THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH:	**MILDRED CONSTANTINE (MC)**
INTERVIEWER:	**SHARON ZANE (SZ)**
LOCATION:	**306 EAST 44 STREET NEW YORK CITY**
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BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE 1

SZ: Mildred....

MC: By the way, I'm called Connie, not Mildred. That's a good way to introduce this....

SZ: Tell me, if you would, where you were born and a little bit about your family background, and in more than two sentences [LAUGHING].

MC: I was born in Brooklyn, New York, on June 28th, 1913. My father was a jewelry designer and a calligrapher, my mother was, in addition to being a housewife, a beautiful embroiderer. I had a very simple upbringing in a relatively lower-middle-class Jewish family. Went to school in Brooklyn, right straight through high school. Could not continue into college because of the depths of the Depression.

SZ: That's right, because you must have graduated from high school in 1929.

MC: Right. Not quite sixteen.

SZ: Where in Brooklyn, what neighborhood?

MC: The Williamsburg section of Brooklyn. So I started going to the branch of City

College which was in Brooklyn, at night, and then I got my first job, at the College Art Association, as a stenographer, because I had taken a brief business course in order to be able to get a job, which was important at that time.

SZ: Was important to your family's income?

MC: Not just important: it was essential. My father was not getting anywhere at that particular moment in his professional life.

SZ: Was it his own business?

MC: He had his own business at that time and was working in rhinestone jewelry, having come from diamonds and that kind of thing into the rhinestone field. It was essential that I work, so, as I say, I started college at the Brooklyn branch of City College. But then, when I got my first job at the College Art Association, I switched to CCNY at night, uptown, at 137th Street. The College Art Association was probably the best training ground that anybody could have had, because the professors who were on the board at that time were extremely responsive to me. The woman who was the executive secretary, Audrey McMahon, was indeed of the most nurturing kind that you can possibly imagine.

SZ: Let's go back a little bit, to you, because I want to know a little bit more about you. It's clear from what I know of what your interests have been over the years that your parents' talents and interests played a large part in....

MC: You know, it was really...they played an enormous role, but not consciously. And I think that was one of the nicest things that happened, you know? The consciousness that it created in me, for example, for form, for design, for the understanding of creativity of any kind--although neither of them knew how to exploit

their abilities.

SZ: You said your mother liked crafts.

MC: She embroidered, she crocheted, she was knitting--she taught me all of those things. But as I say, neither of them exploited this. It was within the household.

SZ: Were they both born here?

MC: No. No, my father came from Vilna, at the age of about seven, and went to school here. My mother, equally, came about the same age, but she came from that part of the Austro-Hungarian empire, you know, which was Poland, a small town in Poland. Both grandfathers, interestingly enough, were musical. My paternal grandfather was what we called a music meister in the Russian Army. My maternal grandfather was a chazzin, a cantor.

SZ: So there was a strong....

MC: ...a strong musical element.

SZ: Is that something you were interested in as well?

MC: Oh, we all played the piano. It was a family that sang, aunts and uncles that sang. One of them had a victrola. Interesting...he had the victrola, he had a curious selection, but my consciousness, my response somewhere, somehow, to Spain and Spanish music was born at that time. Of course, it stayed with me all my life, since I'm a Latin Americanist in addition, as you may know. My transference from Spain to Mexico was immediate when I first got there. But I'm jumping ahead.

SZ: But that was an important element in your home life.

MC: Oh, yes. That kind of music. I danced. I danced, well, I even at one point danced professionally.

SZ: Ballet or modern dance, or ballroom dancing?

MC: Ballroom dancing. I danced at the Savoy, because there was CCNY way up there, there were the men from the project--you mustn't forget that the WPA [Works Progress Administration] and the Federal Arts Project and all of that was really begun in New York by the College Art Association. So my relationship with artists--not just art but with artists--started there. And we used to dance in the Savoy Ballroom as often as we could.

SZ: Were your parents educated, had higher education?

MC: No, not at all. Neither of them went beyond public elementary school.

SZ: That was something that was important to them?

MC: It was not that important to them. That type of Jewish family was very much involved simply in their small family life. My father was a little different. He was active in the Democratic Party and the Democratic club in our neighborhood. He was involved very much in what was going on in the world. We had an uncle who was a Socialist, and I would hear conversations on Sunday morning at the breakfast table that were utterly fascinating to me and undoubtedly shaped my own attitudes, which were then sharpened by the Federal Arts Project, by the WPA and by the Spanish Civil War; you know, all of that kind of thing. It was impoverished economically but not spiritually, and this was very lovely.

SZ: Religious?

MC: In a modern sort of way, yes. Mother kept a kosher household. I was intrigued when I visited my father in synagogue because of the ritual, which I thought was rather beautiful. But on the other hand, we lived in the kind of neighborhood where we had non-Jewish friends, so I went to church at an early age with neighbors; [I] found that ritual kind of interesting. I had an Italian boyfriend. In other words, it was a darn good way to grow up.

SZ: Did you have an idea early on what you wanted to do?

MC: Well, I had originally wanted to go into teaching, and that was what I thought I would do after high school.

SZ: You went to public high school in Brooklyn?

MC: That's right, Girls High School in Brooklyn, separated by four blocks from Boys High School. Again, that was one of the serious good schools.

SZ: So you were a good student.

MC: I was a pretty good student, yes.

SZ: Do you have any brothers or sisters?

MC: I have an older sister and a younger brother. I just want to tell you that neither of them followed any path that I followed.

SZ: Totally different?

MC: Totally different, totally. I don't believe that my sister understands to this day anything about me at all. My brother is different; we are closer, to the extent that Spanish is very important as a language in our lives. But neither of them has pursued any of the concerns or the interests that I have, and I don't know that either of them is aware of what our backgrounds were, as keenly as I am, you see.

SZ: They were not interested.

MC: I don't know, I think it's a matter of a human being's curiosity about life, which you're either born with or something nurtures it, and then one goes one's own path. And that's what I did from the minute I got my first job. You'll be interested--I think amusing, too--to give you an idea how I was brought up: When the College Art Association had its annual meeting in Chicago one year, and Mrs. McMahon wanted very much for me to come, she had to go to Brooklyn to ask permission of my mother and father to take me, because I was very young and I had not traveled. But she did.

SZ: And they granted it?

MC: And they granted it, and I went to Chicago. It was my first real experience, not only in a foreign city--you see, it was a foreign city--but also another kind of exposure to another aspect of the art world, of the art-history world.

SZ: When you were growing up, did you come in from Brooklyn and enjoy the museums?

MC: Brooklyn Museum. That's when I discovered the Brooklyn Museum. But I also was

a reader. I could not be kept out of the library, I could not be kept out of the adult part of the library. It was very strongly separate, the children's section and the adult section, and I had finished with the children's section. I was in the adult section and being tossed out, by a very sympathetic librarian, I will say. So I read a lot, and my Italian boyfriend--I guess I must have been thirteen or fourteen--would bring me books; he was older. So, the combination of the Brooklyn Museum, my own home environment, friends that I had who were outside of the family, my reading and all of that...I didn't know what I wanted to do, I just knew I wanted to go.

SZ: Was there anything in particular at the Brooklyn Museum that really held you?

MC: The whole museum, the concept of the museum. I suppose it's hard, even at this point of our lives, to try to remember what it was like to leave the home environment and to get into this fantastic environment of a museum. Why was it, what was it? It was the kind of revelation that slowly grew until I lost, in a sense, my fear. Can you understand that there is a fear associated with removing yourself from one environment into another? Are you the alien? It is not that that is alien to you, but are you alien to it? Now naturally, none of this was articulated then, but I just remember. Some people might call it timidity, but I call it fear.

SZ: Because it had a lot of implications, many of which you couldn't even imagine.

MC: I couldn't imagine. I couldn't imagine, no.

SZ: Girls High--did you study anything specific to prepare yourself?

MC: Languages, of course, were my first love. I loved the concept, the idea, of a foreign language. That's why I bring up this business of these Spanish musical records and voices. Languages, I love languages. I took as much language as I could. I was

fascinated by physical geography--that's what we used to call it, but it was the early stages of what geology would be, and I was utterly fascinated by it and have never lost that, never. Just imagine my excitement when, in 1973, the U.S. Geological Survey asked me to create an exhibition for them.

SZ: The appearance of the....

MC: Not just the appearance but the mystery of what makes up the world. The sheer mystery of it absolutely fascinated me. And I suppose if I hadn't completely gone into art history I would have gone into geology or anthropology or one of those other disciplines, because I'm still interested in it. Again, I was fairly active in sports and in dance.

SZ: When you were in high school.

MC: Yes.

SZ: That's where you learned to ballroom dance?

MC: No. It was interesting. We had extraordinary teachers at that school. We had a teacher who was our gym teacher but who spent half of each period trying to get us to use our body through dance movement, which I suppose was like the beginning of ballet, and that was just marvelous to me. It was something that...it had again the kind of ritual which I liked.

SZ: You talked about wanting to move and wanting to go, and I think I see what you were talking about. Was that okay with your parents and with the family?

MC: I can't say it was okay and I can't say that they forbade it. They just were mystified

by it, you know? Like, for example, when a non-Jewish person, who was my boss, came into their household to get permission for me to go away? On the other hand, as I said before, we had a lot of non-Jewish friends. My father had employed a black woman who was married to a white man, [and] who was very much a part of our family. So again, there was a richness there. They were without prejudice, and that was good. So they neither aided me nor did they prohibit me. I'm sure I wasn't an easy child, because I only remember that my grandmother, when I would ask questions, she would only say, "You must not ask questions." If that did not produce alienation.... [LAUGHTER]

SZ: The College Art Association, which was your first job--you went after that particular job, that was the place where you wanted to be? Or did it just kind of happen?

MC: What happened was that a woman had been working at the College Art Association and she needed a stenographer, and she called the business school where I had had three months. I did a business school course to learn typing and stenography. I needed a job, what could I do? I didn't want to be a saleslady, although I had on Saturdays gone to get jobs, and at one point had a job in a big department store, where in addition to being a saleslady or a stockwoman I modeled a little bit. I was very slim at that time. And she simply asked the director of the school for his brightest student, and he sent me. And I pinned my hair up.

SZ: Because?

MC: I wore curls. I pinned my hair up for the first time and went into New York City to be interviewed, and got the job.

SZ: That must have been a tough time, as you said.

MC: It was a very tough time.

SZ: So it was a particularly happy occurrence?

MC: Oh, it was wonderful. I was able to bring home money every week. My mother gave me enough for carfare and lunches and the rest went into the household, which is why I was so pleased to be able to do this.

SZ: But also, what about the substance of being in that particular environment.

MC: At the College Art Association?

SZ: Yes.

MC: It was like flying. Again, it was fear. There was timidity. The woman I worked for, Audrey McMahon, was just fantastic, absolutely fantastic. The minute she learned that I knew French and could handle French easily, she would sometimes dictate things in French for me. It was the best education, in tandem with what I did at City College and then NYU and then the Institute of Fine Arts. And don't forget, all of this was at night--it took nine years. But in tandem with the College Art Association, it cannot be duplicated. It was absolutely wonderful. I worked with some of the best art historians: Charles Rufus Morey, at Princeton; Paul J. Sachs, at Harvard; Francis Henry Taylor; Walter Cook, who started the Institute of Fine Arts, and at that time, when he was working on the formulation of that, it was simply called the Research Institute and it was in the same building as the College Art Association.

SZ: Where was the College Art Association?

MC: We started out, first, in a small study room at NYU, and then Dean Munn then gave

us a house at 20 West 58th Street. It was there that the College Art Association developed its exhibition program, and then the Research Institute was downstairs. I used to steal Cookie's whiskey--"Cookie" we called Walter Cook--when he began the Institute of Fine Arts. So that all of these people had a profound influence on me, and they helped me.

SZ: When did you discover that this was something that you really were interested in?

MC: From the minute I got into it. From the very minute I crossed into that office and was interviewed. Being interviewed at NYU? Come on, can you realize what this meant? I was in a milieu that I couldn't be in because I couldn't afford college, but here I was in this milieu and some mysterious thing called the College Art Association. So, from that minute on, I've never deviated. Never.

SZ: And you started out as a secretary.

MC: A stenographer.

SZ: How did that change over the time you were there?

MC: My boss used to sign letters by saying, "Signed by me but not dictated." In other words, I wrote the letters and she signed them. It was very cute, because I could almost imitate her signature when I had to. And then don't forget the whole, what shall I say, social involvement--and I'm using social in the sense of society. We were in the depths of the Depression. The Gibson Committee for the Arts...together, Mayor LaGuardia had helped to establish, with Mrs. Gibson, the Gibson committee to help the artists, and this is before the real formulation of the WPA and the Federal Arts Project--and artists would come in to get help. As the thing grew...I'll give you a perfect example: David Smith, a famous American sculptor, came in, and he brought

with him a carton (I was out at the front desk and I would talk to all the artists) and said, "Do you want to see what I brought?"--of course, some would come in with paintings under their arms, and friends like Louise Nevelson with some ceramics she was doing at the time--and I said to David Smith, "Sure, I'd love to see what you brought in." He opened this box and I looked in it and there in plaster were constructions or structures or configurations such as I had never seen. We talked a little bit about that and why he was doing it, and then I went in to see Mrs. McMahon and said, "There's an artist out there who's bringing in some work like I've never seen before, and I'm going to be very interested in what you think about it." David and I became friends. He took me home to meet his wife, Dorothy. They were godparents to my first daughter, Judith, and Dorothy's my friend to this very day. All the artists who came into the project became my friends. So when I got to The Museum of Modern Art, everybody was surprised that when the artists came in, they came to say hello. "How do you know all these people?"

SZ: It all went back to that.

MC: It all went back to that. Ben Shahn...well, you name it, I knew them all. Some of us were playing poker--strip poker. Some of us were dancing....

SZ: I heard that [LAUGHING].

MC: Some of them were...well, they never let me strip. They were so protective, you've no idea. It was a wild time.

SZ: And you were quite young.

MC: I was very young. And don't forget, Audrey McMahon kept an eye on me too. They were all very protective. And then we would dance up in Harlem, and we would go

out on picket lines. We, the College Art Association, helped organize a picket line against Rockefeller Center when they were ruining the Diego Rivera murals. I told this story when I gave a lecture in Detroit--because I was the guest curator in '86 of

the Rivera retrospective in Detroit--and I told this story about my being on the picket line and helping to form the picket line against Rockefeller Center.

SZ: Is there more to that story than that?

MC: Oh, sure. It'll come.

SZ: Tell me, I want to hear.

MC: Well, we were all activated by this phenomenon of the Depression. The artists who were beginning to organize were beginning to think not simply as individuals but about their whole collective problem, so that when we heard about what was happening at Rockefeller Center, about Diego being told to stop working on a mural, we immediately organized a group and went over there and picketed.

SZ: Did he come to you and tell you what was happening, or was this common knowledge around town?

MC: With the artists it was common knowledge, because a lot of the artists had heard about him, went to watch him working....

SZ: Because it was actually a wonderful thing. Here they were....

MC: Here a mural was being done in New York City. We had heard about murals in Mexico; we knew what the artists were doing, we were well aware of this. Hell, the

College Art Association did the first major exhibition of Mexican art to circulate in this country. There was nothing that was happening in the art world that the College Art Association didn't know about. So this is the milieu that I brought with me to MoMA with two things that happened in between. When I left the College Art Association--that was 1938, because in '36 I went to Mexico; I left [the CAA] '37, I guess--I went to work for an organization called the National Art Society that was going to do two things. We had a national radio program to talk about art in your life, and the man who created the program was Dr. Bernard Meyers, who had been one of my professors at NYU, at the Institute, and also became a very good, close friend. We did two things, the radio program [and] we reproduced works of art, good reproductions, which were then sort of sold through the radio program. In connection with that, I traveled throughout the United States, so that museums and colleges could persuade the local radio station to carry the program, which was very fascinating. So I got to know practically every museum and every college through that. And then we published the catalogue for the New York World's Fair art. I was the designer, the graphic designer.

SZ: MoMA had a lot to do with that.

MC: Not then.

SZ: It was Holger Cahill.

MC: Holger Cahill--that's where I met Eddie. But I did this whole...I laid out this whole publication, and after that I left. But, where did I learn about graphic design? At the College Art Association. We were producing Parnassus, and they taught me how to understand the layout of a magazine. We were producing the Art Bulletin, and Professor Morey would get me to work with him on abstracts of periodicals. He was a Medievalist, and I became infatuated with that period of art, Medieval art. They

sent me out for Parnassus to go to all the art galleries so I could find out what was going to be shown so I could write up a calendar. Hell, where do you get an education like that?

SZ: All the time you were at the College Art Association you said you were also getting your bachelor's.

MC: My bachelor's, and working toward my master's. I went to Mexico to do research--you see, it was during the time of the Spanish Civil War, and I was going to do my thesis on the Byzantine influences on the crucifix. What's a nice Jewish girl doing.... On the other hand, thanks to Professor Morey, I was fascinated, you see, with that period. I couldn't go to Spain. [Both] Cook, Professor Cook, [and] Philip McMahon, who was professor of aesthetics at NYU, said, "Can't let her go to Spain." Somebody suggested Italy and I said, "You want me to go to that fascist country?" No thank you. So it was Philip who said, "Go to Mexico." That was '36.

SZ: The Depression was still pretty keen at that time.

MC: Yes, but you see, my family was a little better off, my salary was better. My sister began teaching piano, was earning money. My father was a little bit better off than he had been.... The economy was beginning, just beginning to move....

SZ: But you had to finance the trip.

MC: Oh, sure.

SZ: You said you'd been to Chicago, which you described as your first foray into the great unknown, and I assume this was your first....

MC: No, it wasn't my first [trip] out of the country. I can't remember what year it was. I came home once and showed my mother a whole batch of tickets: I was going to take a cruise ship that was going to take me to Cuba. It was a fait accompli. I just went. That was my first real foreign country. Puerto Rico and Cuba. And then I had spent a summer at the University of Rio Piedras in Puerto Rico.

SZ: So this all revolved around your interest in Spanish as well.

MC: Right.

SZ: What was Cuba like in--what was it? In 1930? It was early.

MC: It was earlier than the Mexican trip. Must have been about '34. It was fascinating, absolutely fascinating to me. I went everyplace. There was a man who picked me up--or I picked him up; I can't remember who did what--and he took me around and showed me things. I guess I must have been so innocent--if I can use that word--I must have been so innocent and so absorbing of things that people were just quite wonderful. Took me to the museum in Havana, took me to a wonderful restaurant.

SZ: Well, Havana had, even though, although a little bit afterwards especially, had the reputation of being a very gay place.

MC: Oh, it was. Took me to the bars. We danced in the middle of the afternoon. By the way, Audrey McMahon took me to my first speakeasy, and I shocked her, because she thought she was going to order an orange blossom for me. And when I asked her to give me a little straight whiskey, she looked at me and she said, "Straight whiskey? Who taught you to drink that?" I said, "My father." Which he did. But she took me to my first speakeasy. She took me to my first Broadway play, my first theater experience--I mean real theater, because I had an uncle who was an

acrobatic clown with Keith Vaudeville, so my mother would take me when he was performing--but a real legitimate Broadway theater, Mrs. McMahon took me.

SZ: Remember the play?

MC: Sure: Green Grows the Lilacs. I will never forget it. I had a very, very rich and varied upbringing, because all these people brought me up.

SZ: And then the artists whom you met.

MC: And then the artists brought me up. Gorky, Arshile Gorky, explaining to me about abstract art, sitting in a corner at some party....

SZ: You said something before, and I just want to ask you a bit more about it--the artists as a group beginning to understand what their situation was in the '30s. I guess it really flowed from the economic situation. I'm trying to think of the '20s and what that decade was like for artists. What you're saying is that it organized them in a different sort of way.

MC: It organized them in a different sort of way. Don't forget--I shouldn't say don't forget, because how would you know--we organized the artists' union, and in the Archives of MoMA, in the library somewhere, you'll find a wonderful photograph of me and Harry Knight and Dick Lewis...and I can't remember who else, one of the other artists, because I persuaded the Dutch Oil Company to lend us their dining room at Rockefeller Center for a meeting when we were establishing the artists' union, the first artists' union, really. We organized picket lines, we did all kinds of things.

SZ: So it was very political.

MC: It was very political. We worked for the Spanish Civil War. How many of our artists went to volunteer for the Spanish Civil War? We were extreme loyalists at the time. Before [David Alfaro] Siqueiros went over he was in New York and I met Siqueiros here in New York....

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BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE 2

MC: ...it has to be, because there's no way to describe in a linear fashion all the things, all the currents, that were going on in which I was fortunately able to participate.

SZ: Just describe it a little bit more if you could, the general sentiment around the destruction of the Rivera mural.

MC: There were two things going on simultaneously. The artists were absolutely fascinated. He had a number of artists who were assisting him. Watching the work in progress was something that was like going to Mecca, and we were all very much involved.

SZ: So you went and watched him do it.

MC: Oh, sure, sure. So when we heard that he had been forced to stop work, my God, this affected us all personally, politically, artistically, aesthetically, and the whole mood of society at the time in New York was one of action: We can't let this happen. We were all activists, in the good sense of the word. Don't forget, another thing that was important, the projects, the federal art projects, were the only time when the hiring of people was done regardless of race, color, religion, sex, nationality--you name it. So that meeting homosexuals and meeting lesbians was part of my

education as well. These were people, people I loved, people I knew. Okay, they finally told me what it meant to be homosexual or a lesbian, but I had read, and I had read enough. And we were all active, and we were all active together. And the projects were not just painting and sculpture--printmaking; the utilization of silkscreen serigraph for the first time; photography, the photography project was absolutely thrilling, the things that were being recorded; the creation of the Index of American Design, which was done right in the College Art Association and through all of the WPA offices; the various craftspeople who were teaching in settlement houses and schools; the artists who were doing murals, the Rikers Island mural, Newark Airport.... Think of that combination. So as I say, it was the kind of education, exposure, experience, a limitless exposure, expansion of my own personal vision and conception of art and the relationship of art to life. Pretty good time to grow up. Hard, but.... I remember telling my eldest daughter when she was at Antioch--and Antioch by that time had an established program of work out of school--what advantages she had to really go out and work at various things all the time that she was at Antioch, because I said you're going to find what you did outside is just as important as what you did inside, judging from my experience.

SZ: That was something you knew personally.

MC: I knew it first-hand. Absolutely.

SZ: I just made another little note. You mentioned Paul Sachs, that you worked with him.

MC: He was one of the directors of the College Art Association, and we not only had meetings very often, but when they were in New York, they would always come in bringing an article for the Art Bulletin or for Parnassus. And Paul Sachs did something for me that was just marvelous. He invited me to come up to Harvard to

the Fogg Art Museum, and he brought out different states of prints by Rembrandt and Dürer to teach me what these particular techniques were, why there were such things as one state or another, how the artist had changed or added.... Pretty incredible, you know. So that's why I say that these professors, these men, were just fantastic.

SZ: You knew of the existence of The Museum of Modern Art during this time, the time you were at the College Art Association.

MC: Sure, because when I left the College Art Association and after my experience with the National Art Society, I was interviewed by Alfred Barr for a job. It must have been about '39, '40, something like that. MoMA wasn't hiring Jews, period, paragraph. In spite of the fact that Paul Sachs was on our board. But MoMA was not hiring Jews.

SZ: That was something that everybody knew?

MC: I don't think everybody knew, but I think that...after all, The Museum of Modern Art was an elitist institution and was looked upon that way. You could go look at their exhibits....

SZ: This was true of most of the museums in New York?

MC: Not just New York, because Paul Sachs, through his art history training at Harvard, trained so many young men who became directors of museums in this country--we used to call them the Sachstets--but never was a Jew sent out to become a director. This was just the way the world was at the time. Alfred and I laughed about it when I finally joined the Museum, because he remembered he had interviewed me, you see.

SZ: So you'd gone for this interview knowing that it was not really a real....

MC: Well, this was a lowly job. This wasn't going to be one of the top jobs. And I had had enough exposure to the world, to all kinds of people, and at that time it just never occurred to me that for a lowly job this would be an issue, you see.

SZ: But you just felt that when you weren't hired that it was?

MC: Sure.

SZ: That's interesting that Barr was interviewing for a lowly....

MC: Well, it was in the Department of Circulating Exhibitions, and I had had all this experience in circulating exhibitions because of the College Art [Association] program. That's how I heard about it.

SZ: I know that he, and he was still director at that time of the Museum, would interview even for...

MC: ...oh yes, even for that kind of job, absolutely. Oh, he was hands-on in every department, and in many ways, thank God. No, Alfred is one of the great men in my life, really.

SZ: Most of that comes later, but just from this one time, since you brought it up, what was your impression [of Barr] then?

MC: He was somewhat intimidating. He was very decent, but somewhat intimidating.

SZ: In his manner?

MC: In his manner, yes. And I left there, sort of crept out...you know what I mean, that feeling that you have. Of course I knew from the interview that it wasn't going to work. But then...when did I land at the Library of Congress?

SZ: I don't know, but I want to go back to Mexico. We didn't touch on that trip, which must have been seminal--one of Bill Rubin's favorite words. [LAUGHTER] So, tell me about that trip.

MC: First of all, we went by car.

SZ: You did not go alone.

MC: No. I and my great friend Martha Davidson, who at that time was at the Institute of Fine Arts--she was a day student, I was a night student, and the only one who was snobbish about my being a night student was Helen Franc, but never mind that--and that was with two men, who were driving. We formed a group so we could split expenses, and it was about a five-day trip, five or six days, to get there. But it was the cheapest way we could get there, you see. I stayed at the pension of the Arenal family, because Luis Arenal had given me an introduction to Mexican artists; some of them were on the project....

SZ: Such as?

MC: Such as Luis Arenal, such as Emilio Ameró, such as José Gutievvez....

SZ: They were on the project but they were living here.

MC: They were living here. So that when I went to Mexico, I went with all kinds of introductions and information, you see, and I stayed at this wonderful pension, and the Arenal family--Siqueiros was the boyfriend of one of the daughters. It was a pension where Aaron Copland came, where...well, you name all the people in the arts that were in Mexico--Americans who didn't stay there--we were all there at one time or another. It was just fabulous, you see. And I got to know all the artists....

SZ: Where was it in Mexico?

MC: Mexico City, and a wonderful pension, the address of which was Paris Siete--Paris Seven was the street. I got to know all the artists who were working at the Taller de Grafica Popular--Leopoldo Mendez, Pablo O'Higgins, Maximo Pacheco--a whole batch of them who were working there. Of course they were very political as well, and I got so involved in that aspect of Mexican art and Mexican life that I could not go into a church to do my research, I just couldn't, and I changed my research paper. I was overtaken by the whole milieu of Mexico in 1936, if you can possibly imagine what it was like. I was just overwhelmed, overtaken by it. It was the most glamorous thing I had ever experienced in my life, it was the most <u>real</u> thing I'd ever experienced in my life. And the whole idea of writing about Byzantine influences on the crucifix blew out the window. I was enraptured with the revolutionary art that was going. I had started with the Rivera in New York City, but there they were doing murals all over, there they were involved in posters on social things and social subjects, and I got so wrapped up in it, that was just fabulous. It changed my life. And then for a brief period I was on the stage in Mexico with the Pan-American Theater, but that came later, about 1938, because once I started going to Mexico, you couldn't keep me away from it.

SZ: But that first trip was just Mexico City.

MC: No, I went down to Oaxaca, which was absolutely exhilarating. I of course went to Taxco, Cuernavaca; I had visited the pyramids. In other words, I really traveled around, by train, which was wonderful. Went down to Vera Cruz by train, and that was just sensational. The whole image of the forests of Mexico is quite different from the mountains, but the train rode right into and through the forest. Because I spent about six months, I didn't come back easily. But that was wonderful, that was absolutely wonderful. From that time on, I have been going back and forth every since, from '36 on.

SZ: And the poverty?

MC: You know, you were not as conscious of the poverty because you were not as conscious of the rich. You see, Mexico's middle class really didn't develop until way after World War II. Having come from the poverty of the Depression and understanding what that was like, the poverty of Mexico did not have the same feeling, and, frankly, I knew very few of the upper class in Mexico at that time.

SZ: You knew the artists.

MC: I knew the artists.

SZ: In general, what class did the artists come from?

MC: They almost all came from working-class families, almost all of them. At least those that I met...those who were active. I could spend a whole day talking about Mexico.

SZ: So when you returned, that's when you went to the National Art Society.

MC: Right, and after that was over....

SZ: Because you did not want to go back to the College Art Association?

MC: The College Art Association, the role was changing. Audrey was so completely involved in the projects, you see, and we weren't doing exactly the kinds of things that we had been doing for all those wonderful eight years that I had been there. I wanted to fly again, and I wanted very much to be involved in Latin America, in Mexico. I went to Washington next. I'll give you the curriculum vitae and you can follow it. I went to Washington and one of the first jobs I got was with the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs.

SZ: By the name of?

MC: There was Nelson Rockefeller, and there was René d'Harnoncourt, although he was at that time he was still with the [Bureau] of Indian Affairs.... I had met René d'Harnoncourt at one of the great College Art Association meetings in New York, and we had danced rhumbas and tangos and he talked to me about Mexico and he encouraged me to go and do that. So I knew René then, before I went to Mexico [TELEPHONE INTERRUPTION].... I was doing a research project for [the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs] on what was going on in Latin America, information that I had obtained mostly through two intervening things that had happened. I made a trip to South America sponsored by a very interesting man, William Morris, who was connected with the William Morris Agency, and I just traveled all over, all over....

SZ: For what purpose?

MC: I was going to collect posters. I was just going to investigate what was going on in Latin America.

SZ: Posters in Latin America. You were doing this for him?

MC: Yes, for him. And now the collection is in the Metropolitan Museum.

SZ: That came about through...?

MC: I met him someplace, can't remember where. We talked and talked, and he was a man who, although he was head of the William Morris Agency, this man was very much involved in all sorts of social and political things. Anyhow, at the Coordinator's office I did this big research project and I got to know all the people involved. From there, I went to the Library of Congress and the Archive of Hispanic Culture.

SZ: You were in Washington during the war. What was that like?

MC: Right, and that was exhilarating, that whole period. But in between, I was married, in Washington--married actually in New York but living in Washington. My husband was first with the OPA, the Office of Price Administration and then the Board of Economic Warfare. Then, of course, he went off to war, and I was pregnant, and since, as Dr. [Lewis] Hanke said, "I can no longer introduce you as Miss Constantine," because I was in the eighth month.... By the way, I also met Porter McCray. I had known Porter McCray through the College Art Association and then re-met Porter when he was in Washington, you see. Then I came to New York, had my child, did all kinds of things. After the war, when my husband came back and I had my second child, I...I had a very interesting neighbor. I lived on 18th Street and Ninth Avenue, in a wonderful little house that sat right next to a high school and was owned by a woman who was at NYU and was very much involved with the [National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis], and she talked about the whole educational problem and difficulties they had. I said, "Look, you're not communicating with the

general public the way you might, and one of the ways is to use the artists and use artists to create posters for you." This was a project I brought to MoMA, and before I knew it, I was on staff.

SZ: And that's how that happened.

MC: That's how that happened....

SZ: Well, I don't even want to start that today, I want to mine these fields a little bit more, because we sort of really skipped over Washington, unless there wasn't a lot there that you feel....

MC: Oh, god, that was a marvelous experience. Washington was alive, it was just absolutely fantastic. The collection that I had made for William Morris was shown, both at the Library of Congress and in New York City at Rockefeller Center--Library of Congress indoors, New York City out-of-doors. Mrs. Roosevelt came to the opening, and I have a wonderful photograph of me and Mrs. Roosevelt. By the way, the Women's Caucus just honored me, so let me give you this.... But I have a photograph--I think that might also be at MoMA, but you can just take that. I worked with the Pan-American Union because the Coordinator's office and the Pan-American Union were all trying to do things. How did I get to Washington? I think this might be interesting to you. A group of us, like Anna Marie Henle Pope, Craig Smyth, myself, we were trying to formulate an organization that would be interested in contemporary Latin America, and in order to get funding, we knew that we'd have to work out of Washington, because anything that was happening about Latin America was there. The American Council of Learned Societies gave us a small grant, and we began to work there. But we just couldn't get anywhere, what with the Coordinator's office beginning to function....

SZ: Because it was set up right around that time.

MC: Sure, around that time. So it was very short-lived. But they were very good, the American Council of Learned Societies. And that's how I was in Washington, found myself there and got the job with the Coordinator's office.

SZ: And you decided to stay there?

MC: And then I stayed there until after my research project was finished and then went to the [Archive of Hispanic Culture] at the Library of Congress.

SZ: The posters that you collected--I guess that there was a lot of that kind of work going on.

MC: Oh my gosh, yes.

SZ: Because it was part of an outgrowth of the political....

MC: ...of what was happening in the whole social scene. It started in Mexico.... My interest in it, my interest in posters started there because of what was going on, and all the artists were making posters; it didn't matter what kind of artist they were, they were making posters. The government was commissioning them, against illiteracy and pro-housing and, well, you name it. At the College Art Association, I had already been involved with different groups like...we at the College Art Association did the first traveling exhibition of photographs put out by the Farm Security [Administration]. Roy Stryker and I became very friendly, I met all the great photographers working at the time. So when I went to Washington, I had all these friends in different areas of Washington life, and it was just exhilarating. Again, it was--educational about what a government can do once it got itself activated into all

these activities; so as we were approaching the war, these things were already beautifully in existence, you see. They were there, one knew how to use them. The Rural Electrification Project took over the kind of photography that Farm Security did, and I got very much involved in photography and all the photographers, because a lot of them had been on the project--the photography project of [the] WPA had gone to Washington. So in a sense it was a continuation, an expansion and a continuation.

SZ: It also seems like it was destined that you would end up at the Modern. Tell me about Nelson Rockefeller and that office, whatever you can about it.

MC: He was great, he really was. He got a pretty darn good staff around him, I mean really good, in all aspects of the whole coordination--architects, artists, scholars. The atmosphere there was one of eagerness to learn, eagerness really to understand and cooperate, to really work with the governments and the people of Latin America. Again, since I'd already made this fabulous trip all around Latin and Central America....

SZ: For the posters.

MC: ...for the posters, I'd gotten to know architects.... See, fortunately, I never stayed within my particular assignment--and by the way, that followed me right into MoMA, as you'll see later. So I got to know architects and I got to know artists and I got to know politicians, which is fine, wonderful exposure, and then brought all of that with me to the Coordinator's office, and later, then, to the Library of Congress. Nelson was just absolutely marvelous.

SZ: In what way?

MC: You see, he and René had already developed their relationship, and Nelson had already been in and out of Mexico...well, for example, I called him Jefe; when we met we spoke in Spanish to each other, just for fun and for the bond that we knew we had. He was participating, he wasn't a politician yet, he had not yet become a politician. He was earnestly involved in what he was doing and he got good people around him and we really, really did good work, really did good work.

SZ: And René was interested in all of this?

MC: Yes. René, after all, had been in Mexico, had lived in Mexico, had been very much involved there with all the artists, had been responsible for Rivera's doing the murals in Cuernavaca, supported by Dwight Morrow, who was our ambassador at the time. When René left Mexico, he was at Sarah Lawrence College, [and] he brought up a Mexican exhibition, earlier than the one that we at College Art had done. He was then working in the Department of the Interior in the Bureau of Indian Affairs, but it was obvious that his interests were not limited to the Department of Indian Affairs, although he was successful in that area, and we were all in touch with one another.

SZ: [Did he have] the same enthusiasm, I guess, for the political situation?

MC: Well, let's face it, I was probably to the left of all these people, but that was natural. I came from a totally different background. I had totally different experiences. I didn't expect them to be as left as I was.

SZ: What I'm thinking is that's how you were and that's what drew you, then there was what was there. So there's the other aspect, which is just the aesthetic.

MC: Absolutely.

SZ: So you're saying that that was much more what pulled both of them to that.

MC: Oh, much, much more. It was always that.

SZ: And Lincoln Kirstein, too.

MC: Oh, Lincoln Kirstein, yes. There's a wonderful statement that Lincoln Kirstein made, which came back to me much later. He and I had sort of followed each other on this trip through South American, and he came back and he made a statement that I had a Latin Lover hanging from every tit. [LAUGHTER] He said some very cruel things about my political affiliations in Latin America, so my husband and I were thoroughly investigated.

SZ: When it came time?

MC: Yes. I won't go into that political aspect, but we were thoroughly investigated. My husband was blackballed and did not get the job offered to him by the U.S. Government because of that, but I won't go into that, no....

SZ: So Nelson you've talked about at that time but René you haven't talked that much about at that time.

MC: Don't forget, I had met René in New York. We resumed our friendship. I met Sarah--this was before Anne was born and before I was married--and we would see each other. I had known Porter, because I had met him, again through the College Art Association, and he was doing a job at the National Gallery of Art on a Latin American project, and I did a big project for him, which he sent down to Bolivia. So we were all sharing that Washington milieu and enjoying it enormously. We were all friends.

SZ: But you stopped working when your first daughter was born?

MC: I took my first daughter, right after I weaned her at the age of almost six months, to Mexico, where I did a very interesting thing for a political organization that was also interested in art. I did a very big job down there for them, in the arts, worked with Siqueiros, worked with [José Clemente] Orozco. I took her down there, and her name was--I say <u>was</u> because she doesn't use it anymore--Judith Velasco Guadalupe Bettelheim.

SZ: Bettelheim.

MC: Yes, my married name.

SZ: This was while your husband was away at the war?

MC: Yes. He was ready to be shipped out and was up beyond Boston when I delivered Judith, and he went AWOL for one day to see her and then went off.

SZ: That must have been a frightening time.

MC: He was away for quite a while. So after I came back with Judith, I did a number of interesting things.

SZ: You never wanted to stop working.

MC: I never stopped. First baby, second baby, I never stopped. I'm going to be seventy-eight in June and I intend to go right on working, never stop.

SZ: I'm going to stop for today. Thank you.

END TAPE 1, SIDE 2

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH: **MILDRED CONSTANTINE (MC)**

INTERVIEWER: **SHARON ZANE (SZ)**

LOCATION: **306 EAST 44 STREET**
NEW YORK CITY

DATE: **APRIL 23, 1991**

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE 1

SZ: Mildred, we left off last time....

MC: Connie.

SZ: Connie, that's right. Everybody calls you Connie.... I think we left off last time, you had come back to New York and had had your children, and so we can pick up with the beginning of your association with the Museum.

MC: When I had developed the idea of a poster competition--or, I shouldn't use the word competition--but a poster project to help the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis. I came to see René in 1948, who was, after all, an old friend, and I talked to him about it as important both from the point of view of the contemporary artists working in graphics and the association of the Museum with an institution that has social causes, like the anti-polio [cause], which at that time was still pretty strong. And René was quite wonderful, understood almost immediately what I was driving at and he said, "Fine, why don't you come in and start working on it. I don't know that I can but you on the payroll, but there'll be enough money in the budget," which was going to be worked out with the polio foundation, "so that you can get something." And so I started to work on that [Polio Poster Competition, 1949], and then, because

he and Robert Goldwater were doing the exhibition Modern Art in Your Life, and because I was already completely involved in the department's activities, you see, they asked me to please do a great deal of research for them from the collection, which I did; so that I was brought into the life's blood, so to speak, of the Museum almost immediately. Even though, when I went to ask if I could buy an extra pair of scissors I was told by our then treasurer that I wasn't on the payroll and didn't know how long I was going to be on the payroll, and so she didn't think she could allow me to spend that much money. She was very, very careful with the Museum's money. Suffice to say, I got my pair of scissors and I was put on the payroll, because, I suppose, everybody was asked what they thought about me and whether they thought I'd be an asset to the Museum and the answer was in the affirmative, and so I was put on the payroll.

SZ: This was in the space of how many months?

MC: I would say in the space of not quite six months.

SZ: Tell me what you found when you got there, how you would characterize the institution and the department and some of the people who populated it at the time.

MC: Well, Philip Johnson was, of course, head of our department, and as you probably know...the Department of Industrial Design had lived through Eliot Noyes and all of that and was called the Department of Architecture and Design. Peter Blake was there, and Ada Louise Huxtable and Greta Daniel, and then I came in. I was rather fascinated. I was curious to learn what the department was really all about, how did it relate to other departments in the Museum. As I think I mentioned to you, I had a wonderful, nice, long lunch with Alfred Barr to welcome me on board, and we had a fine time talking because that had been the first time since my initial interview that we'd been together. We agreed on a lot of things; one thing we were violently in

disagreement about was David Smith, the sculptor David Smith. He didn't like his work at all. David Smith was my dearest friend,...

SZ: From your College Art Association days.

MC: ...the godfather of my children and whose work I knew intimately, and I felt I had every right to disagree. Somehow, at that time, I wasn't intimidated at all by Alfred. It was an enjoyable lunch, because I thought it was awfully nice of him to ask me to lunch and welcome me on board.

SZ: Where was the luncheon?

MC: We had a nice restaurant called Mercurio's, which used to be on 52nd Street before it moved to 53rd Street, and that's where we went, which I thought was nice, instead of a cafeteria luncheon. I didn't really know Philip Johnson, but I knew about him, I knew a great deal about him, some admirable, some not so admirable. I was curious to see how the cast of characters was going to work together. Greta Daniel and I got along with absolutely no difficulty. Shortly after, Ada Louise went off on an American Academy of Rome fellowship, something like that, and she went off. And pretty soon, Peter Blake left. So, in a sense, there we were, Philip, myself and Greta, running the department; and in some funny way I was never closeted into the graphic design part of it. There were one or two exhibitions that I did before Arthur [Drexler] came on board that were architecture. For example, Philip and I did the Skidmore, Owings and Merrill exhibition, the architecture show [Skidmore, Owings and Merrill: Architects, U.S.A, 1950]; that was a time when we underlings were not allowed to sign our work in the catalogues. Oh yes, you see, the underlings were not given very much credit or attention; we were there to do the work. I must confess that I was one of Philip's greatest admirers. Philip was going through a very difficult time, mea culpa, because of his past--in all ways. He had been supporting

some offspring of some Jewish refugees that he knew; he had hired Peter, who was Jewish; he had hired Greta, who was Jewish; he hired me. It was a true period of mea culpa, you know, but it was the man's mind, his point of view, that absolutely mesmerized me. I was enchanted. I learned so much working with him. He was the kind of man who would talk over something and then he'd say, "Go do it." He gave you the leeway to really work and produce and come back and talk about it and exchange ideas.

SZ: A good teacher.

MC: An excellent teacher, an excellent teacher, a sharp critical point of view. It's curious, because I also had been a friend of Edgar Kaufmann's; I think I mentioned that I met him originally in Mexico. Edgar was doing the Good Design exhibitions, you see. But by the time Arthur came on board, it was obvious that we needed somebody there who's really involved, and not just in architecture but in understanding all the phases of what our department was all about. I worked with Arthur on his first exhibition, which was a small Corbusier exhibition [Le Corbusier: Architecture, Painting, Design, 1951].

SZ: Wasn't there tension between Philip and Edgar Kaufmann, also?

MC: Always. Always, forever. I'm sure that that is something that Porter [McCray] must have gotten into.

SZ: No, I haven't gotten anywhere near that with him yet; we just started.

MC: There was a great deal of tension, because when Edgar was in the Museum, he was very, very close to René and to Alfred. When Philip came in, it was an immediate break; it was as if Philip said, "Are you on my side or on Edgar's side?," because he

could do that.

SZ: From your point of view, was that because they disagreed on things aesthetically, or was there something....

MC: It was a combination. They disagreed on things aesthetically. Completely. There was also, I think, a jealousy about the relationship between René and Alfred and these two people. Edgar had given heart and soul to both René and to Alfred, so this was a tremendous blow to him. One of the reasons that René was anxious to sponsor the Good Design shows, which were Edgar's baby, is because it did give him a really strong position in an area he loved, with the Museum's support, without any interference at all from the department.

SZ: The blow, then, was that Edgar had expectations. Is that what you mean?

MC: I think Edgar had expectations about staying in the department, sure, until Philip came back.

SZ: As a teacher, you said Philip was so wonderful. I guess it was a small enough department. As an administrator...?

MC: As an administrator, he sort of left it to all of us to administrate, but we cleared with him, we cleared with him every bit. He was participating. Let me give you a kind of nice example. When I decided I wanted to do this exhibition Signs in the Street [which opened in 1954] and we started and we cosponsored with Yale University a symposium there on the whole subject. Philip and I would take a taxi together and we would sit not on our seats but on the floor of the taxi so we could look out the window and find signage that we felt was exciting, was important. We loved it; we loved doing it and we loved talking about it. He had a way of participating in

whatever was happening without stepping on you, allowing you some freedom. Even when I did the Skidmore, Owings and Merrill exhibition with him, we talked it over. He said, "Okay. Start it, see what you're going to find, see what you're going to do." I was the one who worked with Bunshaft, for example, Gordon Bunshaft. That's how Gordon and I became good friends. So that, when it came to administration, he left it all with us, with the various people in charge of various activities. It was the program of that department that he was more interested in, more involved in. I sort of co-edited the second edition of the book on Mies van der Rohe. In other words, no matter what my title was--and as my mother would say, "title-schmitel"--but no matter what my title was I was able to do other things in the department. Again, it was somewhere in the middle of the 1950s, the early part, when René began to do the exhibition Ancient Arts of the Andes. Before that, and between Modern Art in Your Life, he also did an exhibition called Timeless Aspects of Modern Art. Again, René asked me to help. And then, when he asked me to work on Ancient Arts of the Andes, it was because I guess I was the only person in the Museum that had had any background whatsoever in pre-Columbia art, which René knew. I had studied with Herbert Spinden at the Institute of Fine Arts. Philip came to René one day and said, "I know you want her on that, but she's doing the sign exhibition. Do you think it's going to interfere?" And René said, "Ask her. Just ask her." And Philip came and asked me. I said, "Philip, absolutely not. I'm working on that--our exhibition will go off as quite a show, by the way--and it will not interfere if I work with René." He said okay, okay. In other words, he did have faith in the people he was working with, and that was very nice.

SZ: I was going to ask in relation to that, the development of the department postwar, things like really building up the design collection and posters and these different directions that it in general went in, and of course what was happening in what was strictly the architecture field. Did that just come from the various department members, or was that a plan that Philip had--how did this all [come about]?

MC: Well, first of all, it all came from Alfred--the whole concept came from Alfred. The concept of collecting graphics, posters...the design collection came, after all, from what was the Department of Industrial Design before it became [the Department of] Architecture and Design. So Eliot Noyes and people like that had already been working on those ideas, you see, and as far as architecture was concerned, there was a lot being done. Mary Cook Barnes was in the department and was in charge, more or less, of architecture. She wasn't there by the time I got there, but she had been there. So that the framework for the department really existed; but, for example, when I came into the department the poster collection was in one spot down in a storeroom, in rolls. Nobody knew what was in the rolls, nobody knew whether they were empty or whether they really contained what they were supposed to contain. So in a funny way, I was able to begin from scratch, to see what was going on, because here I was trying to help René and Goldwater on Modern Art in Your Life and how could I if I didn't know what was available, or if they weren't available, how to go out and get them--a curatorial job. How do you enhance the collection? By finding out what's missing, you see. And learning what it was to be a curator, something you're never taught. You have to learn that on the job.

SZ: So you went down in the basement and looked in every tube?

MC: Every damn tube, finding some of them empty, some of them mislabeled [and] needing to identify, etcetera, etcetera. At the same time, I was working on the polio poster show, and that was good, because it extended my own vision about what I wanted to do with it. I had painters and sculptors and photographers and graphic people, all working on different aspects of the subject. Sculptors like David Smith, painters like Philip Evergood, photographers like Herbert Matter, graphic designers like Herbert Bayer, and we really produced some magnificent original designs, of which two or three were produced by the polio foundation for vast distribution. In

order to get this group of creative people to understand what the foundation was aimed at, we had some wonderful revealing meetings between them, so that the artists could ask questions, so the foundation people could ask questions. René sat in on it because he was interested to see how this kind of thing would evolved. Which it did.

SZ: This was all done at the Museum.

MC: All done at the Museum, right. So there I was, by 1954, completely involved with Ancient Arts of the Andes, with the Signs in the Street exhibition, with all kinds of things, and having already worked on two interesting architecture shows, not only working on the exhibition itself but on getting a good designer, too. Have you ever seen the catalogue?

SZ: I've seen the SOM [Skidmore, Owings and Merrill: Architects, U.S.A., 1950] catalogue.

MC: So, getting a good designer to really create a meaningful buffer between graphics and architecture. With the coming of Arthur, we became an extraordinarily, wonderfully well-knit department.

SZ: Before we do that, tell me about Greta Daniel a little bit.

MC: Alright. Greta was born in Essen in Germany and was among the early refugees. She began to work in the Museum at a time when Chermayeff--the father, Serge--was involved in something. I can't remember, I have to go back to my notes somewhere to get you all the proper information on that. She had worked a little bit with Eliot, she had worked with Edgar and then she was brought right into the department. She was a perfectly delightful human being. She had a good eye, she

was beginning to get a good understanding of all the things that were involved, she was passionately devoted to the Museum. Her German was so eloquent and elegant that when René had to write a letter in German he would come to Greta to do this. She and I worked beautifully together. The only time we really had to be involved in anything that touched completely was when I was working on Art Nouveau [which opened in 1960] and edited the book, but that brings us way up to '58 or something like that. But our working relationship and our friendship was extraordinary. I was devoted to her.

SZ: By "with the coming of Arthur" do you mean when Arthur came or when Arthur took over the department?

MC: Well, when he was hired, he more or less came to take over the department.

SZ: What was your first impression of Arthur?

MC: I liked him. I liked this bright young man, very friendly--another Jew, I may point out--and there was an immediate sharing of ideas and points of views and things of that kind. It was fun to see him working on an exhibition, because there you saw exactly the directions that we would be going into. We all pitched in to work with him on that first Corbusier show, so that he would have the right materials. If he wanted sandpaper for a shelf he got sandpaper, if he wanted the right geraniums on the floor--you name it. It gave us a feeling of what this young man was all about. Of course, at that time no one of us understood the depth of Arthur and his knowledge and his marvelous writing abilities. Working with him and watching him grow was another kind of experience. He and Philip got along extremely well, extremely well. That was nice because then the department seemed to be a happy one. There were no jarring personalities around.

SZ: Which you had obviously experienced.

MC: Which I had experienced. It was quite wonderful because Arthur and I became extraordinarily close. I suppose I knew more about Arthur and his life and his thinking than almost anyone else, not just in the department but in the Museum. Of course, we were truly quite close. He grew, he really grew, so that the whole problem of really being the director of a department--which meant administration, which meant direction--he had hands on everything, and working with him was just great. Toward the end we had problems. As I was saying at a symposium the other day, when we were doing the exhibition--this goes into the '60s--of what I call Wall Hangings [1969], and Arthur was very slow and reluctant to understand what this whole movement was all about, and we would scream at each other, and then he said, "This is going in over my dead body," and I said, "Okay, Arthur, then I'll kill you." We had that kind of relationship, you see. Or when Greta died, which was in 1962, and there was no question I had to take over, I had to take over everything. That first exhibition that I had to take over, in addition to the collection and things like that, was Design for Sport [1962].

SZ: Which she had already begun?

MC: She had already started it, but just in the infant stages. Arthur never questioned this, and I never questioned it on account of by that time I was used to it--you know, moving around from activity to activity.

SZ: What about the rest of the Museum in your early years there? How did it seem to you as an institution?

MC: It was wonderful. We were like a big family, with particular squabbles, with particular, well, "You take care of this, it's really your department." But I would say,

and I have said this before, that between 1948 and 1970 was probably the most creative time in the Museum's lifetime.

SZ: Why do you think that was?

MC: Because we had a mixture of people that brought fresh ideas and fresh notions and more courageously doing things that other people had not done. We had a marvelous group of people working in painting and sculpture, whether it was Andrew Ritchie, whether it was Sam Hunter.... And you know, there we were with a--it wasn't really called the International Program at the beginning, the one Porter was in charge of--but Jim Soby and I collaborated on an exhibition on Ben Shahn for a traveling show, with, presumably, Soby doing the painting and I doing the prints and the graphics. Jim and I got along so well that before you knew it we were really working together, and having a fine time doing it. I didn't feel that the hierarchies were so hard and firmly established as they became, with everybody having the little province. And René was wonderful about that. When Willard van Dyke came into the Department of Film, René brought him to introduce him to me and said to Willard, "If you have any trouble, if you want any information, ask Connie." And he said, "Take care of him," meaning don't let the wolves get at him. That happened not only with Willard, but has anybody talked to you about Douglas MacAgy? Oh boy. That's something you should dig into, because Douglas came in without the real title of assistant director to René but in a sense functioning that way. Again, Doug and I became extraordinarily good friends and close colleagues.... Sure there were problems. Whenever Bill Lieberman is around, you're going to find a problem. That wasn't too difficult to forecast. Our librarian, Bernard Karpel, was wonderfully active with all of us, and again, I was very close to him. We both loved certain aspects of how a book looked and would talk a great deal about it. They also allowed us--I'm talking about the staff now--to participate in a great many outside things. For example, when the International Design Conference, which was at

Aspen, [was held] both René and Arthur wanted me very much to participate, which I did, and then I was on the board--I can't remember how many, ten [years], maybe. Because all those outside activities in some way reflected the Museum's interest. This is what helped the Museum itself to grow and develop. So this is what it was like. We weren't that large, and if you look at what we did with a small staff, we accomplished quite a bit. You probably will eventually be wanting to talk to Wilder [Green], because Wilder came in as...I don't remember what his title was--assistant curator of architecture? I don't remember. But again, there was no difficulty. It was wonderful. We all enjoyed him, we loved working with him. It was kind of sweet. Let's say that Arthur and Wilder had a different point of view about something. They would call me in and say, "What do you think?" So there was that kind of collaboration. Then, when we did the Art Nouveau exhibition, that's when we really saw how we could function where all the departments could be working on the same subject, on the same exhibition, and how could we work together. And we did, and it was helpful, because then we were aware of what was going on in the other departments. The other thing that was most healthy...two things that were very important [were] we had what we called a Coordinating Committee, which meant curators and assistant curators all would sit around discussing programs. What's on your program for the next two years, how are we going to fund it? So you'd know what was in the thinking of the other departments. That was good. The other thing that was....

SZ: A little cross-pollination.

MC: Cross-pollination, yes. With occasional interesting exchanges, disagreements, etcetera, among curators with Alfred, but it would be thrashed out. And the other thing that I think was remarkable was that when we had our Acquisition Committee meetings, we first met, you see, our own departments--because by that time we had committees--but we would all, all the departments, meet with the trustees and make

our presentation. And that was important and informative, because you heard everything, from every point of view, because you felt that you were part of a museum and not just part of a department.

SZ: Those years that you've described as particularly creative, how did Alfred and René relate to each other in terms of that, for the real push to move beyond and go someplace?

MC: Once Alfred was secure in being named Director of the Collection, he really knew what was going on with all of us. For example, if we had any disagreement about collections we could always call Alfred and say, "What do you think?" Alfred, for example, would sit on a chair that we were all looking at from the viewpoint of design and he would sit down in it, and it happened that we had an upholstered chair and would go "phshhh," and Alfred said, "Well, I have something against sighing chairs." And I would say, "But Alfred, this time you don't have to sit in it, all you have to do is look at it." We could talk. See, at the beginning, Alfred was a man who sort of made you step back and feel intimidated, but not if you got to know him. He and René shared all the burdens of the trustees, etcetera, and they made it work. What difficulties they had with each other, I don't know, because there was always a man like Monroe Wheeler around. Has anybody talked to you about Monroe?

SZ: What do you mean by that?

MC: Because sometimes he was a good buffer. He could also be a good buffer because he was in charge of publications between Alfred and the departments if there was conflict. Monroe was a very astute and very sophisticated man. Good head on him, good knowledge, good point of view, understanding where and how the Museum could grow. And that's it: We knew that we could push in certain directions we hadn't gone into before.

SZ: Monroe at some point really wielded a great deal of power in the institution.

MC: He certainly did. Also, Monroe had a good deal of weight with the trustees, and that was good, that was important.

SZ: So Alfred in those days was, in a way...all the things that he had been for the Museum in the early days he could still be.

MC: Oh sure. As Director of the Collection, he could be; what he was relieved from was all that heavy administrative work, which René took over with no difficulty. So it was an interesting team. I can't promise you that each and every one had undying love for the other, but as a working relationship, it worked. And that made us feel that it could work, you see. If we had any questions, any difficulty...René used to say, "Connie, if you want to, just walk in anytime, don't wait." Alfred was more than willing to meet us--and when I say "us," I mean the department--and go over certain things. What happened is that the tempo and the temperature of the Museum was one of pulsating life. We really were doing things. We got into the Department of Painting and Sculpture two great men--I used to call them Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum or the Katzenjammer Kids--and that was Bill Seitz and Peter Selz. You can't imagine two more different human beings who were doing things in the department--lively things, wonderfully interesting exhibitions. The department began to jump. All of this brought a great response from all of us. We felt we could be daring, we could be courageous, we could do things.

SZ: Who brought in Seitz and Selz? Was that something that Alfred would still do?

MC: Oh yes, sure. Everybody who came into the Department of Painting and Sculpture had to be right under Alfred....

END TAPE 2, SIDE 1

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE 2

SZ: Tell me a little about the two of them. Start with Tweedle Dum.

MC: The Katzenjammer Kids. They were both very independent-minded. They were both very conscious of the vastness of the field of painting and sculpture. They were very responsive to things that were going on in the art world that they could respond to. For example, Bill Seitz did the great exhibition of assemblages [The Art of Assemblage, 1961], which was a really great, really terrific exhibition. Peter Selz was doing things like the Art Nouveau exhibition. They worked together quite well, and there was a wonderful give-and-take between them, and certainly with me; I was very close to both of them. I brought Bill Seitz to--I was living then in New City--to meet John Chamberlain for the first time. John was living out our way and was really not that well known for his crushed automobile parts, and Bill had sufficient respect for me that he came. "Sure, Connie," he said, "I should see him? I'll go look." Peter Selz and I worked extremely well together. It was a very curious moment, because, although it was an exhibition that covered so many different departments, Arthur was going to install the exhibition. Arthur was quite good in that situation. He and René were quite wonderful--completely different, but quite wonderful in their installation concepts. Arthur, of course, would hesitate and would almost refuse to install something he didn't think worthy. And since I was already editing the book and working on the exhibition, he'd say, "Why does Peter want this in the show?" and I said, "Ask him." He said, "No, you go ask him." So I would go to Peter and I'd say, "Let's talk about this. Why do you want it in the show?" Peter would look at me and look at it and he'd say, "I don't know." And I'd say, "Take it out." Just as simple as that, you know? I don't remember ranting and raging. The

only person who ever ranted and raged in the hall was Helen Franc.

SZ: This is pre-Bill Rubin.

MC: Oh yes. Because I was there when Bill was there, too, but [he did] not [rant and rage] the way Helen did. But don't let me get into that. There was a receptivity to idea that I don't see in the Museum today and I haven't seen in a long time. There was a conscious following of our mandate: What's happening, let's find out, let's look, let's be out there, let's really get with it, what we as a Museum should and could respond to. After all, we did competitions....

SZ: I was going to ask you to give me some examples of some of the things that went on in your early years there.

MC: Well, look, aside from in the poster field and aside from the polio foundation, I also involved the Family Services Organization and we did a project for them, of posters, because...well, I was a fully socially conscious human being and I felt that part of the Museum's role in the twentieth century was to respond to those social needs.

SZ: And you didn't meet any resistance to that?

MC: No. As a matter of fact, with great interest: "This is a good worthy cause, why not enlist the artists again. We had good success with our first one." We sponsored lamp competitions, all kinds of things, that had not been done before. Dorothy Miller's great exhibitions of Twelve Americans [1956], Fourteen Americans [1946], was again, "Look, this is out there, this is what's happening and we have to look at it." So that's why I say the pulsating drama of the Museum's life was palpable.

SZ: What about the houses and the garden? What do you remember about those?

MC: Oh boy, what do I remember. Peter Blake did the first one, the [Marcel] Breuer house, in the garden, which was a smashing success; that was great. Arthur did the wonderful Japanese house [Japanese Exhibition House, 1954], which [was built] by virtue of all of us, we were all working on it; and the endless house of [Frederick] Kiesler, where we had hoped to build it in the garden but we never quite got around to it [Two Houses--New Ways to Build: F. Kiesler and R. Buckminster Fuller, 1952]. Things of that kind, because we were saying, "This is what's happening. Look at it, make it part of your experience." And this is what we hoped the Museum was all about.

SZ: What was your impression of the trustees' reactions to things like these?

MC: Let me tell you, the first time I had to make a speech before the trustees, strangely enough, it had nothing to do with my department; it had to do with René's exhibition. I had to report on the progress.

SZ: Which one?

MC: Ancient Art of the Andes. I had to report on the progress, because René in effect was in Peru at the time. They could be a pretty intimidating bunch. Some of their questions were quite good, quite pointed. Not all of them, for example, thought René's idea of putting on an exhibition of the ancient arts of the Andes was the greatest idea in the world, so that in my reporting I had to say how wonderful the exhibits were, that they had never been seen in this country before, that René had brought some marvelous things, that I'd been in touch with him and he'd sent me this--and sufficient stuff had come so I could show them. I could tell by the questions that not everybody was all for it. You didn't get unanimity, but you got some good, healthy criticisms and some good, healthy reactions and questions.

SZ: But it wasn't obstructionist, either.

MC: I never remember it being...they had an enormous respect for Alfred, enormous. They had enormous respect for René. As I told you, Monroe knew them all from a very social point of view; he was very close to the Rockefellers, you see, and that all helped. So we were more cohesive as a working organization, you see, than we later became, because even when... after René died--when René retired and Bates [Lowry] came in, which comes much later...from the time the triumvirate took over to direct the Museum--Walter Bareiss, etcetera--from that time until I left is something that is extraordinary. That's when real jockeying for position started.

SZ: What about the Museum in your early days as a socially cohesive community? Did that exist?

MC: Well, we all went to all openings, we all sort of had to appear. If we were married, our husbands wore black tie. I finally gave up trying to get different clothes and just changed my jewelry. We all treated the trustees somewhat from a distance, which was okay. It just so happened that two or three of them were friends of mine. After all, I'd known Nelson Rockefeller when I'd worked for him in the Coordinator's office [the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs in Washington, D.C.], so I still called him Jefe, and jokingly would tell him one day, "Why aren't you a Democrat instead of a Republican?" That was there. But otherwise, as far as we underlings were concerned, we kept our distance. After I had done the Family Service[s] competition and exhibition, Mrs. [Peggy] Burden [wife of William] was very much impressed and invited me to dinner; but interestingly enough, although she knew I was married, she didn't invite my husband. Little things like that, you know. That was okay, that's the way people behave and that's the way they behave.

SZ: It wasn't your main focus for social life.

MC: It certainly was not. Except for those people on staff who became real friends. Douglas MacAgy was a close friend. Peter Selz was a close friend, right to this very day, by the way. Arthur--I cannot tell you how close we were. I will show you, not an obit...I was asked to write something for the Architectural Record, which I did, and it will give you a little inkling of my relationship with Arthur. And there were those people that I just knew. Willard was a good friend. In the early days, when John Szarkowski came, he also was a good friend. Bernard Karpel in the library. But other than that, I would say no. Edgar Kaufmann remained my friend until he died last year.

SZ: Douglas MacAgy.

MC: Nobody's mentioned him?

SZ: Why would that be? Did he stay a long time?

MC: Yes, quite a long time. Then he went to the Dallas Museum, as director, and from there he worked with Nancy Hanks on the establishment of the NEA. We were so close--he was a Canadian citizen, and he couldn't get the job until he became an American citizen, and I was his witness. We were also close to a lot of the gallery people. There was not that standoffishness. Why didn't people mention Douglas MacAgy to you? I don't know, before I talk about him, may I suggest you bring his name up to people like Porter, to Helen, before I talk about him. And then I'll talk a lot about him.

SZ: I want to talk about--I think maybe we'll do this next time--I want to talk about your exhibitions, exhibition by exhibition. Let me go through some of the other things that

just happened at the Museum in these years that we've been talking about today, and just anything that comes to mind.

MC: We did a wonderful symposium, "How to Combine Painting and Sculpture in Architecture," under our department, and Philip and I chose speakers and we got a lot of slides and we had one of the most marvelous, knock-out, drag-out quarrels right straight from the floor--just terrific. I conducted a symposium on the cliches in the graphic world and how we define their forms, and that was quite stimulating also. There should be a great deal of materials on these things in the archives, I mean in the department's archive. I had a symposium in connection with my street-sign exhibition at Yale University--Signs in the Street is what I called it at the time--because together with Yale, you see, we had both an academic approach and a practical approach, and that was a kind of nice one. We did all these extra things. They might be considered extra, but they were really part of what we were all about. And nobody in the Museum minded that you had to work at night or in the morning or.... And then, let me tell you about the fire.

SZ: Before you do that, let me ask you about the garden that Philip redesigned.

MC: It was the most beautiful, most exciting thing that had happened. To have the sculpture garden, to have Philip design it and have all these natural elements, the sculpture, all of it, brought in. Suddenly, it was as though we burst our seams and there we were, out in what Philip used to call "the best living room in New York." Oh, you've talked to Philip. I worked with Philip on the lettering, the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Sculpture Garden, what was the right typeface to use, how should we do it. You see, we were all intimately involved. You see, that's my word: We were all intimately involved. And when we had René's--I think it was his fiftieth birthday, or was it his sixtieth--must have been his sixtieth birthday party, in the Museum with all the staff, all the guys from framing and packing and shipping, and the guards, and

from the administration, everybody, we really used the garden magnificently--for all kinds of things, you see, not just for outside activity but for in-house activity. It was the first time anything like this had ever happened: It was the first sculpture garden. This was part of Philip's brilliance. I learned more from Philip, René and Alfred...let me change it: I learned as much from Philip and René and Alfred as I did in my College Art [Association] days from those people who were responsible, in a way, for bringing me up.

SZ: Anything about the founding of the International Program, the International Council?

MC: What can I tell you? This was René's brainchild, that and the Junior Council, to broaden the scope, to eventually see whether International Council people are potential trustees, because obviously you had to have money to be on it. The Junior Council people were being groomed in the same way for the International Council. Porter's work, both as part of the International Program and working with the council and all, was just superb, marvelously coordinated. Of course, they could support, in more ways than one, the International Program. That worked out beautifully. A lot of the people on it--Louise Smith, Gertrud Mellon, all these people--became friends of mine.

SZ: A lot of your shows traveled.

MC: Oh yes. Look, the Shahn show that I'm talking about never was shown in New York but traveled internationally, but never in New York, because just like Alfred not being interested in David Smith until he was in his "cubie" period, so he really wasn't interested in Shahn, whereas Soby was. But that didn't stop us from doing a brilliant show. And they had a very interesting people working in that International Program. Kynaston McShine, who--he's still around--nobody really appreciated until he left us and went to the Jewish Museum and he put on a smashing show and we rushed to

get him back, in one of the most amusing moments of the Museum. Frank O'Hara, the poet, worked with the International Program and was a marvelous addition to it, and very sweet in his way, especially when he wanted to disagree with Alfred about something. Alfred would talk and then pose a question which would sort of require a yes. And Frank O'Hara would say, "No. No, I don't really think that."

SZ: And Alfred could take that.

MC: Sure. It didn't mean the house was going to fall down. It was fine, it was okay. We all loved him. Of course, I had the disagreement.... I remember Grace Mayer sitting in back of me at one of our meetings, when I was disagreeing about where [Roy] Lichtenstein's Five and Ten Cent Store Teacup should be, whether it should be in the design collection or in the painting and sculpture collection. I disagreed with Alfred right in front of the meeting, and Grace came....

SZ: You took the position that...?

MC: It should be in painting and sculpture, because there was a five-and-ten-cent-store teacup and saucer that had been painted. Anyhow, Grace Mayer came to congratulate me because I was so strong in my presentation. This kind of thing.... We must talk about the fire sometime.

SZ: We'll do that now, and we can stop with that today. But Frank O'Hara, he's kind of a legend and the fact that he was there is a legendary thing, it seems. In terms of what ultimate influence or effect he had on the Museum, what would you say?

MC: Oh, I would say he had an enormous effect on all of us, because he had a different vision. He had a poet's vision, with the ability of a poet who could articulate in ways that those of us who had been trained in art history or whatever didn't have.

Because he had that gentle way about him, we listened to him, and I would say he was very dearly beloved by us all, so his death shattered all of us, really all of us. Again, Frank and I had a special kind of affection because of my relationship with David Smith. I'm sure a lot of the people accepted me in a lot of ways that they might not have except I was so close to artists, and that was nice, that was very nice.

SZ: Okay, Connie, tell me about the fire. Where were you, how did it happen?

MC: Greta Daniel and I were on the fifth floor and I was getting ready to go out to lunch. Arthur and Wilder were in Philadelphia interviewing Lou Kahn on the exhibition that we were going to do. We had a door from the 21 building--you remember the 21 building was a separate building--from the 21 building to the old building, and that door mostly was closed, sometime it was open. I remember going to look at clock, which was at the end of the hall, and I opened the door and there was smoke, and we began to hear, "Fire, fire, fire!" People were yelling. We had not just the Junior Council and all on the sixth floor but a lot of people on the terrace, and of course we were trying to keep them on the terrace and not try to....

SZ: The Museum was open to the public?

MC: When this happened? Yes.

SZ: It was the gallery itself that was closed, because they were working in it. I didn't realize that.

MC: Of course, there were a lot of people in the Museum who were not staff. We opened the windows in our room, in the room that we were in. Of course, Arthur and Wilder were out, Greta and I were in there, and we took--I can't remember what we took--

some instrument, and we broke the window to get some fresh air, and of course it was pretty bad. Finally somebody yelled up to us to get on the elevator and get out, which we did. We were standing outside when we suddenly realized that on the second floor we had a storeroom that nobody had thought of, an important storeroom. We rushed back in--about four of us rushed back in....

SZ: Into the 21 building.

MC: Back into the 21 building, to the second floor. We all wanted to grab the painting we loved most, and I shall never forget somebody yelling out, "But who's going to take Peaceable Kingdom?" I took the Kandinsky. Every one of us took what we could carry. Then, later, we were allowed into the building because there was the famous Seurat [La Grand Jatte], which we had borrowed from the Art Institute of Chicago, and René was beside himself, but we carried it out, about eight of us carried it, with water on the floors, things like that. Arthur and Wilder had heard over the radio that this had happened, but of course everything was over, except the next morning I had to come back to see what had happened to the collection downstairs.

SZ: In your storeroom.

MC: In the storeroom. But again, this was a moment when...our Museum was burning, you know? No one thought about our personal safety, and the minute we could we went back in to do what we could, because who except the staff knew what to get a hold of, like this storeroom on the second floor, which nobody seemed to think about. Someplace there's a nice story on this, I mean a newspaper story.

SZ: I think there was always the image of Nelson Rockefeller with....

MC: Yes, that, of course. Oh yes, a lot of the trustees immediately came.... The minute

we got the Seurat, René went down to his office and called Chicago to tell them that the Seurat was out, it was safe, it was perfect, nothing was touched; because Dan Rich was the director then, and that.... Sure the Tchelitchew was hurt and things like that, but this was a borrowed piece, and René had sworn...and it was safe. So we all felt a marvelous sense of relief, and also, that we had lived through this. But again, wonderful cooperation, all of us, all the staff that was around. Even the next morning when I was speeding--I was living in New City then and commuting, and I was on the highway and I was speeding in to the city and I was stopped, and they asked me what...and I said, "Did you hear that there was a fire at The Museum of Modern Art? Well, I'm on the staff and I've got to get back in because one of the storerooms is underwater."

SZ: No ticket [LAUGHING]?

MC: No ticket. "Okay, go ahead." No ticket. Because, you see, The Museum of Modern Art was public property, you know what I mean? People felt that it sort of belonged to them. I don't think that feeling exists. And I'm just talking about ordinary people, because in two instances--one when the fire came, and the other when René was killed--the kinds of responses, not just radio and press, but ordinary people.

END TAPE 2, SIDE 1

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH:	**MILDRED CONSTANTINE (MC)**
INTERVIEWER:	**SHARON ZANE (SZ)**
LOCATION:	**306 EAST 44 STREET NEW YORK CITY**
DATE:	**MAY 9, 1991**

BEGIN TAPE 3, SIDE 1

SZ: Connie, we were going to start this morning talking specifically about some of the exhibitions you worked on--anything that comes to mind in relation to those. Do you think we should try them in chronological order?

MC: Whatever.

SZ: Does that appeal to you?

MC: Yes.

SZ: The first exhibition you worked on when you got to MoMA was...

MC: The first exhibition was Polio Poster Competition.

SZ: I think we talked about that.

MC: We did talk about that.

SZ: Then the first major one is the one you worked on with René, which we did not talk very much about.

MC: A very, very interesting one was Modern Art in Your Life, and that was the first opportunity to work directly with René d'Harnoncourt and Robert Goldwater, who with René was co-curator of the exhibition. For me, of course, it was fascinating. I had known René for a long time, and I had studied with Robert Goldwater at the Institute of Fine Arts and known him for years, so it was a very easy relationship. We talked over the concept of the exhibition; we talked over the kinds of things that we were looking for; and they let me loose and said, "Go ahead, do your research. Find things, bring them to us. We'll see how they fit in." This was wonderful, because it allowed me the freedom to do my own research, to use my own knowledge, to snoop around in the other areas to see how reflective the material would be from one department to another. You've seen the catalogue, by the way? If you've seen the catalogue, you see how this was an integration of all the activities of the Museum. It was wonderful, because it immediately gave me the vision of how the Museum really functioned, even though the hierarchies of departments were very rigid. Yet, there we were working towards a completely well-defined goal, and all of us were working together. It gave one a feeling of "family," a unity of purpose, and that was a very healthy thing for the Museum to do. The only other time that

that kind of thing was when we did the Art Nouveau exhibition. There was a difference of approximately ten years in that kind of situation.

SZ: Ten kind of rocky years, too.

MC: They were rocky years, but not rocky for the same reasons, you see. That we can perhaps go into when we get into the '60s. But on the other hand, René was the kind of director who could be the director of an exhibition at the same time he was the director of the Museum. He had shortly--if my memory serves me right--he was made director of the Museum in '47, '48.

SZ: I think really officially in 1949.

MC: Really officially in 1949, so there was this wonderful opportunity to really feel how the Museum functioned as a group when one is working on a particular show that involves all of us. Of course, it was a very exciting moment in my life, and in my department.

SZ: You just mentioned a subject that's come up. He was quite a showman, is that correct, in terms of installation?

MC: I wouldn't use that word for René, no. He was the most masterful conceptor, if I can use that word. The relationship of a work of art to the environment that you put it in and to the way in which its best qualities and its relationship to the next object would be exploited. So they had a magic about it, in the way he did that. I have visions of him walking around [TELEPHONE INTERRUPTION]. I have a wonderful image in my mind, always, of René walking around with an object in his hand and knowing more or less what he planned in installation, and whistling some wonderful thing, either out of an opera or.... You would be mesmerized by this, because he then

placed it. So showman is not the word I would use in connection with René, and I had worked with him on three installations--not that I contributed, but participating in that way--when he did Modern Art in Your Life, when he did Timeless Aspects of Modern Art and when he did Ancient Arts of the Andes. I was fortunate, that I was able to work with him in these three instances, and watch him and understand how it evolved, his concept of an installation. It was less the effect, which is why I wouldn't use the word showman. A clear, poetic image of the relationship of the object to the entire concept of the exhibition.

SZ: I think I read somewhere, and you must have said it, that you really took from him.

MC: Oh, yes, I learned enormously from him in that respect. He was, in his way, a great teacher. One of the reasons Barr was like he is is because he was a great teacher; not consciously teaching, but teaching through their work. I don't know if anybody's told you this, Sharon, but a book on René d'Harnoncourt installations was started sometime in the late '60s. René had a very, very interesting young man, Mordechai Omer ,--I'll remember his name in a minute--brought in to work on this; but Mordecai was only there for a year or two, and it then passed into the hands of Arthur Drexler, which it should not have passed into, because their aesthetic concepts of installations were quite different. Nevertheless, Arthur wanted to do it, because he had admiration for René; whether he agreed or didn't, he had admiration.

SZ: This was after René died.

MC: Yes. And then Helen Franc got into the picture. It's in the drawer somewhere--it's never been produced, which is a great, great loss.

SZ: It was going to be photographs and text?

MC: Photographs and text about the various exhibitions, going way back to his Mexican days, you see, and bringing it right up. Because there he is [pointing to a photograph on the wall] down in Texas, where he had gone to the opening of...an entire museum, and had installed Oceanic art. In a typical, wonderful gesture of his, talking about an object....

SZ: It's an amazing picture.

MC: So you see, this confirms for you what I'm talking about. Polio Posters I think I've already gone into quite thoroughly. It was a purely socially-conscious position that the Museum took in working with the National Foundation [for Infantile Paralysis]. It brought a contemporary artist to work with the Museum and with the organization, and that was very, very satisfying.

SZ: What about the other two exhibitions that you did with René--Timeless Aspects of Modern Art?

MC: There I was just like a handmaiden, because, again, I had experience with pre-Columbian art. There I was a handmaiden, and a very, very willing handmaiden. That concept was his idea, and it was brilliant, absolutely brilliant. A tiny little catalogue, which I have, which when I bring out and show to people they are utterly amazed about, and an exhibition that should have been looked at more carefully when Bill Rubin and [Kirk] Varnedoe did the Primitivism show; if they had really looked at that and studied it and thought about it and discussed it, their approach to the Primitivism show would have been better, I think.

SZ: In what way?

MC: René did not say that this influenced that. That's it. There were other reasons to

look at these things, there were other purposes to these things, there were other responses that artists had to these things, without saying this is a linear development or this is a direct [path] because Picasso lived with the stuff in his studio, etcetera, etcetera. The approach was quite different--scholarly, perhaps not as intellectual, but scholarly and quite deep, quite emotionally deep. Then, of course, Ancient Arts of the Andes was a great [exhibition]. There I was directly involved, from the minute the show was conceived by René to be important to the very last gala that we had. I was involved not only in every step of the exhibition, [but also] the book and the special catalogue that was done. Because I had a sense of graphics...I was allowed to design, myself, a small catalogue. Of course, I worked on the book with every one of the scholars. I was, again, brought in and welcomed and exposed to the photographer, to the art historians, to the archaeologists and anthropologists; every aspect of the show, I was right there.... It was an enormous learning experience. I think I mentioned to you that when René was in Peru, he had to make a report. A report had to be made, let me put it that way, and I was asked to give the report, which was a wonderful acknowledgement, but I was also scared to hell to do it, because I was not carrying my burden, but René's.

SZ: Is that typical of how he worked with people?

MC: Completely, absolutely completely. Which is why I brought up MacAgy. He brought MacAgy in, he brought Douglas in, being in the sense his alter-ego at moments, when he needed it. He allowed him to function, unlike so many people who bring somebody in. That was René's way. He was a super diplomat....

SZ: You're saying that in a positive way.

MC: Oh, a completely positive way. I think he responded to that in me, because he said--I'm quoting Douglas MacAgy now--"I can have her meet a prince or a pauper, and

she'll know how to handle him." But in a sense I learned that also from him.

SZ: You said to me that [during] those early years, that there was a lot of internecine [TELEPHONE INTERRUPTION], a lot of tensions among....

MC: Sure. How could they help it? René, who had been brought in as a coordinator, Alfred shoved aside, resolving that problem from the top produced a lot of tension below. People were jockeying for position, so it took quite a time for the Museum to settle down.

SZ: And René's part in that?

MC: René was the one who protected Alfred. He was the one who realized that Alfred had to be there and had to be there in a top position of Director of the Collection. He also knew what his troubles were with Monroe Wheeler, who had the ears of certain trustees. He also had to facilitate, if I may use that word, the difficulties between Edgar Kaufmann and Philip Johnson. He had inherited a mess.

SZ: That was something you must have seen first-hand.

MC: I did, I did indeed. When Edgar brought in the Good Design project, which was a five-year project, René felt a great sense of relief, because he had not lost Edgar. He was very fond of Edgar, you see. Yet Philip was there in the department and Philip was wanting the department to be his department. This is how I use the word "diplomat." He showed it again much later, when it was obvious that Peter Selz, who was in [the Department of] Painting and Sculpture, was at loggerheads with Alfred; that he recommended Peter for the University Museum in Berkeley.

SZ: To get him out. They were at loggerheads over...?

MC: Barr and Peter didn't get along.

SZ: Do you mean personally, or in terms of their taste in art.

MC: Art. It was the art, and it was the personality, both. René had a loyalty to people, and he was not about to sacrifice. The things he did to save Bill Lieberman's neck--I don't have to go into that with you, but believe me, the things he did to save that man's neck, whether it was in the Museum or abroad when Bill was functioning for the Museum and getting into messes. He had a deep sense of loyalty.

SZ: On the Andes show, you didn't travel for that?

MC: I made one trip. I'd been in Peru the same time René was. I went up to Canada, because we borrowed from the National Museum, to select a few objects from them and bring them back, because we didn't want to trust them past Customs in an ordinary way. Otherwise, I was the person who was there in the Museum while René went around. We went together; we went, for example, to the Museum of Natural History together, so that we could select objects and work with Junius Bird. That was a lovely experience, because we would pick certain things out in storerooms, very, very high storerooms with objects piled up. We were given two ladders so we could get up on the ladders and look at things. René and I would look at things, you see, and then we would bring them down and Junius would look and say, "What do you see in that?" But again, it was a learning experience, because Junius pointed out certain things, René pointed out certain things, and there I was, like a sponge, absorbing it all--a willing sponge. When we went to dealers in the city I went with him; I once went to Chicago, but most of the traveling was his.

SZ: That show was well-received.

MC: It was a fantastic revelation. It was very, very well-received. It was a magnificent installation.

SZ: In what way?

MC: You see, nobody could handle the stuff who didn't understand the spirit of the countries from which they came, or the people who had produced them. After all, René was a Latin Americanist. He knew this area, he knew this territory.

SZ: And so did you.

MC: Not as well as he. So that if he chose a color, it was for a certain reason, not because it was a capricious choice of color. He moved one object to another place for reasons of its similarity or contrast. He understood it. He trusted the viewer...he trusted his ability to communicate through his installations [with] the viewer.

SZ: Was that different than Barr's way?

MC: Oh yes.

SZ: Because?

MC: Barr had a different relationship with a work of art. It's a strange thing to say, but for me I always felt that he had a totally different relationship. He was a complete intellectual, he was a complete scholar. He was part mystic in his peculiar puritanic way, so that his relationship to a work of art had less emotion than René. It was wonderful to work with them, and with Philip, who was totally different again.

SZ: In what way?

MC: Philip had a superb eye for what he was interested in, but not for the mass.

SZ: Does that mean for the communication of it, the sharing of it?

MC: The sharing of it, for the communication of it, yes. I remember we had long discussions about what our social reactions were. We were discussing [Luis] Buñuel for some reason, Philip and I. That's another thing, and I think I would enjoy pointing out to you the kinds of conversations that went on with people were not necessarily confined to the specifics of what you were working on. If a thought was thrown out, it could be picked up, it could be discussed. We were talking about Buñuel as a social realist in a surrealist way, whether Surrealism had within it social consciousness. We were talking about Buñuel in that connection. Philip and I had no reason to discuss this other than that we were both interested; we were both, forgive me, intellectuals; we were both discussing it. This is what made the Museum work for me. I don't know that it made it work for anybody else, but for me it made it work. Am I describing a Museum that nobody else has talked about?

SZ: No.

MC: I get rather emotional myself when I think about those days, because I think that's missing in the Museum today. I think it began to be missing in the Museum in the '60s.

SZ: We'll get to that, as a whole issue. We talked a little about the SOM [Skidmore, Owings and Merrill: Architects, U.S.A, 1950] show; I think we did last time also--unless there's something else...?

MC: Arthur had not yet come into the department. Peter [Blake] was gone.... Philip help me with it." I was scared to death, but I also was excited. His recognition that I had something to offer in the field of architecture was wonderful. Sure, I wasn't going to avoid this. I was going to learn again, and I did. Aside from my relationship with Philip, which was, is and always will be good--I want to stress that he's my friend, to this turned to me and said, "I want to do the Skidmore show, and I want you to very day--but he said, "Why don't you work with Gordon Bunshaft," who was the young rising star at Skidmore, where, prior to Gordon, almost anonymity among the young members of the firm was the real important thing. There was Gordon, a rising star, and wanting very much not to allow this anonymity, and there was I, who appreciated the fact. I could talk about it with all my friends who were architects, since a lot of my friends were architects. The approach was such an interesting one. We were going to show the work not of a single architect but of a whole organization, and Philip said, "Write the bulletin." I said, "I will if you help me," because I was honest enough, I wasn't going to say I knew it all--I didn't know it all. So again, there was a wonderful opportunity and a learning experience, and we produced a beautiful, beautiful catalogue, and I got the right kind of designer to work on it. Again, there was some coordination. It was a great show, it really was a great show, and it put Gordon on the map, which is what we wanted. Philip was very sympathetic to that idea.

SZ: He was.

MC: Oh yes. I wasn't allowed to sign the bulletin; in those days, we little underlings were not permitted to sign anything. It was much later that not only could we sign but... I can't remember whether it was before or after that that Philip said, "We have to do a new edition of the book on Mies van der Rohe.... I want you to sit down and edit it. See what you think we have to bring up-to-date and what we have to change." Again, I thought, "Gee, this is terrific. I don't have to be stuck in one little area." I

did that. I worked on the revision, the second edition, of the Mies book. So when Arthur came in, I had had enough of a feel of the department to welcome him. He was a bright young man; I'd heard a lot about him, knew about his past. Our working relationship, up until the '60s, was fine.

SZ: I'm just looking at the list I've got. There was Modern Abstract Japanese Calligraphy, which was an interesting show.

MC: That was another revelation.

SZ: That was 1954, and then it circulated.

MC: Again, that was a marvelous situation. We had a few inklings of things that were going on in Japan that might interest us, but very little that had body. Then I got a telephone call from a very fascinating man from Columbia [University] who said he had just received a batch of stuff that was Japanese calligraphy and therefore he considered it graphic, and he was told that I was the person that was involved in graphics and would I come up and take a look at it. And I said sure. I wasn't about to turn down anything that sounded interesting, especially anything that would expand what one was doing. So I went up to Columbia and met him. A very fascinating man.

SZ: Was he an art historian?

MC: No, his field was Asian cultures and history; he was head of one department. I'll remember his name in a few minutes. Theodore de Bary.

SZ: It had just been sent to him from Japan?

MC: Yes. You know how it goes: somebody knew of him, knew that he was in a place like Columbia and just sent him all this stuff. I went up and took a look and was just bowled over. They were beautiful, they were fantastic, because they were not traditional, you see, they were abstractions. They were a move away from the traditional into a modern reaction to the form. I came back and told Arthur about it and said, "This is a show we have to do, Arthur, it's marvelous." I had photographs and showed him some of the stuff, and he responded. He did that installation, and that was a very nice installation, perfect for what it was. It was a great show; I know it had a lot of influence.

SZ: Did he want to do that installation?

MC: Oh yes.

SZ: Did you want to do that installation?

MC: I did, but I deferred to him. First of all, he was my boss; he was the head of the department. Second of all, he had shown me when he did one or two other small shows that he had his own concepts of installation, so I said fine. If I argued with him, it was later. We had a wonderful time arguing, but that was Design for Sport, when we did that show, which again, I had to do, because Greta Daniel was in the hospital, got sick. I had to do it. They all turned to me when they needed me, and I welcomed it all the time. We had arguments when we did Word and Image, but that's another time. Arthur did a beautiful installation, and then the show went to one institution down in Texas, and they published a beautiful catalogue--we didn't; we didn't have the money for it. But they published a beautiful catalogue, and I wrote the introduction, which I could sign, of course: it wasn't MoMA.

SZ: They had an unwritten policy.

MC: It was an unwritten policy, yes. Also, I don't know, but on books and things like that, I think only--and I'm not sure of this--I think only Alfred and one or two of the top people ever got royalties. But when Peter Selz and I did Art Nouveau, Peter insisted not only that we sign everything but that we get royalties, and that policy was installed because of Peter Selz and Art Nouveau.

SZ: The last show circulated. You said it went down to...

MC: Just one institution.

SZ: That gave you a chance to work with Porter a little bit.

MC: I'd worked with Porter before. Our friendship went way, way back. We met in College Art Association days, and when he was in Washington I did an exhibition for him, an exhibition that went down to Bolivia --Aspects of American Culture. Then when he came to the Museum, I worked with him on several different exhibitions. So ours is a very long, good relationship, working and friendship.

SZ: Lettering by Hand, which I suppose you could say had some relationship to Japanese Calligraphy.

MC: It simply made me aware of the whole world of type design and the world of the printed letter was overcoming the hand. Lettering by Hand was something that was always deep within me, because my father was a calligrapher, and I decided it was time to bring this out. So we did a very darling exhibition and published a nice little catalogue. Again, I was able, because of that, to bring in painters, sculptors, graphic people, and that was good. Almost everything that I did, I tried to broaden the field rather than narrow it.

SZ: Because that's how you saw it?

MC: That's how I saw it and that's how I thought. That was my thinking from the very beginning. So I had a David Smith sculpture with letters, I had a Saul Steinberg with non-letters, the way he wrote, and it was a wonderful combination.

SZ: Did that fit in with the major thrust of the Museum at that time?

MC: It fit in with the major thrust of the department. As I said, Arthur and I had an excellent relationship, and he understood why I was doing it and why I wanted to do it that way. No problem.

SZ: Someone said to me that these exhibitions--and I guess there were a couple of others, like Wall Hangings--that your exhibitions were really ahead of their time, in a way. What does that mean to you, to hear that?

MC: I don't want to sound as though I'm modest, because I'm not, about things like that. Maybe this is why I loved when I was given an opportunity to do things, to go out and bring them back and stimulate some kind of thinking at the Museum. I didn't do it consciously; I did it because that's what I am.... It's my thinking, my aesthetic, my vision, and that's what I shared with René. That was our great meeting place, beside affection and friendship: vision.

END TAPE 3, SIDE 1

BEGIN TAPE 3, SIDE 2

SZ: Maybe we could just list these exhibitions and then put them into context, unless it

comes out as we go along. I have some of these '60s exhibitions: The Object Transformed, which of course was....

MC: I adored it.

SZ: Was that all yours? The concept was yours?

MC: The concept was mine. Look, we were concentrating so hard on industrial design, which, after all, has a certain rigidity about it. Just as my feeling about lettering was in a way a reaction against just the printed word, so my feeling about objects was in reaction to, okay, there's more going on than just industrial design. So my idea was "the object transformed." That was one instance where Alfred Barr had to come between Arthur and me. We disagreed, Arthur and I. We agreed on almost everything, but we disagreed badly on one item; at this moment I can't even remember which one it was. So Arthur said, "Let's ask Alfred." I said, "Fine. Okay with me." So the three of us sat down, and Alfred was wonderful. He was very pensive, very thoughtful; he listened to Arthur, he listened to me. Then he voted in my favor, and Arthur said, "Okay, if that's the way he feels," and he walked off. And Alfred said to me, "Honey, if you have any trouble, just come to me." Because Alfred knew what I was trying to do in the exhibition, you see.

SZ: And Alfred still had that kind of position; he was the final....

MC: Oh sure. Because Alfred was the Director of the Collection and the man who was the final arbiter of our aesthetic judgment.

SZ: I hear you say that, [but] I've heard other people say, "Oh, once they shoved Alfred away into that little office...." You get the impression that he wasn't really there. It's interesting; people's perceptions are so different.

MC: Who would say that?

SZ: I don't remember who it was.

MC: René got him out of that little office, shoved away. René restored Alfred his stature, and Alfred's exhibitions restored it. The respect he commanded.... So I can't imagine anybody saying a thing like that. Interestingly enough, Arthur and I, we didn't say, "Let's go to Philip." We said, "Let's go to Alfred."

SZ: Philip no longer had that position.

MC: He no longer had that position, but he was the chairman of our department. But this would have been of no interest to Philip, but to Alfred, yes. For example, I brought the [Robert] Rauschenberg Bed, the famous Rauschenberg Bed, into the Museum for the first time.

SZ: Tell me that story.

MC: I knew Bob and I knew Jap, Rauschenberg and Johns, before they were anybody, and I'd been in and out of their studios and knew what was there. When I saw that bed, I was just bowled over. When I began conceiving of the exhibition, I pretty much knew the kinds of things I wanted to bring in, and it was one of the major ones. Lucas Samaras.... I mean, there I was. Bill Seitz said something wonderful to me. He said, "Connie, I wish I had thought of that exhibition, because that is the exhibition I would have done." I said, "Would you have done it differently?" He said, "Maybe yes, but still, I wish I had thought of that exhibition." I can't tell you that there was any exhibition that I did about which I felt neutral or negative, otherwise I would not have done it.

SZ: But that one appears to hold a certain place in your....

MC: And the catalogue. When I brought that catalogue into René--of course, René wanted to see everything from every department, which is the way it should be. You see, if René had been alive at this time and had seen what this "Art of the Forties" symposium the other night was going to be like, he would have nixed it. But when I brought the catalogue into René and he felt the cover, he asked me how I got to it. Because again, it was cohesive; it was a wonderful concept that was visually brought out. I loved doing that show.

SZ: Before we go on, let me just ask you, did Arthur--you said he never would have asked Philip. Does that imply a conscious effort on his part to be Arthur and not be Philip?

MC: Sure. Arthur was really beginning to assert himself as head of our department, and he had the undying support of every one of us in the department. This was a brilliant young man. René and I would often discuss, was he a genius, was he brilliant, was he talented? We would often talk about Arthur that way, you know? He was an extraordinary person; [he] grew up to a point, a fascinating point.

SZ: Up to a point?

MC: Up to a point where his next ambition got him into trouble.... You can see why I have René's photograph there.

SZ: Do you think that Philip always felt, even after Arthur had really established himself, that Philip felt that somehow it was still his?

MC: Only in certain ways; otherwise, he gave Arthur free rein. He was really supportive.

SZ: What were those few ways?

MC: They might have disagreements about an architect, which is inevitable. Problems began to emerge in the department with the addition of one person that came into the department, and that was Ludwig Glaeser. Problems began to emerge.

SZ: But Ludwig Glaeser was Arthur's person.

MC: Ludwig Glaeser had been recommended to come into the department, and he was introduced to Arthur by, of all people, Porter McCray. He came in as assistant curator to Arthur. But Ludwig was not the personality that we thought he was. The backstabbing and the climbing were not to be believed. I mean, to the point that he bribed my secretary to do something, because she was going to Columbia, that was completely out of his scope. But dissension grew from the minute Ludwig came into the department.

SZ: How did his taking over the archives affect that? Was that a move to...?

MC: To get him out. A move to get him out, absolutely. All the time, when Arthur blindly thought that he could become the director of the Museum, and Ludwig blindly thought that he could become the director of the department, it was just impossible. Of course, this was after René's death and this was after Bates had been fired. Walter Bareiss, who was the one trustee that was the member of the troika that was running the Museum would talk to me about the department. He said, "Connie, you're running the department." I said, "I know. I know, but I don't know." It was one of the most awful moments in the Museum, but that's a broader subject, because there you have internecine warfare and you have jockeying for position. It

was utterly incredible. But let's go back for a minute. Arthur had a desperation. Arthur had never built anything, and he desperately wanted to build something. There was a project going on in which something was going to be built in the garden, and Arthur decided he was going to get it. He wooed René like mad. He couldn't get it; he just could not with Philip around, but he didn't want to believe it. Those were, again, bad moments. I kind of had to be confidante, mother, colleague--everything all wrapped up--and that was not an easy time. And then, Arthur and Liz Shaw became a combine of collusion. That was an uncomfortable time. From the mid '60s on, it was difficult. But where are we with exhibitions?

SZ: We had two more that I have here--Word and Image....

MC: That was an important show to do, because I had shown aspects of the collection here and there, and I had gotten gifts from the collectors and I had persuaded Philip to let us buy certain things, and damn it, I wanted to show what we had. So it was to show the collection at its best. Arthur and I had one of our classic fights, because I wanted to show posters by artists, and he said, "They're nothing but paintings with captions on them." I said, "True, but they have a validity in how they project a concept." He said, "What do you want to do?" I said, "Look, give me a room of 'culture and rest' (I used a phrase associated with the social realism of the Soviet Union in their cultural centers) for the installation, and we'll put them altogether in there, and it'll say something." So he conceded, and we did. It was a very handsome show. It was a very important show. A good book....

SZ: Important because?

MC: It was important because it brought out one aspect in the Museum's collection that very few people had really understood or knew about. The Museum had rarely shown the collection as such. We had shown posters in different exhibitions, but the

range of the collection, both the posters and the graphic ephemera, was an aspect of the Museum's collections that was unknown to our public, and I felt strongly that the richness of this aspect of the Museum's collections deserved exposure. Important because so many of the living artists were able to come and be part of what was happening at the Museum. They weren't painters, they weren't sculptors, but they were part of the Museum. I think I told you about the project I did with the bus? Or didn't I? Greyhound Bus had published a marvelous, enormous poster that would fill, say, that whole wall. A bus. This was a moment when the concept of graffiti was suddenly in our consciousness, and I invited ten artists of different kinds to come in and do graffiti of whatever they wanted on the poster.

SZ: You had ten known artists?

MC: Known artists, not just young ones, but known artists--painters, graphic designers, whatever. I invited ten of them to come in and do that, and that was wonderful, because it brought, again, a sense of contemporary life to a project.

SZ: This was before the Projects exhibitions?

MC: Way before anything like that was thought of.

SZ: You had a lot of contact, I assume, with the art world, from everything you said. You were always out there looking and knowing what was going on.

MC: Yes, absolutely. Well, look, when Rauschenberg wanted to get a grant to do his [Illustrations for Dante's "Inferno"], he came to me, and I brought him to Dorothy Miller, because, as I said, Jap and Bob were friends, and Merce [Cunningham] and John Cage--they were all friends. My world--I should say my art world--was never small.

SZ: So that when you put on a show, like Wall Hangings...you're smiling again. I'm smiling, too.

MC: You see, what had happened is, here we were in our department and we were concentrating so hard on industrial design, and only by accident occasionally would we bring in a piece of "craft." We had Anni Albers's work from the Bauhaus, and Gunta Stadler Stolzl, but nobody was aware that something else was going on in this world. But I was aware of it, so I wanted to have a show. Since technically I knew less about what was going on within a given work that I responded to visually and aesthetically, I, who had worked with Jack [Lenor] Larsen before (since I was the one to work with him on the Biennale in Milano), and became the president of the jury in Milano, I asked Jack to work with me on the show, because I wanted to be sure what I was doing was right. Yes, it was the first, but I did say at one of our Coordinating Committee meetings that I would only do the show if I could have the first floor, that I didn't want to do a small show and I didn't want to have it stuck in a small gallery. I wanted to do an exhibition that was exploring what was going on in the field. I said if I can't have the first floor, I don't want to do the show. So I got the first floor, and that was great. That was innovative, that was an excitement that worked on people's consciousness, something they'd never thought about before, never had looked at. But I'd looked at it.

SZ: You knew pretty much the artists you were going to include before you even proposed the show?

MC: Oh sure. This was not just an idea. It was an idea based on what I knew. Of course, when Greta died in '62, and again, I took over her exhibition Design for Sport and took over all the curatorial work. I began to meet people in that field. I think I could set the Museum on its ear right now, frankly [LAUGHING].

SZ: What would you do? What do you think is out there that nobody can see yet?

MC: So much, so much. The Museum is going along its way, and missing things.

SZ: In a very kind of even manner?

MC: Very even manner, and so often missing the mark, like in the High and Low show. But that's another story. Up to the very moment that I left, this was the kind of thing I was doing.

SZ: Tell me about Art Nouveau--you mentioned that before in relation to the other one, where there was a lot of interdepartmental [cooperation].

MC: It was an exhibition that, after all, involved painting and sculpture and prints and drawings and architecture and design. Since I worked very well with Peter Selz, I was the person in the department that really coordinated much of it. Greta and I worked beautifully together, so that we never had any problems in our work. Arthur was going to install it, because Peter was not somebody who was really interested in installation per se, whereas for Arthur this was going to be a really marvelous opportunity to go all out with different elements, and he did a very good job. Then Peter asked me to edit the book, which was good, too. So again, I had the interaction of the people I had to work with, both in the creation of the exhibition and in the book. That was another instance of working with the total Museum, which was a happy one.

SZ: There was one other thing that I read that you had a nice hand in, which was the installation of the Philip Goodwin Galleries, the creation of them and then the installation, which was done for the twenty-fifth anniversary.

MC: Yes. Well, there was nothing going on in the department where I was not involved. We were a very good team until both Ludwig came in and later, the young man we brought in as so-called registrar--I'm consciously forgetting his name at the moment, it was so difficult. He also wrought havoc in the Museum. [Lanier Graham; see p. 84.]

SZ: As registrar?

MC: He was brought in to be registrar but sort of took over a curatorial role.

SZ: Which was right near the end of your time at the Museum?

MC: The year before.

SZ: [Emilio] Ambasz.

MC: No, Emilio came in after I left the department. I left the department and went into the Study Center, and Emilio came into the department. I was made special assistant to René and part of this so-called Study Center at the time and left the department because of what was going on. We'll have to talk about this quite separately.

SZ: Next time. I can't think of his name, but Ambasz was a name I know we haven't touched, and we haven't said much about Wilder Green, either.

MC: Wilder was wonderful. Wilder was absolutely wonderful. He came in as an assistant--I can't remember the title, but working with Arthur, and was a marvelous addition to the department. Wilder had an independent voice. He was strong, he

was sufficiently secure in himself so that his working relationship with Arthur was smooth. His exhibitions were a fine contribution to the workings of the department. All of us had a very good working relationship. Then Wilder left the department and went to work with René in coordinating all the Museum, in which role he was, by the way, very good. Very good. He's a great guy. I hope you're going to interview him.

SZ: He did work for you, too. I saw that magazine article, the little house....

MC: In my house. Sure. By that time, Dick Koch was there, working with René, and Wilder worked also coordinating the Museum's activities, so that he had to work with every department.

SZ: I think next time we'll talk about the '60s and all that.

MC: Yes, because the '60s are complicated.

SZ: I know. For lots of reasons.

MC: For lots of reasons--outside as well as inside....

SZ: Maybe we'll stop for today?

MC: Okay.

END TAPE 3, SIDE 2

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH: **MILDRED CONSTANTINE (MC)**

INTERVIEWER: **SHARON ZANE (SZ)**

LOCATION: **THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART**
11 WEST 53 STREET
NEW YORK CITY

DATE: **MAY 23, 1991**

BEGIN TAPE 4, SIDE 1

SZ: Picking up from two things last time, before we get into the '60s, were two exhibitions that we really didn't talk very much about, so I'll just throw it out to you: the packaging exhibition [The Package, 1959].

MC: Okay. The packaging exhibition was what one of my critics said was so finely selected that he was disappointed that there weren't more common objects in it. And I asked him what did he expect--a supermarket display of packaging or was he really going to pay attention to what we were trying to say about this fantastic combination of design and industry? It was a fun show to do, because I found it fascinating to see ideas that we had that were developed in Europe and beautifully executed, and, consequently, I brought them back. It was full of innovative ideas, too. We brought in a whole batch of people that really hadn't thought in terms of the museum, except, as you know, the artist who said a museum was the best swipe file in the world. It was an important exhibition. We had it on the first floor, we had good space for it. The exhibits ranged in size from an Odol bottle to an enormous tube on a flatbed, [similar to a] toothpaste tube, that was used to package certain industrial things. So it had a lot of wonderful visual impact. People around the Museum liked it very much, so that was a good thing to do. I was happy

with it.

SZ: And Design for Sport?

MC: Design for Sport I inherited.

SZ: That was from Greta.

MC: Yes. Greta died. Arthur just turned to me and said, "Okay, Connie, just take it over. You've got to do it." So I took it over and I did it, picking up all of her contacts and making a lot of my own, and finding the collaboration with Sports Illustrated an interesting experience, because, of course, they were looking at it from one point of view and we were looking at it from another point of view. But it was a good experience. I didn't have any real difficulties about either agreement or disagreement about what we were doing, even when I selected a certain baseball bat against another other. I was asked on what terms I selected it, and I repeated a wonderful conversation I had with a manufacturer of baseball bats in which I asked him certain questions about the design of the bat which he found utterly and completely amazing. We went into the right weight of the wood, how it could be finished, all those things. So again, it was a learning experience.

SZ: Coming at the same thing from two totally different....

MC: Completely different points of view, you see. In each instance, that is what happened: Why did you select that? What was interesting about that? It took me a little bit of traveling to do, and that was good too. We had an exciting time when the big round boat came in; that was from Japan. We had to have the streets cleared in order to get it [here]. It was a totally different concept in a boat for an outing. All of this was in the garden of the Museum, in one of the hottest summers we ever had.

So the original idea of having a tent in which to show the smaller objects really didn't work, because the tent got so hot, nobody went in to see it. On occasion small objects were missed, and it was almost always the same object, which we found rather fascinating; it was always a mitt, but it was a rather beautiful mitt, you see. It helped to expand the notion of what we could look at. After all, we were a design department.

SZ: So when you say what we could look at, you don't mean the larger public.

MC: No. We in the Museum, our viewpoint, that could then be related to a public. So if one could go into packaging or sports, where, interestingly enough, both the design of the object, the application of graphics, etcetera, were all combined, it made a good deal of sense, and we got terrific response, both from the public as well as the press.

SZ: Since I was just thinking of it, let me ask you, from the point of view of the effect on the public ultimately, just give me your opinion on some of that, in terms of these kinds of exhibitions.

MC: Mostly surprise and delight.

SZ: That's interesting.

MC: For example, when I did the exhibition on greeting cards, which I called "Greetings!", the public doesn't think in terms that these things are designed. They think they're churned out by some kind of a machine by Hallmark; in effect they are--their kind. They don't think about these as objects that have been created by important, talented people dedicated to the common, everyday items that we live with that has to be considered from the viewpoint of how was it made, why is it made that way,

therefore why is it better than x. So these had very interesting responses from the public. And each time it brought in a different kind of public, which is nice.

SZ: What about that phrase that's often used about the Museum as being sort of the ultimate taste-maker of the twentieth century.

MC: Look, that started when we began to put the Good Design label on objects.

SZ: But it's more of a....

MC: No. No, because, you see, it goes two ways. It's part of the accusation that we are of the elite and we only serve the elite; on the other hand, when we're taking a common object like a mouthwash bottle or a toothpaste tube, as we did in the packaging show, or of an ordinary greeting card that one might get, then that isn't true. Then, in a sense, we are taste-makers. But a long time ago, on a platform in Aspen, Colorado, there had been many murmurings about the word taste, and using it in a derogatory way, and I simply said, "Look here"--I said this on a platform, by the way, Sharon--"You all sound as though taste is a four-letter word. Taste is something you have, you can learn about, can be nurtured, any one of the sensibilities can, and we've got to look at it from that point of view." I was protesting the very word that you used, that we were taste-makers, as though this was an evil, which indeed it was not. We did it with automobiles, we did it with greeting cards.

SZ: I'm asking you how profound you think the effect has been, how deeply it's penetrated.

MC: Most effectively, most effectively. In the advertising for Movado watches--I'm not wearing mine today--every commercial ends up with the Museum watch. If it's in the Collection, it's given "the stamp of approval," like Women's Home Companion used

to do so many, many years ago. When we had actual labels on the Good Design objects, that they were from the Good Design exhibition or collection of MoMA, it had a profound effect. Witness the fact that when you go to ordinary country fairs around the country, you're going to find objects people had acquired that they now want to get rid of. Of course, they don't understand the value of them, but you find that all the time.

SZ: That they acquired knowingly?

MC: That they acquired knowingly, right. Because it probably went to an heir, a daughter or son, who probably didn't give a damn; on the other hand, it had been acquired, knowingly. Absolutely.

SZ: I can't remember, did we talk about how things were selected to become part of the collection?

MC: We touched on it briefly. We had Acquisition Committee meetings that were made up of Alfred Barr, some of the trustees and all of the curators of all of the departments. We brought before this committee things that we in the department, or in each department, had selected to be added to the collection. That was one of the moments...where the Lichtenstein coffee cup and saucer was proposed and Alfred thought it should be in the design collection and I said it should be in the painting [collection] because it was nothing more than a five-and-ten-cent-store coffee cup which would never have come into the collection if it didn't happen to have a Lichtenstein design. That system apparently broke down in later years, but while I was curator, it was still very much in force, and I thought it was a very healthy way, because then all of us knew what was being presented, why it was considered to acquire, so that you got the totality of the Museum's point of view rather than just one's immediate department.

SZ: So you're saying that the way things are structured now....

MC: ...I don't think it is as healthy, and I use the word healthy because it promotes the separatism which I think is bad in a museum of contemporary art. What other exhibitions shall I talk about? Shall we jump into the '60s?

SZ: I think we will move on to letting me ask you, since you were so good at painting a picture of what the atmosphere was when you first got to the Museum, to talk a little bit about what was happening then, because the 1960s, obviously, were full of a lot of upheavals there.

MC: Let's take for a moment my department. There was Arthur; there was Wilder, who at that time was associate curator of architecture, I think that was his official title; there was Greta, in design; and there was Connie, in graphics. What we four were able to accomplish was pretty fantastic, with a very small staff. When Greta died, I took over the problem of design as well as graphics. So the early part of the '60s was a really comfortable moment. I'm using the word comfortable because of the discomfort that settled in afterward, in the middle and late '60s.

SZ: So what you're saying is, up until the time the building reopened it was....

MC: It was quite wonderful. It really was. Sure there were going to be little difficulties within different departments, but never to the extent of great seriousness. Never. But then....

SZ: There was the issue of Porter's leaving.

MC: The issue of Porter's leaving was a very complicated one. You must have gotten a

lot of it from Porter, in your interview with him. You will get a lot from Wilder, also. It was in that period that personalities began to emerge in a power struggle.

SZ: You're saying that in relation to what happened to Porter?

MC: And what happened to Porter, yes. Struggles with Monroe Wheeler, struggles with some of the curators. The burden was put on Porter to protect himself, but he didn't. Why he didn't, I don't know. I can only suspect.

SZ: What's your guess?

MC: His pride. Porter is a Southern gentleman. His pride. That anybody would question either his ability or his integrity after having built up so strongly and with such success, you see, that international department--it became the [International Program], and the proof is that his relationship with the people in the International Council is as strong as ever today as it was, so that the real burden and the real difficulties came from within rather than from without.

SZ: The staff, you mean, not trustees.

MC: Yes.

SZ: And was his integrity called into question? Is that what happened?

MC: I'm using the word integrity. I'm not so sure that they would have used it. They would have found another way of moving around it.

SZ: What's said frequently is that the International Program became so strong it seemed like it was operating outside the Museum, but that doesn't make sense to me.

MC: But you see, this is where certain curators were questioning his power. The International Program was strong. He could not have done it without the curators; he wasn't about to go outside and hire guest curators when we had a good curatorial staff. And when you worked on something with Porter, you exchanged points of view, you discussed what you were going to do. Jim Soby and I discussed with Porter the Ben Shahn exhibition, which never was shown in the Museum, only on an international tour, but where we understood completely what our goal was. That was where the difficulty started. So the complaints were too much power. This is why I use the word: where the power struggle was beginning, you see. I daresay that they were somewhat aided and abetted by Monroe Wheeler, because before that Monroe seemed to pride himself on the fact that his internationalism, his relations with the trustees, gave him extra clout, and here Porter was getting a great deal of extra clout, and with it, power. And that was it. And so René did what René always [did]: he got him into what was then the JDR 3rd Fund, and Porter became a trustee. So, you can understand by that that the difficulties were not with the top; they were internal.

SZ: That was one major thing that played itself out, but other than that, during those first years of the '60s you said it was relatively placid.

MC: Yes, they were relatively placid. But begin to think what the hell was going on in the '60s all over, just all over. New staff--people were coming in; we were growing. We had lots of things to think about that we never had before: the strength of the Black movement; all the things that were going on in all areas of our museum work; the clarity of some of the Blacks, since René was involved not only with The Museum of Modern Art but with what was the Rockefeller collection, the Museum of Primitive Art, and the problem of restitution--"Give all those things back to the Africans." Everything that was going on was reflected in the Museum. In our department we

had two additions to the department, when Wilder left the department and became deputy director to René, that produced more havoc internally in the department than almost anything else. One was Ludwig Glaeser, and the other was a young man by the name of Lanier Graham, who was hired to be the registrar because our work was getting so involved that poor Dorothy Dudley and her office couldn't handle everything, and so it was decided that we would have our own registrar. A very bright, very ambitious young man, somewhat unstable, but we all tried to help. He was bright enough so that pretty soon it was easy to allow him to take over an exhibition. We had enough work, we didn't want more staff, but oh god, the dissension, the underhandedness of somebody like Ludwig Glaeser using people in the department as well as out in other departments, was shattering, really shattering. Arthur was getting edgy. If he would ask a guest curator to do something that we all felt was important to do and not one of us was really capable of doing it, he had the worst difficulty in accepting that person. And yet he went to the best person. I'm specifically referring to the time when the exhibition of Architecture Without Architects [1964] was being planned by none other than Bernard Rudofsky. They had a terrible time together, and the only thing I could do was try to explain one to the other, try to be a buffer. They were alike in many ways, which was one of the problems, in the personality, you see. Nevertheless, Architecture Without Architects was a fabulous show, a catalogue that sold and sold and sold and sold. Bernard was very strong-minded and not very understanding of all the things that Arthur was good at: installation, judgment. And yet the personalities were so abrasive that.... So that with somebody like Ludwig around, he was of no real help at all, and the only time that I watched him actually working is when he did the engineering exhibition [Twentieth Century Engineering, 1964], because again, Arthur called me in once or twice to say, "Look, Ludwig and I disagree about this. What do you think?" And I would listen to Ludwig and I would listen to Arthur, and I could see that Ludwig was never going to be happy to be under Arthur, he just simply wasn't. We had constant meetings with small groups in the Museum, working to face the situation of the

Blacks and the whole civil rights movement and recognition for Black artists in all areas. We would all sit in on meetings and I would have to listen to somebody like Benny Andrews...saying to me, "Connie, are they giving us a snow job?" I knew a lot of the artists, from my previous life, pre-Museum, and all the tensions that we were experiencing in society, we were experiencing in the Museum: not certain how to work with them, not certain how to react, but trying to feel our way. I think there was sincerity and honesty in the fact that we were trying, but we really didn't have a direction in that area, so we were all feeling our way.

SZ: Would you say that in general the staff was politically active, or not politically active?

MC: The political action and the political...well, action is really...consciousness came later. But generally speaking, I think most of us on the staff were pretty liberal people.

SZ: So there was some sympathy to some of these pressures.

MC: Yes, there was a great deal of sympathy.

SZ: I assume that these things came up before René died.

MC: Oh yes....

SZ: What I'm asking you is: René, how did he respond to these kinds of pressures?

MC: The best way that René would: "They are legitimate, let's see what we can do about it." I mean, he wasn't even upset when they demanded that the Museum of Primitive Art return the objects. "Let's talk to them, let's explain why that museum exists and how we can help them, rather than disband." But René was a true internationalist,

both in experience and in point of view. How far could he go? Well, let me put it this way, if René had been alive at the time of the Kent State--now I'm taking you quite a ways....

SZ: 1970.

MC: Seventy, yes. He would never have done what [John] Hightower did without talking to the trustees. He knew his board, he knew how far he could go; even if he wanted to go beyond how far he could go, he knew that he had to clear certain things. So René was possibly the best politician that we had around, in the good sense, because he was able to work with staff--with just ordinary staff, not just curatorial staff--with the heads of departments, with the trustees, with the Junior Council, with the International Council, most of whom were his friends. If I say René was unique, I'm saying it in the most positive sense, certainly as applied to people in the Museum. Of course Monroe never began to have that attitude. I'll tell you a little story which I think might fit very nicely in here. On a Sunday afternoon, I was invited to a dinner party given by a gallery which was showing some rare works of Picasso at the time--Eleanor Saidenberg is the woman's name. It was a nice party; of course there weren't too many people around. There were maybe two dozen people. But Monroe came over to me and said, "What are you doing here?" Which gave you a complete idea: I wasn't keeping my place, you see. I was outside of my place. [With] René, it never occurred. So he was the glue that held all of this together during a great deal of those difficult times.

SZ: And he retired.

MC: He had to retire. We had that mandatory policy of age retirement, and they asked him to stay on for quite a while. Then he retired, and choosing his successor began quite a job. I often asked René how the choice centered on Bates, Bates Lowry,

and they felt that Bates had shown a great deal of administrative ability in addition to being an art historian, when he masterminded the relief program for Venice, and that impressed most of them. Also, he was the right size and he had the right presence [and] a perfectly respectable wife. And Bates came in.... You see, the people who followed René thought they had a mandate, a mandate that had really been given them by the trustees. In between, after René's retirement and this whole business--we had, I told you, the period of the troika running the Museum.

SZ: That was after Bates Lowry.

MC: That was after Bates Lowry, because by the time Bates was fired--and he was fired; he didn't leave, he was fired, without much notice, I may hasten to say--that was when the Museum was run by the troika. But Bates inherited an almost impossible job.

SZ: Because of the great figure René was?

MC: Partly because of the great figure René was, partly because of the whole situation outside, all the volatile action that was going on in our society at the time--the pressure from the Blacks, the pressure from gays (we didn't call them gays then). The truth of the matter is, Bates was not equal to this job.

SZ: It's also been said--and you alluded to it a minute ago--that he was not savvy about dealing with trustees.

MC: Well, that's why I say he thought he had a mandate, but he didn't. And here he was dealing with issues like the Blacks, like homosexuals, and he had to be able to work with the trustees on situations like this, and he didn't. He took certain independent actions.

SZ: What was he like? What did you think about him when he first came in, in that position?

MC: Again, I had the advantage of knowing him. We had several mutual friends: Peter Selz was a great friend of Bates's; Allan Fern, who knew Bates quite well and they each had quite a collection of graphic things; and one of my friends who also taught at Brown at the time, Ed Koren, a great cartoonist. I had the advantage of knowing him personally, you see, and I had already left the department and I had been made by René a special assistant, so that here and there Bates trusted me. I only say here and there, because after all I was very close to the curators in the departments. So Bates didn't last. I think it was just as well that he didn't, because I don't think he could have seen us over that difficult period. The transition from René and a calm future was badly stacked, both from the pressures within the Museum and without, and Bates couldn't take it. He didn't know how to handle it. He was <u>not</u> a diplomat. He made really no attempt to endear himself to the various department heads, so that he couldn't hold them together, <u>already</u> they were pulling apart, and it was almost inevitable that he went--not as precipitously as he did, but....

SZ: Was it a shock?

MC: To him? To us?

SZ: Both.

MC: It was, because in many ways we were sympathetic.

SZ: Did the staff like him?

MC: Some of the staff liked him. Some of the staff. He had a bit of arrogance in him that some of them might not have liked. But it was a shock. It was too soon after René's, not only departure, but death, because the actual death of René had greater effect than his departure. Everybody, every one of us, was secure in the knowledge that he was around and he would guide Bates, he would be able to smooth certain things for him. But with René's death, that all disappeared.

SZ: And Alfred wasn't a factor at all. He was almost out too, I think.

MC: No, he wasn't almost out, but he wasn't an important part. I would say that Bates had most of his difficulties, I would imagine, with Monroe Wheeler, who was a conduit to all the trustees, always.

SZ: Why wasn't Monroe made director of the Museum?

MC: I don't think they ever considered him, because they were considering, number one, a younger person. That was important.

SZ: Because he retired.

MC: Yes. A younger person and also somebody with some administrative abilities. Bates had raised a great deal of money, and that colored their vision. It was a false coloration, but it did. So Monroe was never considered.

SZ: This was also the time that there was agitation from within to unionize, right?

MC: We were beginning. We had a wonderful strike.

SZ: You had a wonderful strike [LAUGHING]?

MC: Oh yes.

SZ: What was wonderful about it?

MC: The kind of sympathy we had, from artists, from dealers, even sympathy from within the Museum from people who couldn't join us, like what's-his-name from the Film Department, Willard van Dyke. There's a photograph somewhere of me sitting at a card table in front of the entrance to 21 giving out information and saying to people who came over to me [asking] "Connie, what are you doing here?," and I'd tell them, "You don't want to go in. We're on strike." Things like that. Or else teaching the young picketers to sing "It Isn't Cricket to Picket." You know that old song from Pins and Needles? Ask your mother. "It's Not Cricket to Picket." I taught all those songs to our strikers, so that when Mrs. [Blanchette] Rockefeller came through, they could sing it to her.

END TAPE 4, SIDE 1

BEGIN TAPE 4, SIDE 2

SZ: Did Mrs. Rockefeller enjoy it?

MC: I told her later that I thought the words were very apt.

SZ: That was the beginning of a certain kind of strain between elements within the Museum family.

MC: Where the head of a department took a kind of paternalistic point of view--for example, Bill Rubin couldn't get over that his curators were striking, he couldn't

understand it. We met at lunch one day--not he and I lunching together; we were each meeting other people for lunch--we were standing close and [he said] "Connie, why didn't they tell me they were going to do this?" And I said, "So what would you have done? Would you have willingly come out and struck with us?" So, in a sense, it depended. Another great dissension that I think came upon us like a plague was the concept of the Study Center, which was René's idea. The Museum had grown so much, leaps and bounds, in that period and would have got more and more complicated, and while we all had our own archives and our own study materials, René had the idea of formulating a study center which would try to centralize all certain materials from the different departments and become the place where scholars and people like that could go to get all kinds of information, help, etcetera. A woman was brought in, Anne Hansen, who started to create a study center. Obviously, it needed two things: It needed complete understanding about the range of her activities, it needed complete understanding within the totality and within each department and it needed the cooperation of each department. There, then, began one of the worst power struggles you ever could imagine, because certain departments simply refused to give up their material, their rights to their material. It was destined to die before it really got off the ground, but it also exacerbated the difficulties within the Museum itself. She didn't last too long, and this international study center died a quick death, but the havoc it created in-between was neither comfortable nor healthy. If it had only one positive role, it indicated how important it was for each department to develop its own study center.

SZ: Which is what's happened.

MC: Which is what happened. That's the only positive result.

SZ: Give me a few negatives, the things that you saw specifically.

MC: Well, John Szarkowski and Anne Hansen were at loggerheads. He simply wouldn't cooperate. Arthur kept telling her that what she was asking was not in her right to ask.

SZ: But she'd been asked to do this by René.

MC: Yes.

SZ: So did they take René on directly or did they kind of do it....

MC: By that time, René had left. Bates was there, and all these things were happening. All the aftershock, if I can use this word. These were aftershocks. It created a situation that was just unbelievable. René was aware that there were going to be some difficulties, so he brought in Inez Garson.... Inez was trying to work with Anne and at the same time work with the different curators to see if she couldn't smooth out certain things. Everybody liked Inez much better; some of them didn't, but some of them did. But it didn't do any good. It just was a horrible time. You didn't feel as though you wanted to do anything except bury yourself in your own work and shut the books. But you couldn't; just too much was going on, too much that was sending tremors, or as I say, aftershocks....

SZ: After René retired and then died, where did that leave you in the structure?

MC: I was then special assistant to Bates. I had been asked to work with Anne Hansen in the Study Center. I was helping Victor D'Amico in his educational department, doing small exhibitions for public schools, because there were more and more requests to do that kind of thing, and I was "still on the cards consultant to the department," but with the department in the state it was in I had no interest in consulting with it, although after I left the department, Arthur and I didn't resume our

old relationship, but it was an easier relationship. It wasn't until Emilio Ambasz came into the department that I really felt it a little easier to work within my old department; not on specifics, you know, but in more general ways. I had introduced Arthur to Emilio by taking him down to Princeton and meeting with two or three people from the department of architecture at Princeton University. [Tomes] Maldornado, from Italy, was giving a lecture and his three brightest students were, believe it or not, Michael Graves, Peter Eisenmann and Emilio Ambasz. Two of them wanted to be working architects. Emilio was the brightest wunderkind that you could possibly ever meet in your life. He would be perfect for the department. Of course, he was many things that Arthur was not, but he was a fireball.

SZ: So he came in.

MC: So he came in. And of course Arthur had gone through that bad period of realizing that no matter what, he couldn't become director of the Museum. Ludwig could not become head of the department. All of that by that time had worked itself out. I told you, the '60s were going to be so turbulent.... I knew we wouldn't get much beyond this.

SZ: The other piece of turbulence which we left out, which came from the more placid part of this time, what was going on in [the Department of] Painting and Sculpture.

MC: We had had a number of curatorial people that had worked with Alfred. From the time Peter Selz was hired, at the same time Bill Seitz was hired. As I told you, we called them the Katzenjammer Kids; they each did excellent things, each in his own way. They worked together fairly well, but it was not a very comfortable situation for Alfred or for Dorothy Miller. That's when Peter left and went to Berkeley. The Department of Painting and Sculpture sort of limped along, with people in and out, until Alfred left and gave the mantle to Bill Rubin. Before that, nothing could really

happen.

SZ: Didn't Bill Lieberman expect that he was going to inherit?

MC: Yes. Look, I only described to you what was going on between Arthur and Ludwig. But...this was one of the worst periods, with a person like Bill Lieberman. He wanted to be named head of the department. He took the most negative role in the whole situation. Nobody was any good, nothing was any good, nobody who suggested anything was any good. Of course he could not be named head of the department. Bill Lieberman has an absolutely destructive streak in him, which got worse and worse as he kept losing ground. That certainly didn't help. What I'm explaining to you is, we were all going to pieces in a funny way. The structure of the Museum was going to pieces, our infrastructure was going to pieces, in personnel as well as....

SZ: What about in the shows it was putting on?

MC: Here and there we were doing exhibitions; here and there we would give lip service to certain political-social points of view. I don't think anybody's heart was really in it. If you look at the roster of exhibitions in that period, I think you can easily see what was going on.

SZ: So some of that power of the early postwar years was really gone.

MC: Really gone, never to be recovered.

SZ: What about the troika? You talked about Bates Lowry.

MC: Between Bates and Hightower, somebody had to run the Museum. I mean, come

on. So it was decided that three people--we called them the troika; it would be a committee that would take over the administration--Walter Bareiss, who was to represent the trustees, Wilder Green, who had been deputy director under René, and Richard Koch, Dick Koch, who was originally our legal adviser but became more than that in his assistance to René. This produced, again, a period of unease. No one of us was accustomed to this. Where were the decisions being made, how were they being made, how did the department heads relate to these three? Uneasy. Uneasy was the whole situation. Of course, all this time they "were looking for a director." It was Nelson Rockefeller who brought in John Hightower, because John had been head of the New York State Council on the Arts.

SZ: Which he started.

MC: Right. Again, I knew John in his capacity of that, so he was no stranger to me.

SZ: And you thought at the time?

MC: I'll tell you something amusing. I thought he was the wrong size. He was a small man. I didn't know whether or not he'd understood the board of trustees, or whether he thought since he had Nelson's ear and backing he could do what he wished. He didn't understand his mandate, if he had a mandate. His death knell was sounded on the day of the Kent [State] shootings.... Did anybody tell you why?

SZ: I'm hoping you will.... [PAUSE]

MC: By that time, certainly, the entire staff of the Museum...we'd been working on being unionized, and the guards had a union and the maintenance people had a union and the electrical guys had a union, but the consciousness started to grow in the Museum after the [Robert F.] Kennedy assassination--consciousness about

politics.... I can date it from that day, where it was articulated--all the expressions were being articulated. Anyhow, the Kent State shooting just struck us in the Museum as though we had been there and as though we had been shot at. John Hightower himself responded to this and closed the Museum and put out a sign explaining why it closed. The trustees were up in arms. From that moment on, John was finished. He did it without telling anybody; he didn't ask, without even telling them that he was going to do it. You can't treat a Paley and a Rockefeller...I mean, remember, whose side were they on?

SZ: So he was gone.

MC: Well, not immediately. Then a lot of people were being brought in on the top level, people who were fundraising, people who were doing all kinds of things. Anne Hansen was fired, and then I was let go, Sarah Rubinstein was let go, our chief bookkeeper, who was our treasurer. All peculiar things began to be happening, and it was a very uneasy moment.... At that particular moment, PASTA/MoMA was being solidified. Our union was actually created. We won. We won, because I remember fighting Irene Gordon. Irene had been brought in by Bates to be what Ethel Shein is now to Dick [Oldenburg].

SZ: She was brought in after you....

MC: No, while I was there, when Bates came in. She was also a very brilliant editor. She used to fight with Helen Franc such as you can't imagine, the fights that went on. Nothing in that period, really nothing in that period, gave you the honest gut feeling that the Museum was ever going to be what it once was. Too many things had happened, too many outside influences, too many upheavals. And Dick, of course, was head of the publications division when I was there. It was interesting that they chose him, because--this is how I view it--as head of publications, he had to work

with all the departments. He got to know the curators pretty damn well.

SZ: So he had that base.

MC: He had that absolute base. He was not new to the Museum. He got a really damn good hard look at how it worked, how the curators worked, who they were, what their difficulties and responsibilities were. So he had a very firm base from which to go into an executive role, a really administrative role. Not like Bates, who himself was an art historian, or John, who had some experience.

SZ: What were the circumstances surrounding your leaving?

MC: They were beginning to let all kinds of people go. My job, shall we say, with the Study Center had disappeared, because the Study Center disappeared. I was still special assistant to Bates, I was still a special assistant to John. Victor D'Amico and his department had fallen on very hard times, with great disapproval about his old traditional academic viewpoint toward education, etcetera, etcetera. And I took retirement. Perfect moment. Because there was only one thing for me to do, and that was to either go back into a curatorial role, which I certainly would not have done.... Because of the whole situation. Absolutely.

END TAPE 4, SIDE 2

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH: **MILDRED CONSTANTINE (MC)**

INTERVIEWER: **SHARON ZANE (SZ)**

LOCATION: **THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART**
11 WEST 53 STREET
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BEGIN TAPE 5, SIDE 1

SZ: You wanted to go back....

MC: I want to go back briefly to tell you why I decided to leave the Department of Architecture and Design. It was in turmoil. The personalities, the backstabbing, the jockeying had gotten absolutely out of control, and I decided at that point that there was really no use in continuing with that. I had spent too many years working amicably and accomplishing things, and I just felt I'd reached that point. René also wanted very much to have me help Anne Hansen in the Study Center and therefore made me special assistant to him and moved me down into the Study Center, because with all my experience I could help her with all of the other curators. This was a perfectly logical idea. Also, he knew that I was helping Victor D'Amico in the development of the educational program. It was not a very comfortable position to be in, but nevertheless, I was called upon to do some interesting things. For example, when the whole Black movement started in the assertion of the Museum's program and how it would affect that issue, I sat in on many of those meetings because I knew a lot of the people involved. I'd helped Victor D'Amico, who was developing another new approach to art education. All of it was interesting. I don't feel that it wasn't interesting. Incidentally, I've just received a letter from a secretary

that I had at the time, because she had read my name in the Women's Caucus.... My relationship with all the curators was fine, because it always had been. The strike at the Museum, all those things were building up, and it was not among the most peaceful moments in the Museum's history. Walter Bareiss, who was absolutely astonishing, was slightly upset with me because I had left the department--he felt that they needed my presence there. [He] had asked me to prepare a report going back into the Museum's entire program, in which one could find evidence of our whole past, of reaching out beyond a description of modern art. I had talked to him about this, this idea, and I prepared this long, long report, which was complex.... The point was to help understand that although not clearly stated in the mandate, it was always the attitude of the Museum that they would do this kind of thing. And that, I think, was a very important thing to do.

SZ: Did that report get circulated?

MC: I can only presume so. I had drafted it for Walter Bareiss for the trustees, but it wasn't up to me to circulate it. I would hope it wasn't for his eyes only.

SZ: He'd wanted it as an assessment of...?

MC: An assessment of the Museum's program in the past. He'd wanted it for two reasons. He wanted to show the people who were commenting, the people who were accusing us [TELEPHONE INTERRUPTION]...of ignoring their minority interests. He wanted to show that the Museum had reached out beyond its mandate. I think that was the first reason, and I think he wanted also to perhaps use it as a way to show the trustees that, look, we could do more than we're doing. He wasn't a great guy, but he recognized the difficulties involved at the moment.

SZ: This was the time when he and Dick Koch and Wilder Green were running [the

Museum]?

MC: Yes, with Wilder actually being called one of the deputy directors. So I prepared this report. I worked very long and hard; I went into the library--I didn't depend completely on my memory--and researched completely every indication of exhibitions. For example, way back in, I think, 1939, American photography was shown, in which all of these Walker Evans things about farm security and all these social programs were exhibited at the Museum. And that was important; it was a social program that the artists were working for, and it was art. In doing this, I myself was stimulated into thinking, By God, we can do so much more than we've been doing, and being utterly and completely sympathetic to the minorities of the time. I was encouraging this idea to the curators, to the Study Center, to the education department, where I really had the contacts. But it was the greatest period of turmoil....

SZ: The overall impression that you would get from this report was that the Museum, the status quo was good?

MC: No, the status quo was not reaching out [as] consistently as it had in the past. That was the whole burden of the report. Not that anybody should get the reaction, but what the record told us.

SZ: But that may have been a message that....

MC: Let's do something about it.

SZ: No, I understand that, but I'm thinking of the ways in which it was accepted.

MC: I don't know who saw it, I don't know what use was made of it. I can't imagine that

Bareiss put me on this thing and then buried it. On the other hand, he may have looked at it in horror and said, "Let me just bury this, the point of its being done in the present and future might jeopardize the attitudes of...." Don't forget, Kent State, all these things were happening, and all the reverberations were right there, right in the Museum, every bit of it. Then came this famous managerial questionnaire about, Who are you?, What is your job?, How do you evaluate yourself? First of all, I was shocked that this kind of thing would be circulated in the Museum, and I thought to myself, Well, this is the first indication that we are a corporate structure and this is the way corporations behave. My second attitude was, How the hell do I answer this goddam thing? Describe myself at present--which I was just beginning to shape, because the whole Study Center bit had thrown the staff into confusion, and [there was] aggression against Anne Hansen, and she didn't know how to handle that. René was gone, and there was no real clarification about the relationship of Anne Hansen and the Study Center and the curators. There had never been more than a nice pipe dream and then you work out your organized plan, but that never happened. So I hardly answered the question, because there was no one to whom I could go to talk it out. No one. There was absolutely no one in the Museum. René had died, Bates had been fired, we were being led by this...troika, and when John Hightower was brought in, again, this man was faced with something he couldn't either handle or understand. He thought he had all kinds of mandates from the trustees, and obviously he didn't.

SZ: Do you have any sense how the management study was received by other staff people?

MC: Only a few. Inez Garson, who was around, later was removed. A whole batch of people were removed. I didn't even know whether everybody had been sent this questionnaire form. My contact with my old department was at that time rather superficial, although René had insisted that I remain as consultant to the

department, had insisted on that, and when he had the cards printed for me, both those titles were on it--Special Assistant to the Director, Consultant to the Department [of Architecture and Design]--but I wanted as little to do with the department as possible.

SZ: You really had strong feelings about it.

MC: Well, I thought they had to settle their own problems, and only if somebody called me and said, "Connie, can you help, can you tell me?" I responded, but there was no point, you see.

SZ: And your relationship with Arthur at the time?

MC: That was very bad, because that was the moment when he and Liz Shaw had really ganged up together, because he absolutely wanted to become director of The Museum of Modern Art, and what could you do? So he was preoccupied with that, so everybody in the department up there were going mad trying to jockey for power and position. I didn't want to get mixed up in that. This is why Bareiss was angry with me for leaving. He said, "You were the only one who could hold the department together," and I said, "No, dear, not under those circumstances." Not with people like Glaeser and Lanier Graham. Oh boy, no thank you. Then later, of course, when it fell down and Arthur was not made director and Emilio Ambasz was brought into the department--after all, Emilio was my friend, [and] I had a much better relationship with the department--by that time it had simmered down. Because when Arthur came back sort of full-time....

SZ: He was not there?

MC: You know, when you're jockeying for position, there are meetings and secret

meetings and tea upstairs with this one and that one. He wasn't there much. But by the time Emilio came, he was back as head of the department.

SZ: What kind of director of the Museum do you think Arthur would have made?

MC: Terrible.

SZ: Then what do you think made him think that it would be a possibility?

MC: Blind ambition and ego--two things. I asked him, you know. I said, "Arthur, you blew it. You're a homosexual. What the hell made you think it was at all possible? You know the board as well as I do." Was there an answer? No. And that's why I use the words blind ambition and ego.

SZ: You think a Jewish director of the Museum is not a possibility?

MC: I would doubt it. I would really doubt it. I don't think the Museum has advanced to that point.

SZ: One other question: You said that when this troika was running the Museum you had no one to talk to, and that gives me an idea what it was like, but....

MC: Look, I wouldn't talk further with Bareiss. I wouldn't talk further with Dick Koch, although we were friendly. Wilder was so involved with all of this. It was terribly difficult with the three of them, because Bareiss was still a trustee; he was acting on behalf of the board. Dick was an employee, Wilder was an employee; their relationship with the rest of the staff was very difficult. Bill Lieberman was acting up--you name it [LAUGHING]. Consequently, it was the worst possible situation in the world. It started way back when the concept of a Study Center started and René's

retirement, because it takes a certain kind of person to be able to run that institution and the board of trustees. For example, when John Hightower, with all the good intentions in the world, after the Kent State shootings put out this statement without consulting the trustees, there was hell to pay. You don't make a statement like that, you don't do such a thing without consulting the trustees. Now, whose idea it was for this management questionnaire to evaluate staff and things like that, and how broad it was, I don't really know.

SZ: But it happened.

MC: But it happened, and I've got to say, I can't even remember what I wrote on it.

SZ: It must have been a very disillusioning end to a long and happy run.

MC: It was frightful, it was really frightful. There was no way that you could reach some solid ground on which to work. That's why I said there was nobody I could talk to. Sure, when we had the strike, you know, I could talk to Willard van Dyke, I could talk to Arthur. They all understood what was going on. About that kind of thing, sure, I could talk to them. But, for example, I remember Arthur saying to me, "You mean to say I'm supposed to hand over everything in the department, which is our archives and all, to Anne Hansen, who doesn't know a thing about this? What is she going to do with it?" Every one of the curators was clinging to their own bailiwick.

SZ: Which is not unlike what happened to Porter.

MC: Exactly. I look back on it and I think, Why is Dick Oldenburg a good director? First of all, as the director of Publications before, he had been consistently in touch with every department; he got to the individuals involved, he got to know his difficulties with them, to evaluate them, and was in the process positioned for that

administrative role, because, of course, it was an administrative role, not like [those] of the other people, his predecessors--not like René, not like Bates.

SZ: Who were art historians.

MC: Who were art historians, who had been involved in art as a major aspect of their lives.

SZ: That says as much about the evolution of the institution as anything else.

MC: Exactly. My use of the word [corporation]--because I remember talking to my husband about this questionnaire, and I said, "What do I do with it? This is the way a corporation acts. We're not a corporation." Of course, I must confess, when the Museum reopened and I walked into that large foyer, that reception hall we now have, I thought to myself, We are indeed a corporate structure, and our new building is indeed a corporate structure, not really realizing then how prophetic I was in thinking this is the way a corporation behaves.

SZ: That was the other thing I had on my list, talking about the evolution of the institution. I think one of the things that came up is that [William S.] Paley had heard this from a number of people, that he and David Rockefeller had dismissed Hightower without consulting the board, and that this represented a whole new....

MC: Again, this poor guy didn't report to the board and then two people on the board [John de Menil and Ralph Colin]--de Menil raised holy hell about this; he really, really was infuriated.

SZ: About what?

MC: About the fact that Paley and David Rockefeller took it upon themselves to fire John Hightower without consulting the board. You don't do this. The President of the United States can do it, but not in an organization and the structure of how the board operated.... If you can think back to what the late history was like and that all the things that were happening externally...[were] happening internally in the Museum, I think you can begin to understand what the turmoil and the deterioration was like. With a man like René d'Harnoncourt, who could hold it all together because he never lost sight of what was going on outside as well as inside--he knew how to handle his board. Oh boy, did he know how to handle them, over the years. The important thing is that there was no one. Bates was having his own problems--with the board, with the staff, with the outside pressures of the minority groups, the Blacks, etcetera--and Bates couldn't handle that. And he ran completely afoul of the board. The way he was fired--I mean, he was fired, and we on the staff were told--it couldn't help but aggravate the situation in the Museum. I could see it just falling apart; I could see it in the way it was moving. The troika, they tried, and Wilder, who had operated on a curatorial basis before, knew all about what was going on within the departments. He was the one at least one could speak to. Dick Koch knew the administration; Bareiss was functioning on behalf of the trustees. Then, when Nelson brought in Hightower, it was because Hightower had been head of the New York State Council on the Arts, and had done a very good job; Nelson knew him, Nelson liked him. So, to have Nelson bring in somebody like that, he would be able to work with the trustees. They didn't like him, they didn't like him at all, and the poor man had an awfully rough time. He was doomed, absolutely doomed. I have an amazing letter from Hightower someplace, when I left; his understanding, oh.... He understood, but he couldn't do anything about it. He had no clout with any of the curatorial staff.

SZ: So it came from within in that way.

MC: Well, it came from within and from without--"without" being the trustees, because the trustees at that time took a pretty active role in the Museum, which is why John de Menil was so furious at the arrogance with which David and Paley summarily fired John Hightower. It was unbelievable. Of course, I had been close to all of the staff, not just the curatorial staff, with whom I'd worked all those years.... Of course, amazingly, the first job I got when I left the Museum was to do a job for the Museum, for John Szarkowski, who wanted me to do the research for a Tina Modotti exhibition. Why? I was the only one who knew anything about her. I know Mexico upside-down and inside-out, and John could trust me insofar as my "safe knowledge." But from that point on, I stayed away from the Museum, and I stay away from the Museum. Yes, I'm invited to everything that the Department of Architecture and Design does, and all of the curators and the director call me here and there for information, guidance, one thing or another. I'm always welcome when I go in if I need to look up something or telephone, things like that. But otherwise, I've stayed away. Sure, when I see Kynaston--we're old friends--we talk. I had always had a nice close relationship with Riva [Castleman], and Dick Palmer, Waldo [Rasmussen]--a couple of the guys who are around, which is fine. If I need information, I call; if they need help from me, I'm perfectly happy to give it. When Stuart Wrede was doing his big exhibition on the posters, he first called me to come down and tell him what the collection was all about; he didn't know, but he decided he wanted to do it. In the book he acknowledged me and what I had done before. So it's all amicable, with Ethel Shein and Oldenburg. But I stay away.... There's no reason I should do anything more than I do.

SZ: We could finish up with some of the things you've been doing since then, because you've had a whole career beyond that, a whole wonderful career.

MC: Yes. Well, first of all, what was obvious to me was that I could move in any century I pleased. One of the great things I did was the big Latin American exhibition I did for

the National Museum of American Art, because I'd been trained that way. All my experience in the Museum gave me access to a world I knew, but without limits. So it all came, which was very nice. I could write, I could get books published that I couldn't at the time; for example, when I did the Wall Hangings show and I wanted to do a great book on the field, all we ended up with was a very important catalogue which everybody wants, but the book was published outside. Things like that, you know? So I just spread my wings, and it's been a very exciting time.

SZ: You won an award, an important award.

MC: Yes, I've had NEA grants, I've had Asia Society grants; I've had grants from Japan; I've been in the Women's Caucus. You know--things.

SZ: Just doing it.

MC: And I'm going on doing it. I look back at the Museum and I think does it take one great human being to not only recognize an institution and how to function on every conceivable level, does it take one human being who understands people? I don't know that the Museum today has that one kind of person, and I don't know, except on rare occasions as I look around and as I work with museums in the United States, rarely do you have the kind of director who would fit that pattern. There is Evan Turner at the Cleveland Museum of Art, who is a superb director, really superb. There is Anne d'Harnoncourt, René's daughter, at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. There is even somebody close to home--there's Sam Miller at the Newark Museum, who is doing fabulous things. But in each instance, the human being at the head of these institutions is a kind of human being who understands how to run and make an institution live. The Museum of Modern Art is not living, it's existing, and only here and there does it come to life. Sharon, do you have any idea how long it has taken for The Museum of Modern Art to put on this exhibition of Roberto Burle Marx and

the unnatural garden? This is 1991. Somewhere around '62, something like that, and I'm not sure who brought it up that we should do such an exhibition of this man's work. Between Alfred Barr and Arthur there was such disagreement. Are these plans, or his paintings, which belong under paintings; do they really belong in architecture? Not even a thorough discussion, but the most obvious misreading. And we never did it. But today they did it, and they did it because an outside curator came with the idea and Stuart Wrede recognized that this would be a good idea. There is that wonderful man, Roberto, absolutely one of my really, really dear friends, who when I saw him at the opening invited me to come back to Rio and spend time with him. So I look at this thing and I think, Well, we did wonderful things and we lost some marvelous opportunities. People ask me, people around the art world in this country and wherever I am abroad, what do I think about what's going on at MoMA, and I have to tell them what I think about what's going on at MoMA. I told Dick when I met him in the garden that I was enjoying the interview with you, and I said, "Dick, I'm not pulling any punches."

END TAPE 5, SIDE 1

END INTERVIEW