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Oral history interview with Robert Boardman Howard, 1964 Sept. 16

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Transcript

Interview

RH: ROBERT HOWARD
MM: MARY MCCHESNEY

MM: First I'd like to ask you, Bob, where were you born?

RH: New York.

MM: What year was that?

RH: 1896.

MM: Where did you get your art training?

RH: In Berkeley. I didn't do very well in school so my parents sent me to art school.

MM: What art school was this?

RH: California School of Arts and Crafts in Berkeley. It's now in Oakland.

MM: And how long did you go there?

RH: About two years. Then they gave me a scholarship and I went to New York and studied there for a year before going into the army.

MM: At what school did you study in New York?

RH: Art Students League.

MM: And then you went into the army?

RH: Yes. Then they sent me to France and I spent about a week in an army training center before I got my discharge over in France and I stayed over there and traveled on a bicycle and went to the Netherlands and Belgium, all over France, Italy to Greece, Constantinople __ quite a thorough trip. And I was painting all the time. My older brother was studying architecture at the Beaux Art. Whenever he was free from his studies there, why he joined me and we bicycled.

MM: And you traveled together? What kind of paintings were you doing then?

RH: Water color. Lightweight. All I carried was an overcoat, a box of water colors and a portfolio of paper.

MM: Sounds like a good way to travel.

RH: Yes, it was. I still think so.

MM: You still have a bicycle?

RH: Yes, I use it here in San Francisco and often when I have errands to do across town in the Mission District. I go down along the Embarcadero and I ride that. It gets me there quicker than a car sometimes.

MM: Good exercise and more enjoyable too. When did you first start doing sculpture?

RH: Well, on the first trip to Italy and Greece. After I saw a lot of sculpture in those two countries, I just thought I'd try it out and I've been doing it ever since.

MM: Had you studied it at art school?

RH: No. I just picked it up.

MM: So then, when did you come back to the United States?

RH: 1922 and then I started getting jobs. Hired myself out, first to a housepainter to learn to handle big quantities of paint and also in a plaster shop where they were doing the San Francisco Synagogue. They gave me the job of doing the ornaments on the Synagogue in clay, modeling in clay, then it was cast in cement.

MM: And you made the plaster molds?

RH: That was my first sculpture job.

MM: What kind of decoration did you make for the Synagogue?

RH: The architectural ornament for the outside.

MM: That would be all relief then.

RH: Yes.

MM: Was it a very big job?

RH: Well, it was for me at that time. Yes. It was quite a big job. It kept me busy for three months.

MM: You made the clay model and then made the plaster mold and then they poured in cement?

RH: Yes.

MM: What was your next position?

RH: Then there was a small theatre up at Guerneville that I decorated. They gave me a free hand. I painted all the natives of Guerneville, their portraits, including the village dog. That was quite interesting. Good experience.

MM: Was it a very large painting?

RH: It ran all the way around. It was kind of a frieze that ran around the inside of the theatre, the auditorium. It wasn't a very big theatre.

MM: Is it still there?

RH: I don't know. I think the theatre is still there but I doubt if the decoration is still there.

MM: And this was done in oil paint?

RH: Yes. Well, then, that led to more architectural work. I worked a lot with the architect, Timothy Phleuger, and worked on the stock exchange building, both murals and sculpture.

MM: What sculptures did you do there?

RH: Well, there's some reliefs in the lunch club upstairs on the top floor and some murals. I think every artist in town got a job on that building.

MM: They did?

RH: Yes. Ralph Stackpole did the big figures outside and I did six panels in the trading room, besides the things in the lunch club. That just made more and more jobs. I was very busy during the first part of the depression. I had some very good jobs. While everybody else was having a hard time, I was the only one that had any kind of work that I knew of, except the people of the PWA.

MM: Your brother, John Langley Howard, painted a small mural at the Coit Tower on the PWA project.

RH: Yes.

MM: But you sere never involved with that?

RH: Well, I did the phoenix over the front entrance but that's all. I didn't do any of the decorating.

MM: Was the phoenix done as part of the PWA? Were you on that project then?

RH: No, I think that was part of the architecture. I got that through the architect.

MM: Arthur Brown?

RH: Arthur Brown.

MM: What size is that phoenix? How large is it?

RH: Oh, about four or five feet. It's a circle. Four or five feet in diameter. Not too important.

MM: What materials did you use?

RH: Well, I modeled it in clay and it was cast in cement.

MM: But it was added after the building was completed?

RH: No. I think they poured it right with the building. It was part of the cement form.

MM: Oh, I see. What was the first connection you had with any of the government sponsored art projects in San Francisco?

RH: I can't remember. I remember going out when they were first organizing that work. There was a meeting out at the D.C. Young Museum, I remember going out there but I don't remember what happened afterwards until, about a year later, the commission made a dubious relief over the one of the doors of the Livermore Post Office. That was a woodcarving. But that came through Washington.

MM: Did you submit drawings for this? Do you remember? Was it sort of a contest thing?

RH: I think so.

MM: It must have been part of the Treasury Art Project that came out of it later when they were doing a lot of Post Offices.

RH: Well, probably it was. Maybe it was.

MM: If you did submit a drawing, that's probably what it was.

RH: Can't remember.

MM: And this relief that you carved in wood is over the door, the main door, of the Livermore Post Office in Livermore, California?

RH: It's the Postmaster's door.

MM: How large is this?

RH: Well, I'd say three by six.

MM: What kind of wood did you use?

RH: Oak.

MM: And what's the subject matter of it?

RH: Two natives, a cowboy and, I think, it's a farmer, reading their mail under the rural mailbox.

MM: Oh, I see. How is it placed? Is it set into the wall or just as a hanging?

RH: It's on the wall, flat against the wall over the door.

MM: How long did you work on this project?

RH: Two or three months.

MM: Did you work in your studio here or did you work down there?

RH: No, I worked in my studio.

MM: Do you remember any of the other artists who were doing paintings for decorations at the Livermore Post Office?

RH: No. I was the only one on that particular Post Office, that I knew of.

MM: There were no murals done inside. Did you do any other sculptures or painting for any of the government projects?

RH: I seem to remember making some small sketches for the Merced Post Office. That was won by -- it was a kind of a competition -- that was won by the two ladies, one's dead now, the other, I think it was Dorothy Puccinelli and Helen Forbes, but I'm not sure. Helen's dead now. They had a much better idea than mine.

MM: Is your relief still standing in the Livermore Post Office?

RH: I think so. It was there five years ago. That's the last time I stopped.

MM: Probably still there then. And then did you go on and do any more sculptures on the project?

RH: Well, I can't remember any more sculpture work.

MM: I thought that the large piece that you have out in front of the Aquarium here in San Francisco was done under some kind of a project.

RH: Well, that was done for the exposition on Treasure Island. The fair in 1939. And then the city took it. Well, it belongs to the city because it was in the San Francisco building so they just moved it over from Treasure Island when the fair was over.

MM: It was in the San Francisco building?

RH: Yes.

MM: That's the group of dolphins.

RH: Whales.

MM: Whales? I was afraid I was going to call them the wrong thing.

RH: Well, everybody calls them dolphins. They are really killer whales.

MM: What material are they done in?

RH: Black granite, but they were cast. It's cast stone. It's a material called cast stone. But for aggregate they used black granite.

MM: How did you go about making a project of that size? That's quite a large piece. It stands, what?

RH: About thirteen feet high. I made a scale model. Three inches to the foot, a quarter full size, and then from that, I enlarged it in clay and then made a mold and caste it in the mold, in pieces.

MM: And then it was assembled at the fair?

RH: Yes.

MM: It seems at the fair there wee some people who were working there like on the Volz murals on the WPA. Apparently that was a WPA project. But then yours was not?

RH: No. I was commissioned by the city.

MM: By the city of San Francisco?

RH: Yes.

MM: So actually then the only project that you worked on, the only things you did for the government art project, were the relief in Livermore and the sketches for the Merced Post Office and then the phoenix on face of Coit Tower which was done through the architect?

RH: Yes.

MM: Did you know many of the artists who were on WPA?

RH: Well, I guess all the artists were on WPA at that time or in those years. I knew a great many of them. I guess

the murals at Coit Tower were PWA, weren't they? They were done under the PWA?

MM: On the Public Works Administration which came a bit earlier and then that ceased and they began the WPA.

RH: Yes, I knew most of those artists.

MM: Did you ever go up to Coit Tower while they were working?

RH: Yes.

MM: Do you have any amusing anecdotes to tell us about the experience?

RH: Well, I seem to remember taking a movie of it. That's the project they gave me, to take a movie of the artists painting. Now what's become of that film I don't know. It was about two or three hundred feet long. Well, I remember going up quite often because my sister-in-law, Jane Berlandina, was painting her piece and I think my wife, Adeline Kent, was helping her and I'd go up and have lunch with her and I'd go the rounds and get hold of my friends, most of whom would be working very hard because it was all done in fresco and they had to paint while the mortar was fresh.

MM: It was all done in a very short period of time too. Quite surprising. Where is your sister-in-law now?

RH: In New York.

MM: At that time she was married to your brother Charles Howard?

RH: No. She was married to Henry Howard. My older brother. He's an architect.

MM: Did Charles have anything to do with the project out there?

RH: Well, not on the Coit Tower but he did something for the Alameda Navel Air Station under the project, but he didn't actually execute it. He made full sized drawings but they never went ahead with it. It was in the officers' mess room. The commanding officer was changed and he didn't care for Charlie's designs. They were abstract and a little too much for the commanding officer, I guess.

MM: Do you remember how large a project that was going to be? Was it going to be a very big mural?

RH: Quite extensive. It was quite a big room and I think these murals took up a great deal of the wall space. I just remember those things vaguely. It's so long ago.

MM: What is your impression or what was your impression of the role or the importance that the government sponsorship of the arts during this period played in the lives of most of your friends or of you? It probably didn't have much effect on you because you'd been very busy and successful before. Do you have any thoughts about the way it affected the artistic careers of the other people that you knew at that time?

RH: Well, it kept them from starving to death. Well, I think it probably continued the what do you call it? In those days there wasn't very much abstract painting going on, the little scenes, the scenes in the streets and on the farm, people doing things, realistic, more illustrative than anything else. You know the murals of Victor Arnautoff?

MM: Yes. There's one at Coit Tower.

RH: Well, he did some others. They're very much like Diego Rivera's. Very little imagination. More illustrations and very beautifully done. He did lots of research to make them realistic and historically correct. A lot of the people that I knew, when they weren't painting were doing research work. All kings of the finest details. If there was a ship -- why the sails even all the rigging had to be correct. If it was a garden, all the flowers had to be correct. You had to practically study botany to be accurate. There was a great deal of that kind of work going on, besides painting.

MM: Diego Rivera had quite an influence on art in San Francisco during that period. What do you think of him? Did you know him when he was here?

RH: Yes, I knew him quite well. He cam up. He was a great friend of Doctor Leo Eloesser, who interested in the arts, and also of Ralph Stackpole and they persuaded him to come up and paint at the fair. He was in the art in action and painted an enormous mural there which is now in one of the high schools out in the Southern part of the city. I forget which one it is. He had a tremendous influence on San Francisco painters. Everybody was painting murals. The school (San Francisco Art Institute) was full of them. They've all disappeared now at the

school but there are quite a few of them around the city in different public buildings.

MM: You mean the California School of Fine Arts, now the San Francisco Art Institute. At that time there were quite a few people teaching fresco painting at the school. Somebody told me that Ray Boynton was a fresco teacher there.

RH: Yes. He was a great enthusiast of the Mexican, they called it "The Renaissance of Mexico."

MM: Did you ever do any fresco painting yourself or get interested in it?

RH: A little bit. I wanted to learn the technique but I never painted anything really big.

MM: Do you think Diego Rivera's influence on art in San Francisco was a good thing?

RH: Yes. "period".

MM: He must have been a very dynamic person.

RH: Yes, he was. I remember going out to dinner with him and a group of other painters and sculptors and we had some wine and had a very good dinner and when he came back, he was using Ralph Stackpole's studio, and when we came back, there was a student from the art school that wanted to meet him, wanted to talk to him, so he had come down to the studio and had gone to sleep and when Diego found him lying on the floor why he pulled out his revolver -- he always carried a revolver under his coat -- and he started shooting. He didn't shoot the student but he shot holes in the ceiling, practically went berserk and had to be controlled with force.

MM: I've heard stories about that famous pistol dropping out of his pocket all the time. What were you going to say?

RH: He was really a wonderful character. He had all kinds of mysterious theories on composition and was filled with Indian superstition and Greek theories on proportion. he had to divide up his walls in the most complicated ways of geometric spacing before he'd even start to sketch. You know the golden section and the harmonious division of Pythagorus.

MM: Did he follow those in most of his murals?

RH: He had a mystic reason for every shape that he used. He was a wonderful fellow.

MM: Yes. I'd never known that about him before. Was he a very religious person or just a mystic?

RH: No, I wouldn't say he was religious, particularly.

MM: Or superstitious?

RH: Well, he was just interested in strange theories, half of which I think he invented himself.

MM: He had a reputation for being quite a storyteller.

RH: Yes.

MM: Did you actually work over at the fair on Treasure Island? Was your piece on the whales done there?

RH: No. Really all my work was done when I'd finished the full size model. But I had plenty of other work over there. I worked on some reliefs, at that time the biggest ones I had one, on the state auditorium, outdoors, and then we painted them -- polychrome sculpture. They were just enormous reliefs on that big wall facing north.

MM: On the front of the building?

RH: Yes.

MM: How large were they?

RH: I did a big parrot for the Ghirardelli building. I did two big maps for the auditorium, the state auditorium inside and two murals for the Brazil building. So I was pretty busy.

MM: It certainly sounds as though you were. How were all these things arranged for the fair? Who took charge of hiring the artists and that kind of thing?

RH: Well, usually the architect of the building. Almost every architect had a building. They weren't all designed

by the same man. But, there was a group of supervising architects so each architect was free to choose his artist, sculptor and painter. Everybody had a job.

MM: The fair sounds as though it were really a bonanza for the artists.

RH: Yes, it was.

MM: They were either working on the WPA Federal Building mural or working on some private project over there. What would you think about the government renewing sponsorship of the arts in the United States?

RH: Oh, I think it would be a wonderful idea. I'm all for it.

MM: Do you think there's any need for it now? Do you think the artists are doing as well as they need to be doing or do you think there's a need for sponsorship?

RH: Far better.

MM: Than they should be doing?

RH: Well, I think they're much more creative. America is one of the great creative artistic countries of the world now. They're second to none.

MM: Why then do you think the government should sponsor art?

RH: I do think they should!

MM: Yes, you think they should.

RH: Well, because I think there are a lot of fine buildings to be decorated and I think opportunities to decorate buildings are very important in the present state of art in the United States because there aren't enough painters that paint in that way. Most of them paint for galleries and small shows for museums and they don't have the opportunity to get their teeth into something really big.

MM: That's true. It's a very different kind of an experience for an artist.

RH: Oh, yes. Very exciting, very thrilling. It would be good for the architects too. I think they tend, most architects tend to keep their buildings pure and unembellished with sculpture or painting and mosaics and I think it's a great pity. I think there ought to be things here just as in Greece and Italian Renaissance and all the other great epochs of art. The artist and the architects always collaborate in the other great epochs. Now, why can't we?

MM: Is there anything else you'd like to say about the idea of government sponsorship or about the time when they did do it?

RH: Well, I think if they did do it it ought to be in that line. They should not try to produce framed painting or gallery painting but should do it in an architectural way. The artist should be encouraged to study a little architecture and try to understand how the architect works and vice versa. Then the architect could think more of his walls as calling for a mural or some decoration of some kind and not just promote painting and sculpture, but also promote decorative architecture.