



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Edythe
Kidd, 1965 Aug. 5

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Edythe Kidd on August 5, 1965. The interview took place in the Santa Fe Office of the Archives of American Art, and was conducted by Sylvia Glidden Loomis 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. 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

SYLVIA LOOMIS: This is an interview with Mrs. Edythe Kidd, widow of Hari Kidd who was employed as an artist on the Public Works of Art Project in Philadelphia during the 1930s. The interviewer is Mrs. Sylvia Loomis at the Santa Fe office of the Archives of American Art, where the interview is being taped, on August 5, 1965. Mrs. Kidd's home address is 1404 East Silver, Tuscan, Arizona.

It was kind of you, Mrs. Kidd, to volunteer to be interviewed about your husband, and we're grateful to Eugenie Shonnard for telling you about this project we're doing. Would you tell us something about your husband, Mr. Kidd? Where he was born and received his art education?

EDYTHE KIDD: Hari Kidd was born in Detroit, and he went, at the age of five, to El Paso, Texas. At 13, he went to Philadelphia. I thought he went to study art, but instead he went to see Ty Cobb play. He remained in Philadelphia and lived with his aunt and was very happy living with her. He went to Germantown High School, and he didn't graduate because he volunteered for the Canadian Royal Air Corps.

When war—when the armistice was declared, he returned to Philadelphia and went into his uncle's business, a printing business. But he couldn't stand it. He couldn't stand trying to sell advertising and things like that, and he enlisted—enrolled in the Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts. And there he received a great deal of inspiration from Henry McCarter, whom he said liberated his spirit.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

EDYTHE KIDD: He had a very rich and happy life in Philadelphia. John Frederick Lewis Jr., and his wife, Ada, were patrons and good friends to his work and to Hari Kidd. He had scholarships abroad and he went to New York about 1925 with his wife, Betty Kidd. It was sometime in the early '30s that they were visiting a friend, Dr. Winifred Stuart [ph], and she turned and she said, How long has Hari had post-encephalitis? He didn't know what had happened, but he knew something had happened, and they realized then that he was a severe, chronic post-encephalitic. And he left Philadelphia, and went alone to El Paso, Texas, which they thought would be beneficial for his health.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: When was that?

EDYTHE KIDD: In about 1934 or '[3]5.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, then he was involved in the Public Works of Art Project before he went to El Paso.

EDYTHE KIDD: Before he went to El Paso.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, before we go on then to El Paso, could you tell me something about that period of his life?

EDYTHE KIDD: Well, it was a very rich period in his life in which he enjoyed and knew the intellectual people of Philadelphia. George Howe, the architect; Louis Flickus [ph]; Stokowski;

Fabien Sevitsky. And he had had one-man shows in New York, one with Alma Reed, of the Mellon [ph] Galleries, and his work was shown at the Philadelphia Art Alliance and at the Academy shows.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well now, do you know anything about that period of the Depression, when he became employed on the Public Works of Art Project?

EDYTHE KIDD: Yes. He was in his studio one day when a student came to see him, and he one dollar left, and she said, Hari, what are you going to do? and he said, I don't know. He went downstairs then with her and he looked in his letterbox, and there was a letter from--

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Washington? Could be?

EDYTHE KIDD: From Washington.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh yes. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

EDYTHE KIDD: Asking him—I don't know what his position was—but to be on the Project in Philadelphia.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. And do you know what kind of work he did on the Project?

[00:05:00]

EDYTHE KIDD: He did murals and he did oils pertaining to the social protest order of the day.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh yes, mm-hmm [affirmative]. And would you know how long he was on the Project?

EDYTHE KIDD: No, I really couldn't say.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: You didn't meet him until sometime later, is that right?

EDYTHE KIDD: No, I didn't meet him until 1944 or '[4]5.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Do you recall anything that he's ever said about that period, other than just this information you've given us? I mean, what effect this had on his career, perhaps? Or was it—any benefit that it might have been to him aside just from the financial—

EDYTHE KIDD: Well, I think it was a lifesaver financially and a lifesaver for his spirit.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

EDYTHE KIDD: Because it's a terrible thing to be in a Depression, to be an artist.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, that's right. Well, it was fortunate it came along, just at that point.

EDYTHE KIDD: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And then you said he went to El Paso around 1935 or '[3]6?

EDYTHE KIDD: Yes, around 1935 or '[3]6. And there again, he was very happy in his life in many ways in El Paso, because Mexico has always been a great influence, and the Southwest has been a great influence in his life. So that he took frequent trips into Mexico, and it was there, in Chapala, that I met him, in about 1944.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And when were you married?

EDYTHE KIDD: About 20 years ago.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

EDYTHE KIDD: In Palmetto, Florida.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: About 1945 then?

EDYTHE KIDD: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And I saw somewhere in these papers that you were his favorite model? Is that right? It was, mm-hmm [affirmative]. And I also understand that you were an artist?

EDYTHE KIDD: Yes, I was painting in Chapala and Hari came up to my studio one time and he looked at my work, and he said, Edy, you're an artist. And I think that's probably what caught me. [Laughs.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, mm-hmm [affirmative]. What—what name did you paint under?

EDYTHE KIDD: I painted under the name Edythe Wall and I had a one-man exhibition at the Bonistall [ph] Galleries around 1944 and Walter Pach was kind enough to write the introduction to my show.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

EDYTHE KIDD: Since then I've exhibited in various galleries around the country.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: What type of work do you do?

EDYTHE KIDD: Well, it's an Expressionist—belongs to the Expressionist school; it's probably Romantic.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: In oils?

EDYTHE KIDD: In oils and casein [inaudible].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well now, Mr. Kidd exhibited extensively then in El Paso, in that area?

EDYTHE KIDD: Yes, and his watercolors and oils would go on tours from one museum to another throughout the country.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Oh, there was one other thing you told me about his changing his name. I wonder if you would--from H-A-R-R-Y to H-A-R-I, would you tell about that?

EDYTHE KIDD: In 1936, Leopold Stokowski came by and spent a week with Hari in his studio, and he said, Hari, if you change the spelling of his name, it will change your luck. And so he changed it to H-A-R-I.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, it's very distinctive, certainly.

EDYTHE KIDD: Yes, it is.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: That was an interesting little anecdote about him and his association with Leopold Stokowski.

EDYTHE KIDD: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I have quite a correspondence of letters from--that Hari had with Stokowski and with other people, and recently I went to a concert and I heard the *Appassionata*, and I had a feeling that this was very repetitive, and I couldn't quite respond the way the rest of the audience did. And the next day, I was going through correspondence and there was a letter from Stokowski to Hari saying, "Yes, I quite agree with you. Beethoven needs re-editing, especially in the light of modern-day instruments."

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh. That's valuable correspondence.

EDYTHE KIDD: Yes, it really is.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, how long was he in El Paso?

EDYTHE KIDD: Well, that was just for a week, but the correspondence went on.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, I meant how long--

EDYTHE KIDD: How long was Hari there?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

EDYTHE KIDD: Well, he went there in '35, and then he was there until about '43 or '[4]4 with trips into Mexico.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And then you went to Key West?

EDYTHE KIDD: And then we went to Key West where we lived for 20 years.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

EDYTHE KIDD: And we had--we enjoyed our life there in our studio very much.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, and both of you continued to paint?

EDYTHE KIDD: Yes, we both were.

[00:10:00]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And these albums and these papers that you're letting us borrow for microfilming tell a good deal about his work during that period.

EDYTHE KIDD: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Is there anything in particular that you would like to say about it? I mean, in the way he developed and--

EDYTHE KIDD: Well, in his watercolors, he used what he called the nervous breakdown medium. There was no preliminary drawing. He went right in with big, bold brushes. And of course, since he had post-encephalitis and his coordination was affected, why, it was really a very remarkable feat. His work has a strong emotional impact, and he was a mystic. I feel, of course, that he has made a very fine contribution to American art.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yes, on the basis of these color photographs that you have shown me, I think so, too. What has happened to some of his paintings?

EDYTHE KIDD: Well, they're in collections throughout the country and in museums, and I am interested in finding a collector who would take a group of about 30 oil paintings, which I think contain some very tremendous and powerful work.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: These are the photographs that you showed me?

EDYTHE KIDD: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, I hope you find a repository for them.

EDYTHE KIDD: Yes, I hope so, too.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Because they are beautiful things. I suppose it's difficult today to sell paintings of that period, do you find that's so?

EDYTHE KIDD: Yes, that is a problem. If it isn't a collage or some work that is considered contemporary [ph]--I think what is very difficult is for every artist to find that at some time in his life, he's no longer avant-garde.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

EDYTHE KIDD: That--of course, our youth makes such an impression upon us, and we're so ready to look down, when we're young, at some of the mature artists of the time, and then to find out that now our work is no longer considered contemporary is a rather difficult thing to realize.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, that's true.

EDYTHE KIDD: And it's a heartbreaking thing to realize.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I think so.

EDYTHE KIDD: And I don't think it's quite fair.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, I hope that this present trend will reverse itself soon, so that a good many of the excellent painters of the past are accepted again.

EDYTHE KIDD: Yes, the thing that should be required is whether it's good art or bad art--.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: That's right. I think so, too.

EDYTHE KIDD: And the category shouldn't be as important as it is today.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yes, it's gotten a little bit too faddy, I think.

EDYTHE KIDD: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, are there other things that you would like to tell us about your husband's work or about his life? That would be of human interest in this record that we're making of the artists of the PWA and the WPA period?

EDYTHE KIDD: Well, I--there isn't very much that I can say about the Works Projects, because I really don't know anything about it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: No, that was--

EDYTHE KIDD: I can just speak about him as a person.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, that's what we're interested in.

EDYTHE KIDD: Well, when I--we were in Chapala, and we were invited to a party, and it was a very gay party, and there was a festival going on in the town. This is about 21 years ago. And a boatman came to get us, and we got into the boat, why, we realized the boatman was *muy borracho*, very drunk. And so Hari asked him to take us back, and he did, and we paid and we decided to walk down to the village.

It was a very narrow road. It curved and there were high walls on either side, and Hari's walk was unsteady, and you just had to touch him and he would go over. And around the bend, an Indian came, blind drunk with tequila. And he had his hands--fists clenched and I knew that there was nothing that Hari could do, and Hari said to me, You keep walking. So I kept walking, and as I passed the Indian, I turned my head and I looked back. The Indian stood--encountered Hari, and he stood in front of him, and very slowly, I saw the Indian bring his hands down, and Hari joined me and we walked on down, and we didn't say anything. And it was a look--the look that Hari gave him that I could see was a look of pure Jesus Christ.

[00:15:05]

But we didn't say anything, and years later, I said to him, Hari, how did you do it? And he said, I looked at him without any criticism and without any condemnations.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. The Indian recognized it.

EDYTHE KIDD: Even though he was blind drunk, he could see it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, that's a beautiful commentary on your husband and his spirit. And we're very grateful to you, Mrs. Kidd, for this interview. Thank you.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]