



Smithsonian
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Oral history interview with Juan Menchaca,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Juan Menchaca on November 13, 1964. The interview was by Sylvia Loomis for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

SYLVIA LOOMIS: First, Mr. Menchaca, would you tell us about yourself, where you were born and where you received your art education?

JUAN MENCHACA: I was born in Fort Worth, Texas, on a farm about three miles from the city and after finishing school I was interested in the art field at all times, I attended the Texas School of Fine Arts. It provided all phases of crafts, and then later I studied in Denver.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Did you go back and forth?

JUAN MENCHACA: Yes, I did.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Your home was still in Fort Worth, but you came here to go to School?

JUAN MENCHACA: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And where did you study here?

JUAN MENCHACA: Under Robert Graham who was a teacher and professor, specializing in portrait painting.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: What school was this?

JUAN MENCHACA: Graham's

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, his own school?

JUAN MENCHACA: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: How long did you study with him?

JUAN MENCHACA: I was very fortunate to have two years of his training, both in portrait and landscape painting field.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: When was this?

JUAN MENCHACA: This was in thirty-four, thirty five.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And then did you say that you moved here?

JUAN MENCHACA: Yes. On my last return to Fort Worth I married and then I moved to Denver.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And how did you become involved in the art project?

JUAN MENCHACA: Well at the time I didn't know how I could get started in my field. I was very fortunate that I visited some of the projects and Donald Bear, at that time director of the art museum, suggested that I bring some of my work and he would see what could be developed, or if it would be possible to get started in any of the art projects, in Denver.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Were you applying for an easel project?

JUAN MENCHACA: Well at the time I applied for the fields that I had some information or know-how.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: You didn't care just as long as you got a job?

JUAN MENCHACA: Yes, of course when I did return and show Mr. Bear the work that I had, he was impressed with it to the point that he recommended me to apply to this museum, the state museum, which was involved in portraiture work and diorama work. Up to that point the diorama was only a very vague craft that involved the field of art.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Was somebody already working in that - state museum - with the dioramas?

JUAN MENCHACA: Yes, there were. When I visited the state museum I saw Mr. Edgar McMechen. He was the supervisor and his supervision covered a wide range of activity; writer's project, art project and of course the historical reproduction of the artifacts and the portraiture of the different people that involved the history of Colorado.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: What was it that you did first?

JUAN MENCHACA: Well my first assignment was to reproduce, from old photographs and some very sketchy history about the individual, to reproduce or to make an oil painting of these different characters. The first assignment involved the military men, explorers such as Fremont, Long, Gunnison and quite a number of them.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Did you do portraits of them?

JUAN MENCHACA: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: How many? Do you remember?

JUAN MENCHACA: I recall now at least fifty portraits of different groups. I mean that there were industrialists, there were cattlemen, there were farming developers, mining men.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And you did fifty of these?

JUAN MENCHACA: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: That's an awful lot. How long did it take you to do one?

JUAN MENCHACA: Well, at first I was a little more or less at loose ends and of course I was trying to benefit by producing or painting as many as two paintings per month and that was a little too energetic, because I was new in the field but I wanted to be productive.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, well you certainly were. Now this would have been when? 1935 or '36?

JUAN MENCHACA: This was in '36.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Then how did you get into the diorama work?

JUAN MENCHACA: The fact that there was a lot of operation or a lot of activity going about us. I was assigned to paint backgrounds for some of our early dioramas, I say early from the time that I started, and before long I was doing some of the figure work, modeling. And because of the different changes of personnel moving about, before to long I had specific assignments in the diorama construction. I was at that time assigned as immediate supervisor to the different operations in the diorama project.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: So you supervised it as well as doing some of the work, making the models. Well I want to ask you more about that, but also the historic aspect of it. Where did you get your information on which you based these dioramas? Who did that for you?

JUAN MENCHACA: Well we had a staff and this was broken down to research personnel and this research was of course, directed by the supervisor of the project which was Mr. Edgar C. McMechen.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: How many historic research people were there?

JUAN MENCHACA: There were actually two but this also involved a lot of segments of history or reference from the writer's project, there were a lot of researchers, there was a lot of work had been done in assimilating history in both newspapers and we were fortunate to have a lot of fine writers, men that had had experienced with newspaper work. We had one person that I recall, Thomas who had been more or less a man of great research ability and through all of this information I believe it was one thing that really helped us out in getting to our point of view or value in producing our work. It seemed like it was never a set rule to produce, for the making of our dioramas - it was a continuing research, both in the mechanics and of course the history. We had to be correct for historical value of these and we had Dr. Haven who was the state historian and this involved the whole structure as far as the research.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Did they come and check the models as you were working them?

JUAN MENCHACA: I think that we made roughs and then our groupings, our composition, ability to tell a story in a simple or in a comprehensive layout was more or less left to those that actually were involved with producing

it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I know that all of the details seem to be so technically correct and I wondered if you were just given these instructions at the beginning and then you work them out, or whether the historians came to check them and see whether each of these little details were correct.

JUAN MENCHACA: Well there were a lot of details involved in making those dioramas and the historian or the person directing, the fact that we were producing no doubt had a keen eye over all and there are times when you have to make corrections, but I believe that the way that we have accomplished most of our work, and including of course the details, is that we ourselves researched right along with the research project or with the job itself. In other words we feel that if we know what we're doing why we feel that we can accomplish the job much better.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Now will you tell me just how you went about doing one of these, right from the beginning, right on through.

JUAN MENCHACA: Well, perhaps we can do this by taking for example one specific diorama, the trappers. We were told, or I was assigned to produce a series of diorama showing the activity that went about in the trapper series or groups. So we started with the habitat or that lure or the environment that set out the mountain man as a trapper - what was he after? So we designed a case or a diorama where we could show the beaver as the main lure for the trapper so we created a natural historical diorama for it, showing a beaver at work, with all details; we tried to produce water for the effect, the dwelling to their life or their habits or their processing or how the beavers lived and it was just a lot of fun doing this. I'd like to say that I don't give any of our dioramas really to the quality of the work, it's just patience and...

SYLVIA LOOMIS: They look as though you enjoyed them because there are all these little details that make it look so authentic all the way through. Where it shows the mountain men in the canoe with the trading post side of it, was that also in that series?

JUAN MENCHACA: Yes. Now in order to develop a series of a certain subject we can create different views or scenes of activity and so one of them was a diorama about a trapper and their transportation. So here we have a segment of how did they transport the catch or whatever the trapper is after. So there again we'd go into research and we'd find documented information by several writers, books, and so forth and then we'd kind of freeze the picture of what took place.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: One of the incredible things to me was the number of dioramas you made during this period. I understood that all but about two of them were done during the WPA days. Is that right?

JUAN MENCHACA: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: That period was from the time you went on, 1936 to about 1939 or '40.

JUAN MENCHACA: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And as far as I've been able to figure out there must have been about forty of these that you did.

JUAN MENCHACA: Well one time we had as many as twenty-five people working on those dioramas.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh you did?

JUAN MENCHACA: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: So about how long would it take you to do one from the beginning?

JUAN MENCHACA: Of course, again, I would say that it involves the number of people that work with it, you know. We can say that it runs the number of figures involved. Some of our dioramas have as many as one hundred twenty-five figures.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: The one of "The Rendezvous" must have had at least that many.

JUAN MENCHACA: Yes. In this particular diorama, "The Rendezvous," it took about three months. Now, actually, man hours would run about a thousand.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Did you do the original models for these yourself?

JUAN MENCHACA: Yes, for one reason or another I was more or less interested in designing the composition as a

whole.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: There seems to be a technique that runs through them all and that was the reason I wondered about your part in it, because the same sense of composition and even the quality of the models look as though they were controlled by one creative mind, and I just wondered of that wasn't yours.

JUAN MENCHACA: Well, I don't like to take credit for them but I do say that everyone that worked with this, all contributed and I was very fortunate that I could use all of their suggestions and incorporate them, and as long as we all understood what we were doing why everything seemed to fall in line.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well they looked as though one person at least supervised them all. Otherwise they wouldn't have come out with such a consistently good quality. If you have several groups working separately you'd find quite a different technique or a difference in the composition or something of that sort, but there seems to be a continuity through all of these that is sort of typical. Now, we got side-tracked from the question I asked you about the procedure, from the time you got the information about a series and decided which aspects of this whole series - such as the trapping - that would tell the story from a historic standpoint. Then what did you do - start with one of them and just go on through to the end of that series?

JUAN MENCHACA: Well there were a lot of transitions and there were a lot of changes, there were a lot of new ideas involved with each of these dioramas, I mean it provided us with a challenge of doing the figures in more practical ways, and produce them and make the project much more interesting to all of us. For example one time at the beginning each figure was individually cast, which meant that whoever was doing the figure had to be pretty well tied down to that specific figure. Later we developed a process where we could model a figure and make a very simple mold and cast our figures from the small mold and then change them.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh! That probably saved a lot of time. And then that might account for the similarity that exists.

JUAN MENCHACA: Yes. Then there is the case of making the trees, simulating different effects...and that of course took a lot of time - to develop different processes to make trees out of sawdust, color, using wire for limbs and all these different things that give you a pictorial three dimensional view that keeps adding up. It's something that grows in with you or with the individual at each operation.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mrs. Thompson said that you got some of these effects by taking golden rod and spraying it.

JUAN MENCHACA: Yes that is one of the techniques...and so far it has proven very successful and I don't think we can improve on this particular way of making pines or evergreens.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: It's amazing how realistic these are. Do you remember which one you started with, which series?

JUAN MENCHACA: Well I was working on backgrounds of the Indian transportation series beginning with the travois and from there I worked on the Mexican carreta and then for awhile I went back to portraits, but I carried on with the backgrounds through the Indian series of the meat making and the scalp dance.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: You were still doing background then?

JUAN MENCHACA: Yes, I was doing backgrounds and painting some of the figures. Actually I didn't start in actual modeling for the whole project, diorama making, until the trappers. And I, of course we had the Mesa Verde model that was delineated by one person, Eunice Welch, who had been with the project way before '36.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh. She was one of the first ones on that?

JUAN MENCHACA: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Did she go all the way through?

JUAN MENCHACA: Well she finished the model but the figures were made much later, and the clothes and the trees.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Do you remember the continuity of the others?

JUAN MENCHACA: Well, we had a water series that was started before, prior to '36 and through all those dioramas I took part either in the background painting or some of the finishing touches.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, when did you become supervisor?

JUAN MENCHACA: This was in '38.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Then after the WPA project closed down then you continued right on?

JUAN MENCHACA: Well, in '41 I was still working with the arts project. I was doing portraits for the Federal Art, Turner Mesick was the supervisor, or the director. At that time in '41 the project was, you might say, at loose ends, a lot of the workers had gone – those that were young went into the service and others had begun to break away and find employment at different phases. I was interested in either getting in the service or to find a place where I could be of more value to the war effort and I made one application with the Remington plant that had just begun to operate, and the next thing I knew I was altogether in a different field. I was with Lowry Field and my job or my assignment was to become an instructor in camouflage. This was the time when the Army or any of the military operations could change from day to day, and after two months of training the camouflage unit was eliminated because it was felt that the camouflage was part of the engineers instead of the Air Corps. I was assigned to a job in the reproduction division and I was given the title of litho artists. Making line drawings for offset reproduction.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: For what purpose?

JUAN MENCHACA: Well this was for a manual for training, and here again I became involved in making models and I made one for the training [in the] official identification of ships. I believe I saw one of the first photographs taken by our reconnaissance unit from in Balboa Harbor and I was commended by the commanding officer; and this model was kept for quite a number of years. Also I did model making with the convalescent group, those that had returned from Europe, specifically from Salerno. We had a unit of men that had been shot or wounded and they participated with me and we reproduced a large-scale model of this field and to me I felt it was sort of a rewarding thing that I was able to do this. I might add that a lot of this was done besides my regular duty with the reproduction division.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Was this sort of therapy for the men?

JUAN MENCHACA: Yes, they found it quite interesting because some of these men, really to relax and participate, they talked about their experience and I learned a lot from them and we did get a lot of favorable comments for this work.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: It probably helped to get it out of their system too, some of those that had such a terrible time there.

JUAN MENCHACA: I stayed with this work until after the war.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: What happened to this model that you made of Salerno?

JUAN MENCHACA: Well, things again began to move and by the end of the war of course there were a lot of changes and I became more interested by then in the work that I was doing with the printing field. It was then that the government printing office established a field office here in Denver and some of the beginners or some of the men responsible to establish this field office had contacted the reproduction division there at Lowry Field and I was offered the job to help develop the field office for the government printing. I was given a job as working supervisor in the platemaking and camera room and I worked for them for two years. At that time the project of the state museum with the same director that I had started back in '36, Mr. McMechen was developing the reconstruction of Fort Garland, Colorado, and he offered me a job to take over the making of the dioramas that are there now. And I resigned my job with the government training office and started with the dioramas of Fort Garland.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: When was that?

JUAN MENCHACA: This was in the fifties.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And then how long were you there?

JUAN MENCHACA: Well, really, we did our work, and we still do our work for our field museum here in Denver, and then we assemble them and send them to our different places.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh I see, you do the work here and then you send it out to these various places?

JUAN MENCHACA: Yes, or we go and assemble it there.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: But the work is actually done here?

JUAN MENCHACA: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: How much of a staff do you have now?

JUAN MENCHACA: Well, at the present we have two people, one Mr. Roy Hunt that's been with the project both here in the museum and in the art project. I'd like to say that Mr. Hunt is very capable and has been a wonderful person in his art field in his own right and somehow or another became involved also in the model making; and I feel that he is the man that should be giving this interview.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, I'd like to get to him too but I think that your association with the project and your own experience is extremely helpful and interesting too so what I wanted is both of you. Perhaps he'll come in so I can interview him too. Well, now let's see, since you came back here what dioramas have you done for the museum?

JUAN MENCHACA: Well for this particular museum we've had two dioramas. They started to be temporary exhibits and one was the participation of Colorado in the Civil War. This was altogether different, we view this segment of history from all, well, not all, but three planes of view, and here I was fortunate to have one of the students from Colorado University that had just finished the musicology course by Dr. Rodeck and he wanted to have a studio or a practice or the mechanics of the business, so we spent about a month and produced this particular one. And during our Pony Express Centennial we made one and we are more or less stuck with it now so we're going to keep with it. Now of course we have dioramas that we worked with or made since for the museum; in Montrose - the Ute Museum. Here we have the early life of the Ute and we hope to start on another diorama that would finish that series - that will be four dioramas that we have.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well are there any comments that you'd like to make about this period of the federal art projects?

JUAN MENCHACA: I think it was a wonderful thing, an opportunity that really helped to change the attitude and the course of our way of living. From the beginning, let's say I was just a greenhorn, yet I was serious enough to have faith and believe in what I wanted to do and here was the resource, here was the provider. And here was the opportunity to do this work and I think everyone felt the same way as I did.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: You really enjoyed it and got a lot of good from it.

JUAN MENCHACA: Well, it was really a schooling as well. To see some of the work that I did thirty years ago or twenty, nearly twenty years ago, I know that I've come up and there's been a lot of improvement and still it's fun to see this work and I'm glad that it's still around and I hope that it's done some good for others.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, I think it's just fascinating - all of the dioramas - I'm just amazed by them and they're a great source of information, and something that will last. They'll never go out of date because they were the early history of Colorado.

JUAN MENCHACA: A lot of fine people that come to visit the art museum they don't seem to hesitate, they don't see any problem to them to come down and visit us and tell us that our dioramas are wonderful. I don't know by that time I'm about ready to say, well, thank you.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Thank you very much. It's been very interesting.

END OF INTERVIEW

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