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Joseph Testa-Secca oral history interview by Yael V. Greenberg, May 6, 2003

Joseph Testa-Secca (Interviewee)

Yael V. Greenberg (Interviewer)

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USF Florida Studies Center
Oral History Program
USF 50th History Anniversary Project

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TRANSCRIPTION

G: Today is Tuesday, April 8, 2003. My name is Yael Greenberg, oral history program assistant for the Florida Studies Center. We continue a series of interviews in our studio here in the Tampa campus library with USF faculty, students, and alumni in order to commemorate fifty years of university history. Today we will be interviewing Mr. Joe Testa-Secca who came to USF in 1959. Good morning, Mr. Testa-Secca.

T: Good morning.

G: Let's begin by you taking us to what year you came to USF and what circumstances brought you here to the university.

T: The year was 1959 and I was asked to participate in a competition that was going on for designs for the administration building. Naturally, being excited by it, I immediately started to think about what might appear to work for the building itself. They [the administration] had an area outlined for two murals eight by fifteen feet, with reflection pools to be done to show off the murals. They were to be made of Mexican glass. There was some kind of connection between Dal-Tile [Corporation], that was in Tampa at the time, with the manufacturers of the glass in Mexico City. The idea was that the murals would be done in Mexico. Whoever won the contest would go to Mexico for six weeks

to supervise the murals and then they could be brought in duty free, making it a lot more economical than if they were done here on campus or wherever. Anyway, my design won out over the other applicants. I believe it was a couple of months later that I left for Mexico with the cartoons, which are drawings to scale of the two murals. I did that so that there wouldn't be any distortion. If drawings are smaller, often time these are magnified and there are distortions along the edges. So, I thought by doing it to scale it would be my piece from the beginning to the end. The winning sketches were also quite large, and I think that enabled my entry to look a little better. They were thirty-two inches by sixty, which is a third of the actual size. These were in color. I had all of this [sketches] with me. I drove down and I was in Mexico for six weeks. Working with Valderama was the artist and in charge. He had a studio there in Mexico City. This was the time that the University of Mexico had just been completed, so the man had done a number of murals for other artists. I felt very comfortable in the work I had seen him do. We went on from there. Typically, the murals being done there, they cut all the glass prior to the installation. The glass was cut in uniform tesserae little cubes or squares [of mosaic]. I wanted some of the glass to be bigger, so that was my first input. Large areas, bigger units; small areas, we go [smaller]. That worked out pretty well, in that I did the cartoons on strong paper [enabled] the tesserae, and [I had also done it] reversed incidentally, could be adhered right to the drawings. I worked it so that rather than having a grid, twelve inch square, it was done more or less like a jigsaw puzzle, following the design where it was convenient to have different shapes. When you looked at the mural from the side you wouldn't be seeing the grid, which has always disturbed me in murals, you know the grout lines. Anyway, they went along with it and the thing

was done. [There were] ten workers. It was done in the six-week period and then it took a while for it to get here. Upon arriving in Tampa, they had a tile setter who had experience in murals and he puts up the mural with white grout. Well, that diminishes the intensity of each piece of glass. I was really upset. We had to wire brush, not a lot, but most of it. I re-grouted it with colored grout. I used cobalt and ultramarine blue in some areas and some of the earth reds, burnt sienna, and other grouts for the areas that were appropriate for that color range. I felt pretty good about it. All at once then, the individual tile became more intense because it wasn't surrounded by little bit of white.

G: I want to take you back to a couple of things because you mentioned some wonderful information. This project, this original contest, who came up with the idea to commission art for the university?

T: Well, I really don't know. I know that the Dal-Tile representative was pretty influential. He might have given the glass. I'm not sure of this. Not only that, [but] that was a time when art was being considered for public buildings, a percentage. I believe that came under that time, and that's how it got started. All I know is I was called to see if I would be interested in being part of it, and of course who wouldn't be with this project going on.

G: Were you initially called because of your previous artwork or because you were a Tampa native?

T: Doing my previous artwork I had been in the service and then went to the University of Georgia and did my graduate work there and came to Tampa and won a number of awards in some of the local and regional shows. My name was around. Someone from Pullara, Bowen, and Watson, who were the architects, thought that I should know about this. Naturally, I followed through. It was very exciting.

G: Do you know how many other artists entered this initial contest?

T: I really don't know. You know artists are usually left out of that part for, I imagine, a number of reasons. Currently, going on with this [initial competition], the murals for the science building were being discussed. Mark Hampton, the architect of that building, knew of my artwork in that he was on the board of the Tampa Art Institute, which I was part of also. I was teaching classes there. He was thinking of doing some kind of artwork for his building, and so it was in the air. There were five new buildings coming up all at once. These were the leading architects, at the time, of the area. It was pretty exciting. That's how it all started. I think this building came first though, the administration building.

G: When you were notified that you were the winner of this competition was there any ceremony presented to you or did they just say Joe go out and do your work?

T: You've got the job, which is pretty exciting in itself and comfortable for the artist. You don't have to have a gathering to be awarded a prize. It was legitimate. In fact at the time of presentation they were aware of what I had in the way of a design. I talked to them prior to that and shared my ideas of what would be a theme for this thing [mural]. Both murals, the theme is a forum or a meeting place for ideas and knowledge. That same theme is on four murals actually. That's what it amounts too, but [they're] done in a different manner because of the building itself and the limitations. The administration building, they knew that they wanted the glass. They had it all mapped out. With Mark Hampton [architect], he had these huge walls that demanded something else, and I think economy comes into it too. The walls for the science building were to be poured, concrete facade and they were seventy feet long by twelve feet. It made it a little costly

say if they had gone with glass. It was a challenge for me to be working in a Bas-relief form with limitations. That's part of any designing that artists are compelled with. What are the limitations? You know you have to work with glass, what will it allow you to do or not do. Size is like getting a canvas, all at once its there. What can I put in it that makes compositional sense?

G: Let's go back to the themes that you were talking about. There were two murals that were placed in the admin building, and then two in the science building?

T: Right.

G: The theme of the forum, how did you come up with that idea?

T: Well, what's a university if it isn't just that? Of course once I was asked to submit something the wheels start to turn. What do you do? If you look at them carefully you can see where the two, at some point, came from the same doodles. In the administration building there is a major figure, and then smaller groups abstracted more so than the one in the other building. So, they are treated differently, again, because of the dictate of the materials. With glass and color, that's like painting in a sense, whereas the other is very stark and you have all of this space and you're trying to span across it with something that's going to enhance the building, not just say your idea. This has got to look good I like to believe.

G: Once you won the competition and you traveled to Mexico was USF building a relationship with the University of Mexico? Why Mexico?

T: Well, the source of the glass. This is why I say Dal-Tile had a lot to do [with the project]. Not only that, they were doing all these incredible buildings, it was also a university site [University of Mexico], and so there was a lot of publicity. I don't think it's just by

chance. I think the connection was the Mexican glass, and then the affiliation of the manager with the architects. They were using a lot of that glass tile in lobbies, in public buildings, so that was part of it. It was very popular at that time. I think that's why it was Mexico, and I guess the economy also. You could bring it in duty free as a work of art rather than being a tax put on it, for say bathroom tile, to protect our glass workers here.

G: Working in Mexico with Valderama, if I'm correct, what you had said was you supervised the making of the mural. With his assistance he constructed the mural based on your designs?

T: Yeah, what I did was the design to scale. I had of course the color reproductions that were quite large also. I was told in fact that they could duplicate any of the colors, which wasn't so. At the time I was there I had blues, greens, violets, and lavenders. None of the lavenders were working, so we had to substitute blue and red tile in proximity to each other in order to get the sensation of violet or lavender. So, it was good that the artist was there to make that kind of decision. As far as the construction, they knew what they were doing, terrific craftsmanship. In fact I marveled at how much they could do in a given time period. They knew the craft and he supervised those workers. My input was on, as I mentioned earlier, larger pieces rather than all the same, how to get a color when you don't have that color by positioning the two other colors that give you the sensation of that wanted color. It was a great experience for me, but I felt very good that I had the call to make those shots rather than leaving it to someone who all at one might have treated it differently. So, I feel that it's an honest interpretation of my work and I was grateful for that. Besides that, I had a great time in Mexico City. The accommodations, it was a first-

class operation.

G: Once the mural was completed it came back to Tampa and then as you said, it was installed. Was there a ceremony for the installation of the murals?

T: Not really. When that mural came here it was in boxes and, as I mentioned, jigsaw shapes, all irregular shapes all numbered. What we did of course was lay it out in front of the area that it was going to be put on to make sure. At that point we found out that the shop drawings were not what they were supposed to be. The murals were eight feet by fifteen feet each, the two murals. In each case the area to put the mural on was smaller, which meant what do we do now? Luckily, it [the murals] was smaller rather than larger, because it was all done. So I had to rework some of the areas. In one case the two edges allowed me enough give to cut those away. In one of the murals where I worked in another area that allowed me greater freedom to make that cut. That was an unpleasant surprise, but it worked out. Those things happen anyway. Now, the shop drawings for the science building, and they were much bigger, [were] seventy feet and they wrapped around, were right on the button. I had to supply them with the form liners. In other words, they were manufactured, brought over, and the cement was poured. If there was any discrepancy than we might have had some problems.

G: You were a young artist when you won this competition, correct?

T: Oh, yes. We're talking about forty-four years ago. Yes.

G: So this was something that really you are extremely proud of to this day, but also that probably helped to further your artistry.

T: Of course, all at once then you become somewhat of an expert. He did the murals at USF, he's got to be pretty good. I did get a big commission, and this [the murals at USF]

was responsible for it I am sure, that was in Jacksonville. Reynolds, Smith, and Hills [commission] for a forty-foot glass mosaic that enhances their building. A number of other projects came because of this. I think that's a natural transition anyway for any artist, but it's the opportunity of doing that becomes very exciting. I ended up doing something like sixteen architectural commissions that I feel this was the beginning right here. It is exciting.

G: I want to talk about where the physical location of the two murals are in the administration building. I believe they're...

T: ...right in front of the entry. Now, what's happened [is] the reflection pools were made into planters, if you can believe this, which really destroyed [the effect], and they put these huge palm trees in front of it [the murals]. That was sad. This is what happens when other artists get involved too. Not only that, it became a problem I understand. Students were throwing their cups and stuff into the refectory pool, so it was a maintenance problem I imagine. But to go ahead and fill it in and then put these huge palm trees where you don't see the murals doesn't make any sense either. Something similar to that happened to the science building also. Prior to the walls going up, and I mentioned this to the architect, was that students waiting for their classes to let out would lean against the walls, which were to be white, and put their foot back up there. I said if maybe there's a little niche right along side for low growing plants, a ground cover of some kind would prevent them. Just having that slot there maybe a foot wide [would prevent them] from leaning against the building. Well he went for it, but then here again I believe the same landscape architects come and put these big cacti that were similar to some of the imagery on the wall. It took about two years to get rid of those. That was

upsetting, but here again those things happen. There are so many people involved.

G: What did USF look like in 1959?

T: Barren; 56th Street had just been opened up to that area. There was just nothing else here. There were these five buildings [on campus]. A couple I think were more complete than the other three. All were similar in that they had a buff brick facade. It was strange, no plants hardly. It was not what we see today.

G: Once you made those first two murals were you involved in convocation ceremonies or university events of that nature?

T: No, I don't think I even was invited for the premiere. They had a ceremony, because I have a copy of that that I'll be sending you a month later. But no, not officially to my knowledge. I don't remember that at all.

G: How soon after the first two murals in the administration building went up, how soon after were you commissioned to do the murals in the science building?

T: Almost at the same time. It [science building] was underway and I had a lot more time working on that because of the friendship and knowing Mark Hampton. We were thrown together in that Art Institute thing. He took his time too, which is very good for the artist, and allowed me to really explore all the situations. I hadn't done a concrete relief or a Bas-relief of any kind, so I experimented on what might happen when you do something like that. It gave me an opportunity to know something about that. It was a very nice relationship between the architects and myself in that not until I was ready to show them something ... I wasn't pushed into a quick remedy of any kind.

G: The two murals in the science building were made locally as opposed to the other murals in the administration building.

T: Well, that was a poured wall, so certainly. This is a poured wall and think of a sandwich type thing. You have these liners [form] that will house the cement as it's being poured into the trough. So, my part of the commission was to supply the form liners to the subcontractor that was to pour these walls all in one shot. There was a river aggregate that was part of the mixture. The idea of this, in order to get some texture, was to put a retarder on the form liner where we wanted the texture. This allowed the cement to stay damp. When the form liners were pulled away, with a wire brush you could work it down to the aggregate. All in one shot you've got the smooth surfaces and then the relief was very shallow because it's an acoustical wall I understand, but it was several inches that we could play with. So, those areas were all done at the same time, which was kind of frightening for me because of the expense of it, but it worked. Of course I had some help as to how the forms were to be put together so that when they were pulled away they wouldn't tear the imagery. In other words, an engineer had to say this is the way the bevel or the cut that we need, the angle, in order for these to be released. I had some professional assistants.

G: Working with concrete is certainly different than working with glass and tile.

T: Totally, that's scary. There were no expansion joints. I know I didn't sleep that night worrying about what's going to happen when these huge walls are pulled away. It was really nice to see that everything stayed in place.

G: Were there other public art projects going on the buildings of USF that you know about in those early days?

T: Not really, I think there was a little bit of stained glass for the administration building, touches of it. Unfortunately, what happens often times with public or any building is

when the price of materials all come in and they go beyond their budget the first thing that seems to be excluded are the art plus the finer materials. There was supposed to be teak benches, and I don't know if that ever materialized. Those things usually suffer because of that.

G: As a resident of Tampa, a native, when did you first hear about the University of South Florida?

T: There was one, the choosing of the site. I was away in the service, I was in the Korean [War], and then I went to the University of Georgia and then to the University of Iowa. I didn't get back to Tampa until the mid 1950s. At that time, I'm not sure if it had already been decided, but there was certainly talk if there hadn't been, to this being the location. The thing that interested me was why South Florida, the name. It didn't seem to make any sense to me at that time. I remember that. Why would they select that as a name when it's really in the center of the state more or less?

G: Did you have any occasion to meet John Allen?

T: Yes, I did, but it was later when I was given a one-man show here. In fact they didn't have a gallery then and it was held in the library, interesting enough, in this building. I met him at that time. The murals of course had been done then. The art department here was really just in its infancy and there were only a few people as I remember. The department head was a music man, so they were talking about the visual art. I was approached at that time with the idea of teaching here. I had taught at the University of Georgia for a year, after my graduate work, and I wasn't enthralled with the idea of working again. It was a new experience for me and it cut into my working time as a dedicated artist. I didn't realize that it takes money to have a studio and support yourself.

I eventually got an offer from the University of Tampa, which I accepted and was there for thirty-five years.

G: When you met John Allen did he mention the murals?

T: Oh, yeah. I think the murals were accepted. I've done other things that were not accepted in the same terms by the public. Somehow I don't remember any unpleasantness. I was the one that was upset by the palm trees and the cacti. I think the architects were too, but those were things that happened. I think they were for it. I was invited to have a show here - I think that says something.

G: Let's talk about that one-man show. Who invited you? You said it was held at the library.

T: Well, it was one of the visual artists that was forming the group that was to be the art department, the invitation. This is prior to Harrison Covington coming here. I really didn't do any research about the one-man show. It was an individual or two that were involved with the arts that invited me to have the show here, which was very nice. Then, they had a second show here where they invited ten so-called leading artists in the community. There you see some of the USF department [art], as we know it today. [Harrison] Covington was in the show and a number of other people, and I was part of that along with another instructor from the University of Tampa, Harold Nosti. It was a great show.

G: This one-man show, what kind of pieces did you bring to the university to show?

T: Well, all sorts. I had drawings and paintings, which is what I normally do. The architectural thing started because of USF. At that point I hadn't done anything to this scale. In fact in that one show I had a small glass mosaic. I say small, it was about two

feet by seven feet. [It] was one of my ideas for the building in Jacksonville. So, I had a piece of glass that was back lighted and pretty dramatic along with drawings and paintings of a good size. Some of those were five to eight feet, museum paintings; that's what artists do to be recognized. Then, we do something big so it will stop us.

G: You had mentioned that prior to doing these murals, primarily you worked with painting and drawing. Were the two murals that you did in the administration building, were they your first two murals?

T: Yes, murals of any kind because then, from that, I've done other murals that aren't glass. I've even ventured into stained glass. It opened a new area for me to explore. It was quite exciting.

G: I know you talk very fondly of making those murals, but is there something in that six week period in Mexico or in drawing these depictions, is there something that stands out in your mind of a fond memory of that time?

T: One is my introduction to pre-Columbian art. I was there and the museum was being put together, the anthropological museum in Mexico City. We went back in the 1980s and it is still handsome and an incredible collection. It was my first [introduction], not that I hadn't seen it before, but that amount of pre-Columbian art. Not only that, some of it was accessible to be taken out of the country. I've got thirty-some pieces that, not all total thirty because I've been back since, but at the time, I purchased a few pieces that were allowable to take out of the country. Now, they've been keeping a lot of their own stuff. So, that was a very exciting thing that I'm still very excited by, pre-Columbian art. It really started in Mexico City. Another thing, I met while I was there, just by chance, Diego Rivera. [He] was a very popular figure in the city and his home had been turned

into a display of his collection of pre-Columbian art. So, I was privy to that and that was exciting.

G: Going back to the idea of art and public buildings, why do you think that USF in the late 1950s wanted to put art on their buildings?

T: I think it was the times, as I mentioned. We were really held back, I think, for many, many years. Art has been on the buildings from the beginning of time. Why don't we find art in the buildings in Tampa prior to USF? It was a wake-up call. It's time for us to have art and this was an opportune time. Of course since the art department has flourished here there's a lot of art, but I don't know of any major pieces in the other three buildings. I think the architects involved had something to do with that, and the time was right that they could include that or they made that effort.

G: Of those five buildings that you just mentioned, why do you think USF wanted the administration and ultimately the science building to have public art, why not the other three buildings as well?

T: Well, I think those were the first ones, if I'm not mistaken. Not only that, the administration building [is] very important. [It's the] heart of the [institution]. That's where all the teak was going to go in and good materials that were cut out, I believe, before the building was finished or even done. They came over the bids, so that's the problem architects face. It's not always fair to say why didn't they use more art. The funds weren't there maybe, and then it's political. We don't want this school to look better than this other school. They're not working in unison.

G: Besides the four total murals did you do any other, or were you commissioned for any other art at the university?

T: No, and that's understandable too. There's a flourishing art department here with many, many artists that are good. You know it would be natural for that, and I don't even know that that's happened. I think it's the timing. Circumstances played a great part in all of this to come about.

G: As you look around the university today, forty-four or forty-five years later, and you see all these buildings and the palm trees and even some public works of art, what are your thoughts on that?

T: It's incredible that it's happened. Now we expect things to happen on this campus because of this background, but it was just bleak at the beginning. It's like going to the moon. There was nothing there. They had to have the acreage. I'm glad it's happened and it's been good for the community and the state of course. It's going to continue I'm sure.

G: Two more questions that I want to ask you. One relates back to the mural and the specifics of making the two murals in the administration building. I believe you mentioned that from your large-scale sketch that the tiles were physically laid on the paper?

T: Yes, that was the cartoon that was done on, I referred to it as, butcher paper. It's a thick brown paper that's used for this method and it's reversed. It was drawn with charcoal and then fixed with a fixative so that it wouldn't smudge. Then, they could adhere the tile, the tesserae, with possibly a rabbit-skin glue, something that would be water soluble. Once this is placed against the wall, then you can wash the paper from the viewing side, so you're working backwards. Yes, it [tiles] was stuck right on the paper like I did the cartoon for. Incidentally, that's where the word comes from, cartoon. These were done

to scale for frescos and they would use the cartoon and then with what appears to be a pizza cutter. It's got little spikes or a spur on a cardboard boot along the edges to allow the artist to see the outline in the fresh cement that would be the fresco, and the color would be put in. Cartoon I think comes from the word for paper. It was done on paper but to scale. Now, we refer to cartoons in other ways. Comic strips are our cartoons. It's a facsimile, but originally it was for murals and frescos.

G: These original sketches, do you still have some of those original sketches of the early murals?

T: Well, I have the two thirty-two by sixty inch colors. They were really paintings in effect that were kept by the architects. Somebody kept those, so I don't have those. For Mark Hampton's building I have some of the original, tiny layout or design to try to figure out how the form liner was to be built. I have those because of your call about collecting some of the clippings or things, so I do have them. They're in terrible shape, but you can get an idea. Those form liners were made from marine plywood, which was quite thick, in order to get the depth several layers had to be put together. So, we needed a shop drawing. I didn't cut those out myself. I had those manufactured, of course by a craftsman, to make sure they were right. So I do have drawings of that, and I have, I believe, photographs of some of the other things concerning the administration building.

G: My final question, and this is something that I've asked everyone sitting in that chair before you, if there was something that you could leave for the record of your experiences here at the University of South Florida to future generations or to previous generations, what would that final sentiment or that favorite story be?

T: I would like to think about that, but right off the bat, just the experience of having my

work chosen and then the processes involved was certainly exciting. They're [the murals] still here, which is nice. I don't know if that answers your [question].

G: Do you ever go back and look at your murals?

T: Well, it's hard to see them, again, because of all of the landscaping. Not often, but at one point I remember bringing people over. [I would say] I did those [the murals]. No, not recently. You're busy with other projects and then I married and we had children. I have a studio here in Temple Terrace. It comes up every time it's mentioned, you think of your input. It's just natural to have that.

G: Mr. Testa-Secca, I want to thank you very much for your time and for your interview. Thank you very much.

T: Thank you for asking me to be part of this. I would like to add that a reproduction of the mural on the administration building has appeared in two books. One is, *Design Through Discovery*, Second Edition, and that was printed in 1970. The other one was *Mosaics: Principles and Practice*, by Joseph Young. That was printed in 1963, which helped me. All at once you're in a publication. Now, Mark's building [architect] has appeared in a lot of trade magazines and *Florida Architecture* and a number of others. The murals are part of the story about my art, because he's well known. He's a well-known architect that's native of Tampa.

G: Could you tell me that quick story about Jim Teske again, for the record?

T: Well, I first heard from Jim in that of course he had been working. He was working here at the university and someone stopped him and congratulated him on the murals in the administration building thinking that he had produced them. He had to call me because he thought it was a funny story and that I should hear about it. Then meeting him and

getting to know him, I thought it was very nice of him to do that, but it was interesting how people [thought it was him]. He was doing art, then Testa-Secca, Testa starts, so immediately he was the producer. [laughing]

G: Thank you.

T: Okay.

End of Interview