



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Grace
Greenwood, 1965 Jan 29

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Grace Greenwood on January 29, 1965. The interview took place in Woodstock, New York, and was conducted by Joseph Trovato 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. Additional information from the original transcript that seemed relevant was added in brackets and given an -Ed. attribution. 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

JOSEPH TROVATO: This interview with Grace Greenwood is taking place at her house at Woodstock, New York, January 29, 1965. From the great mass of material—and there is a great deal here around us, newspaper clippings, photographs, and letters and so on—I can see that we have a great deal of ground to cover. But I would like to have us begin by having you give us some material—some information about your background. So, I'll ask you, first of all, where were you born, Ms. Greenwood?

GRACE GREENWOOD: Well, I was born in Brooklyn. [Laughs.] Brooklyn, can't get away from it. And then, after being married for a short time, I went to Paris, because I always wanted to go to Paris and study. I studied at the Académie Ranson, and the Grande Chaumière, and the Colarossi for several years. After that, I came back, and my sister was going to go to Mexico. And at that time, I had seen a book of Orozco's work, and I somehow felt drawn towards Orozco's work, and I wanted to go to Mexico. So somehow, I got there.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, can you tell us at this point how you happened to become interested in painting? What was it that sparked this interest? Can you recall?

GRACE GREENWOOD: Well, painting was in our family. My father was a painter. My grandmother was a much better painter. In fact, she was a wonderful painter. My brothers, two of them were commercial artists, and of course, my sister, Marion [is well-known -Ed.]. So, painting was in the blood.

JOSEPH TROVATO: So, in other words, you were sort of born with it, you might say? This was your atmosphere at home from the beginning?

GRACE GREENWOOD: Yes, from the very beginning [laughs], and it caused a great deal of dissension. My mother didn't like it, my father didn't like it, but it just had to be, I guess.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Uh-huh [affirmative], I see. Where else did you study, Ms. Greenwood, and who were some of your teachers, the ones who had a real influence on your development?

GRACE GREENWOOD: I forgot to say that I did go to the Art Students League before going to Paris. And I was in Bridgman's class and DuMond's class, but I didn't get along very well in either class. And I wanted a freer expression somehow, so when I got to Paris, then I felt that I could possibly paint, after all.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Now, I know, Ms. Greenwood, that you and your sister did a great deal of the work on the Federal Art Projects. I understand, too, that you were the first—that you and your sister were the first two American women to paint fresco murals in this country. Is that so?

GRACE GREENWOOD: Yes, that is so. My sister Marion went to Mexico first. I got there a few months later. She was already working in the university in Morelia. And while I was there, Paul O'Higgins, well-known for Mexico City frescoes, came over and managed to get me a fresco in the museum of Morelia. That was my first fresco mural, in the museum of Morelia, and I still consider it one of my best [laughs].

[00:05:05]

JOSEPH TROVATO: So that you actually executed murals in Mexico City, as well as in Morelia, is that—

GRACE GREENWOOD: Yes.

JOSEPH TROVATO: —is that right? Now, how many murals did you do at that time in both these cities?

GRACE GREENWOOD: After the Morelia fresco, and after my sister finished hers in the university, we came back here to New York. And for a very short time, we were on something called the PWAP. But after that, we were invited back to Mexico to work in the Abelardo Rodriguez Mercado, and we were both given stairways, quite large, and the entrance to the stairway, both lobby walls, both architecturally exactly the same, opposite each other. That was about 3,000 square feet. And we worked with a group. Although all our works were separate, nevertheless—I mean, there was a group working throughout this huge building. Each had their own architectural unit, including Paul O'Higgins.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, you have already given us some idea as to your training. Will you tell us where you learned the fresco technique?

GRACE GREENWOOD: Well, I just took to it like a duck to water. As a matter of fact, it seemed just right. I liked it and worked well in it so much that I was very happy with fresco.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, now, while you were in Mexico, did you come in contact with some of the great figures in Mexican painting, Rivera, Orozco?

GRACE GREENWOOD: Yes. I forgot to say that Rivera was what is called our technical director. He would okay our projects for the walls. For instance, I just made a pencil outline, in scale, of course. I'd take it over to him, and he'd okay it, and I'd just go ahead and work without any cartoons, or without any color or anything. I'd just get it up on the wall in line. And of course, we also knew Orozco very well.

JOSEPH TROVATO: This is most important, of course, because we all know of the great influence that the Mexican mural painting school had on the painters in this country—on a great many painters in this country. And we naturally want to get down as much of this information as possible.

GRACE GREENWOOD: Yes, I remember, when I came back to New York, I saw some of the artists squaring up their murals, and it seemed very strange to me. In other words, they were just squaring up their small project. We used the Golden Mean, and when we'd put the lines on the walls, I remember now, that it seemed a shame to cover them up. They seemed to be such a beautiful abstraction, just in line itself. But then, of course, we had our tracings of the line on the wall, and we would go every day with that particular part of the tracing to the wall and paint about nine square feet a day.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Do you recall how much you were paid for these jobs that you did in Mexico?

GRACE GREENWOOD: Yes. The pay didn't seem to bother us very much, because we were both so happy and just working, and the pay was just an ordinary workman's pay. And I remember, we were the only two girls in this huge yard, where we would go to collect our bag of pesos, and all the Indians—that is, the peons and workmen of Mexico—would giggle at us, because we were in pants. And we'd collect our little bag of pesos in this great yard and line up with all the workmen, while they giggled at us and thought we were so poor that we didn't have money for skirts.

[00:10:09]

JOSEPH TROVATO: How long were you in Mexico on these projects?

GRACE GREENWOOD: Well, the first trip, I can't really remember. It was about 1933 to '34. And then we came back to New York, and then we went back again, and it was from about the latter part of 1934 to '35 that we completed our respective stairways in the Abelardo Mercado. And after that, we were invited back to the treasury [T.R.A.P. -Ed.] by Ms. Sharkey.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I would like at this point to read from this letter from Alice M. Sharkey, New York City Supervisor, Treasury Relief Art Project.

[Reads from text.] Dear Ms. Greenwood, Mr. Olin Dows, chief of the Treasury Relief Art Project, of which I enclose an operating plan, saw the photographs of your murals which were sent to Vernon Porter, and both he and I were very interested in having you get in touch with us immediately on your return to New York, should you be interested in the possibility of doing some fresco work for our project. I would be glad if you could give me an idea of the time you expect to reach New York. Looking forward to the pleasure of seeing you, et cetera.

Now, this was your first project, was it, here in the states, Ms.—

GRACE GREENWOOD: Yes, we were invited back after the photographs of the Mexican murals were seen, and we were given two respective walls again, 50 feet by 10. We painted them in a loft—25-foot sections, I remember—in a loft on Sixth Avenue and 23rd Street. We were rather crowded, but it turned out okay, and later on, they were installed in Camden. My sister's was installed in a place right now that I can't remember.

My theme was shipyard building. That was the largest shipyard in Camden. I had gotten my material from that shipyard. And it was installed in a social hall in one of the housing projects in Camden. And I remember the shipyard workers saying to me, Why didn't you paint us a bunch of pretty girls instead of us? [Laughs.]

JOSEPH TROVATO: Isn't there a photograph here of this mural? Yes, here it is. It certainly is a tremendous size. How many feet did you say it was?

GRACE GREENWOOD: 50 feet by 10.

JOSEPH TROVATO: 50 feet by 10.

GRACE GREENWOOD: Showing the east and west coast maps.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yes, yes, yes. [Audio break.] Before I forget, I want to ask you if there were other American artists in Mexico at the time you were there, and did they do any actual mural painting such as you did—such as you and your sister did?

GRACE GREENWOOD: Yes, I remember Guston coming in. At that time, he was very young. He wanted to get a wall. I told him about Morelia, the museum there, and he did get a huge wall to do, which he painted with another artist called Kadish. Always kicked myself because I didn't take the wall myself. Now, also, Isamu Noguchi came down. That was before Guston. And Marion and myself gave him a wall on the upper level. We sort of connected our stairways. And he made a sculpture relief, it was built out from the wall, and colored it. He also made a lot of trouble for us by running around with Rivera's wife. I insist on putting that in.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Will you tell us at this point, Ms. Greenwood, about the mural that you did under the Section of Fine Arts?

[00:15:07]

GRACE GREENWOOD: After we finished the Camden murals, we were invited by the Section of Fine Arts to do a post office mural. My sister Marion did a post office mural for the post office in Nashville, Tennessee, and my mural was installed in Lexington, Tennessee. And that's all of the post office murals.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see. And then, do I understand that you went back on the WPA? [Apparently nodded -Ed.] And what did you do then? What are the murals that you did on the WPA?

GRACE GREENWOOD: After the treasury closed, I was switched to the WPA, where I met Rollin Crampton, my supervisor, to whom I am now married. And on the WPA, I had a model made for the Hunter College murals. There were two beautiful walls and an 88-foot stage between them. I made a complete project for Hunter College, and Harrison okayed it—the architect Harrison. But because Schuster—I think that was his name—he said that the encaustic—was it the encaustic plaster could not be stopped up?

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: No, not encaustic. Sound-proof.

GRACE GREENWOOD: Yeah, he didn't want the walls covered because it would stop the some—

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Interfere with the acoustics.

JOSEPH TROVATO: [Inaudible.]

GRACE GREENWOOD: It would interfere with the acoustics. So, after a great deal of work, I did not get the Hunter College murals. After that, I tried for Bellevue—the Bellevue solarium. I made a complete project for the Bellevue solarium, and I just don't remember, but that didn't turn out, either. After that, I returned to easel painting.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see. Now, what was the date, or just about the general year when—I mean the year when you returned to easel painting?

GRACE GREENWOOD: Oh, that was—the Project ended around 1939 or '40, and I returned to easel painting in my studio on Ninth Street, near 6th Avenue. I really preferred murals, but I had to return to easel painting, and entered group shows. And I showed at the Whitney Museum. And the New School [on 12th Street -Ed.]. Some of my fresco slides were shown in a lecture by Mortimer Borne. And the National Academy. And I had a one-man show on 57th Street, and showed it with the Artists Equity, also. Many other group shows. And then I also had a teaching class.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: You showed in the Whitney.

GRACE GREENWOOD: I showed in the Whitney. And then I had a teaching class. I had seven or eight lovely young girls, and they came to study with me in my studio on Ninth Street.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: [Inaudible.] [A third party speaking in the background. -Ed.]

GRACE GREENWOOD: You want to—I think you should take the—

[Audio break.]

JOSEPH TROVATO: Now, about 1945, you applied for a Guggenheim Fellowship.

GRACE GREENWOOD: Yes.

JOSEPH TROVATO: And here is a very interesting letter from Orozco. Apparently, he was asked to—I should say that he was given as a reference, by you, I suppose.

GRACE GREENWOOD: Yes, I asked him.

JOSEPH TROVATO: And this is what he says, which I think is a wonderful endorsement by this most prominent artist.

[Reads from text.] Dear Grace, I have just received a letter from Guggenheim asking a reference for you. Please write a statement saying whatever you think is right and useful for me to say about you and your work. Don't be modest. Write freely, because it is very important to say the right words. My English is very limited. I will write and sign anything you say, and I mean it. I want you to get the scholarship. You deserve it. Cordially, Orozco.

[00:20:06]

I'd be interested in knowing, Ms. Greenwood, whether you got the scholarship after all of this.

GRACE GREENWOOD: I know it. I'm sorry to say I did not get the scholarship. I certainly needed it. I had the finest recommendations. One from Orozco, several art critics of that period, Vernon Porter of the National Academy. I had wonderful recommendations. I don't know why I did not receive it. I certainly should have.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, that's the way things go, sometimes. I think you said earlier, Ms. Greenwood, that about this time—this would be in the middle '40s, would it be?

GRACE GREENWOOD: Yes.

JOSEPH TROVATO: That a psychiatrist collected a good deal of your work. I think it'd be interesting to have you tell us about this? I think you also mentioned that you did two murals in his house?

GRACE GREENWOOD: Yes, about—let me see, about 1954, a psychiatrist became interested in my work. Somehow, he'd heard that I was wiping out a lot of paintings. And I went to his office for psychiatry for three and a half years or so, and I gave him my paintings, drawings, and so forth, and he gave me a commission to do two small murals for him, about 10 feet by five. His home is in Scarsdale, Dr. Murray Jonas [ph].

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, I know from what you have already said how tremendously wrapped up you were in this whole—in the projects of the '30s. Could I ask you know to tell us whether you think this was a fine thing for American art? I can almost guess your answer.

GRACE GREENWOOD: Yes, you certainly can. I think it was a wonderful thing for American art, and I wish they would have another art project, a Federal Art Project.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Thank you very much, Ms. Greenwood. I think that we have some splendid material for the record. There.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]