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Oral history interview with Erna Gunther,  
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# Transcript

## Interview

**DB:** DOROTHY BESTOR

**EG:** ERNA GUNTHER

**DB:** Well, you know that's a very good way to start. We're on at the moment, so I'm must going to do a small test to see if we have the right sound. Why don't you say something about Indian arts and crafts and I'll see whether I have it too loud or not.

**EG:** Well, as usual I am interested in Indian arts and crafts, and I was pleased to see that a comment on this subject was in the correspondence I read.

**DB:** Good, let's play it back and see what happens. Now, we're recording again. This is a taped interview with Dr. Erna Gunther of the University of Washington, Anthropology Dept. She and I are in the manuscripts room of the University of Washington Library, going over the correspondence of the various Federal Arts Projects. So, for at least the first part of this, she's going to continue looking over some of the papers, some of the letters that she wrote and that were written to here, and bring up various points that they call to mind and then I'll ask her questions. We were talking about Indian arts and crafts, Dr. Gunther.

**EG:** Yes, I was very much interested to include Indian arts and crafts in the Project because I felt that in the first place it was a good opportunity to give Indians who could participate in the Project something to do and in the second place I felt it was a good project to bring before the public, because so often things that Indians make are looked up as souvenirs and nothing else. And here is something that is of a higher quality than souvenir crafts. We had a wonderful opportunity for sympathetic attention because Mr. Inverarity was very much interested in it also. Many people know him now through his excellent book on Northwest Coast Indian art which he already had in mind at that time. As director of the Washington State Museum, I had need for things which were rather different from the ordinary art project. We needed some backgrounds for dioramas and we also needed dioramas themselves. Dioramas are excellent teaching material in museum education and also they are very expensive so that only large museums can afford them. I thought this would be our prime opportunity for getting some work done which we could never afford on our own. We set up a cooperative project where the University undertook to furnish materials, some space and supervision, and we designed a number of dioramas that we thought were important, and the Art Project supplied the workmen. The subjects were chosen to illustrate the use of our museum objects and the dioramas represented three geographic groups.

**DB:** Oh, what were they?

**EG:** They were Puget Sound, that is our local Indian setting, the Indians of eastern Washington, because we needed both these for teaching purposes, and the third one was Eskimo. I was in charge of all of these myself, which I had not anticipated because I expected the eastern Washington project would be taken over by Dr. Verne Ray. But at this time he chose to go east and work for his Ph.D. First, I gave books on these various tribes to the Project supervisor to read and then we designed the dioramas, they would go to work on it. About once a week I went to the Project workshop and discussed the work with them. We planned the work in such a way that we could use the talents of the people assigned to the Project.

**DB:** It must have taken a good deal of planning.

**EG:** It did take a good deal of planning, but it paid off. For instance, we had a rather elderly gentleman on the Project who just loved dogs, and anyone familiar with Indians villages knows how many dogs are in the village. Well, he was just delighted at carving dogs and made them in quantities. If you take this by itself, it sounds like a very strange little project, but in the whole group this was a very important contribution and for once I had enough dogs to choose from. In fact, we had to limit ourselves because he made so many good ones that we had them for all kinds of poses, he made them very real. They almost filled the village. We worked very slowly and checked everything thoroughly before it was set into place. I will never forget the last day before we cemented the glass on one of the eastern Washington dioramas. They called me down and I took a high chair to sit on a level with the scene and I examined every piece. The men and women who had been working on the Project stood around and watched. There was a very tense silence and I felt there was something in the air. I worked very carefully and, finally, when I got to a little rush tepee, there was a man sitting in front of it, a very small figure. I burst out, "Whoever put the beard on this man?" And they said, "Oh, she found him!" They were all terribly amused that I found it; they were trying me out to see if I really was looking at it carefully. [The point is that American Indians do not have beards.]

**DB:** They would have been so disappointed if you hadn't found it!

**EG:** Oh, they never would have trusted me on anything again if I hadn't found the man with the beard, but we had a very good relationship.

**DB:** How long did it take for each of those Indian dioramas?

**EG:** They didn't do any one at a time; we usually had 2 or 3 of them going because we had different people working in different media concurrently. There were men working on the background, while others were making the figures, while the man was carving his dogs, so we kept everybody employed in this way. It was not finishing one then starting another. Then some were doing the drafting for the next project.

**DB:** Now was Wellington Groves supervising the actual work; was he foreman?

**EG:** Yes, he was. I always had to make him understand completely what I wanted. This was the important thing because I didn't talk to the individuals except once in a while when something did not turn out right. I would try to explain it directly to the person who was working on it. But, as a rule, he was the intermediary and he was very cooperative and a very pleasant person to work with. We got along very well. He read the literature; he was himself interested, and I think this was true of all the people on the Project. It wasn't mechanical, and some of them came away, saying they never thought of Indians before, but now they're reading whatever they can find. In other words, it was an educational project because the workers learned as much by doing it as people afterwards learned from the results of their work. I think that this is very important because we speak so often of rehabilitation for people whose line of work has given out or something like that. Well, these people, many of them, went away from this with a new interest.

**DB:** Well, that's very impressive. Where were these dioramas placed after they were completed?

**EG:** They came to the Washington State Museum. And they were used there from the early 1940's until the museum was moved, and in the little room that we had for exhibitions between 1957 and 1962, they were shown along with the objects that illustrated the life shown in the dioramas. We used them as the core of the little exhibit room which was set up primarily for the elementary grades. The 3rd and 4th grades of the Seattle and King County schools came to the museum for lessons, and this was the teaching material.

**DB:** That's interesting. The staff who worked on these dioramas, were some of them painters from the Bailey Gatzert School studio, the regular easel painting Art Project and Mural Project?

**EG:** Not in the diorama project, because we had very little of that type of painting in it. But in the dioramas that were made for the biology area where we needed backgrounds, we tried to find a realistic painter who could do a background for a bird exhibit and another that shows a cross section of beach with the shellfish in it. It was very difficult for these people to paint a realistic scene with some dock pilings. We had to have several people do them before we found a background we could use. The first one I saw made it look like a foggy morning and we needed something more distinct. It was really quite a job to get the things we wanted. It was worth the struggle, for these exhibits also were shown until 1957 when they were stored with all other exhibits.

**DB:** Well, that's wonderful. Do you remember who these painters were who did the best backgrounds?

**EG:** I remember one man who worked on the Puget Sound background by the name of Marsh but I don't remember his first name. It seems to me that he was the one who finally succeeded in doing one that was realistic enough for us to work with.

**DB:** I have here a group picture of some of the painters on the Project; perhaps he is there, or perhaps you recognize some of them as having worked with you.

**EG:** I don't, I really don't. It's really quite long ago. Here he is, Marsh, I wouldn't have recognized him, but here he is, and his first name is Leon. I don't remember any of the others.

**DB:** Well, there were 35 to 50 on this division of it at various times.

**EG:** Of course, a number of them have become names prominent in the art of the Northwest. There's a person I know, yes, this is Agnes Kirsh. We used her in a very creative manner.

**DB:** What did she do?

**EG:** She painted birds, and she painted them very realistically and very well in relation to their environment, in relation to their coloration. After this project was over, she continued this work in connection with camouflage for the Navy. Oh, here's another. This little woman painted flowers and we still have these very beautiful, miniature-like, sketches of our native flowers. water colors of our native flowers. She made a regular botanical kind of

painting with the flower in bloom and the entire root system and they were all identified by Mrs. Flahout who was then our curator of biology. They are a wonderful index to the flora since the Museum did not have a herbarium. I have a couple of these paintings in the exhibit I set up at Rocky Beach Dam right now. They have been used often ever since.

**DB:** Well, that's wonderful. She's perhaps the person that Mr. Groves was mentioning the me in relation to his point that you tried to find special tasks to suit special people. He said there was one woman who couldn't work with the group, who had to work alone, and you found she was good at flower painting, and you had her all by herself at the Museum.

**EG:** Yes, she was a Czechoslovakian by birth and very shy, and she worked in the Museum all by herself and really turned material out. She got along well with this small staff there because we did not interfere with her work. She ate lunch with the staff and we enjoyed each other's company, but she was not geared for a part in a large cooperative project.

**DB:** Well, I said I would let you go through these letters and mention various points that came up. Do you want to look at any more of these letters that you have?

**EG:** I see very little here. In this one folder there is a list of the things that the University agreed to supply and they all went through my budget and I remember signing 5 copies of everything each quarter.

**DB:** Yes, there seems to have been a great deal of governmental red tape.

**EG:** Today nobody can read my signature, almost including myself, for it was completely ruined by this Project. You see, in addition to this Project, I also had 22 NYA students in the Museum, and every month I had to sign 5 copies of the pay for each one of them: it was quite a chore.

**DB:** It seems unnecessary.

**EG:** It seems entirely unnecessary. It's unfortunate that the system has kept up.

**DB:** I'm afraid it does. In going through the whole much of folders, I notice Mr. Inverarity's letters to the Spokane office asking them to rephrase their reports so that they would follow exactly the government form. "We must obey the government instructions; I have had to rewrite the letters and send them out from this office," he often wrote to Spokane. His time must have been extraordinarily taken up with this kind of detail.

**EG:** It was, it really was, and he was very pleased when we devised our own projects in the Museum, saying what we could use, because it saved him a tremendous amount of time. One must remember that there were a great many people around who resented the way the Project was run. There were a great many people around who resented the way in which this project was run. This system was not devised here; it was ordered from Washington. The letters had to be worded as they wanted them, or the Projects could not be certified. There are many individualists among the artists and they felt that all this was extremely arbitrary.

**DB:** And I suppose they blame the nearest person.

**EG:** They blame the nearest person. There were so many flurries when we were suddenly notified that the Project would be shut down at once.

**DB:** Yes, I was wondering about that. How often did that happen and why did it happen?

**EG:** It happened so often that I could not possibly remember the count now. A call would come at 3:30 P.M. to tell workers not to come back to work the next day -- the Project was closed. This was such a traumatic thing for people because they were living on such a minimum that they hadn't saved anything for the day the project was closed. And they would go home very disheartened. At 4:30 we would get a phone call, "You don't have to close the project; they can come back tomorrow." Well, everyone had gone home already. Some people had telephones but others could not be reached. We had one woman who lived way beyond the edge of town, she had no telephone, she had no immediate neighbors who had a telephone, so I would drive down to tell her to come back so she would not lose a day's work.

**DB:** Well, of course not. Well, from whom were you getting these phone calls?

**EG:** From the central office.

**DB:** From the central office, you mean in Seattle?

**EG:** Yes.

**DB:** Was this because the appropriations had to be renewed every few months?

**EG:** Yes, they had to be renewed, and I don't know anything about other projects of the WPA, but there was a lot of sniping at the Art Projects.

**DB:** From what sources mainly? Republicans and people against FDR and all his works?

**EG:** No, more than that. From people who felt this was unnecessary. I mean they didn't like the idea that anybody should pay for art. You know, the same attitude was expressed against the WPA theater too and in all of the Arts Projects. And every time the Art Project was about to be closed, you would find an item in the paper, "Hurray! The Art Project is closed!" Then the Project would open up again. But there were times when the sniping was so strong there were thoughts of closing the project. It was a very confusing operation.

**DB:** Well, it must have been. Fay Chong was telling me that he thought people were supposed to be on the Project as painters for 20 weeks and then deliberately laid off to see if they could get other jobs and then they could come back again.

**DB:** Yes, that was true too, but the people who worked on our particular projects weren't in that classification. There may have been many changes of personnel on our projects without my knowing it, because when I met with some of them week by week, I saw principally Mr. Groves and maybe one or two who were in charge of the others, maybe the people who were making the plaster case or so. Many of the principal workers were on the Project for its duration.

**DB:** Well, you say there was always sniping at the Project. Do you think that ultimately, before it wound up at the beginning of World War II, that it did, at least to some extent, justify itself in the public eyes in Seattle, or did people always have their fingers crossed?

**EG:** I think it took longer than that, but I think it did justify itself ultimately. I was of course pleased with the Project for what we got out of it. I never use any of the materials that we got out of the Project without mentioning its origin. Also for the students who worked on the NYA.

**DB:** Yes, I would like to hear about that.

**EG:** I also had a good many projects going which we have used ever since. For instance, I had one of the students copy some sand paintings on a very large scale so that I could use them in class. I felt the texture of the sand painting could be gotten better this way than on a slide. We used brown wrapping paper which is a good sand color and very heavy tempera. I used these reproductions in my primitive art class to this day. In fact, I will use them next week in my primitive art course and, every time I show them, I say something about their origin. Today it is unbelievable for students to think of somebody doing this kind of work for \$15.00 a month and that they could live on it or did live on it. It was not easy living but this help did keep them at school. They just look at me as if they meant to say, "The old lady just doesn't remember." I feel that we had much to be grateful for in these Projects, which were experimental in their time and, while one should hope that we don't have a similar situation again to bring them up, I always hope that some time projects of this sort might be considered again under less drastic conditions.

**DB:** Yes, lots of people are hoping that today. And there's the suggestion that has been made recently in President Johnson's Appalachia project that there be incorporated some sort of government-sponsored art project as a small part of it.

**EG:** It's in an area of the country where they have done some very good work already, like Berea [College], and I'm sure that more of that could be done if they had some sponsorship.

**DB:** The other day you were talking about the Art Week that you were chairman of, and your experiences of going to different parts of the state and taking Indian baskets where they expected more conventional souvenir type things. Do you want to tell about it?

**EG:** Well, it wasn't in connection with Art Week, although I did try to get them to use, in their displays, some things made by local Indians. For instance, in the files there was a note from a farm extension worker in Tapanish where we were planning to show some pieces made by Yakima Indians and showing them as art, not as souvenirs. This was a strange idea to many people. Of course, you know a very interesting thing has happened in the art world, and that is, probably since the San Francisco Fair, more than anything else, the Fair sponsored primitive art as art. Before the middle of the 1940's, art galleries rarely showed any collection of Indian art, but today every well-set-up schedule has some primitive art show over a two-year period. I think this stress on Indian art and other primitive arts has really begun to touch the aesthetic taste of the public. For instance, today there are many collectors of Northwest Coast Indian art. Well, we have a fine show of New Guinea here at the Seattle Art Museum right now, and these are things which an art museum 20 or 25 years ago

would not have touched.

**DB:** And you think the Federal Art Project had a part in it?

**EG:** It had a part in it, it had a part in changing the popular taste. Today I never hesitate to say to people, "This is a piece of Northwest Coast Indian art; but this is not just something an Indian made, it is a piece of art." And it is reasonably accepted. But what you were talking about in connection with the baskets, that happened in connection with one of our local fairs here, where a woman in charge of the Woman's Building asked me to bring something for display because she hadn't gotten enough crocheted doilies, and I brought a show of Indian baskets because they are also made by women and I felt that they would be right in a woman's building. But she did not want them. I told her, "That or nothing at all," and finally she took them. I went down to the Fair several times to see how they were being received and every time, if there was anyone in the building, they were standing at the case with the baskets. It is really surprising to find so many people who have had baskets tucked away in the attic and who suddenly find now that they are being shown in museums. So they bring them out, for now they have a piece of art. So I think we can do a great deal to help channel the interests and the tastes of people with big projects of this sort, and sometimes with smaller ones within communities, but here was a national movement.

**DB:** If there were to be further government sponsorship of the arts, aid to or direction of the arts, have you any suggestions as to how you think it ought to be run?

**DB:** Well, with less paper work.

**DB:** Definitely.

**EG:** With less paper work. I don't know that we can ever do anything to create a greater feeling of homogeneity and unity among artists. They are such strong individualists that they are very, very hard to direct. I think that perhaps if there are any future art projects that possibly the person to have charge of them might be somebody who isn't himself an artist...

**DB:** I think that's a very good idea.

**EG:** . . . but knows something about art. I mean someone that has administrative ability that knows enough about art to recognize the good from the bad in a very general sense but not a person from the art group of the community.

**DB:** Not even an art museum director, do you think?

**EG:** No, no, I don't think so, because I think that they are very frequently committed to certain kinds of art. I think most museum directors are much broader in their interests than the public gives them credit for.

**DB:** I should hope so. We don't give some of ours much credit, do we?

**EG:** Yes, it's because what they show is what they have to show for the sake of the community, or what they have to show because it is available, and so on. There are limitations of that kind, but I do feel that it might be a person who has had, of course, exhibition experience and that sort of thing, but not necessarily connected with any of the local institutions, because every local institution in the minds of the artist stands for a certain kind of program.

**DB:** Very true indeed.

**EG:** I think this is possibly my reaction to the fact that, except that I am a great exponent of primitive art, I sort of stand as a neutral as far as modern art is concerned, and I think that helps a little bit. I appreciate it; I enjoy it. I don't know too much about it but I know enough to accept it, and I know enough that we need a variety of art and not all of one kind. If you get a person who paints himself, who works himself in the field, he sometimes seems to have too narrow a vision.

**DB:** Yes, he could hardly help it; you could say "too specialized" a vision rather than "too narrow," but it's the same thing. Well, I wonder what else is important for you to get on the record? You have a much broader point of view about this than many of the people I've interviewed, so I want you to have a chance to say everything that comes to mind about the Project.

**EG:** Well, you see, after all, my training is that of an anthropologist, and art is just one of my particular interests, and I look at this as a cultural development. I think that the recognition of art in the community, whether you want it as the individual collector, or whether you want it as something that is there for the community to enjoy, is a very, very important step in our cultural development, and I do feel that in the last 15 or 20 years art has become better recognized in many, many communities. I do feel that in this state, for instance, the Art Project

and the direction of attention toward art regardless of whether it was good, bad or indifferent, has helped many communities. It has at least made them conscious of the fact that there should be such a thing.

**DB:** Yes, that's certainly important. What do you think is the cause?

**EG:** I think that these various projects were one factor. They take time, they don't have immediate results. They take time and perhaps many people could not say, "Well, yes, since I saw these exhibits in the WPA Art Project, I have become interested in art." They may not even recognize that, but the results, I think, are there. I always tell this little story. I was driving down to California and I stopped at a small town to get some gasoline and there was a woman ahead of me in a car which a little boy and she had finished her purchase and she called to her youngster, "C'mon, we're going along." And he walked over and he said, "Mother, we haven't seen the museum." "Oh," she said and she turned to the gas attendant, and she said, "And where's your museum?" He said, "Museum?" She said, "Yes, where is your museum here in town?" "We haven't got any museum," he answered. And the little boy turned around and looked at this man and said, "You mean you haven't got a museum?" I mean with this emphasis, what have you if you haven't that? This is very interesting. This would not have happened 20 years ago. And of course the museum movement is not all in art but it links with art, whether it's a historical museum or a natural history museum or an anthropological museum, it is a museum. And many people go there with the idea they should have a bit of everything. Well, most museums, small museums, shouldn't, even if they do, but it is a place the public goes to for education. You know, this is a very curious comparison. I think the museum has taken the place of what was the great education in medieval times, the cathedral.

**DB:** That's a very good point.

**EG:** People went to the cathedral for services, they went to the cathedral for religious inspiration. But look at the art in the cathedral, they also enjoyed that. They came out of rather poor living conditions, and this was their one great inspiration. And I think every time I go into some of the great cathedrals in Europe, especially when you go into the cathedral, a place like Toledo in Spain and you see this community which really hasn't changed very much, and you think what does this cathedral mean to these women who still go to the well to get water, who carry everything on their heads? Perhaps today the cathedral doesn't mean as much as it did to them once, but when you consider that some of these cathedrals that are built up on hills and people carried the stones up there on their backs and everybody did it, every body contributed to it, this was an important building and it housed their art. This housed their inspiration; it was their dramatic entertainment and you just sort of wish you could get an institution today that would knit a community together this way.

**DB:** Yes, wouldn't it be wonderful! Well, the museum certainly carries a large part of that.

**EG:** It carries on a tradition there; it's in a different kind of building, however, it does carry on a tradition of inspiration through which people can see and hear.

**DB:** Perhaps one might say if only television hadn't come along and drained off some of the excitement from the museum and siphoned off the . . . .

**EG:** I don't think it does. I actually think it makes people go. Lots of people who sit at home and watch TV are inspired to go out and see for themselves after shows like the trip through the Louvre, the trip through the National Museum. I think it stimulates them to action. They want to see what more is there. But still there are others who watch only violence and like it and probably one couldn't do much for them anyway, but I do feel that shows about art on TV create an interest that people satisfy by seeing more of it. The number of people who go to art galleries has increased tremendously in recent years.

**DB:** I certainly hope you're right.

**EG:** I hope so, too.

**DB:** Well, thank you loads. This has been awfully interesting. Is there anything else that I haven't asked you that you would like to talk about in connection with either the National Art Week or the WPA Art Project or the Museum and the Northwest Indian project?

**EG:** I don't think so, except that, as I say, I hope this kind of thing can be continued. I have been asked for some consultation and advice on the Alaska Centennial, and I have suggested to them a rotating show that can go to the larger communities, unfortunately, it can't go to the smaller ones, but go to the larger communities in Alaska of native material to give this native material some status and I thought of a show that would be in four parts and that would go to Juno, to Fairbanks, to Anchorage and Sitka, and they would have each show for three months of the Centennial year and by the end of the year they would see all four. I would love to do something like that.

**DB:** Very nice. What particular type of Native material? Carvings? Weavings?

**EG:** Art. In Northwest coast, of course, the Trinket did excellent work, and of course, the Eskimo did beautiful things that are easily transported. I hope I can put this idea across. I am going up there shortly for another consultation. I hope we can set up something of this kind because, the unfortunate thing is that so many places, the only future they see for Indian art are things to sell and sell quick. And this does things to the artists and to the public's image of art. It is harmful not only to art, but also to the artist.

**DB:** Yes, it certainly is, and to the public's image of the Indians, too.

**EG:** And the public image of art.

**DB:** Thank you very much. [END OF TAPE]