



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with George Booth
Post, 1964 Apr. 9

Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a grant from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National Park Service.

Contact Information

Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Interview

LF: LEWIS FERBRACHE

GP: GEORGE POST

LF: Lewis Ferbrache interviewing

GP: Is this on?

LF: Yes, when that white dot is showing it should be on. Sometimes sticks here. This is an old machine.

GP: Oh.

LF: Mr. Post, if you would first give us some biographical material: when and where you were born and your art training and what you were doing before working on the Federal Art Projects.

GP: Thank you Mr. Ferbrache. It is so nice to be here this morning talking with you and I do have some very fond memories of the WPA Project and how much -- it really meant a great deal to me in those days when we were all just getting started. It certainly was a big incentive to go on and do something with my career as an artist. It seems, in looking back, that I had just recently become rather well known in the Bay Area as a watercolor painter and I had done very little painting in watercolor before that. After leaving art school, I went to work in the C&H Sugar Refinery at Cracked, California.

LF: Excuse me, Mr. Post. Where did you receive your art training?

GP: At the California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco, which is now called the San Francisco Art Institute. I went two and one half years there and then I had to leave and go to work. So my brother was working in the C&H Sugar Refinery so I went up there for a year and had a good taste of freedom. I mean, not freedom but independence, I guess, in making my own living. One day I decided that I hadn't gone to art school for two and one half years for nothing, and I ought to get out and start doing something because in art I was getting a little satisfied with the routine of the sugar factory. Anyway, I quit the next day, which was a kind of a hard thing to do in those -- this must have been around the late Twenties, I should think, in looking back on it now. I came back to San Francisco and started looking for art work, which is always difficult, but I found some newspaper advertisements, furniture, pen and ink illustrations, to do for a little furniture store out in Mission district in San Francisco and it was a start. From that it led to one thing and another and I got into sort of the commercial art field for a while. Then the depression came, badly and everything, and I had to go to sea. I got a job on an oil tanker to New York and did some watercolors on my hours off. When I came back to San Francisco, it seems to me, I showed them at the East-West Gallery in San Francisco with Mr. . . I can't remember his name . . . Joe Danish, and he later was on the Art Project. Well anyway, they seemed to take very instantly and I -- in the next year or so, I became quite well known as a watercolor painter. When the WPA Project did break, I was put on immediately as a watercolorist along with Dong Kingman.

LF: This was about what year?

GP: This would be '36, 1936. The beginning of '36 until the middle of '37. A year and a half I was on the Project. Although there was a time before this when I was in Sonora doing some pocket mining with my cousin in the hills

LF: This was Sonora, California?

GP: Sonora, California. And

LF: Up in the old gold rush country?

GP: In the old gold rush country. I had sent two or three water colors down to the Palace of the Legion of Honor Museum in San Francisco for a California show and Mr. Thomas Howe had just become director of the museum or he was assistant director. I don't remember now, but he had something to do with the WPA and he came up anyway. He came up to interview me with this photographer -- I'm sorry I don't remember these names too well. Who did "The River?" Do you remember? [Robert O'Flaherty]

LF: Oh, the . . . the famous film maker who did the one on Eskimo life. . .

GP: Yes, and "The River." I can't recall his name. He and Mr. Howe came up to the ranch and suggested that I do a mural for the Sonora High School. This was on the first . . . the WP . . . the PWA.

LF: Public Works Administration?

GP: That's right.

LF: Under the Treasury Department.

GP: Right. So I submitted a design for the Sonora High School and that was my first experience with a federal government job.

LF: That was a mural?

GP: That was a mural in oil, and this was before I came back to San Francisco, and it was some time later that I . . .

LF: And the subject matter of the mural?

GP: It was . . . Agriculture, Lumbering and Mining were the three themes. It was divided into sort of three areas and there was a doorway, I remember, in the middle that sort of cut it in half, but not all the way.

LF: Was it more than one panel? Or one large panel?

GP: No. It was all one panel. It sort of went from one theme into another. It was done on canvas.

LF: Do you remember the size?

GP: It was eight feet high and thirty-six feet long.

LF: Did you do it there in Sonora or elsewhere and bring it up?

GP: Yes, in Sonora. I pasted the canvas right to the wall, the blank canvas to the wall, and then sized it, then made a makeshift scaffolding and worked right up on the wall after the canvas was installed.

LF: This took you about what length of time?

GP: I should say about a month and a half.

LF: That's quite a feat!

GP: Yes. Well, I was a little . . . I certainly wasn't experienced with working large Doing murals, especially if it came off rather well, I certainly wouldn't think much of it now. But it was a start.

LF: Did you have an assistant?

GP: No. No, there was no one else up there.

LF: You did all the work yourself? And it's still hanging in the

GP: I haven't been in for years. I know they took it down when they refurnished this room. It was a big round room, circular room. I think it was probably the library, but I was never quite sure what room they used it for -- a study. It was in the middle of the building and it was perfectly round, a large round room. I heard that they did the whole room over since that time and rolled it up and put it in the basement and they were never sure just how to put it back. I'm not sure whether it ever went back on the wall because I never went in to see. It may still be rolled up in the basement. They seemed to like it very much. I'm not sure whether they ever were able to put it back. It wasn't easy to put it up, I remember.

LF: Were you paid a flat fee or a commission or salary for this work?

GP: It was a salary.

LF: A contract?

GP: Yes. And I don't remember now what the figures were. I could get them. I'd be glad to.

LF: This is kind of interesting for the record what the artist did receive from the government.

GP: I remember very well what the salary was on the WPA but I was -- this was before the WPA and this was the mural. It probably was the same but on the WPA it was \$90.00 per month.

LF: Yes. GP; I imagine all of the salaries were very much the same, weren't they?

LF: Similar.

GP: Yes.

LF: Then, after you finished this mural, you went back to San Francisco?

GP: NO. I was up there for a year and a half, up on my aunt's property. My cousin and I were mining and building this little camp for my aunt on eighty acres that she had near Sonora. I stayed on until 1935 and then went back to San Francisco. And it was in 1936, a year later, that I went on the WPA Project in San Francisco. That was doing just watercolors up and down the state.

LF: You would go out in the field and you could choose your own subject?

GP: Yes. And I didn't have to be back . . . I had to report to the office with an armload of watercolors every two weeks. But I didn't have to go to report every day, or once a week, but every two weeks. I didn't have a car or automobile in those days. I'd go hitch-hike and go by Greyhound bus and I went all over the state. It was a most wonderful sort of experience to have so much freedom and to be getting \$90 per month, which in those days was a fortune because we were all getting along on so little money. It was a wonderful start and I was never happier, I don't think, than in those days when I could just go roaming all over the country and just do watercolors. It was a good start and I learned an awful lot by having so much time or freedom just to paint.

LF: Did you receive expense money too? GP; No. I think it was just straight \$90. I'm sure of that. I don't remember any . . . ever having expense money.

LF: The other artists also were allowed to go out in the field or just a small number?

GP: Yes. Well, no. Not all of them. Different artists have different things to do. I know Dong Kingman and I were going out a lot just on our own and there may have been other artists -- I don't remember everyone now who was on the Project. There was Marion Cunningham and quite a few sculptors, it seems to me as I look back. Dave Tollerton, I'm sure he was on in those days.

LF: Where was the office that you had to report in with your watercolors?

GP: Well, it moved. It moved around so many times. There was . . . For a while, I remember it was out on Potrero Ave., near the San Francisco Hospital.

LF: You'd bring in these watercolors and then the supervisor would look at them, would he, and . . . ?

GP: They just took them all and I never saw them again. They matted or framed them. Many of them went into high schools and I heard later that a lot of people said they had seen a lot of my things up in Timberline Lodge [constructed by the WPA] on the top of Mount Hood. I never did get up there to see them. I would like to have.

LF: There were some exhibitions, from time to time, I understand, at this time. Were any of your works included in these?

GP: Yes, they were, yes; and since then I have also run into them quite by happenstance. I saw one not too long ago out at the Presidio of San Francisco, at the Letterman Hospital. Of course, I didn't know it was there, all these years, but there it was, and it was kind of fun to see it. And at Hartnell College at Salinas, there were two I saw one day and in San Rafael High School and the High School in San Mateo or it might have been Burlingame, but every once in a while you still run into them.

LF: Were these made to the standard size? Did they limit you to the size? It had to be the same size for all the works?

GP: I'm not sure whether everyone painted in the same size. It seems that most of mine were done in practically the same size. They were quite large. I think probably around 24" x 32".

LF: Then, with your portfolio and your brushes, you would travel throughout, I suppose, the northern part of the state, or did you also . . . ?

GP: Mostly, yes, mostly around the San Francisco Bay area and up Highway 101 to Sonoma Valley, and the wine country, which I've always loved, and the Mendocino Coast. Sonya Noscoirac was on the Project as a photographer. She'd studied with Edward Weston. She was doing photography and we were both up there for two or three days, I remember, in Mendocino City and Albion. It was so wild and rugged and isolated in those days and it was so wonderful. That was, I think, the first, I'm sure that was the first time I'd been up on that Mendocino Coast area. Then we'd go down to the Carmel and Monterey area and the Salinas Valley and out in Livermore and Ukiah.

LF: And wherever you saw something interesting, you'd sit down and . . .

GP: Yes. That's right.

LF: . . . and start to work?

GP: Yes, but I should think most of the things were done probably or certainly around the Bay area. They were building the bridges in those years and I remember doing a lot of both bridges under construction.

LF: This was the famous San Francisco Golden Gate Bridge and the East Bay Bridge?

GP: That's right.

LF: As you traveled, would you stay with friends or would you stay in motels . . . ?

GP: Quite often, yes. Sometimes I'd sleep in a haystack! [LF laughs]

GP: It seems that there weren't nearly as many fences around things in those days and

LF: You could wander pretty much

GP: You could wander in and out of people's farmyards without arousing suspicion the way -- I've noticed everyone is quite suspicious today. I suppose for good reason today, but oh, quite often, I'd bundle up on a haystack or in somebody's barn and I'm sure they never knew I was there. Every once in a while, in the summer.

LF: Did you often team up with someone on a trip like this, or did you travel separately, usually?

GP: Usually. Although I had, as I say I did I'm sure that I must have met Sonya working up in Mendocino while she was doing photography, but we didn't go up together, and I didn't go with Dong Kingman on any of his excursions. Although once in a while we painted together around the Bay area.

LF: Did you have any interesting adventures? Such as people stopping to see what you were doing way out in the country and . . .

GP: Oh, yes.

LF: . . . making comments.

GP: Yes. Most of the time it was a lot of fun and people seemed interested and they still are. People are still interested in watching someone else at work, especially while they are painting. It gave me a wonderful start for working outdoors. I've never since those days enjoyed working inside as much as working outside because I get such a wonderful start in getting used to the elements, and the wind, and the sun, and the glare, and it seems that I'm most inspired by working outdoors. Although I have worked many times indoors, I still like to get out in the field.

LF: Did anyone on your trips ask if they could purchase one of your watercolors or would you do a certain watercolor for them or . . . ?

GP: I don't remember that, no. I don't think many people had enough money in those days to buy watercolors. Of course, this has happened many times since but I don't remember it occurring while I was on the Project.

LF: During the depression years, money was a little tight.

GP: Of course everybody was in the same fix then and it never occurred to me that it was a dreadful situation. Everyone was so used to getting by on so little and of course a dollar went an awful long way in those days. \$90 was a small fortune. Of course today it would get you nowhere but everything is so relative that it never occurred to me all during the depression that things were very difficult. LP: Every two weeks you would report in to the office in San Francisco with your work

GP: With a bundle of watercolors and I dumped them on the desk and I never saw them again, but they gave me photographs of almost everything I did. Very nice 6 x 8 glossy [6" x 10"?] prints. I have some here. I'm sure most of them that they did I have here and I'll show them to you later. LP: Is it possible that the Archives could borrow these and copy them for the Project -- the Archives files? [NOTE: MR. POST LOANED THEM -- NOW ON MICROFILM IN ARCHIVES.]

GP: Yes. I'd be very happy to leave them with you, yes.

LF: Fine, excellent! Who were your superiors on the -- supervisors I should say -- on the Watercolor Project?

GP: There was Joe Allen. I guess Mr. Danish, Joe Danish was perhaps the first. I'm sure he was on it. Was it the first one or the second one? Anyway, there was Joe Danish and Joe Allen and Mr. Gaskin . . . I don't remember. Dorothy Collins was a great friend of the artists and she worked under or with Mr. Allen. I think she continued for a long time with the Project when it turned into the Veterans at 49 Fourth Street in San Francisco. Whether she was still there, I'm not sure, but she was a well-known figure in those WPA days and all the artists and writers knew her. She would entertain them

LF: You were on this Watercolor Project for approximately how long?

GP: For a year and a half. Then I went to Europe; I went on in, very early in 1936, and then in June or July of '37 that I went off of it and had enough money, \$600, which I had saved up so I left in Sept. of '37 and I went to Mexico but before leaving I got a passport just in case I could get to Europe too. So I didn't know where I was going or how long I'd be. But, I had six hundred dollars and . . . no, it was seven hundred dollars, and I went to Mexico for four months and I'd only spent one hundred and fifty of it so I thought, well, I'm going to try get to Europe on what I've got left. I went down to Veracruz and found a boat for \$90 from Veracruz to Hamburg, Germany, and it was, I think, only \$90 American and that was getting it in pesos which made it cheaper. So off I went to Europe and went off into Eastern and Western Europe, rather Central and Western Europe. Germany, Yugoslavia, Italy, France, Belgium, and then in June -- this was in February -- in July I found a little freighter in Paris that sailed from Antwerp to Montreal for only \$60. It took a lot of hunting even in those days to get these remarkable fares. But it was only sixty dollars on this funny little freighter from Antwerp to Montreal. So I saw Montreal and Quebec on the way back. LP: Did you do any studying?

GP: I did a lot of painting and sketching and studying in Europe and I got back to San Francisco thirteen months after I had left and I still had fifty dollars of the \$700 and of course I did it very reasonably and very carefully. I'm sure a man can do these things much easier than a woman but recently I went to Europe by air. Pan American cooked up an art tour directed by me in '62, I stayed over three months after the tour and went off to Spain. I couldn't see Spain in the Thirties because the Spanish Civil War was on at that time, and I was so anxious to see Spain and so I saw it this time. But I couldn't help thinking of that funny, leisurely, haphazard way I first went through Europe on practically nothing and then going over later by Pan Am which was so fast and so smart and efficient. It was such a different feeling from the first one, it was just as exciting and just as much fun -- but maybe not quite as much fun -- as the first trip.

LF: Then you came back just about 1938?

GP: Yes. I got back in late October, -- yes, thirteen months. I left in September of '37 and I got back in October, I think it was, of '38.

LF: Did you try again to get on the Federal Projects?

GP: No. Let's see, what happened after that?

LF: Maybe you could give us

GP: I can't remember now what I seem to have gotten a pretty good start by then. The European paintings and sketches were selling quite well when I got back. I remember I sold most everything I did in that trip.

LF: Very good!

GP: Yes.

LF: Very good. Perhaps you could give us a statement of your opinions of the PWA and WPA Projects in relation to you; your experiences and what you thought of them.

GP: I'd heard lots of You were always hearing these snide remarks about the WPA and how these workers were always leaning on their shovels and that it was a great waste of government money. But it seems to me that, as I look back on it, an awful lot was accomplished. There was probably considerable waste. There always is in any big project but I also think that the amount that was accomplished, like the parks and the roads and the

conservation, was remarkable and I certainly feel that the Art Project gave an awful lot of American artists the stimulus and the start that they needed at this time. Oh, there were a lot of deadbeats, even in the Art and Writing Projects, that were taking advantage, I'm sure, of the \$90 per month and probably returned very little for it. There were so many that did.

LF: You think, then, that it was quite worth while that . . .

GP: I think it was very worth while and I think it was a fine thing that the government would take the interest to include the artists and the writers and the dancers into such a large scale project, rather than just the laborers and the roads and the building trades. Was there a building project?

LF: They used carpenters, plumbers, and

GP: Yes, yes.

LF: Probably you remember the Aquatic Park Building?

GP: Yes, that's right.

LF: It's all done by the WPA workers.

GP: That's right and the Timberline Lodge on Mount Hood I understand was completely done by the WPA.

LF: Stone masons and

GP: I hear it was such a beautiful place, all the wood carving and the furniture and the curtains. Weren't they all woven by WPA administration? Very fine job. And I'm sure there were many hundreds of these going on all through America. I've always lauded it pretty highly, the whole business, yes indeed. And I know many of my contemporaries did also.

LF: It gave an opportunity for creative people to be employed in a period when jobs were very rare and gave them an opportunity to further their training and experience and careers. Don't you think?

GP: Very much. Oh, yes.

LF: Did you ever do any oil work besides the mural?

GP: No. Somehow oil never suited me. It's so that I have just kept to watercolor all through these years and become, of course, quite adept with it. And created a definite style that seems to be my own like you naturally would do if you had stuck to a medium as long as I have. I've tried oil and I find it very exciting and a fine medium but not for me. It just doesn't seem to suit my temperament. I like so much to do things quick and fast and with such spontaneity that I can't seem to pull it off in the medium of oil.

LF: Your watercolors you were doing on your trips. I would say they were landscapes, seascapes

GP: Mostly yes. That's right.

LF: Various country scenes and perhaps small town scenes.

GP: Yes.

LF: How long would it take you to do a watercolor then, say on a field trip in those days? What would be the length of time for you to do a watercolor?

GP: I should think an hour perhaps. Yes, I should say not more than an hour.

LF: Were you supplied with your brushes and your paints?

GP: Yes, that's right.

LF: Did you have a portable easel or

GP: No, I never used an easel, especially outdoors. I've always just put the board right on the ground where it is flat and not too vertical, almost flat, then worked from a little tiny stool. It is only quite recently that I have resorted to a little stool because all these years I've just squatted in front of the board and worked from my knee, well not on my knees, but just squatting.

LF: Did you outline your work in pencil first or just directly with the watercolors?

GP: Well, I've done both. Sometimes I use a pencil and just started. Then the other times I'd just start right with the brush. Both ways are very effective, I think.

LF: Could you estimate how many works you did at this time?

GP: For the Project?

LF: Yes. Offhand, during this year and one-half period.

GP: Probably eighty or ninety, I should think.

LF: Eighty or ninety watercolrs. Did you receive any criticism or were they judged at all by anyone on the Project?

GP: Well, if they were, I never heard it. I just left them and I always got the feeling that everyone was quite pleased with what I brought in, but there was very little comment ever given.

LF: What we are kind of interested in is the methods of this sort of thing: what the Project supervisors would do in a case like this. They accepted them and later they were distributed to various public institutions?

GP: Yes, that's right. But, at the time . . . even since, I've never known where they went. They didn't give an account of what happened to each painting. But, as I say, I have run into them myself occasionally, and then other people have told me they've seen them here and there. So that's the only way I've known what ever happened to them. Some of them are still around, I'm sure. A lot of them are.

LF: Did you learn anything special while you were at work on the Art Project? New techniques or styles or . . . ?

GP: Yes. I'm sure I did but not in any class but just by

LF: Just by working?

GP: Yes. That's right, and by seeing what other people were doing, and artists are always influenced by what's going on around them and especially if they're working with or near or in some juxtaposition to other artists and also going to museums and other exhibits. You are always picking up new ideas and new styles.

LF: Then you think that this experience greatly aided your future career besides giving you an opportunity to see Mexico and Europe?

GP: Yes, I do indeed. It was a . . . I'm sure that . . . I probably, certainly, would have gotten to Europe sooner or later but maybe not as soon as I did if it hadn't been for the Project.

LF: Any further comment or statement you'd like to make about those days?

GP: I don't think so except that, if the occasion should ever arrive again, I would certainly condone it as a solution to a great many problems. Of course, the country is so prosperous right now that it would be the last thing in the world to consider, but I don't suppose prosperity will remain forever, and I do think it is better to have people working than putting them on relief. And I think projects of any kind are much more respected and desirable than putting indigent people on relief.

LF: Thank you very much, Mr. Post. I know you have to go back to your class that you have and, unless there is something further that you'd like to say, I want to thank you on behalf of the Archives for this opportunity to interview you.

GP: Thank you. I've certainly enjoyed talking with you and remembering some of the happy instances of those WPA days. Thank you very much.

LF: Thank you. [END OF TAPE]