in Mexico City when the Taxco period was over. Dr. Ignacio Milan, whom I had known back here in New York, gave me an introduction to the head of the university in Morelia, the University of San Nicolás Hidalgo. San Nicolás Hidalgo is a very ancient university, in fact, one of the first in the Americas, in this capital of Michoacán which is the state, Morelia is the town. So I took my little post card to show to the head of the university and said that I would love to paint frescos on their beautiful walls. And he spoke English, fortunately, and he said yes, much to my surprise, and the university offered to pay all my expenses, my hotel bills and my research for the months of sketching to make my first designs. I picked the wall, which was beautiful pink plaster arcade of seven arches in the inside patio of the university and went to live in the tiny little town of Pátzcuaro where I constantly started sketching. All day I'd go out -- on burros, old Fords, canoes on the lake -- to all these tiny little villages. It was just marvelous because I didn't have anything to worry about; I could just explore and sketch and look and then come home and go to sleep. That's the way I spent the whole summer, almost the whole summer. I probably made about a thousand sketches of just the Indians weaving and making pottery and fishing, just the primitive, simple way they lived. Then I finally tried to compose it all on this long wall. It was quite a problem because it still had to be composed so that when you looked through each arch it be a picture in itself and yet remain one long running scene.

DOROTHY SECKLER: After you had your studies made in the summer, you must have begun preparing the cartoons.

MARION GREENWOOD: Yes. For that, naturally, I had to have not just a hotel room where I had been sketching in Pátzcuaro, so I came back to the town of Morelia. Meanwhile, the university was supposed to have bought all the lime and the plaster, and they had promised to hire Pablo O'Higgins, who needed the money at that time, to

pay him to train the plasterer and help me get started in this little Spanish colonial town. They were very shocked that I was a woman alone—a girl alone—about to do this big mural and there was a lot of hostility amongst the students, because they were Cardenistas and Cárdenas was campaigning at the time. The head of the university was not a Cardenista, and so they therefore were also against me. However, they managed to find a studio in an old sort of monk-like cell in the museum in Morelia, where I proceeded to made great big individual full scale cartoons of actual important figures in the mural from my sketches and then I started making my small scale mural cartoons. Then the big scaffolding had to be built where I started putting the first red outline in red earth paint on the rough plaster walls, which finally gets covered up by this white marble-like lime, the final painting coat. You see, the plasterer has to come at dawn and put on the section so that it's just wet enough to paint on, and not too fresh, and yet dry enough to paint on. It's very, very complicated, and it's a terribly demanding technique because you have to finish that section for ever and ever. It has the time element, well, the nervousness of having to finish it. You have to tear all of it off and put new plaster up if you make any mistakes. It's as Delacroix said, oil painting is a lazy medium but not fresco. It was the true wet technique which Michelangelo had used and Giotto.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It's still basically the same as it always was.

MARION GREENWOOD: Yes. There's no way to improve upon it. But it does crack, and that's about all, and it does get moldy. For another month or two I made my big cartoons. I really had this wonderful miracle of complete freedom in what I did on the wall. The only lack of freedom was of course privately, I had to stay in my hotel room like a prisoner at night because it was Latin America, and I had to be very much aware of what they were thinking of me in the whole little town, or rather it's a small city. There was a lot of unhappiness connected with it, and I did receive letters and phone calls to leave the place anonymously. I had a lot of hostility to overcome, and the students didn't want me to paint because, as I say, they had some idea that I wasn't for the kind of political regime that they wanted. I don't know where they got that idea because I wasn't even thinking about that. But at any rate, I finally tackled the wall, and that was a great day. Pablo came along with all the wood for the scaffolding, and great crowds gathered, and I got up there in my blue jeans and started painting away. They used to call me la gringuita, the little gringo, who was there working all through the siesta hour. They didn't realize that I had to keep on working because the plaster was drying. Sometimes I'd worked for eight, nine, and ten hours a day on the scaffolding. Sometimes even more if I had a big section.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You mentioned before that once Cárdenas himself came.

MARION GREENWOOD: Yes. He was campaigning to be president, and I was painting away one day, and I saw him. They always walked with a great crowd of other politicians and all the students, and he insisted on coming up and looking at the fresco. He was delighted because he was a Tarascan Indian himself, and this mural was completely about the Tarascan Indian as an ancient race and the way they live now. He congratulated me for giving part of my life to Mexico. Somebody translated for him, and that made me very happy, and that also swayed all the students. From then on, they did not threaten to destroy my work anymore, so I was allowed to finish it in peace, and I finally did.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How long did the finished work take? How many months were you at work on it?

MARION GREENWOOD: The actual painting of this first long wall in the University took me exactly nine months. I finished it and came back to New York and worked for a time on the Public Works of Art Project.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Before we get to New York, Marion, I think that it's probably pretty obvious from what you said that there was no political content in this mural, but I thought we might just emphasize it a little bit -- that you were simply presenting the Mexican peasants and their activities, and therefore there was no programmatic political aspect, not in an overt way at least.

MARION GREENWOOD: That’s right. I didn't want to. I was just so overcome with the beauty and the poetry -- for the first time, being able to study and be with and sketch and get material from a primitive kind of life which I had never seen before. Just the beauty of the clothes the people work in. Their old, white—the way they dress—they would take these wonderful classic rhythmic wrinkles. I mean, it's the kind of thing you never see nowadays, in their print dresses. It’s all very unaesthetic compared to what it was.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You have been interested in primitive peoples even before you went to Mexico?

MARION GREENWOOD: Yes, I've always had an absolute consuming passion for other races and faces and the beauty of the different kinds of races in the human being, and just people. I just love to paint people, so it was just perfect to have been given this wonderful opportunity. I never of course had this freedom again, ever. Because finally working on the projects was a completely different story.

DOROTHY SECKLER: When you came back to New York, you had acquired some fame by this time.

MARION GREENWOOD: Yes, quite a bit.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And you mentioned before that Mr. Rowan who was head of the, what was it, the Treasury?

MARION GREENWOOD: No, the Treasury hadn't been formed yet at that time. There was something called the Public Works of Art Project, as I remember, and I did several small mural ideas for that. But then instead of going on with it, I think that fell through anyway, and then that turned into the Treasury Art Department, which I later worked on. Meanwhile, I was invited back to Mexico City because Pablo and Leopoldo and Pujol and all these other Mexican artists whom I had known had gotten an old convent in Mexico City, rather it had been renovated into a big civic center called the Mercado Abelardo Rodríguez, right in Mexico City and they had named Diego Rivera to be the director, in a sense.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Of the art, of the decoration?

MARION GREENWOOD: Of the whole, of the decorations. We were all supposed to do our own group of walls. You see, we worked together and yet separately because we each had our own walls to do. So I was invited back to Mexico City, with the recommendation of Diego Rivera, by the Mexican government. That of course made me so happy that I dropped the project and went back to Mexico City. At that time, Mr. Rowan mentioned in the New York Times that it was a shame that artists like Marion Greenwood had to leave their own country to get walls to paint on. Of course, this time I was going to be paid, rather well for those days, too. It was only thirteen pesos a square meter, but at that time we felt very rich. We'd stand on line with all the workers, and we'd be given great big bags of silver pesos. We all felt very rich on payday in Mexico City.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What was the equivalent value of thirteen pesos at that time?

MARION GREENWOOD: That is the kind of answer I can't tell you Dorothy, mathematically I can't remember. But it was wonderful because--

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did it compare favorably with United States pay rates for that sort of work?

MARION GREENWOOD: Well, because of the way we were able to live there -- you know, you have a criada, and no matter how poor you were you had someone to help, to wait on you, and so it was completely different. An artist wasn't consumed with daily chores because you had all that even though one was poor. I also forgot to mention, incidentally very egotistical of me, that my sister had joined me in Morelia and had also done a wall in the museum of Morelia. At that time, she and I were always getting mural commissions. We wouldn't work on the same wall, but she was also on the projects back in New York.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That was your sister, Grace Greenwood.

MARION GREENWOOD: My sister, Grace Greenwood. So, she and I were together when we returned to Mexico, and she had a big stairway, a lower lobby stairway and an upper lobby in the Mercado Rodríguez, and I had the opposite stairway and lobby. About three thousand square feet each, including the ceilings.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Marion, in Mexico City you were associated with a whole group of artists, I understand. Would you like to talk a little bit about how you worked together and how you decided on various themes that would be developed on your separate walls?

MARION GREENWOOD: Well, yes. We were, of course, at that time, as you know, all very, very socially conscious. It was all over the world at that time, and we were terribly sincere and very eager to make it very clear, if we had anybody suffering in our murals, why they were suffering. And of course, my sympathy has always been with the underdog and always will be, and here I had another chance to do so. Although now I no longer believe in the kind of thing I believed in then. It imposed a kind of stiff formula of thinking which, let's face it, this group of what you call Stalinists at that time. The stiff, almost rigid idea of propaganda which I think was very bad for all of art at that time because it took the universality out of one's message and instead made it into almost a story-telling kind of thing. But from the other standpoint, it was wonderful to be working with artists and with all this wall space and the chance to work out these problems with one another. We'd have meetings every couple of weeks about what we were going to paint and how we would work it out.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Pablo O'Higgins was one of the group, and your sister.

MARION GREENWOOD: Pablo O'Higgins and my sister and myself and [Ángel] Bracho and [Antonio] Pujol, and [Miguel] Tzab [Trejo], oh, I can't remember the others.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You mentioned that you also studied basic fresco design from Giotto and other artists.

MARION GREENWOOD: Yes, we'd take old master's reproductions of Giotto and all the wonderful mural painting of the Renaissance, and Piero della Francesca, and we'd analyze this according to the golden mean. And I

learned so much about geometrical and architectural composition. It was wonderful and will be with me from the rest of my life from that standpoint. I always felt that at that time I learned so much more than from any of the art schools back home or, for that matter, when I studied at the Academie Colarossi in Paris. It was a marvelous experience. It was a time that is finished and will never happen again. From that standpoint, I feel very lucky that I had that experience. From another standpoint, as an artist I wish now I had just painted easel pictures with my own feeling about life instead of trying to do those immense monumental walls, the usual regrets that go with middle age, I guess.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You mentioned once that at this time you were perhaps looking more at the paintings and murals of Orozco rather than simply being confined to Rivera as a model.

MARION GREENWOOD: Yes. By that time, I had come to appreciate Orozco much more as much deeper, more what I would call a philosopher-artist which I think is one of the greatest kind of artists one can be, whereas Rivera seemed to be more of a reporter-artist, although still quite wonderful. After all, I think his best murals are in Chapingo, the chapel, agricultural chapel that he did a wonderful series of murals -- but his other ones I didn't care for half as much. And there were wonderful meetings with Alfaro Siqueiros who of course, at this moment is sitting in jail in Mexico City, alas. He is a very wonderful artist. He had completely different ideas, believed in keeping the image moving, and he was playing around with all kinds of complicated optical problems and fascinated with new modern mediums like ducco. He considered our group very old-fashioned because we were still sticking to fresco.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You weren't influenced directly, then, by anything that he proposed?

MARION GREENWOOD: No, in fact, we quarreled quite a bit. At that time, he was having a public debate with Rivera. We'd all visit these sessions. I remember once getting up and saying a couple of things to Siqueiros that he was too busy out in protests and meetings instead of finishing his murals; he was known for never finishing his murals at that time, always in all these fights. This made a big noise and it was written down by Mr. [Emanuel] Eisenberg in *New Masses*, and it was called “Battle of the Century” in which he mentioned the fact that I got up and put Siqueiros down. I said, "Well, after all, you're attacking Rivera who has done miles and miles of fresco." Siqueiros was calling Rivera a Bourgeois painter, you see, and after all, he had done miles of frescos of the proletariat and the peasants. I'm getting off the track.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did Orozco ever come and speak to your group or get involved in any of this?

MARION GREENWOOD: No, because Orozco at that time was painting the Dartmouth mural here in the States. But he did return to Mexico before I left, and I saw him many times. We'd go to visit him, and I asked his advice about whether or not I should stay on in Mexico when I had finally finished the market series, and I was wondering whether to come back here. I had written to Mr. Rowan about what chances there were for me to get murals, and I felt badly because Mr. Rowan had written that, unless I could certify for relief, I wouldn't be able to get a mural because, by that time, the years had passed and the mural project had turned into a complete relief project. You had to prove that you were destitute to be able to paint a wall. This was, I think, a very bad way to have anything cultural.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Wasn't there ten percent—Arnold Black had mentioned something about a ten percent—who were not expected to be impoverished? Well that's a different subject.

MARION GREENWOOD: That was the easel project. That was very different. I'm talking about murals which of course are on public walls. So at that time, I asked Orozco if I should go back, and he advised me to come back to the United States. I mean, I could have stayed and kept getting one mural commission after another, because I was liked and appreciated, and my frescoes and my sister's were wonderfully received by the Mexican people. You know, students and professors and everybody would come watch and talk and especially the Indians. By that time, I knew a little bit of Spanish and they'd say that they liked my work much better than Rivera's because they seemed to be alive and not made of wood. So that made me feel very happy. And [Rufino] Tamayo used to come and visit when I was painting. He wanted to be with us on the project at that time, but Rivera didn't like him, and so he wasn't in our group.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Do you know why Rivera objected to him?

MARION GREENWOOD: Well, Rivera was always having lots of fights with his own artists. Of course since then it doesn't matter, Tamayo has become very rich and famous. But at that time, he did want to be painting murals and couldn't get one --I never did really know the reason. It was a shame because he was a very fine artist.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How long were you occupied with the murals in Mexico City?

MARION GREENWOOD: That took another year and a half. This whole series in Mexico City. And at that time Isamu Noguchi also came down, my sister and I helped him get a wall by giving him part of our wall space. We

had so much space to give away so we got [José Miguel] Covarrubias and Rivera to get the government to let him in on it with our group.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And was he working along the same lines as the rest of you then? The same more or less political, symbolic . . . ?

MARION GREENWOOD: Yes, we were all doing . . . . I don't know how to say it . . . . propaganda?

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, it was propaganda. It was meant to be at the time when this developed.

MARION GREENWOOD: He hacked out with an ax on built up brick a big relief, half sculpture, half painting, and then covered that with fresco paint. It was a very interesting technique. When I revisited Mexico in 1956, they had it all covered up for some reason, which I told Noguchi only last month when I saw him.

DOROTHY SECKLER: So, you were there a year and a half. That brings you to about the year 1936. That must have been the year you left Mexico and returned to New York. Now when you returned to the United States, your fame must have preceded you, and there must have been a good bit of attention to what you'd been doing in Mexico. What kind of reception did you get in various quarters?

MARION GREENWOOD: Well, very nice. Once again, it was always economic. I was always having to worry how to make a living. I've had to make a living all my life. Ever since I was fifteen, I've made a living at my painting, and I was also having to help my mother and father. So, I just had to quickly get on the mural projects that were happening. And by that time, the Federal Art Project had evolved.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And there was no prejudice against you for having done this work? In fact, it was the other way around?

MARION GREENWOOD: It was the other way around.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You were honored for having contributed to the Mexican . . . .

MARION GREENWOOD: At that time, yes. Finally, of course, it all completely went out of fashion, because, well, because of many reasons.
[BEGIN TAPE ONE SIDE TWO]

DOROTHY SECKLER: This is Dorothy Seckler interviewing Marion Greenwood on March 12, 1964. Marion, in our last interview when we were discussing your experience as a mural painter in Mexico, I recall that toward the end of your work on the mural in Mexico City, that after discussing the question of your immediate future with Orozco, you decided to follow his advice and to return to the United States where a number of new developments were appearing on the horizon, particularly the new government sponsorship of the arts. As I recall, you had returned to the United States then, around 1934. I wonder if we could pick up at that point -- what your first experience was and in the then new government art project.

MARION GREENWOOD: Well, Dorothy, the details now are pretty vague in my mind, but I was terribly anxious to partake of this whole program which was then called the Public Works of Art Project under the PWA and, naturally, being an American and knowing that all the artists were getting important walls to do or about to get them, I wanted to be part of it. I didn't want to become an expatriate and stay in Mexico for the rest of my life, although I knew that there I had had this wonderful freedom of painting walls without censorship and having to please too many people. I had really gone through something which I was never going to have again from that standpoint of freedom to paint what one wants to paint. However, I was included on the PWA for the whole summer of 1934, or rather autumn and summer as I remember, because I went to Woodstock that summer, too, so I must have -- that's it, it discontinued all of a sudden and I did do a lot of mural designs for projected walls which never happened. As I say, I can't remember the details now, but I'm sure they’re in the records for those who want to look them up.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You remember to whom you submitted them at the time, what agency?

MARION GREENWOOD: Oh, I can't exactly remember. The check would arrive every two weeks from Washington. I think it was to Mr. Rowan; maybe it wasn't; maybe there was some other person. Mr. Rowan at that time was gathering speed in trying to build up a really permanent art project. The PWA was slowly folding up, and we knew it would.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mr. Rowan, you mentioned, had written an article in the Times in which he had expressed his feeling of regret that an artist of your stature should have to leave her own country and go to Mexico to find work. This was of course following your return to Mexico after this first summer's exploratory work on the murals which was not -- did not materialize. I'd like to get that into the record if you'd like to read it.

MARION GREENWOOD: All right then. Shall I read the whole article?

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, why not.

MARION GREENWOOD: Alright, so this was in the New York Times on September 22 in Washington, and I think it must have been printed about 1935. Because by that time, I had returned to Mexico because I had been invited by the Mexican government to participate in this group mural decoration which I already told you about on the other tape. "About one thousand artists in New York City who are dependent on brush and canvas or pencil and pen for a livelihood are in serious straits if not actually starving, Edward B. Rowan, assistant technical director of the PWA art program, made known today. Some are men so prominent that publication of their names would cause great surprise, he asserted, in voicing an appeal for some federal program like that of the PWA, which now is being discontinued, to carry artists through the winter. Some rising American artists like Miss Marion Greenwood of Woodstock and New York City, whose work Mr. Rowan described as sincere, sensitive and monumental, were being forced to leave the country, he said, while others with no business or industrial training were in a desperate situation. Miss Greenwood is returning to Mexico, it was explained, to paint murals for the Mexican government at a nominal daily wage. She already has completed for that government a mural sixty-six feet by ten feet, the photographs of which are now on display at the Boyer Gallery in Philadelphia. The fact that she is not doing this work in America was felt by Mr. Rowan to be a distinct loss to the United States. Only about seventy artists are now doing relief work in New York State, Mr. Rowan said, and the most that New York artists could hope for during the winter was aid through the white collar program being inaugurated by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration. He expressed the fear that this program would be inadequate as far as artists were concerned. Last winter's PWA program gave an impetus to American art at a comparatively small cost, Mr. Rowan said, adding that mural work in particular was developed. He expressed himself as certain that another such program would benefit the nation."

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's the end of the quote from Mr. Rowan in the Times in 1935. Marion, when you returned to New York in 1936 after completing your work in Mexico City, you tried again to find out about the possibility of work on the projects, and I understand your next venture was under the Treasury Art Project. Would you like to recall what your project there was, and how it developed?

MARION GREENWOOD: Well, as I remember I met Stoneroff, the architect who had designed the Westfield housing project which was for the shipyard workers in Camden, New Jersey. At the time, also I was given quite a few buildings to choose from. In those days, it was either hospitals or insane asylums or jails, and I wasn't interested in that. I'd rather paint healthy people rather than sick ones. And so I picked the housing project, and naturally, because Stoneroff was very enthusiastic about my work and was also close to Mr. Rowan. The project was still being built when I took down the dimensions of the wall and hired a loft on 23rd Street, and I was sent assistants and the status of master artist. And it took me about, well, 1936 to ‘38 to finish the whole thing.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And this of course was not in fresco.

MARION GREENWOOD: No, this was oil on canvas, fifty feet long by twelve feet high, and I had cut the canvas in two to fit in the loft. My sister had another wall the same size in another part of the housing project. She also had to do the same thing. We had to do our drawings full scale first, submit them to whoever it was at that time, I’ve forgotten, who decided on whether or not they were okay. Then I proceeded to paint them, and after that the mural was installed on the wall.

DOROTHY SECKLER: We haven't talked very much about what the subject of the mural was. I remember that you mentioned before that you went to Camden and decided to base your material on the various industries in the area and that you actually sketched on the spot.

MARION GREENWOOD: That's right. I went through the canning factories and the hosiery factories and the shipyard workers' docks. I saw the actual workers building the housing project, and at that time, there were so many picket lines and strikes that the whole middle of the mural is taken up with picket lines and the usual socially conscious subject matter of that time. I'm not proud of what I did; it was very sincere and hard work, but I don't consider it my best work. In fact, I don't care for any of the murals I've ever done in America because, well, I just felt, I didn't feel free, and I was still full of the Mexican experience, still working too monumentally and heavily for oil painting. I wasn't happy about it at all, but I did it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I think you mentioned before that whereas you were still staying close to a Rivera-like approach to designing, that in your feeling, you were actually attracted to a more symbolic form, closer to Orozco, but you doubted this would have been acceptable.

MARION GREENWOOD: Very much so. Yes, well, I wouldn't have been able to find the symbols in that almost expressionist way. I was only too sure that they probably wouldn't have been accepted because, after all, I had no status as an artist at that time, where I could have just done anything I wanted. I had distinguished myself in Mexico, but I was still very young and unknown from that standpoint. I was probably too afraid that they

wouldn't be approved by the bureaucrats.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you have the example of seeing other artists' work being rejected at that time?

MARION GREENWOOD: Oh, very much so. I can't remember all the examples. Many of them failed because mural painting was a new thing for the young Americans of that day, except for the old academicians who had been doing the usual churches and marble monuments.

DOROTHY SECKLER: After this period of working on the Treasury Art Project, which went on for a long time, you said the mural was installed, I don't believe you have a date there, but you have a general idea?

MARION GREENWOOD: Yes, '38, 1938. Two years I spent on it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: In this housing project in Camden. I believe you said before you don't know whether it's still up?

MARION GREENWOOD: I never went back there to see if it's still there.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Then at the completion of that project, you were assigned then to a mural for a post office?

MARION GREENWOOD: Yes, that was for the Section of Fine Arts which by then Rowan had developed fully, and artists throughout the country, of course as we know, were doing hundreds and hundreds of murals for post offices. Here again, I just did it in my studio in New York City, and it was mailed to the post office. I never even saw it installed. I didn't believe in doing murals long distance like that. I mean to me it was just a big easel picture, from that standpoint.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And the subject matter of this one?

MARION GREENWOOD: The subject matter of that was just a simple family group with the idyllic symbols in back -- of the land and the water controlled and abundance of the tree under which they sit.

DOROTHY SECKLER: So this was completed then in '39?

MARION GREENWOOD: In 1939. And after that I immediately started on the Federal Arts Project fresco murals, in Red Hook in Brooklyn. There I really did fresco again, the wet technique which I had done in Mexico. I say wet, as compared to fresco secco, which Reggie Marsh was doing in the Customs House. There again, I had to do small color scale cartoons, then the large drawing and full scale and then finally the actual walls. I had to change it and change it according to all the bureaucrats looking at it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And there was a model involved, too, in the preparation of it?

MARION GREENWOOD: Yes. Of course, I didn't have to do that. They always had other assistants in the project who, for instance, just did models for the artists, the architectural models.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Actually, to what extent did bureaucrats change your design, influence the changes that you made? I mean, if you find it interesting to talk about it, it might be part of the history of the importance, the evaluation of this government involved with the arts.

MARION GREENWOOD: In one sense, it was either the head of the building or it was the mayor of the town or it was the – it wasn't only the supervisors on the mural project were certainly trying to do their best, but they had pressures on them from all sides also, and then the people of course were constantly criticizing the whole Federal Art Projects calling them boondogglers. And there again too, painting for the poor American lower class was very different from painting romantically with the Mexican peasants watching me, who seemed to understand so much more about painting than the average white collar worker or slum dweller. They'd come up to me and say, "Lady, why aren't they all smiling?" And I'd say, "Well, you've only seen toothpaste ads and magazine advertisements. You've never even seen real painting." Whereas in Mexico, you just wouldn't get that kind of a question. They were used to art around them all the time. So it wasn't in any sense a happy experience. I don't think anything really significant from the standpoint of culture can ever be connected with relief in any sense because it just doesn't work out. An artist must be proud of what he's doing and not make excuses to people, that it's a relief project to help him survive and paint.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Do you feel as a result of the pressures and changes, the result was one in which you felt you could take very little pride, it was that extent of interference?

MARION GREENWOOD: That's right. Well of course, as I say, not many of the artists had the experience of having the contrast. Perhaps it was just the, well, I can't think of the word--

DOROTHY SECKLER: The mural that you did complete in fresco in Red Hook, I believe, was titled Blueprint for Living, is that the correct one?

MARION GREENWOOD: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And Mrs. Roosevelt—

MARION GREENWOOD: Yes, she came to the opening. Lovely woman and very gracious lady. I spoke a few words. She was very kind and always aware of the struggle of the artist and always trying to help out with anything progressive. Wonderful woman.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Marion, with the winding up of the fresco at the Red Hook project, that brings us up to the year 1940. I believe this signals a considerable change in your life as an artist. A shift from the public to the private world, and I believe this was something of a struggle. I wonder if you can recall some of the difficulties that presented themselves in making a shift from having been one of the most public artists on record to working privately in your studio. If you can recall any of that it would be interesting, I think, for historians.

MARION GREENWOOD: Well, you're very sensitive to realize that. It was a terrible struggle to get back to the intimacy of easel painting and the unusual privacy of it. And of course, I was never free of the worry about money and how to make a living. I had meanwhile married to an Englishman named Charles Fenn, but he didn't have much, and he wanted to be a writer. He was always wanting to go away, and he finally did, to China. Actually, he left in about 1941 so I was sort of high and dry, still trying to turn out some easel paintings that pleased me. I couldn't even lose an edge. I was still in this mural heavy thing of making a figure carry for twenty feet instead of a couple of inches. Also it was the time when surrealism and all kinds of -isms were in the air, and I remember how I finally decided the only thing to do is to be yourself. One thing I always had was a terrific love for human beings and people, and so I just painted with that thought in mind and immediately became quite successful with my easel work. By 1944, I had received second prize in the Carnegie National show, and I had joined the Associated American Artists Gallery which at that time was very, very up and coming, and had a lot of very well-known American artists in it. Also, it was the kind of gallery where the American masses would drop in and pore over my sketches and portfolios. I had already thousands of Mexican sketches which I had never used, which I had done on the mural project, so even when my paintings weren't selling, those would sell, although they sold at very low prices. Then I started to do lithographs which were a great experience, although I had done several in years ago in Woodstock and with Emil Ganso when I was very, very young in Woodstock. So I had learned how to work on the stone. The Associated American Artists had a program of paying artists a couple of hundred dollars to do lithographs, and then they would sell them in large editions at a very low price to people. So all that helped me to live. Then the war came along, and I was very much alone at that time because my husband had left for China and the Far East. He had become a captain in the Marines and was also an OSS man, and so I continued to do jobs. I was a foreign correspondent although because I was a woman painter I was only given Atlantic City to go to and covered all the therapy of the wounded for the Abbott laboratories. This series of work is now owned by the War Department.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Marion, you mentioned at one time that just before the war you had made a very quick trip to Europe with your husband, and that this had inspired some paintings. It led me to wonder a little bit more about the kind of subject matter that you were using in your easel paintings, your studio paintings of this period of the early forties.

MARION GREENWOOD: Well, as I say, I always sketched people. I didn't do landscape or still life. When they were another race, I was especially inspired. I always have been with primitive peasants or that kind of thing. On this trip with my husband, I made a lot of sketches in Tunisia and Italy. We just had a short time, and I looked at the frescos of the great Renaissance artists with such love because I had suffered through fresco myself. So I was able to appreciate so much more the Signorellis and the Piero della Francescas.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How did they seem after having started with Mexicans and then working back to classical Italy? Did they seem unusually static to you or did you find interest in their understatement perhaps? How did that strike you, in any case?

MARION GREENWOOD: I found them wonderfully inspiring and wished I had seen them first, before I was the young naive thing that had gone to Mexico. But they were wonderfully inspiring. I had been to the Louvre in 1928 with my mother and sister when I was very young. This time I got so much more out of looking at the murals of the great Italians. When I returned to the States I remember that summer, I went to Yaddo for the whole summer to get a lot of pictures done. I was always behind in having enough pictures, because I was always trying to catch up with the others, easel painters who had thousands of pictures in their studios. I never seemed to have enough because I still scrape out my work again and again. Although I've been very, very prolific, I don't seem to do anything easily; oil painting has never come easily to me, I think perhaps because I never had the right teachers in the first place, and perhaps because I had so many years of fresco painting,

making certain habits, scrubbing with the brush. I still fight against it to this day.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You mentioned your trip to Europe with your husband, but I believe you must have also gone to England because I recall there was a connection with Julian Huxley. Shall we go back to that? And then we might talk a little bit about what you were doing in the summers during these years.

MARION GREENWOOD: Well, in London, I had an introduction to meet Julian from a very dear friend of mine, and this turned into a very close friendship between us. He was quite wonderful. He afterwards wrote very nicely about my work, and I painted his portrait. He also tried to help me in every way and appreciated what I was doing.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Would you like to read something he wrote about your work? I remember seeing it.

MARION GREENWOOD: Alright, Julian Huxley, in the preface of the catalog: "Miss Greenwood's 1947 exhibition of Chinese paintings at the Associated American Artists best summarized the artist's contribution to American painting. Marion Greenwood is one of those original artists whose depth and maturity of vision can reveal new aspects of reality. Already in her early Mexican frescos, here acute perception of a foreign people created enthusiastic response. Since then in her murals and easel painting in the U.S.A., her own people have seen themselves translated into aesthetically new yet humanly familiar aspects. With the present exhibition, Marion Greenwood offers further exciting proof of her capacity to expand expressive power under the stimulus of new experience. Universal human sympathy underlies all her work."

DOROTHY SECKLER: That’s very nice. Marion, that brings in of course that since he mentions your Chinese subjects, and we are getting close to the period when you took off on a very important trip to the Orient. I think we might just mention, as you've already mentioned, Yaddo as one summer, and you might put into the record that during the years you also had been spending summers in Woodstock, New York. We'll come back to that at a later time. But I'd like to find out how it happened that you were off to China at the end the Second World War. I know it had something to do with your husband’s work.

MARION GREENWOOD: Yes. He had always wanted to be a writer, but he had meanwhile become a captain in the Marines and was working for the Office of Strategic Services and was assigned to Hong Kong. The war had finished, and he had a nice apartment, and although we were finally going to separate, we were still good friends. About 1946, he returned to this country and took me back with him to Hong Kong, and I had this marvelous experience. We went, actually, by way of London again and over Europe by plane and through Burma and India – which was marvelous – I sketched there a lot, up the border to Tibet where I made more sketches and on through Indo-China and to China, where I spent almost two years. I had the glorious chance once again to sketch something I loved. The Chinese peasants and people were simply marvelous, and of course Chinese calligraphy and the wonderful culture of the Chinese, of Chinese art. I completely changed and loosened up, and it was, in fact, one of the best periods for me.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It's very evident in your work that Chinese art had an important effect.

MARION GREENWOOD: And I got away from household chores and the horrible rat race of New York City and having to make a living, at least for a little bit, and did a vast amount of work.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you paint as well?

MARION GREENWOOD: I painted also and brought them back on a slow freighter, slow boat from China, and had an exhibit at the AAA finally, in 1948, I think it was. For about seven years after that, I still painted from my Chinese experience. I find that years later, after the sieve of time takes place, you really know more what you want to say personally.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, that's interesting, and it brings back something else that I had wanted to touch on that you've talked about, and that is your tendency to work a great deal from memory.

MARION GREENWOOD: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And I think that probably very few people looking at your paintings realize the extent to which they are painted not from a living model but from sketches, of course originally having been on the spot.

MARION GREENWOOD: Yes. I've composed some of my best paintings from just swift, on-the-spot sketches which I reweave and recompose later according to what I want to bring out. My best things rely on mood. Then, finally, I have done a few, more or less, almost symbolic things like my Elegy, Invocation, Lament, different important paintings of mine, which stand for that whole period. One can't always reach that level. The memory thing comes -- would have to be -- when you're painting from sketches of a far off time and place. You have to paint from memory. Poetry, you know, is remembered experiences. As Degas used to say, he hated the smell of

the model in the painting and yet he used models. I mean, I'm not against using models, and I often do. Lately, I've been using them again quite a bit because you need it after a bit. I mean you can't rely too much—too many years—so now I'm going through a period of having models again.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I wonder if you'd like to talk particularly about the very important painting that we talked about last week, how that one in particular developed out of a sketch and what your feelings about its implications and mood were?

MARION GREENWOOD: Well, actually this painting I called Elegy, which now is owned by Butler Art Institute, got the purchase prize there in, oh, I forgot what year -- middle fifties, I guess. This is not from a sketch, but it developed from many, many sketches and many paintings that I had done of the Chinese in movement, the Chinese peasants. This is really a deeply religious, sad painting in which I used the figure as a symbol of my feelings. I always have to use the figure as a vehicle to express something, as I'm limited that way. And it's just simply scratched out on the canvas. I used a knife, and it just sort of flowed, and I had every abstract artist and realistic artist calling me up telling me how wonderful it was. None of these artists ever seemed to forget it. They all kept saying, "Well why don't you do another Elegy?" Well, you can't repeat yourself if you try. At least, I did it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Then this brings us back to the United States, unless there are other things that you would like to recall from China, anything you'd like to talk about?

MARION GREENWOOD: Well, there are so many things I could recall.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You were visiting China a very important and unusual period for a European woman to be there at all. If there's anything that you'd like to put into the record about that, it might be interesting although may be not entirely relevant.

MARION GREENWOOD: It was fascinating meeting all these Chinese intellectuals. They were all refugees at that time from the Chinese Chiang Kai-shek government. It was right after I left China that Communism took over in China. Of course, not in Hong Kong which is still a free British Colony.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It was after you left that the Red Chinese took over?

MARION GREENWOOD: Yes, it was right in that year also that India got its independence.

DOROTHY SECKLER: There must have been an enormous ferment, of course.

MARION GREENWOOD: I knew one of the most powerful women in the Chinese government. And wonderful Chinese artists and writers. Unfortunately, though, I found that most of them who were being socially conscious were even more backward than the Mexicans from the standpoint of childish symbolism and the usual old propaganda except for the fine traditional Chinese painters.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you meet some of them?

MARION GREENWOOD: They were wonderful.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How did they manage to fit themselves into the demand for propaganda?

MARION GREENWOOD: Well, they didn't. I mean, that was another group.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Coming back then to the United States -- you were back of course at your easel in your studio and painting from these subjects and other probably too. Were there any other new ties at this point, new friends in your associations?

MARION GREENWOOD: Oh, many.

DOROTHY SECKLER: This would be of course the fifties.

MARION GREENWOOD: Then the period started of my renting studios in Woodstock every summer and always keeping my little Bank St. studio here. Been here now for twenty-three years in this studio. And I went to Yaddo several times more because it's always so peaceful to work there. I had been there many times in the early thirties, as a matter of fact. And Woodstock with all its activities.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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