

Interview with Marija P. McCarthy

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Program
Foreign Service Spouse Series

MARIJA P. McCARTHY

Interviewed by: Jewell Fenzi

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Q: This is Jewell Fenzi on March 22, 1990. I am interviewing Marija McCarthy at her home in Washington, D.C. Marija is the wife of our Ambassador to Lebanon. Since he is currently unable to serve at post because of the Lebanese civil war, both are now in Washington.

The thing that interested me most the day we met at the District Building was your reference to yourself as an “auxiliary wife.”

MCCARTHY: Well, yes, that's right, because this is not my prime position in diplomatic service. I truly am, first, a painter, and was a rather mature individual when I joined John in the Service. So it is a sort of secondary calling.

Q: That's very interesting. What was his position in Islamabad and in Brussels?

MCCARTHY: In Brussels, first, he was Economic Counselor there to Ambassador Dean Hinton, to the European Economic Community[EEC]. He was first the Economic Officer, then during the four years was appointed Counselor.

Q: Were you able, during that time, to really pursue your career as an artist? Let's say, how did you mix the two “lives”? How did you handle the role as wife of the Economic

Library of Congress

Officer? And then when he became Counselor must have been even more demanding. Tell me how you handled this and how you view it.

MCCARTHY: Well, I view it as extremely possible. It can be done. It was a very natural thing for me to devote myself to the duties of a wife because this is what a European-raised woman accepts very easily. By the time I married John, I had been a painter for close to 20 years and it was just something like breathing to me, that there was always a time that I painted. One always creates time for things that one wants to do and likes to do.

I don't think that demands were that great in Brussels, frankly, because there are the two Embassies — ours to the Kingdom of Belgium, and the EEC. So the social opportunities and responsibilities were very easily divided. I was very happy to do the things that we had to do — going to parties and dinners and having dinners. We had a lovely home, I love to cook, I love to celebrate dinners on a daily basis, especially if you receive some nice, interesting people. So it was very, very do-able and my career really blossomed there because we were able to travel weekends, and also two or three times a year to the south and north of France where I painted on site. I had shows right after these extended trips and it truly was an awakening for me that Foreign Service was just not making those impossible demands that I had heard from people who were there before, in earlier years under the pressures and responsibilities that just did not let a woman do anything else.

Q: Were you able to set aside a certain hour every day to paint? Did you have your own time? How do you paint — when inspiration is there, or —?

MCCARTHY: No, no, that's a luxury, that's a myth actually. I think inspiration is a part of the working process and of getting yourself into the studio. It's something that to me is the first commitment to work, and such a simple act as that requires all of the conviction that yes, you are going to work and you are going to create something.

For example, yesterday I worked all day, and from faulty paper to the shadows going all the wrong way to a few too many phone calls, I really did not accomplish too much. So the

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opportunity to work is often interrupted by daily life. I must say that I cannot screen away the rest of life: I always have to work parallel, and I have always worked in my home. I never had a studio elsewhere as a lot of painters do. But I just look at the calendar, and if I'm not giving a dinner, or I'm not teaching, or I have no tremendous pending chores, I just go upstairs. Currently, that's about two or three times a week. And I do not like to work if I have only a couple of hours. I may finish up something that I did the day before, but I cannot commence something, because it takes the wheels awhile to start rolling and energy to build up. And then to have to quit after that crucial moment has taken place is really very sad.

As I said, even though yesterday was a full working day, it stil^(she laughs) wasn't as satisfactory as I would have liked it to be. But in Brussels I worked very, very hungrily, because that was during the first year of my marriage to John, the beginning of my second year with two of my adopted children, his two of his first marriage (he was a widower). It was just something that I was trying to almost artificially work into my demanding schedule of wifehood, motherhood, and so on. And it took some doing. So perhaps the first six months until we got settled and got the house, the children into schools and went through the pains of being de-rooted from here and settling down, I had a pause in my painting, but gradually my work found its place naturally.

Q: How was the decision arrived at for your husband to accept Lebanon? Were you ever in Beirut?

MCCARTHY: No, we were never allowed to go because from the time that his service started, it had already been off-limits to any other Americans except essential personnel. So I had never been there in peacetime; very regrettable to me.

Q: I was about to ask, because duty there would certainly be a marvelous career opportunity for him. It certainly has created a different life-style for you — you saw him how often?

Library of Congress

MCCARTHY: In retrospect this is true but because of the worsening of the situation there, John has been home since September, when the Embassy was closed. I was about to say he has not set foot on Lebanese soil since then but indeed he has. He met and presented his credentials for the first time to the late unfortunate first President Moawad who was elected one day and assassinated a week later. John saw him in that tiny interim of time, having presented his credentials in northern Lebanon, certainly not in Beirut. While John was in London en route home, he was informed by telephone that the assassination had occurred. He felt that the bottom had fallen out of his efforts, hopes, and so forth.

Since the situation is in no way settled down and secure enough for the Embassy to be reestablished, here he is. He's doing his share. He has just returned from Florida. He's speaking to civic groups, to academics, to colleges, trying to explain the U.S. Government position vis-a-vis the Lebanese problem and political situation. There are many, many students of the Lebanese situation and Lebanese nationals who are extremely interested in that. He could continue doing that but I must say he's very anxious to go back and finish up his job. He feels that being Ambassador to Lebanon is being in Lebanon and doing his work.

But the decision to arrive at, Jewell, that you asked for in the beginning, was, surprisingly, not painfully difficult. It was certainly something that we together had to determine, even though his career always, in my opinion, comes first. Mine, as you know, is easily transportable, though the practice of the career itself may have some interruptions here in the U.S. But when an ambassadorial offer comes to a man who is not yet 50, it is truly something that you have to consider extremely hard. But in John's case, I must say, he has ha— in the year or two before Lebanon he had opportunities to be Ambassador to some rather tiny countries where he felt his creativity and expertise would not keep him nearly as busy or challenged as he had hoped his first assignment would do, so he had declined.

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So I must say, not in his defense but merely in describing his idea of how he sees himself as an American Ambassador, his ideology was really quite tickled at the prospect of being Ambassador to Lebanon. That truly was the chunk of importance that he was hoping would come his way. And certainly what he was not hoping for was that it would be that difficult for our family life. I'm sure, knowing John, the dangers to his safety were certainly not prime in his mind. That is how he is: he truly considers his career extremely important and somehow, fear is just not part of his mental makeup.

I remember one long night in Islamabad hashing this back and forth but in my mind there was never a point when I would say, "Well, John, this would be a little too hard to do." I just knew that we had to work out the pedestrian part of his being away, and where we would settle Julia in school, this and that. The older children, thank God, are on their own now. It was still important that he be available and that he would be coming back — he has an elderly mother in New York.

So the promise of his coming every four months or so certainly softened the blow of total separation. As it turned out, those returns were also something to get used to, because being away and having an enormous residence, with an army of attendants and servants and bodyguards and whoever, at your service for four months, (she laughs) then to be dumped down in America where you have to tie your own shoelaces and make your own coffee sometimes, such things do take a little adjustment! I mean, the human animal is very adaptable to the extremities of both luxury and deprivation, but it does take a little bit of smoothing at each end. Of course I don't know if it takes as much smoothing once he's back in Beirut, but here we sort of get used to each other and it's just wonderful. And then two weeks before he has to go we sort of project the difficulties of separation and mentally, a tiny bit even physically, the act of separation begins to take place.

It's very, very interesting. Let no one think when husband and wife are living totally separate lives — really totally separate, on two different continents with nothing but one phone call a week and, mercifully, many letters in between — still, physical separation is

Library of Congress

extremely rough and extremely real. So that when reunion takes place, it is just not one long honeymoon. It truly isn't. We are beautifully suited to each other, we have a wonderful life together. But still these sorts of juncture points had their rough moments and they had to be gone through.

Q: How is Julia faring with the separation?

MCCARTHY: She is such a little survivor, it's incredible. I mean, she draws the best out of every situation. She just is so enamored of her daddy and she so loved the mere thought of the letter coming, the telephone call coming, the little gift that John every once in a while would send by lots of kind people, she just truly loved it. She would weep a pool of tears on the way back from taking him to the airport — cry, cry, cry. And then the next day would be sunny, good things happening in her life, you know — a little dance, movie, show, she just runs off and has a happy time. She has John's wonderful nature, which is — I have a broody, Slavic nature, but the two of them are the happy Irish. They have an extremity of expression no matter what feeling comes. If it's distress, they are more distressed than anybody can be distressed. They're delighted and it's just heaven. And both moods last rather briefly and then the normal life takes over. She was ten when he left, and at her age I think she is extremely buoyant and adaptable, and it truly has not been a problem. The two of us do get along very well.

Q: I was about to say I think a lot of that is your attitude. And I think it must have been an enormous help that you are so engrossed in your own profession.

MCCARTHY: Oh yes. You know, in a lot of ways, Jewell, I missed John but I missed him at happy moments, you know. I really did not miss him “Oh, my God, it is so dreadful that John is not here because of such-and-such.” Instead I felt: “Oh, my God, it would be so wonderful to share this lovely thing with John.” And thank God that life did not take some kind of negative or tragic turn. Thankfully, I was not truly tested by life's hardships, so my positive attitude thrived.

Library of Congress

Thank God that Julia wasn't in any way ill or any desperate thing happened to either one of our other children; that some dire need of his presence didn't present itself. I did have a distress in my spine at the time. I just don't think that John being here would have made that much difference. I would have been very sorry to see him trying to make me comfortable. There was just nothing that anyone could do, even doctors couldn't: it was the pinched sciatic nerve. Just my lifting 100 pounds of material in the garden and that I just stupidly twisted my back, so that for 2-1/2 months I was a real cripple. It was very, very painful and disabling to my normal life, in driving and so on. But John's being here wouldn't (laughing) have made it any different; not really.

Q: You said you drew inspiration from your trip to the south of France. Did you draw inspiration from Pakistan?

MCCARTHY: Oh, an enormous amount. Oh yes. (she points to a painting on her wall of a landscape) That's a house in Murree, a resort about 50 km. from Islamabad. It has a wonderful ambassador's residence that was open to most people because Ambassador Dean Hinton did not use it, he and Patricia found that getting there was quite stressful — winding roads, and Pakistanis not being the safest drivers. So for the two years that John served as deputy to Ambassador Dean Hinton, we had a great deal of use.

Then when the Raphels came, they were wonderful hikers, loved nature, and spent happy, happy weekends there. We used it afterwards too but not as often. Going there was sheer heaven. Nature was so pure and somehow the foreignness of it hit you between the eyes. It was just you and this odd, mountainous continent. Being there you almost felt as if you could view the entire continent — the Himalayas, and the Hindu Kush and the Indian Kashmir. It was just so vast, so inviting to be recorded, because one almost felt as if it weren't real. It was just so beautiful and so cast into its own existence that painting it one almost felt one was an intruder. Yet the urge was there and the time was there and I just did it. I did the most prolific part of my creativity in Pakistan. During the three years I was there I had three one-person shows. They were voluminous — upwards of 20 large

Library of Congress

watercolors each time and many in between. I taught very satisfactorily and I must say to tremendous demand — art education is so wanting there and there are so many talented people, extremely bright, talented, the most gracious people we have ever met.

So the inspiration was omnipresent. You know, the word “inspiration” I find fault with it. It almost connotes the idea that the creative urge is to be found only on the outside of oneself. It resides inwardly but it gains energy and a call to action from outside influence. That is how it is with me.

That does happen, you know. Only that, in Pakistan, in order to live the rest of the time and not to paint would mean the opposite of that, that you would sort of have to hook out of this constant throbbing need to work, and the call to work, and the beckoning to work. It was a penetrating, constant presence as far as I was concerned. So in order to give a dinner, or to go to the national day of China, and to do the chores and the marketing and so on, was really to sort of have to quiet this constant voice: “Everything is paintable.”

Everything we saw — the people, the animals, the dusty roads, the glorious sunsets, the market scenes, the kaleidoscope of colors and shadows. And you know, this incredible sun that they have. They aren't that near to the tropics, really, it's just that the sun is so... (words fail her, she pauses) maybe it's the clean air, the air is so penetrating and the shadows so deep, that this display of light and dark is just mesmerizing. And that has always been my pattern fascination, both in oils when I did oils several years prior to painting watercolors; it had been my predominant medium for many, many years. Then when I got into watercolors, I only switched the medium, not the way I related to my subject. Maybe people are a little too sophisticated these days to consider watercolors a very soft, melancholy and pastel medium, which is what used to be in the years before — the famous English watercolors, very gentle, very watery, very light of contrast. Well, that could never satisfy me because I had worked in strong lights and shadows and strong value differences in my oil work. So when I jumped into watercolor, that stayed with me

Library of Congress

and when I found myself in Pakistan, it was all over, everything was that way, the whole world was painted in the way that I liked to record it.

I use the word “record” which is really the way I feel about it. I feel that there is plenty inside me, I know that I'm not an empty person by far, but what I would have to express separate from what I see in the world and the life out there that makes this wonderful world of ours, is by far not nearly so relevant as how I relate and perceive that which is around me. This is why I'm a landscapist, and a flower painter, and a portraitist. Everything that's out there I feel has tremendously greater importance than the things that I could do which would be regurgitating the innards of my being. And that of course is what abstract art is made of.

That's one of the reasons that I sometimes practice abstraction — to maybe test the newly bought watercolor tube, let's say. Just splash it around and make some designs and mix it with the colors otherwise known to me. I get engaged in it, and I like it, and I like the design. I really love the design. But I think the design that's out there, that belongs to the planet Earth is that which will always be the subject of my art works, of my presentable exhibitable art works.

Q: I've always preferred realism. (she laughs) I cannot relate to abstraction.

MCCARTHY: There are some awfully good pieces, I love to admire them and I love to penetrate the thought of the painter via his art work — what fueled the idea, what flow of thoughts and emotions put it on the paper or the canvas. And that activity is fun itself.

Q: You know, I'm looking for your “brooding Slavic nature” in these paintings. I don't see it.

MCCARTHY: Well, it's brooding only in the sense that I internalize things a little too deeply and too permanently, and perhaps only in relation to my husband. I don't think I'm at all a negative, certainly not a depressed person. I glorify life from the morning I get up, I just love being and working and living. But my husband has this wonderful sort of

Library of Congress

momentary appearance of anger and all — everything is so terribly wrong. And then if you just look at him long enough, the face, just as you're blinking and looking at him, turns into this reluctance repentance, “Oh gee, did I have to do that?” And all of a sudden his good humor is right back, and while I am in the depression of being either shouted at or complained at or found at fault, he has already reconsidered it and it's already past for him. And it's so lovely to see this return to normalcy and happiness in a very, very quick time. Well, I keep things like that a little too long for my own good. This is what I mean.

Q: Does that ever express itself in your painting?

MCCARTHY: Well, it does when I do my self-portraits. My self-portraits are very stern, serious, very very concerned and concentrated. There is really no sunny, flighty side of nature visible that I think I also have and that is probably the most pleasant one. But it's there. Still, the seriousness predominates in my self portraits. This is something that I think Slavic people have, that they're very serious, and tragedy weighs and gets carried and gets sort of dwelt on just a little longer. But I think that that too also creates very nice, very beautiful art, you know — all the lovely writing, all the wonderful Russian Slavic writing of tragedies and tragic circumstances, dwelling on the depths into which human nature can go in somehow belaboring tragedy, is also a depth of human nature per se. Which I think in itself is beautiful, you know, finding new depths in no matter what category of happiness or the lack of it.

Q: I'm thinking also of the music of Smetana and Dvorak, the sense that underlines —

MCCARTHY: The minor chords, That's right, that's what would always bring — there's a beautiful word in Serbian: “seta” (she spells the word) a noun, which is “melancholy. “ There is a universal Latin root. The adjective would be setan. Melancholy is about the closest translation.

Q: I really look forward to seeing your student show.

Library of Congress

MCCARTHY: It was wonderful yesterday — I'll relate this, because I did not say to the lady in question but I will when the time comes — as I told you earlier, I was working yesterday against a few odds I would rather not have had. And I was just thinking, “Oh, Marija, there's just so much that is still a mystery to you, so much that I truly wish I could do with greater ease and with greater know-how. This technical, wretched end of watercolors is just so enormous, and so hard to penetrate.” Just as you think you've conquered one way of doing something and you can pretty much count on knowing how to do that in future, something happens: the paper goes wrong, the drip happens in a wrong direction, and so on. And I was working away and I was just wishing I were more expert at this.

And then the phone call came, and a very lovely student, Anne Brown, called. And she said, “Oh, Marija, did you go to see the show hung at the Art League?” I said “No, Anne, but I did take my painting there and I sort of took a look at the pictures standing around before they were hung, and I thought they were good.” “Marija, you've got to go, it's wonderful.” I will only quote her words — saying that my students had done the best, that my own work is very fine sitting there and it sort of makes one think that the students are very receptive since the teacher's art work sort of leads the way and you can almost see the path the students have taken, and so forth. And she said a wonderful litany of praise and flattery. I thanked her up and down and was delighted. We said good bye, only I did not tell her what a crucial moment she chose to call. It was a moment which transcended civility. But I'm seeing her, she will take my class again and I will tell her that that was the most auspicious moment for m(both laugh) to hear that I'm doing well in something, as I was lamenting through my drips on the working board upstairs.

Q: Your childhood was spent with art too, wasn't it.

MCCARTHY: Yes, but not really excessively so. I will preface this by saying that soon, coming in May, a national magazine, *American Artist*, is going to feature me on the watercolor page. There will be reproductions of my works and an article about me will be there. So I was well aware of the limits of how much I could say and what I needed to

Library of Congress

say, but somehow I did squeeze in the fact that the art comes to me as my professional calling through my wonderful brother. He did not do anything consciously, he was just the first artist in the family. He's only three years older, so we really grew parallel and very contentedly and loving each other and having a very wonderful childhood as the War unwound.

And he always drew. He used watercolors, he drew people, animals, airplanes and ships. We did not have any paper during wartime and we drew on the margins of newspapers, and we giggled. He would make a face and I would laugh, then I would make a face, and we would make funny gestures — grimaces, squatty people, fat people, and we just entertained each other sitting like that around the paper and just drawing every day. That's when we were quite little. He chose to go into architecture and I had a few more years to decide, and I decided to be a painter. I think that was truly one of the most real and most pragmatic sort of causes of my becoming a painter.

Another was that I wanted to have paintings in the house. If I remember one moment that may have tipped the scales as to what I was going to be as a grown person, it was one afternoon our parents took me to their friend's home in Belgrade. I don't know where Paul was, perhaps he was in on that visit. They were people considerably older than my parents, very wealthy. They had just marvelous art works — oils from known Belgrade 18th century painters, some still lifes. I remember to this day a bowl of peaches and I looked at it and it was so real and so beautiful and so — so dramatic. I thought, “Oh, I would just love it if we had such paintings, any paintings.” We had pictures, icons, a few reproductions, family pictures. But nothing to compare to that. I just thought, “Well, it would be awfully good if I took care that we had pictures in the house.”

And that must have been so strong with me that I — you know, it is almost like supplying the demand. There was a duty. I am very “duty-bound”, I just do what people tell me. I find it wonderful, because I certainly don't do it if I don't like to or if I don't think that there is a definite, wonderful reason behind my work. I just adore work, I love work. And it was as

Library of Congress

if I had given into my, at the time, 14-year-old brain the task to supply this demand. The “demand” was to have paintings in the house and I was about to supply it somehow. And before I left my parents' home, in 1959 when I came to this country, my parents' house was full of oil paintings, then I came here and filled every house that I lived i(laughing) with paintings. So it was just something that just needed to be done.

Q: It must be very satisfying to do that at residences abroad, too, to fill them with your paintings, your own Art in America program.

MCCARTHY: Well, that's true. My husband wasn't the Ambassador, so it wasn't the Residence but it was our very lovely home in Brussels that was like an American art-in-residence, and in residence in the country where we were. People really did look, and I sold lots of paintings. I exhibited there too, three or four times in the four years we were there. Truly I had dispersed my art very much everywhere we went.

In Lebanon, before John left, he selected his show. There are thirteen very lovely pieces still, I'm afraid, in his residence there. We hope that they're in good condition; we just heard some windows were blown out not long ago in the latest assault. I just hope they were stashed away safely somewhere but there is no way he could contact anyone at this point.

Q: You must be an ideal Foreign Service wife, with your own interests!

MCCARTHY: Well, it's true. I think Foreign Service is ideal for me, I think this is definitely what I can say. I think I've always been a nomad. I've just loved traveling, and it was my sadness when we were young and lived in a very depressed, poor country that traveling was certainly not available to us. All we could do was an annual trip to the seacoast, and even that at some debts and sacrifice on other sides of our life. So the prospect of marrying a diplomat and transporting yourself to most fascinating, wonderful parts of the world — it's just sheer heaven for me.

Library of Congress

Q: How did you happen to come to the U.S. in the early 1960s?

MCCARTHY: I came as an art student. I became an honor student of my class at the Corcoran school, I won a Weiss Scholarship. There was a scholarship for a student with full tuition. The following year I had a working scholarship where I had to work in the gallery — I did a lot for the then famous Corcoran Balls, I don't know if they still take place. I was a work hand there. I hung the shows and rolled the dollies with paintings and worked happily and earned my schooling there for the next two years. I had the Monitor Scholarship that time.

Then I began to teach; and then came five years from the time I had entered the country, when I had accumulated the time required to become a permanent resident, the Corcoran sent the petition to Congress and I remained. So the Corcoran is really a big factor in my staying in America. My marriage years later is really not at all connected to my continued residence in the U.S.

Q: Your family was Royalist.

MCCARTHY: Well, they were. My uncle was the Adjutant to King Alexander, my father was in politics, and they were all very opinionated Royalists. Communism to them was anathema, and there was just no way we could have stayed there and had a normal life. So from an early age my brother and I wer(with heavy sigh) sort of preparing mentally to leave for the West one way or the other. It was in Paul's second year of architecture studies, in 1953-54, I believe, that he escaped, swimming for nine hours one night over Prespan Lake into Greece.

I was sort of biding my time — learning English, reading everything I could about the American way of life. Our uncle, who spent the entire wartime in German prison camps, came to America and started writing for the Pentagon as an educated ex-politician and on the basis of his military experience; he was a General. So there was this wonderful

Library of Congress

preparation for me to come here. In school I excelled and won a scholarship, and landed here as an exchange student.

Q: I was about to ask how you met John.

MCCARTHY: Oh, again, that's very private too. My brother's wife was very sweet in giving a beautiful, lavish dinner for her best friend whose husband was a diplomat — they are Bob and Domnica Malone, and were about to leave for a tour of duty in Paris. She told Bob to invite “whoever you consider your friend” and John was among the guests. I didn't attend that party, but both Jos#e and Paul just adored John, I could not hear enough about this wonderful blue-eyed Irish prince that they had met, a young widower with two children, and so on. At one of the consequent dinners they invited me. At that time, 1974, I was going off to Greece to paint for the summer. So we had had the one meeting.

After I returned I had a full one-person show at the Spectrum Gallery. That's another gallery that's very important in my life — ten others and I founded it in 1965, it's still in Georgetown, doing very well. So I showed my Grecian art works, and invited John among many, many others of course. He came, he was very complimentary, liked the show very much, and invited us all to his home for a drink afterwards Then I invited him for dinner, and so w(both laugh) went right from there. The gallery show was in September, I think. Right after Christmas we were engaged to marry, and were married the next summer, on July 19, 1975.

Q: I think this is a very interesting interview, because it shows, as you said very early on, that you can have a career, and you can be a Foreign Service wife at the same time. And you can juggle both.

MCCARTHY: I think it probably takes adaptable people. One would need to be resigned to picking up and going, and any terrible attachment to things or people or places becomes very painful. A person would need to be sort of forward-looking and anticipating the next. So that the one that is inevitably to be left behind can be borne without too much

Library of Congress

unhappiness. I think it takes — again, the word “flighty” without a negative connotation to that word is appropriate. You would need to sort of soar above things, and look forward, and be projected forwardly rather than concentrate on the past.

Q: I always used to say that I would just “tune out” of a post several months before I left it; and then tune into the next — it’s the only way you can handle it, really.

MCCARTHY: Just like those separations that I told you about from John when he was coming up every four months. For self-preservation, you have to gear yourself just a tiny, tiny length each day, so that the final separation, when it comes, when you take him to the airport or as a family lifts off from a post, you are not torn apart. You have already severed the easier severable little tissues. Then it just sort of takes off, and life is bearable, and indeed wonderful.

Q: Above and beyond the settling-in when you arrive at a post — the searching for a house, the moving-in, does it take you a while to absorb the local scene before you can begin to paint?

MCCARTHY: You are very astute to say that. That is exactly what I must take. I must take a certain amount of time to internalize what I am surrounded by — my surroundings, sensing the smells, the sounds, everything has to become known to me. So that once I begin to record that — and “to record” of course I use in the sense of painting, but it is, I see it that way. I see that as something that passes through me and comes down as that which I can record, I being the creative agent.

This is also why when I go to the most magnificent, most breathtaking places, overnight or even for a brief weekend, friends of mine will say, “Oh, Marija, you must have painted?” And I say, “No, I didn’t paint.” I’ve spent three days of my life in Ireland, on a single occasion. And I wa(almost incoherent) just astonished, I was dizzy with how wonderful and paintable and beautiful that country was. Yet I did not paint a thing there. We took some photographs, not many. I could not just sit down and paint because it was not a part of me,

Library of Congress

I have not been abducted by Ireland and it has not become part of that internal makeup of me which can then begin to recite how wonderful it is.

It happens so with other places. I adore the West Coast of the U.S., I have friends and relatives whom I visit there. And unless I can settle down for at least a week and devote myself just to viewing and looking and breathing, not visiting and dining and climbing stairs to people's apartments, just being in nature, then I probably can begin to work and be successful at it. So it is truly a good long moment sometimes. As in the case of Pakistan, which is such a totally different immersion in culture and climate and sights and sounds and smells. Good God, the smells! You feel you're somehow dumped into the “dip” used to de-flea an animal — you're entire being is dipped into something. And whatever else existed before, it has to sort of fall off of you because it is so penetrating and powerful, your brand-new surroundings and brand-new presence.

That is why I waited in Pakistan easily a month before we went to Lahore and to Murree and began to see the city and rural areas and mountains. Then the painting just started pouring out.

Q: But how marvelous to have the psychological makeup that you have that enables you to absorb all of that and then re-create it I would say — you call it “record”, I would say “record and re-create.”

MCCARTHY: It is both.

Q: But not everyone can do it. Some people do it with words. But not everyone can do it.

MCCARTHY: I'm most humbled by that, because I still feel that my output nowhere, absolutely nowhere matches that which is in my mind. I'm a very desperate person many times. I look at these works, and I like a lot about them, and I think that a lot of them are somehow the tiny bells of recollections of these places and these people and these lovely

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sights; they're just sort of little echoes. But I have far grander, far more powerful and wonderful images in my head.

Q: That's the way I feel about words too — if I could just get them down (she laughs).

MCCARTHY: I know exactly what you mean.

Q: In a manner that really satisfied me!

MCCARTHY: Well, that is also that perpetual motion pushing one to hope one day to paint that way. I would be totally distressed if today I thought, “No, it will always just be in my fancy, it will never come out on paper.” I still hope it does. And tiny little bits here and there do come out, and I do congratulate myself every once in a while. In fact what I do is very primal, very primitive. This is why I like to work in empty places, I don't like when half of my family is here or — I like to work in an empty house. I'm up there, when I come to this wonderful moment when something has taken over as if I were a tool in one enormous wonderful gifted hand, and I've done this, and it's lovely. It's looking at me and saying, “Marija, finally your mind has splattered itself on the paper.” I scream, I jump and I scream, I just jump for joy. And when people say “jump for joy,” I mean I stomp around and I let these wonderful shrieks out.

Once I frightened my mother to death. My mama lived here, this was an addition made for her, (gesturing toward an adjoining room) she lived with us for three years. When we were to leave for Pakistan, she couldn't join us because of a severe heart condition and Pakistan is a country where in medical terms you could not take an elderly person. So Mama was with me here in those times and of course I did my painting upstairs, and she was way down here, and I must have forgotten and I jumped and screamed, and Mama came halfway up and said, (breathlessly) “Marija! Are you all right?” (repeating it in her mother's tongue) “What is this?” “Oh, Mama, I should have told you.” And of course she

Library of Congress

was ready for the next time. But that is what I do. As I said it's very primal but it is a part of the creative process.

Q: There is another interesting aspect of your personality I find — so many creative people would not be happy pushing dollies and hanging pictures and...

MCCARTHY: I love work.

Q: Yes. But that's part of it.

MCCARTHY: (with feeling) That was it. That was art. That was my art school. I would give my — not my right, my left hand for my art school. Oh, I would. It was my bread-and-butter, it was my life, it had provided for me the most wonderful cushion of living in this country and an opportunity that millions even now, let alone in the 50s and 60s, would do anything to come to America. It was a mecca, it truly was. The Free World was just a dream, almost an illusion, to half the world at the time. Now it is getting a little more spread about and equalized.

Q: In Brussels were you aware of any envy on the part of the other wives, because you had your own career, your own interests? You really had your life all together.

MCCARTHY: Well, Jewell, I would not say envy, really; I would not say envy. At least I never saw it like that, I truly never did. I think people were very generous with their wonderful comments and complimentary actions and purchases of my art work and coming to my shows and things like that.

Q: So the Missions were supportive.

MCCARTHY: Oh, tremendously. The diplomatic family, they're just lovely people. Truly I don't think you could survive if you were forever suffering without an idea of what to do. Well, let me put it this way: There were plenty of women whose time in my opinion was not spent as lucratively as I would think a bright, healthy human being could do. They stayed

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around the pool a lot, they played cards, they played tennis, and so on. But that's how they constructed their days and they were doing that, and perhaps a lot of them would feel even a little luckier than I, who was forever slaving away at home in my lovely little windowed room. But I don't think there was either envy or incapacity on the part of other women to creatively spend their time. It's that their creativity is different from mine. And they were certainly very wonderful in every way — I made a tremendous number of friends, both Pakistani and American, and certainly the foreign community which we mingled with heavily, we just loved.

I don't know... John and I are really probably what you would call “expatriate with a capital E,” because we just love foreign people, you know. When we're in a foreign land, we really want to take in the entire experience and the other people from foreign lands who converge with us to serve and to experience and to find out and to somehow become enriched. Truly we've had many wonderful American friends but I just wasn't hanging around too much any American groups exclusively. I am not your very “social person,” I'm a recluse, I truly am. For me to work as much as I like to, I just can't be that social. I cannot have lunches, I cannot have teas, I cannot go to picnics, and study local folklore. It would be wonderful to go to museums and listen to speeches, and read more — not reading is my greatest sorrow. By the time I get to read in the evening I'm very tired.

But that was another thing I did much more than ever, in Pakistan. Just because your daily chores, your housekeeping, ironing — all of this was taken care of by other people. And I read everything written about the Subcontinent that I could lay my hands on, both contemporary and past, and I just love it. But truly being a working painter takes so much of your time that all other contacts just had to be reduced to a minimum or to a “respectable” amount so that people could not fault me and I would still be sensitive to my husband's professional needs and so on. It was all around a very wonderful combination.

Q: Splendid... I think it's a marvelous interview.

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MCCARTHY: Thank you. I enjoyed it tremendously. It's lovely to have an ear so nice and inquisitive and patient. I love talking about it. Thank you very much.

[another subject follows directly after the above w/o spoken transition]

Q: But you're looking at the positive side of a CODEL, the opportunity to travel.

MCCARTHY: That's right. They came, it was a very active time, very politically sensitive — this was two years ago, we were in Islamabad three years, 1985-88. Those were the three years as you know that the Afghan war was raging, the Russian presence there, our help to the mujahideen was taking place. Especially fired-up and interested Congressman Charles Wilson of Texas came at least five or six times while we were there, a lovely gentleman, exciting person, always bringing very interested, insightful people. We went with them I think a couple of times I think to the Khyber Pass.

CODELs were coming over, Congressional people with or without wives, Secretary Weinberger came with his wife. It opens opportunities for you. One is being invited to the homes of President Zia and/or the Prime Minister, Junejo at the time, and to see the cream of the crop of the government of Pakistan. The other opportunity was going to these remote places where otherwise one couldn't go, both because of their remoteness and because of their sensitivity. You could not just go and have an outing and see, let's say, the Afghan refugee camp; which is what we did in Peshawar and Rhetta. We would see the materials which were sent by the U.S. Government for these poor people, the houses that were built, the oil and flour and rice brought to them, children's schools, medical supplies. And it was very wonderful to see how much our government was doing for these very deserving and very unfortunate people; as well as to see a strategic geographic spot such as Khyber Pass, from the heights of which you could look straight into Afghanistan. We would look over and see puffs of smoke and vapor of the grenades and hear the

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explosions, as the war was indeed raging at the time. And the d#fil# of the very hospitable, wonderful Pakistan soldiers who would dance and play music for you and treat you in the most regal manner.

And so these were great privileges. One can say what one wants but I think that is an extreme privilege to participate in such an auspicious and important national display, being one Marija McCarthy, wife and painter. I consider that a great opportunity. I leaped — every time they were willing to fly us out there I went. And I think I benefited. I certainly never painted any of that but it's the wealth and that part of immersion in a culture whose very history we were privileged to observe.

Q: And be a part of.

MCCARTHY: Sure.

BIOGRAPHIC DATA

Spouse: John Thomas McCarthy

Spouse Entered Service:1962You Entered Service:1975

Status: Spouse of US Diplomat

Posts: 1975Washington, DC 1976-80Brussels, Belgium 1980-85Washington, DC
1986-88Islamabad, Pakistan 1988-89Beirut, Lebanon (husband only)

Spouse's Position: US Ambassador to Lebanon

Place and Date (optional) of birth: Feb. 17, 1935 Belgrade, Yugoslavia

Maiden Name: Pavlovich

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Parents (Name, Profession):

Branibor Pavlovich, naval engineer;

Milica Pavlovich, fashion designer & homemaker

Schools (Prep, University): Fine Arts Academy Belgrade, Yugoslavia

George Washington University; Corcoran School of Art, Washington, DC

Date and Place of Marriage: July 19, 1975, Washington, DC

Children: Stepmother to John (25) and Beth (23) and Mother to Julia (11)

Profession: Painter, Educator

Volunteer and Paid Positions held: A. At Post - Taught art classes in American Womens' Club in Brussels, Belgium, and the same on the grounds of the US Embassy in Islamabad, Pakistan; Julia and I made weekly visits and did volunteer work at Saint Joseph's Hospice in Rawalpindi, Pakistan.

B. In Washington, D.C. - I have taught art professionally since 1962. I was a Red Cross Volunteer (1965-72). I went to Walter Reed Army Hospital and made portrait sketches of patients each week and gave the drawings to the subjects. I also worked with DC orphans in the DC Village in 1968-70.

End of Interview