

## Oral history interview with Edward Biberman, 1964 Apr. 15

Conducted by Betty Hoag, At his home in Hollywood, CA

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*Note: The following consists of excerpts from a 26 page interview. Line breaks indicate text that has been removed.*

Biberman speaks of his early painting career; the influence of the Mexican muralists, especially Jose Clemente Orozco, upon him; coming to California; murals he painted for the Los Angeles Post Office. He also discusses his interest in painting around architecture and city fixtures.

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MS. HOAG: Had you been interested in mural painting before that time, in Paris?

MR. BIBERMAN: Only in theory. I received a great deal of publicity for a series of studies of the figure that I had done, which the art critic of the overseas edition of *The Herald Tribune* felt showed a possible new approach to the use of the figure in mural painting. That was his idea, anyway. But it's true that my use of the figure had a certain architectural conception behind it, and I was very interested in the problems of art for contemporary architecture. As a matter of fact, one of my motives in coming back to the States was a desire to relate to the architecture of the 20th century. In theory I was interested in mural painting and I entered my first actual competition for a mural for some industrial firm-I don't remember its name. The solution at which I arrived was one that received a great deal of attention when the sketches were exhibited. I didn't get the job, but I got much publicity from it. More and more then, I became interested in the whole idea of mural painting. All of us at that period were terribly excited by the great Mexican mural movement. I didn't go to Mexico at that time, but I was a very devoted and partisan follower of the work of Siqueiros, Rivera Orozco and Charlot, and in theory I became an ardent muralist. I had never actually painted a mural. Then the Federal programs were instituted. I never tried to enter the Federal Art Projects because I was still in the very fortunate position of coming from a family which was able to see to it that I wasn't in want during this very difficult period. Under those circumstances, of course, I felt that I could not indicate a desire to be on the Federal Projects, which were predicated on "relief," although actually I would dearly have loved to have been.

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MS. HOAG: Interesting. Had you seen any of the Mexican muralists' work in New York? I believe Rivera had his controversial Rockefeller Center mural when you were there.

MR. BIBERMAN: Yes. I had met Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros, because from time to time all of them were in New York. I was a very good friend of Alma Reed, who owned the Delphic Studios and who was responsible for much of the work that Orozco was commissioned to do in the United States. As a matter of fact, I spent an instructive weekend at Dartmouth with Orozco when he was painting his murals there. And I even collaborated: there is one line that I painted on the Orozco mural at Dartmouth! He was doing a kind of architectural decoration over a doorway at one point and-do you remember the gag about, "I can't even draw a straight line"? Orozco, as you know, had very bad eyes, only one arm and I don't remember whether it was because the reach was too great for him with his one good arm or whether he was just bored with drawing a straight line, but anyway-

MS. HOAG: You were handy?

MR. BIBERMAN: -he handed me his brushes and he said, "Biberman, would you mind making that line for me?" I said, "I'd be delighted to make that line for you." So that I can claim collaboration on the Dartmouth murals with Orozco. But the fact is that I, as I say, did meet all of the "big three." I happened to be in Radio City watching Rivera work the night before his murals were destroyed-just one of those strange coincidences. He used to hold court. He was a great showman and he loved to paint with an audience. And one night I had decided-just by chance-to go to the foyer where he was painting this large fresco. I watched him work for a couple of hours, then it got late, I was tired and went home. I found out the next day that at some ungodly wee small a.m. hour the mural was covered and either destroyed then, or subsequently. But the point is that all of us in the East at that time were very excited by the phenomenon of a great Mexican mural movement and were delighted when our own government instituted, both through the WPA projects and the Section of Fine Arts, something that we felt represented a counterpart to what was being done in Mexico. So I was very, very happy indeed to find that it was at precisely this period that I was able to embark upon something which in theory I had been terribly interested in, namely, mural painting. Also, in New York at that time I was made a member of the National Society of Mural Painters, an honor I really didn't deserve because I still hadn't done enough to warrant it. But most of my credits had to do with my designs. And strange it was that, although I was entering Federal competitions in the middle 30's when I was living in New York, the resulting commissions were not awarded to me until after I had come to California.

MS. HOAG: They were the direct result of the work that you had done there? [in New York]. You came here in 1936, didn't you?

MR. BIBERMAN: Yes, but I had been here earlier. I had spent the summers of 1930 and 1931 painting in the Southwest-1930 in Taos and 1931 in Monument Valley.

MS. HOAG: In what state is that?

MR. BIBERMAN: Monument Valley lies in northern Arizona and southern Utah. They filmed Stage Coach there, and this fabulous scenic background of Monument Valley has become a great film location center.

MS. HOAG: Geologically it's probably very much like the Grand Canyon in formation.

MR. BIBERMAN: Well, it's like that on a small scale. But the point is that the Grand Canyon goes down and Monument Valley goes up. You see, the Grand Canyon is actually eroded down into the earth. The extraordinary thing about Monument Valley is that these great red sandstone cliffs go up.

MS. HOAG: Are they wind-carved?

MR. BIBERMAN: They're wind-carved and eroded, and they're utterly unbelievable.

MS. HOAG: Were you doing landscapes particularly?

MR. BIBERMAN: I painted few landscapes before that time, I had never been particularly interested in landscape painting in the East. I had come West primarily because I had heard so much about the strange beauty of the country and I wanted to see the Pueblo and Navajo Indians, and so forth. For a Philadelphian who spent three years in Paris and then became a New Yorker, the idea of the West with its great beauty of country and indigenous peoples was very exciting. I had gone out, not with the idea of painting landscapes particularly, because I had never been very interested in painting landscapes, but hoping to paint Indians. Which I did. But when I got there I also found that the landscape itself was so exciting that I did a great many paintings of the country, both in Taos and in Monument Valley. Incidentally, the first summer in Taos was fascinating because there was a wonderful group of people there. Georgia O'Keeffe had been going to Taos for some years, and John Marin also, and Paul Strand, the great photographer, was there, and Lady Brett and the whole backwash of the D. H. Lawrence tradition at that time. So I had a very exciting summer in 1930.

MS. HOAG: Did these people all get together at that time? They all knew each other?

MR. BIBERMAN: They all knew each other, yes. There was a certain amount of socializing, although we were all there to work. And we did. But we saw each other quite frequently. And the following summer I went to Monument Valley because of an incident which went back to the last of my stay in Taos. Some friends of mine who were coming through Taos told me that they were going to visit a fantastic place called Monument Valley. They wanted to know if I would be interested in joining them on this trip, and I said, "Great!" They had a good car to make the driving easy and we had a marvelous trip. I had to go back East at the end of it, but I decided that the next summer I was

going directly to Monument Valley. This I did, and at the end of that summer I decided to go to California, which I had never seen. Some California friends invited me to come and stay with them for a little while before returning to New York.

MS. HOAG: The end of every summer oriented you for the next year, apparently, then.

MR. BIBERMAN: Yes, that's right. This was sort of the dessert of the work period. An amusing coincidence occurred which I've thought of so many times. The friends who invited me to stay with them were connected with the motion picture industry. They gave me their Hollywood address, which meant nothing to me. And when I got here and inquired where this particular street was, I was directed right down to the bottom of this hill [indicates it out the window]. Graciosa Drive. And the first night that I was with them my friends said, "There's one thing that we have to do—we have to take you up into the hills and show you the wonderful view of Los Angeles at night when all the lights come on." And they drove me up this very road [indicates the one his house faces] and I think on to this very piece of ground. If it wasn't this piece of ground, it was very near here: This was in 1931.

MS. HOAG: You fell in love with it?

MR. BIBERMAN: Well, obviously I had no idea that (a) I was going to live in California, and (b) that I would live in Los Angeles, and certainly (c) that I might be building a house on the very spot from which I had my first look at Los Angeles at night! Just one of these crazy things, you know. But the fact is that I became very enamored of which I saw of California. Although I went back to New York and stayed there, I thought of this area with quite a sense of nostalgia. But it was to be four years before I came back. In 1935 I spent the summer out here visiting my brother who was doing a directorial job in motion pictures. I had a very rewarding summer, with my first exhibition here at the Stendahl Galleries, which was then located on Wilshire Boulevard. I went back to New York after that summer, but this time I was determined that I was just going to wind up whatever had to be done and come back here. And I did, in 1936. So that's what brought me to California.

MS. HOAG: And you've been here ever since?

MR. BIBERMAN: I've been here ever since. That's a much longer story of my life than I had planned telling you; but anyway, that's how I became a Californian.

MS. HOAG: I have certainly enjoyed hearing it. So you came to Los Angeles permanently in 1936. And you must have built this house soon after that.

MR. BIBERMAN: No, actually, I came to California in 1936 with the idea of seeing what living here would be like, but with no sense of a permanent commitment on my part. I

was not married at the time so I had no family ties that would have inhibited a free-wheeling kind of existence. I very soon found that I enjoyed living here a great deal, although there were certain things that I missed. The art activity in Los Angeles in the middle 1930's certainly was nothing like what it is now. It was quiet then. However, I rather enjoyed that because one of the things that I had become pretty well fed-up with in New York was what I considered to be a very introverted kind of art life. In those days "57th Street" really meant something on the art scene because most of the galleries were on 57th Street, unlike today when they are mostly on Madison Avenue. I lived for one year in a studio building on 58 West 57th Street. I may have been that the actual closeness to "57th Street" was a little unnerving; at any rate, I would find myself at lunch time going to the galleries, and late afternoons going to the galleries, and becoming involved, since I was a young painter in a very exciting time in the East; I was caught up in the agitated life of the art world.

MS. HOAG: With not enough time to paint, you mean?

MR. BIBERMAN: No, not that. I had plenty of time to paint. As a matter of fact, I turned out a great deal of work during that period. But I began to question the validity of this type of frenzied preoccupation. I felt that maybe there was too much emphasis on something which perhaps was not that important. And there was a kind of inbreeding that I seemed to feel in the art field. So I came to that much quieter atmosphere in Los Angeles with a great sense of relief. I was delighted that people really didn't care very much about art in California. It was very relaxing not to feel this frenetic preoccupation with the galleries, and the dealers, and the critics, and the art magazines, and the conversations. How long I would have been happy in that atmosphere I don't know, but in the late 30's we were moving close to a very important period in all of our lives—a war that was going to last five years. Of course, we didn't realize at the time the imminence of our being involved. But the point is that I became rooted here very quickly because shortly after I arrived I received my first mural commission—a mural commission for the Federal Post Office Building then being erected, so that within a period of less than a year after I arrived I had to strike roots: a fair-sized mural is a major undertaking and you have to stay put. Ed Rowan, who was second in command under Ned Bruce of the Section of Fine Arts program in Washington, D.C. came to California after my first mural was in place and was very pleased with what I had done. He indicated that the architect of the building was very happy with it, as were the people in Washington, and I suddenly found myself within less than two years with two more mural commissions. So, willy-nilly, I was "nailed down." And instead of the very relaxed atmosphere that I had enjoyed in the first few months that I came here, I found myself, not unpleasantly, deeply involved again, but with something which I had not done before. It was very exciting for me to put a major emphasis on mural painting rather than easel painting, which had been my major occupation in the period until then.

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MS. HOAG: And what about Creative Man? Were you given the idea for that or was it your own?

MR. BIBERMAN: Fortunately, even though as I indicated I was very unhappy about the first mural, I had decided to do it despite the circumstances. That proved to be a good decision because after it was completed in the next two murals I was given carte blanche. I was very fond of Lucien Labaudt, so I don't wish to be misunderstood, but I felt that there was real retribution when the ceiling mural was awarded to me and it was Labaudt who this time had to tailor his design to my general approach. The whole compositional concept of the ceiling was a fascinating one to me because I was given the problem of painting a mural in a difficult area. The over-all shape was a perfect square; inside the square there is inscribed a circle; a lighting fixture hangs from the center of the circle, and each one of these elements is recessed on a different plane, so that actually there are three levels on which the mural is painted. With the circle inscribed in a square there are four corners left rather isolated, basically triangular shapes which have an arc on the hypotenuse part of the triangle. This is the type of challenge that makes mural painting so exciting to me, the necessity of working with the architectural demands as presented.

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MS. HOAG: I think it's interesting that you used the bridge in an artistic sense because this wasn't done very often at that time. And today in your recent work you often paint freeway pictures that are very beautiful.

MR. BIBERMAN: Well, I have always been attracted to problems of space engineering which I find arrive often at very beautiful forms. When I lived in New York, as a matter of fact, I painted the George Washington Bridge, which I think is one of the most beautiful engineering structures I have ever looked at. Since I loved that bridge so much it seemed very natural to me to paint another bridge which I found equally exciting and fulfilling visually.

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MS. HOAG: I have one tapering-off question I don't want to forget to ask you. Did you ever have any easel painting commissioned by the Federal Government, or did they do that?

MR. BIBERMAN: No. The Section of Fine Arts was solely concerned with murals exclusively for governmental buildings and did not commission easel paintings. The counterpart of the commissioned single work did happen in the field of sculpture. There were portrait busts, I believe, actually commissioned as part of the decor for buildings. But as far as I know, the Section of Fine Arts did not commission anything other than murals; the Art Projects did subsidize easel painting.