

**Conrad Buff, interviewed by Elizabeth Dixon, Oral History Program, UCLA Art Library, 1964.**

Full text of Conrad Buff Oral History Transcript:

[http://archive.org/stream/conradbufforalhi00buff/conradbufforalhi00buff\\_djvu.txt](http://archive.org/stream/conradbufforalhi00buff/conradbufforalhi00buff_djvu.txt)

*Note: The following consists of excerpts from a 300 page interview. Line breaks indicate text that has been removed.*

Dixon: Did you try to sell any of your work, any of your paintings at this time?

Buff: I had never had the courage to really show my work up to that time, because I was never satisfied with anything I did. The blue skies especially always tempted me. I couldn't find a way of harmonizing a really blue sky with the landscape. The rest of the painters never tried to paint the blue sky. Their skies were always sort of a grey-blue, and that was easy enough to harmonize the color of the foreground and hills with. But I struggled and struggled, painted things over and over and over again, trying to find a way of harmonizing a really blue sky.

When I came back from the mountains I was fascinated by what I'd seen up there — the snow and the deep blue sky, and I kept on working from my sketches. I painted a little picture of the glacier and the surrounding country and I got a little further on the blue sky, not really blue but fairly blue. I exhibited that at one of the art club exhibitions in the spring, and strangely enough I got a little special mention in the paper. That encouraged me, and I started a large painting of the same subject. It was almost as large as this wall. I worked on it and worked on it and finally I got it fairly well. I think somewhere I've got a photograph of it.

But since I had shown that particular painting on a small scale, I didn't want to show it again the next year. I had painted another painting of the desert where I practiced with the blue sky; it was a fairly large painting, about three times as large as that one, and the next year I sent it to a California Art Club exhibition. But it was turned down. I couldn't understand how they could turn it down, because they had certainly a lot of pictures that they had accepted that were not anywhere near as good as that.

The only way I could figure it was that it was painted in an unusual way. I used the pointillism technique, and that was something that had never been seen at the California Art Club. I think it was too strange, and they turned it down. That gave me quite a knock. I couldn't understand how I could lose with a picture like that, but that's the way it happened. Mary (of course, I was already engaged to her at that time) encouraged me. She said you have to take the knocks with the good things.

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Dixon: I'd like to ask you about your techniques. Have you changed your techniques?

Buff: Yes, I have changed my technique quite considerably. In the earlier pictures I used the pointillist technique in order to be truthful to the light of the deserts and the mountains. But later on I found a way of expressing that clarity of air by broader application of colors, by more bright application of brighter colors. In that sense I changed entirely, and lost a lot of friends by doing so.

Dixon: I know this happens to authors who change a style of writing.

Buff: Once you get a public that likes your work and you change your style, then all of a sudden you lose everybody. If you're young enough to build up a new audience that's all right, but if you're too old you're just out. I don't mean to say that I haven't any friends left who like what I'm doing, but it's certainly not a popular idea, together with the fact that of course landscape painting is out of style today entirely; the same with ordinary figure painting. We have come into more wildly expressive ideas, and abstract and nonrepresentational. Paintings are entirely in style now. I'm just too old to start. At all times, my pictures were built up on a design basis. I stress strongly the design. In fact, the landscape of Arizona and Utah appealed to me mostly because it strongly emphasized design. But to entirely drop the representational character is somehow outside of me--I can't feel happy in just working in pure design. I don't mean to say that that's necessarily a virtue, but it just happens to be that that's the way I am. I have to do as Luther said, "Here I stand. God help me, I can't do otherwise."

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Buff: Now that we've talked so much about our fancy-trips up to Utah and all those pleasure trips to Maynard Dixon's place, I really ought to say what I was doing myself, besides just having a good time. Of course, landscape painting has been my favorite thing practically all my life. But I found out that the way that I saw landscape, especially the western landscape that I was so much in love with, wasn't the way the public saw it. I just couldn't get interested in the verbenas and the sunsets. I kept on painting these magnificent forms that I saw and that I was interested in; and I tried to get the magnificent blues that we saw on the desert, which wasn't so easy to harmonize with the rest of the landscape. And especially the wild country in Utah.

But I found that the public just wasn't interested in that sort of thing. Most of the one-man shows that I had were a fizzle — they thought that sort of stuff never existed any

place because they hadn't seen it themselves. So I would turn back to my studio again and again, always try to do the things that I liked but without having any success.

On the other hand, I was also interested in mural painting. That was my second love, and interior decoration. Since 1930, there was practically no mural painting on a large scale, so I was thrown back to Just arrangements of color in architecture. I had several architects of the more conventional type who were interested in my colors and employed me as a color consultant and decorator, especially one of them who did a lot of schools, grammar schools.

I felt that there was a real need of developing a color scheme that created an atmosphere of quiet and restraint so that the children wouldn't be excited. Up to that time, most of the public buildings were painted in a sort of grayish-buff or tan, which I felt wasn't as good as it could be. While I agreed that the ceiling should reflect a maximum amount of light, the walls should be rather quiet and retiring. The tan was Just a little bit too reflective. It reflected too much light of the wrong kind. I gradually developed a grey-green that seemed to me was the most satisfactory background. It was restful, and if it wasn't too dark or too light, it reflected the right amount of light into the children's eyes so that they could work and feel quiet. If the light came in not from the front but from the side, it created an ideal place to work.

Of course, you could do all the rooms the same color in a big school. People wanted variation, but there was plenty of room for variation, inasmuch as one could keep one room a little more on the blue-green side and the other a little more on the yellow-green side along the tan or on the more neutral grey side. Then there was always a chance of creating a little bit of excitement by using the doors and the baseboards and window jambs in a slightly different color. That differentiation in color was especially necessary because a sunny room on the south side of the building would stand a little more blue and the northern side would require a little more yellow to counteract the blue light from the blue sky. So there was plenty of change to vary the color scheme.

I had pretty good success with most of the architects I worked with, especially one case where the architect did a two-story building for a grammar school. The principal was a lady and she had in mind this tan, because it was the regular thing. In fact, she called it "parchment" which would be a rather greyish-tan. She wanted that, but by means of samples and talk with the architect and with her, I got her to agree to have the classrooms in the greens--but her own private office she wanted tan. Well, we got along. We got a very nice satisfactory job for the classrooms but she had her tan in the private office. That was a disappointment to her after she had seen the classrooms; she felt she would like to have that green too, but the money was gone and she couldn't have it, so she had to live with what she got.

Those are things that, of course, an interior decorator in developing color schemes is always up against. The people have preconceived ideas of what they would like to have, and it's very difficult to correct it with something different. In that sense the whole idea of interior decoration was very often disappointing, but it was practically the only way for me to make a living.