



Smithsonian  
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Oral history interview with Lowell Houser,  
1964 July 31

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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Lowell Houser on July 31, 1964. The interview took place in San Diego, CA, and was conducted by Betty Hoag for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

## Interview

BETTY HOAG: Mr. Houser is just visiting in San Diego. During the Project period he did one of the Treasury Department murals and I want to ask him about that but first I want to ask him something about his own life. Mr. Houser, would you be good enough to tell us where you were born and when?

LOWELL HOUSER: Yes, I was born in Chicago in 1902 and grew up in the Middlewest, most of the time Ames, Iowa, which is the site of the Iowa State College. Eventually I taught there before I came out to San Diego. I studied at the Art Institute of Chicago. That's where I met Everett, had our scheme of going to Mexico together, and . . .

BETTY HOAG: Were you also a mathematician?

BETTY HOAG: No, ha ha! I should say not.

BETTY HOAG: Ha ha ha. You were in the Art Department then?

LOWELL HOUSER: Yes, I studied at the Art Institute, painting, of course. We went to Mexico and . . . he told you the story there. Later I was, as he mentioned, with the Carnegie Institution at Washington. They were doing the digging at Chichen-Itza and they had artists making drawings and paintings for the book publication.

BETTY HOAG: Oh yes.

LOWELL HOUSER: I worked with Jean Charlot there.

BETTY HOAG: Oh did you? Incidentally, Jean Charlot was on our first committee for the Project in Los Angeles.

LOWELL HOUSER: Oh really?

BETTY HOAG: In 1934.

LOWELL HOUSER: I didn't realize. He is now in Hawaii.

BETTY HOAG: That's what I heard.

LOWELL HOUSER: But, of course, I knew him before that in Mexico City. He'd lived there, and then he'd already been a year or two with Carnegie before I joined . . .

BETTY HOAG: I . . .

LOWELL HOUSER: He really had charge of the art part of it. Then I worked for him.

BETTY HOAG: Are these . . . I probably should know and I don't . . . Ah. Are these Carnegie Records of exact reproductions of the murals there?

LOWELL HOUSER: Well . . . yes. We copied what Mayan murals were found in the ruins and then a great many were drawings and sculpture. Many times the sculpture was so eroded that actually a photograph didn't show it very well and we had to sort of search out with our hands and then make a drawing.

BETTY HOAG: Was a lot of it also in the jungle and covered up?

LOWELL HOUSER: Yes, it was.

BETTY HOAG: So, you'd have to reconstruct?

LOWELL HOUSER: Yes, they did a very large excavation job there and I was only on the last two years of the project. It had been going for years collecting things which - of course, now is open to the public . . .

BETTY HOAG: How long were you there?

LOWELL HOUSER: Two years.

BETTY HOAG: Do you know Covarrubius?

LOWELL HOUSER: I met him but I . . . in Mexico City, as a matter of fact . . . and then later in New York . . .

BETTY HOAG: I suppose you also met Orozco and Rivera?

LOWELL HOUSER: Yes, just to meet. I really wasn't close to . . .

BETTY HOAG: Wasn't Rivera doing his . . .

EVERETT JACKSON: Pardon me for interrupting, but Orozco was in New York quite a while, you see.

LOWELL HOUSER: And when I was here later I would see him sometimes. He was with the Delphic Studios.

BETTY HOAG: What years were those?

LOWELL HOUSER: Let me see. '28 and '29, I think were the years in . . . possibly '27 and '28.

BETTY HOAG: That was before Diego had done his murals at the . . . where were the famous ones that were so controversial?

LOWELL HOUSER: Yes, it was at the Rockefeller Center.

BETTY HOAG: No, I mean the ones in Mexico, at the National Gallery isn't it? Where he did . . .

LOWELL HOUSER: Yes, well, he did work there.

BETTY HOAG: And then the hotel, the ones that were taken out.

LOWELL HOUSER: Yes, that's right. That was later. Of course he was doing things before that all over the place.

BETTY HOAG: I'm trying - not very subtly - trying to get a point whether there was any influence on your later murals from having seen the work of these two men, and probably that of Siqueros.

LOWELL HOUSER: Oh, I suppose so. Although . . . Yes. My job in Chichen-Itza was copying these things and I just spent two years doing it, and after I left there I found I was half Mayan. So I knew that a great deal of the feeling of the thing came from that sort of practice. It was a part of me by then.

BETTY HOAG: Yes. What about the technique? Were those . . . What kind of frescos were they?

LOWELL HOUSER: Well, my . . . you mean the Mayans' or . . .

BETTY HOAG: Theirs versus yours.

LOWELL HOUSER: Oh, theirs were really the true fresco, mostly. Mine I did on canvas in transparent oil.

BETTY HOAG: Then after you were down there did you go back to Chicago or to Ames or . . .

LOWELL HOUSER: Well, not Chicago, but I went to New York for a while. And then I did go back to Ames. That's where I began to teach in college and also do this project in the post-office.

BETTY HOAG: Let's jump around that period and come back to it. Are you still at Ames?

LOWELL HOUSER: No, ha ha!

BETTY HOAG: Well, that brings us up to date.

LOWELL HOUSER: No, first I came to San Diego and taught at the college here for many years.

BETTY HOAG: Oh, you did!

LOWELL HOUSER: I retired from that and had gone back to Virginia to Fredricksburg . . . where I now live.

BETTY HOAG: And are you an active easel artist now or . . .

LOWELL HOUSER: Well, sort of . . . ha ha! Yes, I'd say I was. I'd like to mention Grant Wood, who had a very large project in Iowa about that time, which was '36, I would say. He was painting murals for the library at Iowa State

College but he was doing the actual work with about 30 assistants at Iowa City, where they had taken over part of the gymnasium and so my job was to make drawings and do some design work for the wall of engineering and . . . at Ames where I was living I brought different materials and sent that over and then that was reworked by Grant and the group that he had there and it was a very large job.

BETTY HOAG: Was this a Project job?

LOWELL HOUSER: Yes, it was.

BETTY HOAG: Oh, that's interesting. Then what about your Treasury one?

LOWELL HOUSER: Well, that was one of those competition things.

BETTY HOAG: Yes.

LOWELL HOUSER: It had to do with corn, I remember that.

BETTY HOAG: Ah.

LOWELL HOUSER: At Iowa State College, you see, and there was a tie-in with Mexico: the Mayans also raised corn.

BETTY HOAG: Well of course . . . ha ha! Was this an Iowa State College Post-office?

LOWELL HOUSER: No, it was the town post office.

BETTY HOAG: Where is the mural in there?

LOWELL HOUSER: The mural is in the Post Office of Ames and then the other work with Grant was for the Iowa State College library, and that was also a Project work . . . but I was only a piece of that.

BETTY HOAG: Yes. Do you remember, off-hand, the size of your mural there? Can you tell me about it?

LOWELL HOUSER: Well, it was, I would say, maybe five and a half feet high and 36 long. Something like that. It was big for me.

BETTY HOAG: And did you do it in your own studio?

LOWELL HOUSER: Yes. I did it . . . yes, in a room. So I was surprised, when it finally got on the wall, to see what it looked like!

BETTY HOAG: Did you have any complications of doors cutting it up? So many people ran into that.

LOWELL HOUSER: No, we just simply moved it up above the line of the doors so that I was just up above.

BETTY HOAG: You had just a regular rectangle with no interference? You were lucky, some people . . .

LOWELL HOUSER: I know, I know. They had to go around bullet in boards and so on.

BETTY HOAG: It's one panel, is that right?

LOWELL HOUSER: Yes.

BETTY HOAG: And, the subject of corn, how did you carry this out?

LOWELL HOUSER: Well, I developed the idea that the raising of corn was Mayan, or at least ancient American Indian . . . So, on one side it was all done with the Mayans raising corn, and the other side I tried to repeat the same ideas: the Rain God, the Sun God, and so forth, to make the corn grow on the Maya side and; on our side we had scientific symbols for these things and the farmers harvested the corn.

BETTY HOAG: Oh, that would be interesting. You balanced the two sides then?

LOWELL HOUSER: It was almost duplicate except that it was just different objects.

BETTY HOAG: What did it come up to a sheaf of corn in the center or . . .

LOWELL HOUSER: Of course! Ha ha!

BETTY HOAG: Good.

LOWELL HOUSER: The sheaf was sort of X-rayed. It looked like a corn stock and also an ear of corn . . . enormous . . .

BETTY HOAG: Is it scientific? Did you go into the types of corn developed from the early days?

LOWELL HOUSER: Oh, of course! I had lots of advice from the college people there.

BETTY HOAG: I'm sure they were all interested. Did they come along and give you their version as you were painting?

LOWELL HOUSER: No, no . . . I'd just go to them and ask questions.

BETTY HOAG: Did you have any helpers on it?

LOWELL HOUSER: No . . .

BETTY HOAG: Complete one-man job?

LOWELL HOUSER: Yes.

BETTY HOAG: Was this one that was won in a competition?

LOWELL HOUSER: Yes, it was.

BETTY HOAG: Did you do any other work for the Project?

LOWELL HOUSER: No. I did . . . No, I didn't. I mean, there was another one that I was sort of signed up to do, but in the end I just didn't have the time and they let me off.

BETTY HOAG: Yeh. Can you tell me anything about any of the other Project work that you know about in Ames? I'm completely out of my territory; I don't know what to ask you!

LOWELL HOUSER: Well, I don't recall too much of that sort of thing there but Des Moines was very active.

BETTY HOAG: Was it?

LOWELL HOUSER: It was really . . . in those days they had a lot of painters, a lot of craftsmen working on big buildings. It was rather an exciting place because of the things going on.

BETTY HOAG: Of course, that part of the country was where all of the . . . I think we were most conscious of our grass roots in the artists who came out of the Midwest during the 1930s.

LOWELL HOUSER: Most of these movements begin when people feel very strongly and deeply about it. So, there was a School of Dubuque, and a school of Iowa City and Grant Wood was part of that, and Des Moines had to have its own . . . I remember a lady sent out by the Project and she said she never heard of such a thing as having all this fighting going on between schools about who was to run the whole thing because everybody felt so enthusiastically about the thing.

BETTY HOAG: They wanted to get their own artists into the show?

LOWELL HOUSER: That's right. In other places they'd put everything under one head of the state. The whole state would be under the work of one man, whereas, they had it set up in three or something like that. They just didn't . . .

BETTY HOAG: Well, the researcher in Iowa must be having fun trying to chase all the roots down! Did Ames have any of the traveling shows? Or was there a WPA Project there always?

LOWELL HOUSER: I don't recall. I really don't.

BETTY HOAG: You would have nothing to do with that part of it . . .

LOWELL HOUSER: No. I just don't . . .

BETTY HOAG: Whether they had schools or . . .?

LOWELL HOUSER: I think Ames wasn't a big enough town to get into that very much but Des Moines was, because it was a large city.

BETTY HOAG: Oh. What in general do you feel about the value of the Federal Arts Project?

LOWELL HOUSER: Well, just as we were saying, the sort of enthusiasm that came about after people realized that somebody was backing up the work; that they were doing and it became part of the town and part of the community. And of course it was much . . . people began talking about that sort of thing.

BETTY HOAG: Of course, this wasn't as true of you people who had Treasury grants.

LOWELL HOUSER: No, no, I . . . You see, about that time I was teaching also a little bit in between jobs at Iowa State College in Des Moines. There was a school called the Art Students' Workshop and it later became the Art Center of Des Moines, the same group as I understand . . . after I'd gone, well, I was sort of got tied into this WPA work there because . . . or just knew about it because of this job teaching. I knew what was going on. Now I can't remember too much.

BETTY HOAG: It is certainly a wonderful thing that you'd travel anywhere around the country to see . . . the . . . especially in the post office . . . the works that were done in that period. There has been nothing since then. Very few artists have had an opportunity . . .

LOWELL HOUSER: That's certainly true and I had an interest in going back to see if it is still there, but I haven't done it.

BETTY HOAG: I wanted to ask you one thing personally about working on something as large as this. Do you think it influenced your later easel painting?

LOWELL HOUSER: Oh yes. I would think so because it was the sort of thing I liked, the large and rather architecturally-designed things that fit the mural plan. That's the only way I know how to work. Now I do small things, but they still are sort of "built" rather than "evolved."

BETTY HOAG: I see. I've been trying to find out from the other artists I've talked to whether they felt that this had influenced the kind of painting that is so general now in the museums and is very large with the younger painters.

LOWELL HOUSER: Well, of course I don't know. The size might be. The viewpoint is quite different, of course.

BETTY HOAG: Yes, of course. But this freedom of working large seems . . . as far as I know, almost none was done before until you get way back into the Sierra School of California.

LOWELL HOUSER: That's right.

BETTY HOAG: This is very interesting as far as architects go too, because it is becoming a problem for the artist where to put these things.

LOWELL HOUSER: Ha ha ha! Almost no walls!

BETTY HOAG: Can you think of anything about the Project or anything you'd like to add to this that would be of interest to the Archives? This is striking you rather cold to suddenly ask you this thing.

LOWELL HOUSER: Well . . . I can't remember anymore.

BETTY HOAG: I certainly appreciate talking to you and thank you so much for the interview.

LOWELL HOUSER: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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