

Monique Lévi-Strauss: *Oral history interview with Sheila Hicks, 2004 February 3 and March 11*

On 3rd of February and 11th of March textile researcher and writer Monique Lévi-Strauss met with her friend of 37 years, American Fiber artist Sheila Hicks, for an interview at Hicks' home in Paris, France. They talked about the artist's education, inspiration and her journey through South America.

The entire interview transcript and an excerpt from the original audio recording can be viewed at the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution:

<https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-sheila-hicks-11947#transcript>

Excerpt

(...)

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: This first trip to Caracas: it was in 1957 and you were 23 years old. The year later, that would have been 1958, you came back from Chile.

MS. HICKS: Yes, but on my way down to Chile – I haven't told you – I travelled in small local airlines and by land. It was economical and I could see and photograph. I was alone; no one was going with me.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: But you're taller than anybody else, don't forget that. [Laughter.] Compared to South American women, you must have been much taller.

MS. HICKS: I tried not to think about danger – just coping with immediate problems – getting from point A to point B. How to get from Caracas to Bogotá, or to Quito and Otavalo, Ecuador – that was the only thing that concerned me. And Junius Bird was guiding me a bit.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: You haven't told us a word about Junius Bird until now. Do you think it's the right moment to bring him into the picture?

MS. HICKS: Yes, when I took the initial pre-Columbian art history course with George Kubler at Yale and he understood I was interested in Andean textiles, he suggested I meet Junius Bird at the Museum of Natural History in New York and he became the main advisor for my research. He was the expert.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Junius Bird. Yes.

MS. HICKS: And we hit it off. He was a real treasure house of information. MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: You owe

him a lot?

MS. HICKS: I owe him more than a lot. He made a list of places for me to go and see. He wanted me to try and find out what was happening in certain sites that were being excavated in South America. So when you're alone and have a map with little pins marking destinations, the story becomes how to get from one place to the next. If there is no public transport, how do you make friends with people driving delivery trucks? Can they take you to one place from where you can pick up a ride to the next place?

It's crucial to have names of people who can –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Recommend you or help you?

MS. HICKS: To check in with. Junius had been to South America many times for his research and even spent his honeymoon down in Tierra del Fuego. He prodded me to go and find things and send him reports, and to collect things along the way. I tried to observe. He gave me reasons for going to see the weaving, the Indians, the villages, the architecture, and the archeology in Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Chile. Basically he gave me a more focused way of traveling.

(...)

MS. HICKS: When you get sick traveling alone it is quite frightening. I caught something labeled the Asiatic flu, when I got to Peru. Everything had gone well in Colombia and Ecuador. The people I had met helped me locate places to see and photograph, but when I got to Peru I came down with a high fever. I was staying in a pension with some archeologists and anthropologists. I had to watch my money, too, because every day you save money means you can extend your trip a day longer.

It wasn't my plan to get sick for 10 days in Peru, but I did and someone helped me out. Miracle of all miracles. I was told about an art school in Miraflores [neighborhood in Lima] and I went to visit it. It was run by John Davies, who had been a teacher at Syracuse University and had married one of his beautiful students, Isabel Benevides [sp], who I think was either the daughter or the niece of one of the presidents of Peru. They lived on a glorious property and they took me in and gave me an impressive bedroom, in an unoccupied part of the house, where I thought I was going to die. This was really going out in style.

I was a sick, lost soul. They fed me and nursed me back to health. I'll never forget this time. When I recovered they led me to beautiful ancient textile collections, so my interest was intensifying.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes.

MS. HICKS: It can only intensify when you're in Peru surrounded by amazing archaeological collections. I went to – is it interesting if I tell you the itinerary, because it was –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, it is.

MS. HICKS: Well, from Lima I went to Cuzco, Urubamba, and Machu Picchu. That was the highlight: Machu Picchu, and to photograph there. The photos were published later in Yale's architecture school journal, *Perspecta*. From there I went down to Pisac, Pucara, Juliaca and Puno towards Teohuanaco and Lake Titicaca – between Peru and Bolivia. I continued to Chile, through Arequipa and Tacna by train and by bus. Crossing the border at Arica, between Peru and Chile, someone asked me if I would carry one of their sacks through the customs – maybe five kilos of sugar. I couldn't say no and make a whole bus full of enemies, but when I think about it now, I must have –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Nowadays it would be impossible. MS. HICKS: Carrying five-kilo bags of sugar across the border – suppose it was something else?

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, something white. [Laughter.] And something powder.

MS. HICKS: Well, that's how I entered Chile through the Atacama Desert, down through Iquique and Antofagasta with bleak, arid landscapes. A wonderful way to arrive to Chile; not just to land at Santiago, but to go to La Serena, Ovalle, La Ligua. Chile is a geographic experience. But Chile is a very long country. They were tedious bus rides and –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Tell me, what did you do during those long rides?

MS. HICKS: Wrote.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: You wrote.

MS. HICKS: Daybooks, journals, and sketchbooks.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: So you drew also?

MS. HICKS: Drew, photographed, and wrote.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, and you did that consistently all the time?

MS. HICKS: Most of the time, because I had no one to talk to and I had to occupy my mind and stay focused.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: And besides, it was a very good means to bring back a lot of information that you would have forgotten.

MS. HICKS: When I was doing this my purpose was just to keep myself on track. I never thought the

information might become useful.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: But it has.

MS. HICKS: Later it became useful, but back then I just entertained myself; almost like writing a comic book describing what was happening every day.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Nevertheless, you did owe a report to Junius and maybe also to Kubler and maybe also to Josef Albers and to Anni Albers. I mean, you did owe them some information.

(...)

MS. HICKS: We made an incredible trip down to Pucón, Villarica and the volcanic regions, and then we went to the virgin forests. We reached the area where Junius Bird had been and where he told me to keep my eyes open for the last Ona and Alakaluf Indians, and to be sure and photograph them.

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