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Oral history interview with Edith  
Hamlin, 1964 May 27

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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Edith Hamlin on May 27, 1964. Dorothy Cravath is also present. The interview took place in Berkeley, California, and was conducted by Minette Martin for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The original transcript was edited. In 2023 the Archives retranscribed the original audio and attempted to create a 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. Additional information from the original transcript has been added in brackets and given an -Ed. attribution.

## Interview

[00:28:46.54]

MINETTE MARTIN: Minette Martin interviewing Edith Hamlin at the home of Dorothy Cravath, 2152 Ward Street, Berkeley, California, May 27, 1964. Ms. Hamlin, I would like to know something about your early training in art, and how long have you been in the Bay Area.

[00:29:13.83]

EDITH HAMLIN: Well, does that mean I have to tell when I was born? [They laugh.]

[00:29:19.32]

MINETTE MARTIN: Uh, well—

[00:29:19.47]

EDITH HAMLIN: I was born in the city of Oakland, some time ago, and I went to the art school in San Francisco in 1920, where I continued through 1924. So that's the California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco.

[00:29:38.38]

MINETTE MARTIN: Which is presently the San Francisco—

[00:29:40.14]

EDITH HAMLIN: —San Francisco—

[00:29:41.04]

MINETTE MARTIN: —Art Institute.

[00:29:41.64]

EDITH HAMLIN: —Art Institute. Yeah.

[00:29:44.78]

MINETTE MARTIN: And what did you study at the San Francisco Art Institute, or the California School of Fine Arts?

[00:29:52.25]

EDITH HAMLIN: Well, I studied the Fine Arts course—in other words, I wasn't studying to become a teacher—which was life class, drawing, sketch class, quick sketches, and painting, chiefly in oils, and some commercial art, advertising. They called it commercial art in those days, didn't they?

[00:30:20.78]

DOROTHY CRAVATH: I think so.

[00:30:22.49]

EDITH HAMLIN: Then I had a class in mural painting with Ray Boynton—

[00:30:28.82]

MINETTE MARTIN: Was that—

[00:30:29.69]

EDITH HAMLIN: —and landscape painting, which was the outdoor painting.

[00:30:33.53]

MINETTE MARTIN: Was that actually in—the mural class that you had with Mr. Boynton—was that actually in fresco technique?

[00:30:39.98]

EDITH HAMLIN: No, no. We, as a rule, just did sketches in oil, or tempera, for theoretical murals until just before the school was torn down for the Mark Hopkins Hotel to be erected there. And then several of the students who were particularly interested in mural painting did those four murals. And I was one of them.

[00:31:20.19]

MINETTE MARTIN: Did four murals for—this wasn't on the Federal Arts Project.

[00:31:25.59]

EDITH HAMLIN: No.

[00:31:25.68]

MINETTE MARTIN: This was a—this was much before.

[00:31:27.96]

EDITH HAMLIN: This was just in my last year there at the art school, in 1924.

[00:31:35.34]

MINETTE MARTIN: So actually, approximately 10 years before the Federal Arts Project started—

[00:31:40.80]

EDITH HAMILIN: Yes.

[00:31:41.01]

MINETTE MARTIN: —you had been working in murals here in San Francisco.

[00:31:44.55]

EDITH HAMLIN: Yes, as a student.

[00:31:46.84]

MINETTE MARTIN: As a student. Um—when did you get on the WPA or the Federal Arts Project?

[00:31:56.31]

EDITH HAMLIN: Well, it was right at the inception, I believe, during what was called the PWAP, the Public Works of Art Project, which was immediately before the WPA.

[00:32:11.25]

MINETTE MARTIN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. That was what date? Do you remember? About 1933, uh—?

[00:32:19.59]

EDITH HAMLIN: I can't really remember. It was—I think it was later than that. [December 1933 -Ed.]

[00:32:24.70]

DOROTHY CRAVATH: I think it was earlier, because we finished those murals in 1934, and it took us about four years to do them from start to finish.

[00:32:36.74]

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

[00:32:37.54]

EDITH HAMLIN: —Maybe.

[00:32:38.06]

MINETTE MARTIN: What was the first project that you were on, on the PWAP?

[00:32:45.26]

EDITH HAMLIN: I did two small frescoes on the second floor in the elevator area of the Coit Memorial Tower, and the subject was sports and recreation in California, for that area.

[00:33:03.35]

MINETTE MARTIN: You say that the technique that was used there was fresco.

[00:33:06.83]

EDITH HAMLIN: It was all fresco, true fresco, and wet plaster.

[00:33:11.51]

MINETTE MARTIN: However, in your studies with Boynton, you hadn't done any fresco.

[00:33:15.98]

EDITH HAMLIN: No, no. We didn't get into doing actual walls very much, and usually just doing sketches for the theoretic mural.

[00:33:32.30]

MINETTE MARTIN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:33:32.72]

EDITH HAMLIN: So, it wasn't until I worked on the walls of the art school, later, in oil that I had ever worked on a wall, but I had—in between that time and the Coit Tower, I had done several small residential murals but always in oils.

[00:33:47.31]

MINETTE MARTIN: I see. Well, where did you learn fresco technique?

[00:33:51.18]

EDITH HAMLIN: Well, there had been a good deal of interest in the Bay Area with Diego Rivera working here, but I didn't have the opportunity to work with him, or even to watch

him work. But I did know other artists who had worked with him, and when the Coit Tower opportunity came up, most of us just dug in and learned to.

[00:34:15.06]

We did test panels and sample panels that we could submit to the head of the project, and then the rest of it, we just learned by doing it on the wall with experts to consult if there were any problems. Everything was made quite convenient in that we had technical experts right there in the building. We had expert plasterers who knew how to prepare the special kind of very firm fresco plaster, and we had assistants to grind colors to the required fineness. So our apprenticeship was made very practical.

[00:34:58.32]

MINETTE MARTIN: In other words, you actually began to learn fresco technique after you got the job of—

[00:35:04.92]

EDITH HAMLIN: Yes.

[00:35:05.37]

MINETTE MARTIN: —doing the Coit Tower murals.

[00:35:06.87]

EDITH HAMLIN: Yes, but most of us—before we started to work on the wall, we did considerable preliminary work.

[00:35:14.34]

MINETTE MARTIN: I see. You said the subject of your mural was what?

[00:35:24.24]

EDITH HAMLIN: It was hunting in California. And one panel was of duck hunting, and the other were of the deer before they were hunted [laughs], peacefully awaiting their fate [laughs], and California hillside.

[00:35:41.79]

MINETTE MARTIN: To whom did you submit the original idea and sketches for the mural? Do you remember?

[00:35:52.44]

EDITH HAMLIN: I can't remember, except that I believe that Joseph Danysh was the head of the project, but there must have been a committee, too. [Danysh not on this. -Ed.]

[00:36:05.91]

MINETTE MARTIN: Did they actually pass on the mural to be painted in the Coit Tower?

[00:36:11.34]

EDITH HAMLIN: Oh, a sketch was to be—it was submitted first, yes, a sketch made to scale.

[00:36:17.49]

MINETTE MARTIN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And who chose the subject matter for the entire Coit Tower? Did the artists themselves do this, or who decided what was to be done there?

[00:36:28.68]

EDITH HAMLIN: Oh, it was pretty well formulated, in general, at least, before the spaces were allotted, and the subjects to go with them in that area were chosen. And I can't really remember just how that was arranged, except that there was a committee, which

undoubtedly would have to be passed on by the city since it was city property.

[00:36:59.21]

MINETTE MARTIN: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative]. Do you have anything to say about the mural while it was going up, the—

[00:37:06.99]

EDITH HAMLIN: Well, I—and I'm sure the other artists too—found it a very stimulating and gratifying experience, because we were doing something that was vital and new, in that frescoes and murals in general were still rarely done, and particularly in that period. Some earlier ones had been done in public buildings, such as libraries and state capitols and so, but they were of a different style and purpose. And to work with a group of artists in such a project, was very invigorating. It was also hard work, long hours. We had to work as long as the plaster would take the paint.

[00:37:53.25]

MINETTE MARTIN: Do you remember how much you got paid during that time?

[00:37:58.41]

EDITH HAMLIN: Wasn't it about \$40 a week? It was either \$45—

[00:38:03.93]

DOROTHY CRAVATH: I think it was \$87 and some odd cents a month as I recall.

[00:38:06.78]

EDITH HAMLIN: It was a short week. It was about 20 hours, as I remember.

[00:38:11.16]

DOROTHY CRAVATH: It wasn't that much per week, because the highest anybody got paid, as I remember, were the supervisors, and they got paid something like \$106 a month, or something. So mine was \$87 or \$89 and [some -Ed.] cents, and I think we all got paid the same.

[00:38:30.39]

EDITH HAMLIN: Yes, they were all the same, except the supervisors. Well, I just have that dim figure in my mind that it was—

[00:38:38.64]

DOROTHY CRAVATH: It was a very dim figure.

[00:38:39.63]

EDITH HAMLIN: —about \$40 a week for 20 hours. But of course, in painting frescoes, we never counted the hours. We finished that area. If we didn't, we'd have to cut it right off the wall, and do it over the next day because it wouldn't hold over. [They laugh.] The lime would set, and that was the end of it.

[00:39:00.59]

DOROTHY CRAVATH: I may not remember that correctly. I remember \$87 and some odd cents.

[00:39:05.14]

EDITH HAMLIN: I thought it was \$160 a month or something.

[00:39:06.97]

DOROTHY CRAVATH: Well, whether that was half—I split mine in half. I sent half of mine to

Raymond [Pucinelli -Ed.] in New York, so it might have been that—[laughs].

[00:39:15.13]

EDITH HAMLIN: I didn't have that problem. [They laugh.]

[00:39:20.72]

DOROTHY CRAVATH: Um, I may be thinking of half of it.

[00:39:23.80]

MINETTE MARTIN: Well, at any rate, you seem to have enjoyed your work—

[00:39:28.51]

EDITH HAMLIN: Oh, yes.

[00:39:29.95]

MINETTE MARTIN: —in the Coit Tower.

[00:39:31.51]

EDITH HAMLIN: I was a dyed-in-the-wool artist, and this was life. [Laughs.]

[00:39:36.55]

MINETTE MARTIN: How long did that project take to complete?

[00:39:39.49]

EDITH HAMLIN: Well, my walls were much smaller than some of those walls in that area, and the Coit Tower—so, oh, I must have worked there over a month. But it wasn't very long because they were quite small areas.

[00:39:56.73]

MINETTE MARTIN: You personally worked there for over a month.

[00:40:00.27]

EDITH HAMLIN: Yes.

[00:40:00.99]

MINETTE MARTIN: Do you do you remember how long the project itself went on? I mean, how long did it take to complete from beginning to end?

[00:40:10.06]

EDITH HAMLIN: Well, since I was working on another project following that, I think I rather lost track of the time that it took to finish the tower. Do you know, Dorothy?

[00:40:20.55]

DOROTHY CRAVATH: It seems to me Victor [Arnautoff -Ed.] told me that it took them about three months.

[00:40:24.76]

EDITH HAMLIN: Altogether? Well, then I couldn't have worked that long on mine, because mine was small.

[00:40:29.56]

DOROTHY CRAVATH: But then, of course, that was putting the things on the wall, and some finished sooner than others, and so on.

[00:40:35.29]

EDITH HAMLIN: Oh, yes.

[00:40:35.92]

DOROTHY CRAVATH: That doesn't count the drawing time and the [inaudible] time—

[00:40:38.20]

EDITH HAMLIN: No, preparatory work of doing the sketches for the wall, and doing the full-sized cartoons, the working drawings, as they're called, and doing the preparatory panels to test out your knowledge of the fresco technique.

[00:40:57.25]

MINETTE MARTIN: Do you remember who your assistants were on the project?

[00:41:04.44]

EDITH HAMLIN: Um—no, I don't. Everyone used the same color grinders, the people who ground the color downstairs, and I think the only time I used an assistant there was when I was putting the drawing on the wall and I needed someone to hold it for me since you couldn't stick pins in this wet plaster, and so on. You had to have more hands than two when you were actually transferring it on the wall in places. Otherwise, I don't think I used any assistants, except for moving scaffolding, and there were people provided to do just those chores, which were, in general, shared generally.

[00:41:48.16]

MINETTE MARTIN: What other projects for the Federal Arts Project did you work on, around this area?

[00:41:54.67]

EDITH HAMLIN: Well, the really big job that I did was two walls, 30-foot walls out at the Mission High School, which is near the old San Francisco Mission Dolores, and this I worked on all—some time, perhaps a year after I finished the Coit Tower murals. This was for the WPA, of course.

[00:42:24.20]

MINETTE MARTIN: According to the inscription on the back of the photograph which I have here of that particular project, it was done in 1936 to '37. At any rate, you know, this is just—

[00:42:35.15]

EDITH HAMLIN: That may not have included some of the preparatory work, however.

[00:42:39.89]

MINETTE MARTIN: Uh huh [affirmative].

[00:42:40.01]

EDITH HAMLIN: It may have been just the work on the walls, as I think of it now.

[00:42:45.17]

MINETTE MARTIN: What was the subject of these particular murals?

[00:42:50.39]

EDITH HAMLIN: The subject concerned the building of Mission Dolores by the Spanish Padres, and the education, and arts and crafts that were carried on in the Mission following its building by the Indians.

[00:43:11.55]

MINETTE MARTIN: And what technique did you use in painting these murals?

[00:43:15.93]

EDITH HAMLIN: They were painted directly upon the wall in egg tempera, which is using an egg a day, with water as a binder for the powdered color.

[00:43:30.45]

MINETTE MARTIN: Wasn't this a rather unusual technique to cover such a large space?

[00:43:35.10]

EDITH HAMLIN: Yes. We were all imbued with the ambition to go back to the golden, historic days of mural painting when the labored wasn't hoarded at all. It was something which was part of traditional mural painting, which was being revived at that time, the art of fresco and tempera painting, fresco-secco and true frescoes, they're called.

[00:44:11.05]

MINETTE MARTIN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. In the preparatory sketches that you made for the murals that you did, did you use live models?

[00:44:17.68]

EDITH HAMLIN: Oh, yes, that was part of our assistants' job [they laugh], and we had plenty of models. And then when we needed a special model, such as some of the leading figures to get a special head, or perhaps children, and so on, we would get those from outside of the assistant corps.

[00:44:44.26]

MINETTE MARTIN: And who are some of the people that you painted into, for instance, your mural of the Mission Dolores?

[00:44:51.07]

EDITH HAMLIN: Well, I remember on the arts and crafts one, I used a visiting conductor of the WPA Symphony, Richard Lert from Pasadena, and he was very happy to pose for his head and his hands in his hotel room. I had been hearing some of the rehearsals, and he struck me as being very suitable for this father who was conducting in the mural. He had a little Indian orchestra.

[00:45:20.23]

And then some of the heads were from old portraits of the Fathers, Fathers Palóu and Cambón, and others of that period. And the Indians, of which there were a good many in there, were reconstructed from old drawings and paintings of the California Indians and other American Indians in general. But some of these were models, as I say, of our assistants there and relatives, anyone who was willing to sit and be captured. [They laugh.]

[00:46:06.69]

DOROTHY CRAVATH: By the way, the Coit Tower has a wonderful portrait gallery of all the artists, I think, who worked there.

[00:46:15.06]

EDITH HAMLIN: I enjoyed doing our artist friends and sometimes with a little satire thrown in.

[00:46:20.39]

DOROTHY CRAVATH: And their families, and their children, and their girl friends.

[00:46:24.54]

MINETTE MARTIN: I think that Rivera did this, too, a lot.

[00:46:27.99]

EDITH HAMLIN: Oh, yes. That was part of the sport.

[00:46:33.10]

MINETTE MARTIN: Uh-huh [affirmative]. Were these the only two projects that you worked on—

[00:46:37.06]

EDITH HAMLIN: Yes.

[00:46:37.18]

MINETTE MARTIN: —or did you work on more?

[00:46:38.86]

EDITH HAMLIN: No, this was such a sizable, a lengthy project that by the time I finished it, the projects were over, and having practically ruined my eyes for the moment, too [laughs], I was about through painting these tiny, fine strokes in a not-very-well-lit room. But I enjoyed it thoroughly.

[00:47:00.76]

I painted in the room which was also a study hall, this library of this big high school, and so the students got an art-in-action during the whole—most of two years that I worked on those walls. We all were not too distracting to each other, I don't think. At least the librarian thought it was all right. And some of the students I used for models too. They were probably descendants of these Spanish Fathers, in both Spanish and Indian blood.

[00:47:35.52]

DOROTHY CRAVATH: What? Descendants of the Fathers?

[00:47:38.21]

EDITH HAMLIN: Well, not the Fathers, no. [They laugh.] The Spaniards, but not the Fathers. Supposedly! [They laugh.]

[00:47:49.50]

MINETTE MARTIN: Do you have any comment in general to make about those days and about the atmosphere at that time? I mean, you mentioned that you yourself had a good time working on these—

[00:48:02.12]

EDITH HAMLIN: Well, it's, of course, really more than a good time. It was a time of a very stimulating art experience, in that we were doing things which seemed to us important for those times, a revival in mural painting, in public buildings, and an active corps of artists who were dedicated to their work, but also had a very lively time accomplishing it.

[00:48:39.82]

And to me, personally, it was the fulfillment of a sort of dream, you might say. It was the beginning of a very—a great fulfillment because those opportunities had largely been denied most of us before then. It's true that we painted and exhibited and carried out our work as we can, but to people who are especially interested in architectural art, that was a different kind of a period for us.

[00:49:19.57]

MINETTE MARTIN: I understand that you personally now continue to cover walls with both mosaic and various other techniques, and I would like to know how much of this you attribute your present work to the work that you did on the WPA projects.

[00:49:38.14]

EDITH HAMLIN: Oh, I'm sure that it was a very vital thing, and I always count it as the beginning, really, of my professional life as a muralist from that time, even though I had done smaller things before that. But this was—this gave it a great big impetus, and it was a very exciting start.

[00:50:04.02]

MINETTE MARTIN: Do you have any other comments to make at all about the project?

[00:50:13.46]

EDITH HAMLIN: Um—well, I can't, for the moment I don't think, but I will always be grateful that I had the opportunity to be a part of it.

[00:50:23.72]

MINETTE MARTIN: Thank you very much, Mrs. Hamlin.

[00:50:29.34]

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

[00:50:29.73]

MINETTE MARTIN: Mrs. Hamlin, you have something else to add about the murals around this area.

[00:50:34.53]

EDITH HAMLIN: Yes, I thought it might be interesting that I had rather definite ideas on what buildings and walls in those buildings were suitable for murals that called for a decoration, and would be attractive to me for that reason, because I have a very strong feeling—even then I had—that the wall should call for a mural and not be a lugged-in affair.

[00:51:03.66]

So I combed over the public schools, especially, and located this one area where I thought it would be very attractive. And that is the mural that I did. So I felt that it was a personal choice from the very beginning, and I think that added something to my enjoyment, that I really believe that a mural should be in that place.

[00:51:35.23]

MINETTE MARTIN: I think it's probably nicer to choose a site for the work that you're going to do, instead of having it pointed out to you and say—

[00:51:44.02]

EDITH HAMLIN: Well, when buildings are already constructed, and were not planned for murals, it is quite a different thing than planning a building for a mural from the beginning, which, of course, is the ideal way.

[00:51:57.72]

MINETTE MARTIN: And Mrs. Cravath, you, after the WPA projects, also painted murals. Do you want to tell us something about that?

[00:52:11.91]

DOROTHY CRAVATH: Well, I think [inaudible]—I know the WPA project sold me on the idea of architectural art as opposed to easel painting, and what I liked particularly is the idea of fitting the lines and the colors and the subject, and so on and so forth, to the place, and the use, and the light, and so on. In other words, working in some definite situation rather than in the air, as you do with an easel painting, really.

[00:52:47.84]

MINETTE MARTIN: And do you attribute your first interest in architectural art to the Federal Arts Projects?

[00:52:55.43]

DOROTHY CRAVATH: Right, because before that, I didn't care anything about murals. In fact, I thought they should leave the nice, clean walls alone. I changed my mind completely. Now I think they should put murals on walls—preferably my murals or Edith's. [They laugh.]

[00:53:15.12]

MINETTE MARTIN: Do either of you, before we finally close the tape, have anything further to add? Can you think of anything that you would like to say?

[00:53:26.02]

DOROTHY CRAVATH: Well, I am still—I suppose I have a lifetime job repairing those Coit Tower murals from time to time as the public damages them and also, probably, the murals out at the Mother House [at the zoo -Ed.] when the weather damages them. So this is one way to work yourself into a lifetime situation. [They laugh.]

[00:53:49.26]

MINETTE MARTIN: Just do a mural for the—

[00:53:51.96]

DOROTHY CRAVATH: Do a large mural in a place where it will inevitably be damaged.

[00:53:56.28]

MINETTE MARTIN: And then keep restoring it. [They laugh.]

[00:53:57.35]

DOROTHY CRAVATH: And then keep restoring it. And have someone to pay you.

[00:53:58.62]

EDITH HAMLIN: If you have the temperament for doing restorations, that's fine [laughs]. Dorothy, you're such a good technician. It's just a natural for her.

[00:54:11.11]

DOROTHY CRAVATH: I get so fed up with this stuff.

[00:54:14.60]

MINETTE MARTIN: Well, I want to thank both of you. Your help has been really invaluable to the Archives. Thank you very much.

[END OF TRACK AAA\_hamlin64\_4268\_r.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]