

HOPE COLLEGE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Eleanor Van Haitzma
Interview
August 1985

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FOREWARD

The Hope College Oral History Project was designed to record and transcribe for permanent collection the living heritage of Holland, Michigan. Since the project's birth in 1977, Hope student researchers have interviewed people involved in various parts of Holland's history, including that of Hope College. The persons interviewed represent a vital, but non-renewable resource, whose reflections will provide primary material for future historical research.

Upon completion of each interview session, the taped conversation was transcribed and edited by both the interviewer and interviewee. Some alterations concerning accuracy of detail and grammar may have come about during the editing process, but at all times the viewpoint of the interviewee has been maintained. Due to the fact that each of these interviews comes from a highly personal perspective, there may be some inaccuracies in detail. No claim is made that the information contained within these transcripts is absolutely accurate. The interval of time between the interviewee's experiences and the events mentioned can add to some inaccuracies. Tapes of all the interviews are stored in the Hope College Archives in Van Zoeren Library.

Without the advice of Dr. Elton Bruins, Dean of Humanities at Hope College and project coordinator, this project would not have succeeded to the extent it did. The success of this project must also be attributed to the efforts of the interviewees -- each has gone above and beyond the call of duty, putting in much time both in research and editing. I thank each and every one of them for their contribution to the history of Holland, in both this interview and what they have accomplished with their lives.

Phil Tanis, Summer 1985

Name: Eleanor DePress~~s~~ Van Hait~~s~~ma

Birthplace: New York City

Birthdate: May 17, 1921

Elementary through High School: Kirkland Missouri Public Schools (St. Louis County)

Colleges: Grinnel College (Iowa), Washington University School of Fine Arts (St. Louis), Indiana University for graduate work in watercolor painting, silversmithing, and jewelry design

Professional Experiences: CBS Radio Art Department (New York City), freelance illustrator, Hope College Art Department

Father's name: Edward J. DePree

Mother's name: Alice Benoist DePree

Spouse's name: Dr. Titus Van Hait~~s~~ma

Date of marriage: June 1, 1957

Affiliations: Michigan Watercolor Society

Honors: painting prizes--Michgian Exhibition at Grand Rapids Art Gallery and Muskegon Museum of Art, Michigan State Fair; silversmithing--Vandy & Harmon National Competition

Present Activities: Chair of the Visual Arts Committe of the Holland Area Arts Council

INTRODCTION

Today, the Hope College Art Department is housed in a beautifully renovated factory. It has many studio rooms for students to work in, each getting their own cubicle; extra class rooms which are used by other departments; and a nice art gallery which is climate controlled.

Today, the Hope College Art Department numbers over four members on its staff, some of whom have created works of art which sell for thousands of dollars. There is also a good number of students majoring in art--a program which offers, among other courses: painting and drawing on several levels, silk screening, print making, sculpture, photography, and numerous art history courses. It is a well rounded and respected department on the campus.

Such was not always the case. In the following interview and history of the Hope Art Department, Eleanor Van Haitsma, the founder of it, sheds light on the thoughts and feelings of the people towards the newly created department some thirty years ago. She had an enourmous impact on the development of the Hope Art Department, creating its foundations upon which it has grown. Without her, the Hope Art Department would not be the fine thing it is today.

Special note: A few years ago a foreign student, for an independent study course, wrote a history of the art department. It is included between the original and edited intwviews, and Mrs. Van Haitsma comments on it, correcting what she feels was improper in it.

Mrs. Van Haitsma: There's something here (in the history paper on the Art Department previous to this interview) that says "Depree returns to art staff October 1950" and I don't know what that means. That's easy to check on, if you know when Helen Harton began teaching it would be the same. What happened with the Art Department before I came, I don't know. I know Mr. Gringhuis was there part time for a few years--and there's a description here (again in the history paper) of an earlier class for public school art teachers and I suppose that's correct. That was dropped by the time I was there. Dirk was hired part time and they have a list of classes that he taught. Now, these were my classes. He has the dates down that Dirk and I taught together for three years. We didn't teach together at all which is a major error. Dirk, in fact, may have taught one class the fall of '49, but he taught that at his home. From the time I came I was the only one there until I resigned and then other people took over.

Interviewer: So what -- let me try and get this in perspective for myself at least. This is about 1950 we'll say -- just for a rough date -- and Hope has no art department as of yet.

Mrs. Van Haitsma: That's right.

Interviewer: And you and Mr. Gringhuis are just starting some courses but he didn't -- he was teaching out of his home for college students?

Mrs. Van Haitsma: He had taught a couple years and I think then he taught in the college. Where he taught I don't know. I don't think he taught in the attic of the science building. So, I don't know where he was; he may have

been up there, but we had to do a lot of work to renovate that room. I don't know how he could have worked in it. So, when I came in that fall, he was finished except for one class that he continued--with about three or four students for that one semester. And then that was it. He didn't teach at the college with me. We didn't work together as it's described here. Then I started these other classes. And some of these, you see, were listed on the page before. Now, he may have had something like that going that I didn't know anything about. But these were the classes I taught.

Interviewer: How many classes were there? Quite a few -- you didn't teach these all at the same time?

Mrs. Van Haitsma: Yes. Yes. I taught about 18 to 20 credit hours a week.

Interviewer: A week?

Mrs. Van Haitsma: A week.

Interviewer: You were right then the sole art department.

Mrs. Van Haitsma: That's right. And we were on the fourth floor of the science building.

Interviewer: Which is Lubbers Hall.

Mrs. Van Haitsma: Right. We had to carry everything upstairs. There were no

elevators. The ladies room was on the second floor, so we were all trooping up and down all day long. And, we had some work done in that room. We had it all cleaned up. And the closet where the hoods ended from the chem labs, we made into locker space for students to keep their materials. There were days up there when all the fumes from the chemistry lab would be rolling around, blue fumes, in rolls. Until finally, after about three or four years (my father was a chemist) and I complained so bitterly (there were days we just couldn't meet up there), he went in and talked to Rein Visscher and said, "Something has to be done." They were not poisonous but they were very unpleasant. So finally vents were put out through the roof of the building. When they built the building they ended them inside the fourth floor. So that was another thing that had to be repaired. There was another room up there, adjoining the big L-shaped room that we used for a studio and that we made into a very nice jewelry design studio--for jewelry and silver smithing. It was well equipped, and after I left I guess it just fell apart, things disappeared; apparently no classes were offered. It's too bad because that's a wonderful kind of work to do.

These were the classes. We had children's classes on Saturdays, and we did that just for a couple years. But some of the college students from the public school art class helped with the children's classes which gave them some good experience. Then we also had a night class in jewelry design. (That was where I met Tite.) Another part of our program was to present a schedule of art exhibits in that room. The theatre was on the other half of the fourth floor. It was wonderful. It was very cozy, but it was very nice; they did amazing things. The director--Helen Harten, who has just resigned from Albion--was a wonderful director and a very good friend. We had a good

time. We worked at a lot of projects together. I did some of the costume designing for her and we planned things so we would have special exhibits in the art room for the openings of the plays. That brought in quite a few people. We also had student exhibits--that was always an interesting display. There was a great variety of media that we worked in.

I suppose the most traumatic experience we had up there was the fire. You've heard about the fire on the fourth floor, haven't you?

Interviewer: No.

Mrs. Van Haitzma: It was during (I can't remember whether it was spring vacation or Christmas vacation); I had borrowed from Hollis Baker, Sr. about 15 from his personal collection of original paintings. This included Picassos, there was a Ruoault, a Fieninger, I think also a Braque. There were all sorts of very, very valuable paintings. Nowadays this would never be allowed--to have paintings like these in a fourth floor, paperboard walled gallery or work room. My uncle called me from Holland and said, "I thought I better let you know--I just drove past the college and the fourth floor of the science building is on fire." I tore in as fast as I could. And sure enough, the fire department was there and water was running out of the building and smoke was pouring out of the fourth floor. I tore up and down that four flights of steps about eight or nine times carrying two paintings each time. We got them out alright. There wasn't any damage to the paintings. There was smoke damage in the rooms. The theatre was badly burned, the costume room, and so on. I remember going into the costume room when things had settled down a little bit with one of the firemen. And he said, "Ah, ha! Here is the

cause of the fire." He picked up an iron that was on an ironing board--"Somebody left the iron on." But it wasn't even plugged in. The fire was really caused by some wiring problems, I guess. It was a mess up there for a while. That was really kind of a frightening experience. After that, I didn't want to have people's personal and very valuable collections--though we did continue having some smaller exhibits. We were sure they were well insured, and we exhibited print collections only.

One of the other things that I marked in here was his description of the attitude. This bothered me. Something about the students who were working -- "they were studying art just as an addition to their teaching degree for elementary school" and then he says "who very simply just had a personal interest in art." I think "very simply just" minimizes what they were doing. A lot of the students were very interested and very dedicated and were very fine art students and beginning artists. Stan Harrington was one of those students. Also during these years we began our first art major program. It was a one person department and even with the number of classes being taught students needed a great deal more exposure than we could give them in this program. We did work out a program finally, with the academic committee of the college, that with a combination of all the classes at Hope (with the exception of public school art) plus a semester at an accredited college or university could give them an art major. At that time, students had to have another academic major with it. In other words, they graduated with a double major. It was more than a minor and that was very good.

This I was really upset about (in the history): "She did not expect great art from her students and her only requirement was participation." That couldn't be--I don't know where a remark like that comes from because just to

say "helping them develop their creativity" is the whole thing. This is what we're working for in the Arts Council visual program right now. If you can persuade people and show them and encourage them to use their own intellect and their own skills and talents and imagination and dare to do this, what more is there? This is something I would really like corrected.

There are things here that I really don't remember specifically. I suppose there may be some catalogues which specify--I don't remember, I may have taught a course in water color. I do love water color. As the years went on I might have added something specifically like that. I doubt that I would have taught an abstract painting course because we weren't that specialized. There were students who worked abstractly part of the time for different reasons. In fact, that was a wonderful way to start out with the very beginning students so they wouldn't have to worry about drawing. They just thought about color and movement and depth and light and dark and all that sort of thing in their paintings.

Interviewer: So how many years did you teach at Hope?

Mrs. Van Haitsma: Well, I was positive it was seven years. But it was either eight years or I started a year later than I think. Because I did resign in 1957.

Interviewer: And beyond that, was there somebody to take your place right away?

Mrs. Van Haitsma: No. I had a frantic call in the fall saying "would you

please come and teach another class for us this fall?" And I said, "Well, I thought you had people hired by now." And they said, "No, we didn't think anybody was interested." That fits in with the description in this paper about the college's attitude. There was a lack of interest in the college as a whole, not for individuals, because people like Dr. Hallenbach were very much interested in art and so on. But the college as a whole was not particularly interested. I had some where between 95 and a little over 100 students each semester, which I thought was quite a respectable number since (except for the public school art class) it was all elective. I was quite startled when they said, "Well, there wasn't enough interest to make it worth hiring anybody." I did go in, and there were some students who were in the art major program--and they needed another class or two. I did go back in that fall and taught one class, and by the second semester of that year, they had hired four or five people who each did different, separate, things and then by the following fall they were beginning to get better organized and hire full time people again.

Interviewer: Even though they never had a really good building until just a few years ago.

Mrs. Van Haitzma: That's right. We were crowded and it was hard to get to the Art Department on the fourth floor. It was a nice relationship that we had with the theatre people, it was fine, and it was an improvement over what had been going on before. So each time of change there has been a progression, or a step in the right direction. It's alright to start small. We feel the same way with the Arts Council. It's fine. Right now we're spread out in five or

six or seven different places to do our art program. But we have to do it that way in order to show that there is an interest and that there's a need for a good facility. When we can prove that then we will have a right to ask for something special.

Interviewer: Do you want to say anything about the Arts Council? It's present activities or what it is?

Mrs. Van Haitzma: I'm really most familiar with the visual arts program. I can tell you a little bit about the Arts Council in general. It's changing, and we're trying to become much more businesslike in the way things are done. The visual arts program and the performing arts program are much bigger and we're beginning to need more money to present these programs and to give a service to the community through these programs. We're reaching a point where we really need a building. We could fill a building right this minute.

Interviewer: And right now you have, what, two rooms?

Mrs. Van Haitzma: We have two rooms, and we are considering renting a third room in the Post Office building upstairs. Moving things around so that the art room now will be in the front room, the large room, and the office will move into a smaller room. Then we'll see what happens. If the Hart & Cooley program catches on and a lot of people get interested through that then we can't do less next year. We've got to at least maintain that same program. That means then that we're still going to have to have seven or eight different places to go to to give our classes, or otherwise have a building.

That takes a lot of money to purchase and to maintain. The programs themselves cost something. It's a big project, and it really will require the participation and support of the whole community.

Interviewer: So with the visual arts what you're really doing is something like you were doing for the Hope art department -- maybe?

Mrs. Van Haitsma: Yes. I think the similarity is in the attitude toward what we are trying to do. In both cases, the important thing is that--in the college classes and also in the Arts Council visual arts program they are both basically educational programs. It's obvious at the college, but with the visual arts program of the Arts Council that can also include other things that are entertainment, you know. I still want to push the educational aspects of it, and we are working very hard to promote the idea that it is the creativity of the individual that is the important thing. We're not teaching people how to make pictures. That comes later, if at all. The most important thing is to teach people how to dare to use their imaginations and be creative and then go on from there. Then individuals can work without a teacher.

Interviewer: That's when the fun begins.

Mrs. Van Haitsma: That's right. That's when the frustration begins, too.

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