



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Bertha
Louise Hellman Rublee, 1965 May 13

Contact Information

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

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Bertha Louise Hellman Rublee on May 13, 1965. The interview took place in 1536 Sacramento, San Antonio, Texas 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

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Well, isn't this cute?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. This is an interview with Mrs. Bertha Louise Hellman Rublee. 1536 Sacramento, San Antonio, Texas on May 13, 1965. The interviewer is Mrs. Sylvia Loomis of the Santa Fe office of the Archives of American Art. And the subject to be discussed is Ms. Hellman's participation in the Public Works of Art Project in Houston as a muralist in 1934. But first, Mrs.—I don't know whether to call you Ms. Hellman or Mrs. Rublee.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Mrs. Rublee.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mrs. Rublee. Would you tell us where you were born and where you received your art education?

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: I was born in La Grange, Texas. I lived in Houston. I went to Rice Institute for a few years. Studied drawing under John Tidden. And followed a summer in Chester Springs, Pennsylvania. Then I went to the Academy.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Where was that? In—

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Philadelphia.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Philadelphia, yes.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: And I wanted to go on and compete for a scholarship at [inaudible] the next year, but of course I didn't have the opportunity. And so I inherited a little—enough money to take me to Europe on my own. And I studied with André Lhote there.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: But I would like to say that while I was at the Academy, I studied with Ervis [ph] Garber and Arthur Carles.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Who was quite a star in my life. I think he preceded Abstract Expressionism.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: I studied with André Lhote in Paris.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Then I came home and had a studio in the Sevarre [ph] Apartments.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And where was that?

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Houston.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: In Houston, I see.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Houston, Texas.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And how long were you in Paris?

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Three months. I was in Spain. I had traveled through Spain.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see, yes. And when was it you returned to Houston? [Lillian Hellman laughs.] Well, approximately.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: I don't—I just don't remember.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: You don't, well, that's all right.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: But I'll look it up, I—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, it's not that important. But I just wondered if it was around in the '30s.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: It was—I believe it—yes. It was the early '30s.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Probably the early '30s.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: '32, I think.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: I have a little series of articles that was published in *the Post* with my illustrations.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh?

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: In *the Houston Post*.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, well that's—

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Which—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —that would be interesting to see.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: —added to my friend—helped me gain quite a few friends. Certainly was good for a beginning artist.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I should think so. Well, what did you do in Houston? Did you just start—just paint?

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Oh, I taught and I painted. I was among the group that was the first that exhibited at an art museum.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And what art museum was that?

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Fine Arts. Mr. Chillman [ph] was there.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh yes, yes. Oh, that's right, we're in Houston now. [Laughs.] I'm—

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Oh, yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —mixed up with San Antonio.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: We're in Houston, mm-hmm [affirmative].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh yes, I—of course.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Saw through many a hard [laughs]—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: —show. We had consistent shows there, of course. Grace John, Ruth Uhler.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: A young man named Bailey, Gordon [ph] Bailey.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And was—Mrs. Cherry was quite active in that whole art movement, wasn't she?

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Oh, yes. She was the backbone of a lot of things.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, that's what Ms. Uhler told me.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Oh, yes. [Inaudible.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well now, how does it come about that you got this commission to paint the mural at the post office? Do you remember that?

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: [Laughs.] I don't—[laughs] no, I don't.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh?

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: I didn't even know it—I didn't even know I won anything. I thought—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Do you remember how—

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: —just appointed.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —how you were—how it was announced to you? Did Mr. Chillman select you as one of the artists to do the murals?

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Oh dear, I'll have to read the clipping.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: All right, [laughs] well we'll try to refresh ourselves by reading the clipping then.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: It's terrible to think that those things pass out of one's mind when they're so important at the time.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well they were, but it was a long time ago.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: I lived right near the school, Sidney Lanier school, and that's where Grace John has her work. And I thought I'd be awarded—it was so near home and I thought I'd work right there. But—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: But what—

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: It was a fairly odd shape and she handled it so beautifully that I was glad—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: What school was that?

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Sidney Lanier. Sidney Lanier.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well now, this was on the Public Works of Art Project? This mural.

[00:05:04]

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: WPA, yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, was it WPA or the PWAP? There were two different kinds of projects.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Oh, of course. You're—I'm sure it was the—uh-huh [affirmative]. I'm sure I've gotten it—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Because if it was in 1934—

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: —confused.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —and I think it said so here in the clipping, I did notice that. Because the WPA Federal Art Project came on a little later. And as far as I can find out, there was no Federal Art Project under WPA in Houston. Do you—would you remember anything about that?

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: I'm sorry, I have such a bad memory.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, you don't. Well—

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: It just seems dedicated to painting. I could remember colors easier. [Laughs.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, I see. Well then—then these little details. Well, we—I talked with several other people and apparently there was nothing after this Public Works of Art Project, which was in 1934. And that was the only one that you did, that was the only commission you had under those auspices?

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well then, what did you do after that?

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Well, I could pay my rent in the studio. So I stuck it out in Houston with my classes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Did you have private classes?

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Yes. And in the same studio, we would have a sort of a forum. An open forum once a month, I believe. And we had a Mr. Talley [ph] lecture from Houston University. And Mr. Chillman came down, I think, and lectured. We'd have—it was a really small town then. And they were all very sympathetic with our efforts. And we'd get the chairs—I knew an undertaker—a doctor who knew undertakers. So we'd get the chairs. Mildred—she's on the newspaper now and does [inaudible]—she'd come down and give us publicity, and then we'd get coffee from [inaudible], who had 25 more people. It was sort of a community. But it was—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. Very interesting days, weren't they?

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: [Inaudible.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: About how many professional artists were there in Houston at that time?

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Oh, I guess there must have been about—it's hard to say, to be honest.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, just generally.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: I imagine about 15 or 20. And the newspapers were so kind to us. And Grace Jones—a great booster. She knew—her mother had a big newspaper in California. She knew just how to create—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: To create publicity.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. She could create [laughs] situations though, too.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. So that they could be publicized. Newsworthy.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Uh-huh [affirmative]. But regardless of that, I felt they were very generous in my case. As you see. [Laughs.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, will you tell about the mural itself? Your subject? Even though you told me, I wanted to get it on tape.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Well, it was a peace mural. I've always had a great desire—I don't know why but I always had a deep feeling, as many—we all do, I suppose, painting. But anyway, I had some friends down the street that were Communists. [Laughs.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, mm-hmm [affirmative].

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: And they gave me a great deal of information of what I should do. And when they saw my peace mural in the post office and not a hand and sickle, why, they thought doves should—it should be replaced by my magnolias. And they thought I was just a sissy.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: And a space—a fence-straddler, you know?

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

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: But anyway, up it went. And I suppose that the stimulation of these people—they were always animated and having talks. Dr. Altenburg [ph] even went down there; he came from Russia. And—for one of their evenings and talks. So I guess the thing sort of grew out in opposition. Opposition [laughs] to some of those ideas.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: And I called it *Peace Guarded by the Strength of Man*. "Peace guarded by the strength of man" was down at the bottom—[let's her (ph)] mantle fall over the Earth. And the funny thing was—this is incidental—I had spelled mantle wrong. It came out in the newspaper that I had been to Rice Institute and didn't know how to spell mantle. [Inaudible.] [Laughs.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, well that wasn't very nice, was it? To say such a thing.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: No. So—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, what were some of your ideas on world peace? You spoke about that just briefly before.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Oh, I wrote to the—to Washington and got the information from the post office, I think, the history of mail and the history of the postage stamp. And I knew the date at the time, how these nations had gotten together, I believe in Geneva, and agreed on a postal system and a price for a stamp to deliver mail throughout the whole world.

[00:10:19]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: And I thought it was so wonderful to think the whole world can get together on that point. Which of course was very important. And for so many reasons. And so I thought that it would be a good idea to bring it into a peace mural. Because, if we could get together on one thing, why couldn't we get together and [inaudible]? And then for the second one, which we were working on, I wanted to have the seaport. The channel in the second mural.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, yes.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: But I think it would've been too much of an undertaking for a person [laughs] that hardly knew how to paint, much less how to do a mural. But—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Was this oil on canvas?

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Yes, it was. And then it was—we put it up—had it put up by Buttes [ph]. James Buttes [ph] put it up.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: How large was it?

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Oh, it must've been about 18 feet by—it was well—by eight feet, I should say. Yeah. But I had a prizefighter pose for the men. The backs of these men. And took it out and—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: You must've had to work on a scaffold then, didn't you, to do the painting?

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: I guess I did. A ladder, I suppose. It was done in the studio, so it wasn't so bad.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Did you submit sketches first?

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: To have them approved?

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Yes, I did.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And were those sketches submitted to Mr. Chillman? Or was it some committee? Do you remember?

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Oh dear. I don't know. I had a blueprint made of the preliminary sketch and maybe I might have that. And if I do—I'll look for it and see, and I'll send it to you if I do.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Oh, I made quite a lot of notes and would I'd dream about it at night, you know? And I wrote, oh, quite a bit about this. But of course—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. How long did it take you?

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: I don't know. I'm sorry, I don't know. I just don't know. I did think when it got up—I remember mother and I had dinner together downtown—and I thought there should've been some sort of trumpet blowing, you know [they laugh]? Sound of unveiling. But there wasn't. [They laugh.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes. Well, there should've been an unveiling, certainly. Something like that.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Yes, I thought so.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Some sort of ceremony. Except that perhaps there were so many of those going on at that time.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Because they did this—the Public Works of Art Project was quite extensive throughout the country.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Well, it was up to the—I'm sure others—Grace John would have known how to do it. [Laughs] But I wasn't that much of an engineer.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. Well, do you think that these murals that were put up in Houston made much impression on the public? I mean as far as their appreciation of—or at least their awareness of art?

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Oh yes. I think it did. I think it was quite an attention-gaining sort of thing. I think so.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And was the public response good to this?

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Well, I don't think it was a sort of mass thing. I think it went on through the years.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see. Sort of developed.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: I feel that it was a sort of individual thing, you know,

that went on just with time. And they noticed it. And of course, bare walls, walls with any sort of color or painting have attracted—vibratory [ph] effect, I think. Just—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, the—from some of the things I heard, I sort of got the impression that this—that these projects did help to stimulate the interest in art in Houston, which now is really quite an art center.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Oh, indeed it is. Like San Antonio. [Laughs.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, that's true.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: But just looking at the overall picture today, it's hard to know just what brought this thing about. But I know that I was part—quite a part of the community there. And different things certainly [inaudible]—

[Cross talk.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Was the artist—the artist was accepted in the community?

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Yes. Now I'm beginning to learn the human and the nice things of life. [Laughs.] I was [laughs] so engrossed in my own activity and importance. I must've been a beast. [Laughs.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I doubt that very much. Well, what were the things that you did after this?

[00:15:02]

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Well, I kept exhibiting at the museum and painting. And I did—I remember I did a playroom at the Weingarten's [ph]. And I did a big painting for the Junior League. And I did a series of magnolias. One thing, intuitively, I think leads to another.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: And I never knew anything else but being a painter. And my parents encouraged me. My relatives encouraged me. And—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Did you ever do any more murals after this one?

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: No, I didn't.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: That was the only one.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: I wanted to really study—study mural painting.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: But I had enough problems. [They laugh.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: [Inaudible] your painting. Easel painting.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Then of course—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Have you worked in any other medium beside oils?

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Oh many.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: What else?

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Watercolors. Block prints. I had—oh, I developed quite a big business with my block prints. I had—Fanny Morris, in New York, was my agent.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: I had a movie made of me. And I took the name Liza. And these things were distributed all over the United States.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Is that right?

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: So who knows. You know, you have—one thing carries on into another.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: That's true.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: And I always wanted to be an artist. To be a good painter. Oh, I did work on a mural. Right here in San Antonio, down at the church. There's a diocese. I laid tile. I helped laid the tiles to it. I would love for you to see that.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: That's an interesting—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: —link. It's—Mrs. Ashe [ph] would probably be glad to take you. It's outside, right at the end of Patterson. And this—Margaret Pace [ph] organized it. Three—four of us, really worked on the tile setting. And this little angel is a result, and I've made several that I've sold—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I noticed that.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: [Laughs.] The better ones were sold.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: When did you come to San Antonio?

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: We came right after we married. '48.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: And then we went to—my husband was still in the air force, and we were sent to New Mexico.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, really?

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: I was so frightened when he told me that we'd have to go somewhere. And then he came home one day and said we're going to New Mexico. So nothing—that's really where I would have wanted to go.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Since I met Walter Ufer and that group of New Mexican painters that showed in Houston under the auspices of the Grand Central Art Gallery.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: And Walter told me all about these girls who would come from New York and would go out to Taos. But he said, You don't have a car. [Laughs.] So that would've created a lot of difficulty at that time.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: It's pretty hard still to get around without a car.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: In New Mexico. You sort of need one.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Yes, it is. Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, how long were you in New Mexico?

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Oh, about four years. We bought some property on—in Corrales. We lived in Corrales.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh yes.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: And we bought some property up on—it's called—oh why did I say that. [Laughs.] It's called—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: It doesn't matter, I know where Corrales is.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Some hill. They named it after the hills from Italy. And Charlie sold it before he passed away, because he got asthma bad. And that's why we really left.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: But this was one of the most beautiful places—I have a sketch, a watercolor sketch, looked down on the river and We would drive through the aspen trees to get up there. It was just a little before you got to Corrales. Over the bridge.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, yes.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: [Inaudible] build this house sort of by hand, you know, how they do. Adobe. But now it belongs to these Japanese gardeners.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: And—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, that's quite an art colony there now, at Corrales.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Yes, I know. I knew the jeweler—the man that made jewelry and wrote the book. He and his wife lived not far from us. We lived past the Lenieux' [ph].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh yes.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Peter's [ph] a big real estate agent. And the little girl, Kathleen, is our godchild.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, is that right?

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: And this [walks away from recorder while speaking] [returns, presumably with photographs] is the—Stefi's [ph]—[sound of airplane going overhead begins] these are his grandchildren. And her name is Lisa. Of course, mine is Liza. They always want me to change it to Lisa I think—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: How's that spelled?

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Mine is Liza, L-I-Z-A.

[00:20:01]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: L-I-Z-A.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: L-E-S-A, I think. L-I-S-A. It's my namesake, she tells me. She always writes me: Lisa is so much more aristocratic, you know, than Liza. [Inaudible] like Liza. Because it—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well that was your professional name for these woodcuts that you did, is that right?

[Airplane noise begins to fade.]

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Yes. That's right. My aunt used to call me Betaliza [ph]. I'd go out and the dressed-up girls would be riding around in organdy [ph]—in cars, I should say. And Auntie would say, Come here Betaliza [ph]—I liked to paint the whole day out under the oak trees. And so, I decided that that was such a good name. I liked the zin it, for a signature.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: So—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, what are some of the recent things that you've done? Some of your recent exhibitions.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Well, we've had such wonderful teachers—instructors here that I just went back to school.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, good for you.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: And I studied with Dan Wingren [ph], a wonderful teacher. And then one of the most distinguished teachers was Stamos [ph], that I studied with. And he just changed me immediately.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, I imagine that'd be quite an inspiration.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Oh, he just [laughs]—I just got it somehow, you know, what—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: When was he here? Fairly recently?

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: He was here about five years ago.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, mm-hmm [affirmative].

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: And then Yonkers [ph] came. R. J. Yonkers [ph].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: And he—I'd heard about—he'd just preceded me in Albuquerque.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: And Oliveira [ph], from California was here. So you see, they do get wonderful teachers.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And this was at the McNay Art Institute?

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Yes, Center of the Art Institute.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: So, just really—and San Antonio accepted me beautifully at the time. Charlie helped me, I guess. And I like to say, because I'm so proud of it, that I got many prizes. I was written up in—I'm teaching out at Cal S.U. [ph] now, and they had a little paper, one of my friends wrote me up and said, She got several prizes. [Laughs.] And I said, What do you mean by several? [Laughs.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: What were some of these awards that you got?

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Well, I got—I got—[walks away from recorder while speaking] [returns, presumably with award] this is the first one. It was the—I like to keep all mine. Of course, this was after my New Mexico experience. And I call it From the [Akashic Records (ph)]. [The Akashic records (ph).]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: And I thought that was—the color New Mexico brings out is subdued, entirely different, that turquoise sky.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: And the red clay. And then I got a watercolor prize, which I have in there. A garden. And I got a prize on this block print. \$100 for the best in the show, at the river show. Then they stopped having that prize [laughs].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, mm-hmm [affirmative].

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: This one, and I'd already gotten a prize on that in New Mexico.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: And I got—oh, some frames, from the Little House Frame Shop. A couple of frames as a prize. And then I got—on this one I got two \$50 prizes. And I got \$100 prize on one that went to New York from Frost Brothers. And I hope I left out a couple, [laughs] but I don't remember.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I see.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: I have them listed here somewhere. But I thought that that was very—oh yes, and some figures. Another Frost prize, some figures. Mr. Berkowitz [ph] at Frost has it in his home now.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: There was cause—there was some sort of spirits. Very—I have a plate of that somewhere. It's in my publicity too.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, it was nice that you kept these scrapbooks. And maybe sometime when you're through with them, why, you will contribute them to the Archives—

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Oh, I'm just thrilled to be invited.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —of American Art.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: That they should have any value at all.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, of course they would.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: It's just—I mean now I think I'll go keep them at the bank [laughs].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well you should, they're very valuable. Because they are historic records, you see, that tell of the work in this area at that time. And unless somebody kept them, well then there wouldn't be any record of that to pass on to the future.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: See, I'd love to have that in writing. [Laughs.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: We'll put it in writing, and we'll send it to you. [Inaudible]—

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: [Laughs.] Please do, I just want to flip it in front of some of my artist friends. [Laughs.]

[00:25:02]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, that is one of the projects of the Archives of American Art of course, is to save, for posterity, any of the archival material, the clippings and the letters and the photographs and that sort of thing.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Wonderful.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: So that they will know as much as they can about the artists of America.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Oh, I have wonderful letters from Stamos [ph]. But I don't know whether I'd dare. They're not—you know, they're very personal.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, that's all the more interesting. So—

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: [Laughs.] I wonder what he'd say to that. Oh, but they encourage me so, and they're so beautiful and wonderful. And he tells me in the—always he gives me some word about how to paint, you know, just in his way. What he says—no, he said this to me, I think he said: paint first, Liza, and think afterwards. [Laughs.] You know, that sort of thing that no one else in the world would tell you.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, letters of that sort are exactly the kind of thing. And I'd say the more personal they are and the more human they are—

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: —the more interesting. Rather than—because it gives the— helps to give it character and picture of the artist or the teacher and their relationship to one another.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: I think he'd be infuriated though.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, I don't think so.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: You don't?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I don't think so. I think he'd probably be very glad to have these. That you kept them, and that you're willing to let them be a matter of record.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: He said he kept mine too, but heaven forbid [laughs]— [Inaudible.] [They laugh.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well the—and as I say, whenever the time comes that you want them disposed of, I know that those things are precious to you now—

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Well, they are, because I feel so removed from art centers now. It isn't true, but right out here in this particular spot, oh, they're beginning to come to see me more and I wasn't ready to receive them—anyone. But you know, it gives me strength to have these ties [ph].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Of course, mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, are there any other comments that you'd like to make about that early period in Houston? When you did the mural, and the feelings that you had of yourself and your other—your fellow artists during this formative period?

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Well, we were all—seemed like—now that I look back, we were real pioneers.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: After this growth.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I would think so.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: And we just stuck to it, not that we had to. I mean, I guess we were just inescapable.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: We couldn't do anything else.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: There was one question I did want to ask. And that is, were the artists well enough off at that time so that they didn't need the Federal Art Projects?

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: No!

SYLVIA LOOMIS: They weren't?

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: No, I don't think so.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: [Inaudible.]

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: I don't know that—it was a battle.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: I remember that I would walk—I guess I was about a mile to my house from my studio. And I'd put my walking shoes on [laughs] to walk to the house. And then I'd change and put on my good shoes, you know.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh yes.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: When I had company it was just, you know, keeping up a front. And all these ladies and people would come down to see me, you know?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, it seems strange to me that this didn't go into the Federal Art—the WPA Art Project. Because those lasted, you know, from 1935 until the war, which was 1941.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Oh, oh.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And so they helped a great many artists, you see, during that period. Which was a tough time all over let alone artists.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Yes.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: But the fact that none of the Houston artists seemed to be involved in it.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Well maybe they saw our work and decided that was enough, that we shouldn't be [laughs]—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: No, I don't think so. Because this work was a lot better than a good deal of it that was done on the Federal Art Project. But I can't—I don't seem to be able to find out why there was no—there were no Federal Art Projects either in Houston, or so far, I haven't found anything in San Antonio either.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Well, I remember that I was planning this series of things.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: But I don't know what happened.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: You don't know why they stopped?

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: I don't know what happened. And they were to be much larger than this one. This was the central one. I do remember that, for some reason. And I remember the ship channel was, as I said, to be the second one. Because it tied up with the rest of the world.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: And that—it could've continued to carry out my piece. And then I think I wanted to do some farmlands, you know, in case—for peacetime. To represent the industries and so on [laughs]. I think it was a good thing. Probably I didn't—

[00:30:02]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh no, I think it would've been a wonderful thing if you had continued. Because then you wouldn't have had the struggle that you had.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Thank you.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And I think that was one of the great accomplishments of these Federal Art Projects, that they did allow talented artists to develop themselves during a period which was very difficult. And to—so that they didn't need to go into some other kind of work. It saved a great many artists that would've been lost otherwise.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: I'm sure it did.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: I'm sure it must have. And of course, I just thought Roosevelt was the most marvelous creature [inaudible].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And—but I didn't know whether all of the artists in Texas were so affluent that they didn't need any help.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Well, I don't know, but I don't—I think we all had our struggles. And not only was it the money, but it was the strength, the moral strength it gave us, you know? Just think how wonderful that was.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, I suppose.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: It seems more wonderful now that I'm talking about it.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, there's actually never been a period like that in America, when the artists were subsidized for a period.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Uh-huh [affirmative].

SYLVIA LOOMIS: And of course, it would not have happened if it hadn't been for the Depression. But it turned out to be a real blessing, because so many artists did develop during that period.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: What a shame that we can't do it like the music—the composer in Sweden. That, you know, was subsidized and composed—Sibelius.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh, that's Finland.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Finland?

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Oh yes, *Finlandia*.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Yes, *Finlandia*.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: What a shame that all this beautiful talent isn't.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: I know, I know.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: And I'm of course—I'm opposed very much to having artists or inventors, or any of these fine minds in battle. I guess I'm not democratic, but it seems to me they serve their country so much better than—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Oh I'm—well, let's hope that the—our government will mature enough so that they do realize that it is important to do this now that we don't have the big patrons of art that we've had in the past. And that if the government doesn't do it, then a lot of this is going to be lost in the future, too. And perhaps we can learn a lesson from the work that was accomplished during the Project days, and have something similar. But not on a relief basis, but on the basis that the country needs the creative talents of its people.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: I really got a big thrill now. I just feel like I want to dig up any material. To think that I was a part of that. It—

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, we'd be very happy to have anything that you can dig up. And we will—if there's anything that we can borrow now, then we will microfilm it and return it to you. And then eventually, if you'd like to give your papers to the Archives, I know they'd be very happy to have them.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: My, that's just something to live for. Just the thought of it. [Laughs.]

SYLVIA LOOMIS: That's very kind. Well, I thank you very much, Mrs. Rublee, for this very interesting and informative interview.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Well, I thank you, Mrs. Loomis. You've given me a certain status that I never dreamed I possessed.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Well, you have the status already in your work. I can see that.

BERTHA LOUISE HELLMAN RUBLEE: Well, I thank you.

SYLVIA LOOMIS: Thank you.

[END OF TRACK AAA_hellma65_8647_m.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

