

Interview with Jo Cooper

Topic- China Painting

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Where: The Cooper residence.

Who: Nancy Danielson and Misao

I started in 1955, and uh my husband didn't think I could paint china because I never got an art grade in school but uh I wanted to do it so badly. I'd seen some of those hand painted work when they were still using the greatbig old iron kilns. These are with carosine or alcohol I think, part of the time, coal, maybe not coal and uh they could just hardly be moved and they didn't have they had no way at al to test the heat the way we do today. Like a karomter, or cones so they really had to quite adapt at uh just looking at the through the peep-hole and testing by the looks of the heat whether it was a red hot heat or a cherry heat. And of course how do you distinguish unless you just get to doing it and youknow and find out which one is the one that would uh be the one that would fire your china most readily.

Do you take the plate itself, too?

No, the plate is uh we we buy the plate its uh already I think it comes from, no the plate comes from Japan now days they didn't they they first they were not as nice and uh every one preferred the Bavarian and the uh Austrian, German things like that you know. But now the the plates have turned out so lovely that they are heavier than the old plates however the real old ones are (very thin, egg shell thin.) But uh most of the teachers now say that the Japanese ware is coming in beautifully. They reproduce most all the pieces that one would like to have painted. A teaset, dinner set, candlesticks, vases, pictures, about anything you can think of that and you know and blank china. You're probably familiar with the ceramics that is an underglaze painting whereas this is overglaze painting.

Wow, you really have some beautiful pieces here, nice.

Well, thank-you. I've uh I, I've enjoyed doing this very much.

Did you have to take art lessons on painting and everything.

No, I uh just went to the china painting teacher and uh, I just went along for the ride to begin with and uh because my husband didn't think I could do it. The teacher said well You're not going to sit here all day and watch us you're going to paint and so she handed me a tile, and we a round tile you know or a square tile and uh give me her brushes and paint and we painted. At the end of the day I was so intrigued and interested that I had her send away for a pallet and just the beginners set of paints and a little vile of gold so we could put a little edge around it a finger edge of gold. And uh from then on I was I just really wanted to paint, so it's really been uh.

How long does it take to do each plate?

Well, that depends on how fast you work and how adapt you are to getting your pattern on and so on and so forth. Now they all tell me, I belong to the teachers organization, china painters teachers organization, called Michiana, Michigan, Indiana and of course that's Kalamazoo, Grand Rapids, Muskegon, way up north somewhere, and uh her and uh, Southbend, Michiwawka, and around St. Joseph, and Ann Arbor. Well uh they all tell my, they all laugh at me, they say that I always get mine finished before anyone else, I guess I'm a fast painter. My uh my original teacher was a fast painter, and whther I just got in the swing of things a little more but uh I get ghings done pretty fast. Not so much since I've had, since I've been ill I can't quite cut it like I did.

What kinds of paint do you use on your china?

Well we use a powdered paint and they are mineral paints and uh oh like blue, you know would be have cobalt in it and the reds and things are called iron colors. The pinks, roses, and purples and things like that are called the gold colors, they have gold content in them. And uh they're usually in, they used to be in little tubes already mixed, but they would dry out so readily, now they are always mostly always in the little viles. Little viles about that high and just about as big around as my pinkie. And uh them uh then you mix those with a midum, a special medium. Which was uh Greek to me when I first read about em, I thought well where do you find a medium like this and I started inquiring everyone to

sent me to a ceramic teacher, well ceramics is entirely different and uh and their and uh they type of things they use, type of glaze and paint and brushes and everything. And uh so I had a little trouble there when I had read about it and then when I went to this teacher and then she a oil, you could but the mineral oil. She put me in touch with the company in Detroit, in Chicago, which I wasn't aware of that had catalogues on these things and uh and it has sort of a spicy oily smell, a very sweet oily smell. You use turpentine, too and uh and also some types of alcohol to clean your brushes.

It's an oil like that you mix with the powder?

It's just, yes, it's just a little oil that you mix with the powder, it's a mixture of different oils uh I think it's a kapyba, and uh clove oil and a little lavender in various proportions, some people like more clove oil to keep the paints open so you can make repairs more easily before the paints dry. You uh put oil of lavender in and I think it dries quicker you can uh get away with your paints if you don't have it so wet you know. The paint isn't still wet. But they should dry up awhile before they're put in the kil. But not too long. We do work in the afternoon and I'm usually putting them in the kil the next morning. You could even sooner, I have before, but I guess it's better to let them dry thoroughly, depending on the type of oil you use.

When you put them in the kil what does it do?

Well the kil sets the colors to the the heat fuses the colors to the china to the ware. Oh, I see. So that it makes the colors permanent you can even when we take these out of the kil uh we take a very fine sand paper and rub it and nothing will hurt it I mean it just uh. And they're dishwasher safe, amny, they're sort of afraid, many of the friends have washed them in the dishwasher. It wears the gold maybe a little more readily. Because the gold does not fuse well to the china it is something that just stands on top and that's why you find gold worn off of old pieces much more readily.

My mother had a lot of old plates of my grandmother, that were hand painted and the gold was always worn off of them. Well, that's very interesting. Did you paint that plate, too?

That one in the frame? Yes uh huh. I think it was one of my early paintings, probably the first grape that I did.

Do you take some drawing of sketches of the real plants before painting?

Well, yes - uh follow sketches or and line drawings and sometimes they get my proportions just perfect like on animals, birds and things like that. You want them just in their proper pose then I, I make little lines, sometimes I take a tracing, you know of the bird, maybe then put the work by foliage and the designs around it. But uh in the beginning I uh never uh used a tracing we always put uh we sketched from a study a china painters study. We usually have those come in color and uh even in line drawings, and black and white. And I mean I do my own drawings then, so it's drawing rather than tracing. China painting is an art not a craft. Many people in days gone by would call it a craft like they would ceramics and other things but it is becoming a recognized art. I would say so! A landscape artist or a portrait painter has to have a model and so any artist, unless he paints something so many times he memorizes the picture. You have to have an artistic talent to paint china. They think if you have it traced on your on your dish that that's a simple matter your pattern is there, and it's all outlined just like when little kids go coloring book. But you see it really isn't You still have to get your shadings and your oil and your brush strokes and everything. It has to be just so, it's a little different than coloring and making just a solid uh color on coloring paper. The Japanese are so wonderful in their artistic ability. I imagine you can do some beautiful art.

I have a girlfriend who stayed in Japan one summer, and for Christmas the family she stayed with while in Japan sent her a tea set and it's just beautiful. It's real delicate and pretty.

Professor Huttars wife has been one of my students for many year, she started out a student, now we paint at least one day a week. And she has continued on down thru the years because she loves it and she's doing some beautiful work. Now she is a she is really a great copy artist, she has a real talent for that, she'll look at something and just put the pattern on the china without a sketch or a tracing or anything. And uh it's just beautiful. That's really a talent. And so some people have that and other's have a greater ability to make your paint smooth and to add details. And everyone has something they excell on. But, of course I would appreciate hers. Her work without trying is uh antique appearing. Well I always have antique dishes. Some people are uh what do you

call it uh like uh Dorothy her work is entirely different, I mean her technique is so different from my wifes. My wife has like I say it appears antique even though she don't make an effort. Well I've always admired antique plates and antique dishes and uh stuff. I displayed at the Civic Center, I think the first year that, the first or second year that they had the art show there. And uh I had a table full of my plates up on little rachs you know, so a group of women came in and said oh lets rush to this table and look at all these antique dishes! And I smiled and I said, no they're not antique antique. They're reproductions of an antique. The plate itself would be and my uh techinque is one that would fall under that catagory and look antique. And many of my friends in the uh organization think that my things have more of an antique appearance.

The background of that rose is fantastic!

Oh, the rose. The rose I didn't do, is that what you were talking about before? That's called tole work, I think. No, I didn't do that.

Did you make those poppies up there?

Oh, the poppies, well I think uh you know they say that most artists are noted ofr one particulr flower. Someone is noted for their violets, others for their roses, others for something else. And I think I've done more poppies and that's the one thing that most people want to purchase from me is my poppies. My poppies is evidently my flower.

Do you start with a completely white plate?

Yes Yes the plate is completely white, I have a,, I'll show you what I start with. I'm an art critic! This I'm doing, it's like a little main jar, it isn't finished, you can touch it, it's all dry, it's been fired, it's got to be finished, that's where the grasses will have to come. And some more things, but. Now this is uh, this is a recycled plate however, this is how they look smooth on the back. Now this is uh, this is a recycled plate howver, this is how they look on the back. Well I made a mistake and didn't like the pattern so I took it off with an acid so then I reglazed it with a little white paint like uh you put on the backgrounds there. When there, now when I paint it again, I put the design on again it's uh it's alright, see. Oh, I missed a little spot there but that will be alright. But the design is right on there where it's been fired on and uh when you take it off with the acid it leaves a shadow on the

china. So that's the reason I put this white glaze on it so I don't have another design showing through.

You know this is probably a copy of an antique plate. And some of these with the scrolls you know that aren't plain.

The one with the poppies on looks really antiqued.

Ya, well you see it has that open handle on like they used to have on cake plates, bread plates. And this is uh this is that the uh just the first and then a little more detail and shadow on the leaves in. And that brings out your design.

Do you sell your work?

I uh occasionally sell some pieces. That uh one up there with the cherries on with the little milk jar and my husband broke the top, but the top of this one is in the uh ready to be fired. So that is just a little odd dish.

Are those birds? Yes, those are birds, aren't they?

Oh, oh quails, quails. I didn't remember that I had that up there. I sort of forget sometimes. And uh rabbits up here. That's a copy of an antique plate. And the peaches and the apples are a copy of an antique plate. I just love them, my friend loaned me the apple because it looked so much like the peach. So I copied it. And the uh I have a friend who had the uh plum or some other other fruit uh that I've uh never mentioned to her that I have the other two pieces, she may like to let me have the other uh plate to you know as a study. I think it is a series probably. And uh. We make a lot of lemon plates however this is a gift to me when one of the teachers passed away. My granddaughter said one day, Grandma I like that so I told her she could have it I wrote her name on the bottom. But she isn't married yet.

One of my teacher friends gave me this one. This one I did a long time ago, but the rose isn't very good. But uh this may have been one of my early roses. I have the antique one for this but a lady wanted it for her son's room, so I sold it to her but before I did I copied it. I made that for my son, but he isn't too fond of it.

In a way it resembles water painting.

Yes, they say that china painting most resembles water painting. But I can't handle water painting. I did go the high school adult education one winter to take watercolors, but we had such a bad winter that year that I don't think we went more than twice.

Did you do that one above your head hanging down?

Yes, I did. That's a copy of an antique, a very old antique

plate. The boarder was uh—in one of Joy's flower books and so we did that on in pen work.

How do you do pen work?

Well you just take a little crow quill pen and use your mixed paints and make your lines on. I put the paint underneath the pen work. The boarder was a little bit more distinct, and I decided to darken the gold or the yellow color underneath. And so I went over it and then forgot it in the kil, and it got too light. I believe that is Syracuse china and so the boarder design sunk in a little bit.

China sets that you buy in a store that say hand painted are those completely hand painted like what you're doing?

No, some of will say hand painted, but what they are are transfers or decals. They are put on on sheets you know, patterns just by the sheet, and they are put on like decals. And they are put on by an artist and they are hand painted. But then the person that puts them may be in the factory and just lays a design on and then if there's a little twig, or something they want to put on, they want to add a few shadow leaves or few little things. Work with the transfer, then of course that is done by hand so they will say handpainted by so and so. But no individual, whatever the company it is that they're working for. There was an artist at one time, I can't think, remember what his name was, I had a lot of copies of his plates here. And he was noted for painting over transfers. And just touching up over transfers, and adding little bits here and there to fill in. And maybe putting backgrounds in and around it. And he did some beautiful work, and some beautiful gold work, too. I don't know if I have the book or not, no, I thought I did. But uh I always think that if uh you just add to it it's sort of cheating, when you just paint over decalies because your'e doing somebodies elses work. Because your'e just laying it on and firing it, your'e not doing any painting. There's a porcelin slip and you paint those on like china, you can just have the porcelin slip without the glaze. The you have what is called bisque. And I've had some those pieces, in fact I have one from my teacher, it's a Christmas bell. And it was painted with a matt paint rather than a oil paint.

So, it's not shiny like china painting. It's more delicate. That's the beauty of the soft bisque. Everyone got a different little bird, well there was a Cardinal, and a Blue Jay, a Chickadee.

Are those little cups in there?

Yes, I'm starting a tea set for myself. Everytime I get one started, someone says oh, can you do one like that for me. I've made so many tea sets and sets of dishes, that everybody is always gotten them, this time I started one for myself. This isn't done yet, but the rest of it is.

Are these raspberries?

Oh, yes raspberries and blossoms. And then I've got a few blackberries on this one. But it isn't finished yet either.

Now that tall cylinder vase with the dogwood on it is uh I think that's either Bavarian or u could be Austrian. Then the one with the roses in the end is an old uh thin one too that uh.

Did it take you long to get into the swing of things?

Well I had taken about twelve lessons, I think and uh and when we drove to Hastings and uh back and forth and uh then I told the teacher there, I said oh I don't think I'll ever be able to do backgrounds. I'll just be a one coat gal. You know and uh she said oh no you won't. So I went home and practiced, I used to get up every morning and uh maybe start in and paint until sometimes late in the evening. And then wash the whole thing off. It just didn't suit me. You have to attempt backgrounds and I wanted them to look just right. Some people still always have trouble with backgrounds. But uh that was the thing that I liked and I worked on them till I got them right. It didn't take too terrible long to really catch on, course anything you do over a period of time you gradually begin to get better. But of course your'e never satisfied with your own work. Ya, of course when you think you've got it and that's as far as you can go, everything is lost. Everybody can see improvement in my work and I'm glad of that. Ya know this shows that I'm learning and getting better at my work.

Which one is the earliest one?

You mean the one I did most recently?

No, the first one amongst these that you did.

I don't know which one I've had up ther the longest do you daddy? Maybe the plum. I think those are one of the earliest cause I had a set of those a number of years age. And uh different ones, I'd like to give to my grand uh. But so many are gone I had cherries. Now this yellow rose is the first rose

I think I did . Now the one to the right with the pind is from one of the teachers in our organization. I can see many things wrong in these plates now, but I'm not about to take it off.

We also have tea tiles and things to set our tea pots and coffee pots on. One of the teachers make these to fit your tea tile. It's a tea stand. Cause you have your antique type of stand with all your fancy adges and that you use without this. But I sort of lie the walnut.

You probably like a lot rice, I loee rice. Well now with what you've got so far who don't you get busy and do some china painting!

My husband used to design beautiful light fixtures for colleges, and such. We used to do designing and modeling in plastiline, a modeling clay. Sample like uh we used to design uh gas radiants fires we used to put it in the fire place. I'd design and build a stove and model it. Then srpead with lacqure and take a phote of it. You couldn't tell if it was an original. I've got a lot of pictures. You might as well interview me.

We were told you were into architect.

I used to be a architect, mechanics engineer, and an industrial arts.

Oh, boy you hit a lot of field!

He sure did always in that line you know. Designing light fixtures was for uh publice building. Wasn't there one in Dorea Kentucky that college. Bowling Green State College. I designed all the lights. You know those lights in fron of the post office? Well I design thins like that only in bronze instead of iron. And I uh designed some for churches, banks, and things like that you know.

Did you do that for a company or was that an independent enterprise?

Oh, I done that for a company. They build lighting fixtures and these radiant fires. You don't see many radiant fires now.

These are the types of viles of paint we use. A vile will paint many pices but you have to have so many different shades. And this is gold, the gold we put on, the finger gold. It looks terrible, when it's fired it turns out to be gold. I have a platinum. I'm not sure but I think it's more that 14K gold in there. There's a different type of gold, it's called a Roman gold. And it's one thing you have to varnish with a glass brash fiber brush. and uh polish it when you take it out of the kil. In fact they used

to melt gold coins and mix it up. The old timers used to. The gold is expensive, its cost is about \$15 for this little vile.

Now this is a study of a radiant fire. These were little stoves inside the fireplace. That's in Bowling Green, Kentucky.

That's a wall fixture. That was in front of a bank in Punroy, Ohio. That's in Ahtens, Ohio University. That's a picture of a church I have a picture of the inside somewhere.

Is it fun to go around and interview people, I bet it's a little more interesting than sitting in class.

YES!

We had one like that in our place in Ohio. Similar.

This lighting fixture. Now this went in a fire place. There's the thing that's finished. That's now it turned out all done.

You used to live in Ohio?

Yes, uh when he was in Ohio and we got married and lived in Ohio. And then after a while we moved back to Michigan. He wanted to be near the lake.

Here's the light fixture in Athen's, Ohio. Here's a picture of the lighting in the church.

Were you born in Holland?

Yes, I was born and raised in Holland.

Were your parents from the Netherlands?

Yess, my oldest brother was born in the Netherlands. There's a pharmacist here whose last name is so similar who knows we may be related somewhere along the line. My folks are gone but my father's brother still lives there and uh mother's sister. And of course nieces and nephews.

There's the other side of the coin. That's a machine he made. He's built tractors for Clark equipment and Ross-Carrier.

The machine went to the us zone and Laughlin Company near Pittsburg. Used to handle rolls of hot steel.

You designed that?

Yea, I went down to the steel company to investigate the thing and see what they needed and I come up with this. This is uh looking in a truck that went down to Chicago for the R.R. Donnelly and Sons. Company, that prints telephone directories.

I don't think I could ever do that anymore. Well I don't think so at your age you haven't been in business for so many years you can't uh well it's first like anything I haven't uh played the piano if they say 2 sharps or so many flats or what key it's in. Some of these things just leave. I guess it would come back eventually.

Don't take my picture!

My grand was working for the Holland Sentinal and on co-op And uh so he cam out hereto interview me several years ago and uh course it was quite a while after he interviewed me, course he took notes and he couldn't remember everything; and by the time they put it in the paper I told him not to take my picture. And uh so when the sentinal printed there was this horrible picture of me. The next morning I work up and I had a terrific heartattck and I always kidded everyone that picture did it. My minister came to see me and said well I saw your picture and I said that's what did it. He thought I was serious.

Which one is your favorite?

Oh, I don't know daddy which one is yours? Oh, I'd say the tulip plate it has something different about it.