Interview with John Langley Howard and Mary Howard
by Robert Campbell
(Transcript of tape recording)
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RC: My first question to Mr. Howard is: Do people ask you more questions about your Coit Tower work than about your later work? If so, how do you feel about that?

JLH: It depends on who was asking the question. If they're interviewing me about Coit Tower [they'll want to know] about that. Otherwise, many people don't know about Coit Tower. Many people who live in San Francisco have not even gotten around to going up there.

RC: It is, I admit, my major interest, because of its connection to government sponsorship of the arts in the thirties. I just thought that perhaps there's so much emphasis on Coit Tower you though your later work is getting short shrift.

JLH: Would you say that, Mary?

MH: I don't think it's given short shrift, but perhaps it is, given the focus Coit Tower has received and is continuing to receive. I think the exhibits you've had— they've been major exhibits like the Oakland Museum and the DeYoung Museum have helped to give you that position in the limelight— this doesn't sound modest. I'll have to try to be as modest as you are— but the exhibits have given focus to you, and you have enjoyed the limelight and the publicity that has attended

RC: How would you describe the difference between yourself as an artist today as compared to yourself in 1934?

JLH: That's a toughie. I've never been asked that question before. I'm older and perhaps more mellow. I was very much interested in the political state of the world or the conditions of people at the time of Coit Tower, as I tried to put over in the message of the mural. It seems to me most of the murals really don't have much of a message. At that time I was definitely trying to bring to the consciousness of people who were
comparatively well off the conditions and the state of mind of people who were not so well off, as appears in the different figures. Now, I feel that it's, as far as I'm concerned, a waste of time...for me, thinking along those lines in my work.

RC: It's history from your point of view now?

JLH: I'm still interested but not very involved in trying to express things of that kind in my work.

RC: To follow up on that, Do you still have an interest in mural art today? Do you think that murals are as important as they were in the 1930s? Should they be?

JLH: Well, I've never really been a muralist. I did one other mural, for a school. In Corte Madera...a school for orphans, I believe.

RC: Did it have a message?

JLH: No. I depicted a rodeo, and the message was just "Enjoy the rodeo."

RC: Is that still in existence?

JLH: I think the place burned down. Sunny Hills is the name.

RC: How do you feel about government sponsorship of art in public places?

JLH: Well, I think that's nice that the artists should get paid for what they do.... I'm a little suspicious of the government having a finger, in a sense, a censorial finger in certain pies. But if they don't, some things which I wouldn't approve of myself will appear and cause scandal, so I'm not so sure that it's good.

RC: Have you had some government commissions of work since Coit Tower?

JLH: No.

Campbell: J.L. Howard interview 2
RC: Did you avoid them, or it just didn’t happen?

JLH: No. No, I wasn’t eligible for WPA. I was on for three months, and then they passed the rule that you had to be literally in the poorhouse; that is, you know, broke. And I wasn’t. My wife had some money, and we lived on that. But I’d never been broke in my life.

RC: But you had a lot of empathy for those who were broke...

MH: Well, if government grants were omitted, you would not approve of that...

JLH: Well, I just can’t reach any decision on it, because I feel both ways about it. I think they need to be supported, but I also think they need to be free of censorship. On the other hand, there are things, particularly lately, or in the last couple of years or so, that I disapprove of heartily. They seem to be, at the very least, bad taste. I mean, it’s like human beings going out and screwing in the middle of the highway. Who approves of that? Well, apparently these people do.

RC: Here’s another question. Of the various kinds of art you have produced in many media, what gives you the most satisfaction?

JLH: I work in various media. Right now I’m working mostly in watercolor. But that’s a function, partly, of my age. I don’t have as much energy as I used to have. And watercolor is finished when it’s finished. You don’t have to prepare a panel for it. And you don’t have to varnish it afterwards. You can send it out to a framer and have it framed, and that’s it. Not that, for me, it’s any faster, because I work very slowly and carefully, and I put it on and take it off, and I work over it. But, as far as preparing a ground, I do stretch my paper, but having done that, it’s done.

RC: Are your subjects mostly nature?

JLH: Mostly nature subjects, yes. I started to do portraits, a year or so ago, and did a few portraits. And I had the thought when I came up here: Gee whiz! there are portraits all over the place. But I’m afraid to get into it, because the people will get grabby. They’ll want their portraits done,
and I don’t want to do portraits in that spirit. Only if they happen to inspire me for some reason or other. I’m also nervous about offending people. I don’t want to make something that they wouldn’t like... So, I’m stuck with nature... I’m wary of getting into it here for that reason, because I keep getting accosted... "The artist has just moved in..." Artists are supposed to be sort of romantic, you know.

RC: Here’s another one about your more recent work. Was your one-man show at the DeYoung Museum in May of this year important to you? Were you pleased with the way it was done and with the response to it?

JLH: Yes, on all scores. I was very pleased with it. Very pleased with the response to it. Actually, I hate giving shows. I don’t like the limelight and I don’t like all the fuss and bother. It interferes with what I want to do, which is work. Nevertheless, I’m very happy to have had a show when I’ve had one.

MH: You as an educator will be interested, I’m sure, in the fact that the DeYoung has such a wonderful education program. They have a fine docent program. The docent lectures were really great... They really spread the gospel, and we were thrilled with that, and thrilled with the number of students who telephoned and asked where they could see more of Langley’s work...

JLH: To return to [question] number 5. A very important period in my life was doing illustrations for Scientific American.

RC: It was beautiful work. Did you do that for many years?

JLH: I worked for them about twelve years. Mainly for Scientific American. At first they weren’t giving me quite enough work, so I tried to drum up some other clients, with absolutely no luck at all, but after a while as the result of the things appearing in Scientific American, I began to get jobs. I worked for Sports Illustrated. I’ve done a couple of rather important things for Fortune magazine. As a matter of fact, my first commercial job was for Fortune magazine...

RC: Did you maintain control of the originals, or were those sold to the magazines?
JLH: The originals still belong to me. Sometimes I would collect them back, and sometimes I would never get around to it, and maybe they'd be left there. Eventually, my son became art director, and he collected quite a few.

MH: Fourteen.

JLH: ...except for a few that I got back myself and one was sold to the man who had written the article.

RC: I hope he has a show of those sometime.

MH: Well, at the Oakland show they showed six, and at the DeYoung they showed four.

RC: Was that a departure for you in terms of the subject matter—scientific illustration as such?

JLH: Well, actually, for some years I'd been going in that direction anyway. Small, precious little things with the element of exactness and detail, so I fell right into place. And I was very fortunate getting the art director at that time—the same kind of a painter, you might say.

MH: Jim Greunbaum [?]

RC: The treatment of the tools of the man sitting in your mural at Coit Tower presages that kind of work.

MH: He is very tool-minded. We'll show you his workshop.

JLH: Well, actually, the tools themselves were done by my assistant.

[Laughter] But I do like tools...

MH: I want to tell you what is interesting to us recently is the number of requests for his black-and-whites on the mind. This is a subject that is very interesting to people who are doing other articles, or books, and the cover, which is titled "Probability," which is a picture of...how would you
describe it, Langley?

JLH: Well, it’s a whole lot of little cups with beads in them, all in a square.

MH: This attracted more attention than any other. And, of course, Langley’s very pleased with the royalties that come in on the black and whites.

RC: I just reread Mind’s Eye, that play, because I couldn’t remember much about it. Did you see it?

MH: We didn’t see it. We have a copy of the play, and we have certainly been exposed to it, because the director of it just turned out to be a very good friend, and she was a visitor several times.

RC: My question about it was, In the stage play about Coit Tower, Mind’s Eye, Clifford Wight wants the painters at Coit Tower to speak out publicly in support of the striking longshoremen. Was this suggestion really made by him or anyone else?

JLH: I really don’t know. Shortly after the murals were done, I moved to Santa Fe with my family. I was just out of touch...

RC: Your son was asthmatic, and you were searching for a good climate?

JLH: That’s one reason, yes. That was probably the main reason.

RC: What was going on in the play... Clifford Wight wants all of the artists to come out and say, "We support the longshoremen. And Arnautoff, the character, says, "That would just make things harder for me. It’s already hard enough. Let’s not get political." I guess that was either fabricated or...

MH: Well, I think it could be true, because he’s such a mild, gentle soul...

JLH: I think it could be true. In fact, there’s a vague memory in my mind... Well, after all, Arnautoff had a position. He was a professor at Stanford, bringing up a family to support...

*Campbell: J.L. Howard interview 6*
MH: The thing that I found interesting in Mind's Eye was the terror she tried to express, and the fact that they did blacken the windows, and that they lived in a state of terror. Now, Langley didn't feel any of this, but in my talking with Kate [the director] and Kate's talking with various artists, she sensed it. And of course she got this from the writer of the play. She had to intensify this feeling. But it was there. I'm sure it was there. And what I found interesting, too, was the camaraderie that the artists felt. They had lunch together, joked together, and had a good time together, so this was in contrast to the terror.

RC: Was the play faithful to the facts and to the spirit of what went on at Coit Tower?

JLH: I would say yes. In general.

RC: Did either the director or Stacey, the playwright, speak to you before the play was written or...?

MH: No...

JLH: Yes, they came over and interviewed me, and the actor who was going to take my part came over so that he could meet me and study my mannerisms... Actually, all I had in the play was a walk-on. I didn't even say two words, did I?

MH: One line. But he wanted to perfect that. Did you like the idea of the murals being shown on the screen as a background? That was a very good device.

RC: I liked that best of all of anything about the play.

MH: We did, too. Well, Langley was ill at the time, and we had to turn down two performances. And you were very sorry about that.

RC: Of the other artists at Coit Tower, whom were you closest to? Were there any little groups within groups? That doesn't come over in the things I've read.

JLH: I was a good friend with Zakheim. And with Arnautoff. Actually, the
fellow who did the dairy on the other side...

MH: And Maxine.

JLH: We used to have lunch together fairly often. Stackpole.

RC: When the controversy arose, was any of that camaraderie damaged by the tensions that grew up between you artists, as portrayed in the play?

JLH: Not as far as I know. Not with me. But, as I say, I left shortly after that, for Santa Fe...

RC: I have a question about Victor Arnauotff. He's described as a sort of artist-foreman. Did you painters feel that you were expected to get his approval for the content of your murals?

JLH: Arnauotff was in charge on the job. He was supposed to okay any changes that were made as work progressed.... I made changes as I went along. That's the way I work. I'll have a general plan, but inspirations come to me along the way. I can't remember showing him detailed drawings and getting his formal okay on them...

MH: One point I would like to make. They described in the play and elsewhere that Walter Heil was running scared about the whole project. You and I have talked about that. He was never running scared. He never wanted to engage in controversy. He didn't want to tangle with the whole situation, but he was never running scared.

RC: Was Forbes Watson, or any of the other officials of the PWAP, more supportive or less supportive than the others?

JLH: I wasn't aware of any of them saying anything about it one way or another. But maybe they did.

RC: How important to the relationships among the artists was the Artists' and Writers' Union? Were all of the painters members?

JLH: I just remember it as the artists' union. Yes, I was a member of that.
RC: So, when they made a statement defending Wight, did that pretty much represent all the painters, or only a few?

JLH: Well... I don’t know. I think most of the painters were non-politically-minded. They just wanted to paint and not be bothered. That’s my impression.

RC: That gets to the heart of some of the things I’m after. What’s lacking in the documentation that’s in the play: human conflict, drama, opinions and emotions. I was wondering whether there might not have been some artists who resented you, or Wight, or Zakheim...

JLH: I got the message from somebody, I forget who, who said this: that some of the artists were angry that this kind of thing should have got stirred up. I mean, they were sort of sore at the artists who they thought were responsible.

MH: What about Zakheim? You know, you’d think he’d be serious about this subject. But he was a punster and a jokester. Did you know that?

RC: No.

MH: Oh, he was very jolly, and the things that he said and did were fun-making. Weren’t they, Langley?

JLH: Oh, yeah...but he was a serious man, too.

MH: He was serious, but if you knew him, he always had a twinkle in his eye... And then, the painting that he did of Langley reaching for Das Kapital...this was a joke. They were all little jokes.

RC: When the Tower was temporarily closed by the Park Department, a group of local artists described as a "vigilante committee" intended, it is said, to storm the Tower and remove portions of murals that offended them. Who were these artists and how serious was this threat?

JLH: Seems to me I heard a rumor of that, but first of all, I was living in Menlo Park...and shortly moved to Santa Fe. And I don’t remember who they were or how serious it was.

_Campbell: J.L. Howard interview 9_
RC: Were you in town during the strike?

JLH: Oh, yes. It was a time of high tension.

RC: Forbes Watson of the PWAP wrote in a letter, "I join you in regretting the [Diego] Rivera influence in our fresco painting. I think he has been infinitely overrated, and is a thoroughly bad influence for Americans." How would you evaluate Diego Rivera’s influence?

JLH: I have mixed feelings about Diego Rivera. I think most of his work is very pedestrian. But some of his murals, as design, are just terrific. Whether he was a good influence or a bad influence, I don’t know. Except that he was socially conscious, and I think that the socially conscious period that ran through the arts was a very good thing. It seems to have pretty much disappeared now, except for minority groups.... What I’ve seen of that Rockefeller mural, I thought that was a masterpiece of design.

RC: They usually just focus on Lenin’s head.

JLH: Too bad that they tore it down.

RC: Do you know anything about Clifford Wight after 1934? He sort of vanished, didn’t he?

JLH: I don’t know what became of him. I’ve never heard of him since Coit Tower. I don’t know anything about Clifford Wight before that, either. I’d never heard of him before Coit Tower. He may have been, probably was, a member of the artists’ union, but I was out of town. I went to meetings occasionally, but I’m not a very social person, anyway. I don’t remember people very well. Particularly their names, or even their faces.

RC: For a report on the Coit Tower mural project written for the WPA in 1934, Gene Hailey interviewed you and other Coit artists. He wrote: "Circumstances did not permit Howard to remain in San Francisco during the long battle, nor even vote with his fellow artists when they finally capitulated and permitted the eradication of Wight's symbols." This is the only historical reference I have ever seen to such a vote by the artists. Is this comment accurate? If there was such a vote, can you comment on
what you may have heard about it, even though you were presumably not present?

JLH: Not in my memory. If I heard of it, it didn’t make much impression. It’s possible. It doesn’t say how many of the artists voted.

RC: One of the other things he said is that you discovered when you came back after the Tower was opened that part of the newspaper...

JLH: ...the Western Worker. They painted out the headline of that... but not any of the other material, not any of the rest of the typeface.

RC: You had no idea who did that to your painting?

JLH: No, I had no idea.

RC: Did it make you angry?

JLH: What?

RC: Did it make you mad when you saw that painted out like that?

MH: He never gets mad.

JLH: Oh, no. I was very pleased that so little had been done. It made me feel that I had probably done it the right way.... It does seem to me that, for instance... I should think that the great American government could have stood Clifford Wight’s series of symbols up there. But, as I say, those were hot times. There was the cold war, and the Soviet Union agitating world Communism, you know. And people felt pretty strongly. So, I would have thought that people... that possibly he couldn’t expect to get away with that. After all, his figures have no social meaning at all. There just sort of...

MH: Macho.

RC: Monumental...

JLH: ...icons of different classes of working men. Not even realistic, in the

*Campbell: J.L. Howard interview 11*
sense that they’re not quite human... to me, anyway.

RC: You don’t have to answer this if it doesn’t make any sense, but can you imagine a situation where, if you had been there, and the artists had all met, and somebody from the authorities had said, "We’ll take out that hammer and sickle and that stuff across those windows, and we’ll touch nothing else if you artists will agree to it, and we’ll let you take a vote on it. But if you don’t agree to that, we may never open the Tower." Do you think the artists would have voted to obliterate...

JLH: How can I speak to that?... I think that I would have refused to have anything to do with it... one way or the other. But I would expect the censorship to win.

MH: They knew what they were doing, but they did not...it was not passionate.

RC: But if you were an artist who didn’t incorporate a social message in your painting, and weren’t trying to do that, and if some other artist’s painting did emphasize that who jeopardizes your opportunity to be seen, there would be some pretty strong feelings there, if not of a political nature, a personal conflict.

MH: Nobody resented Zakheim. They thought he was a lovable person. And his painting was full of implications.

RC: I guess the three of you bad boys were the ones...you got bad publicity. I did have one last thing, but I can save that for when we come back.

MH: Okay. We’ll give you the tour afterward, and we’ll come back after lunch.

[BREAK FOR LUNCH]

RC: If you regarded the Coit Tower episode in your life as a story, what would you say the moral was, if it had a moral?

JLH: [laughs] Oh... that trying to be a propagandist in murals is not
feasible.

RC: I'm glad I asked that! That's good. Excellent.

RC: Is it possible to be a propagandist in another medium better?

JLH: Oh, well, possibly. Cartooning maybe.

END OF INTERVIEW