THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH:	**GRACE M. MAYER (GM)**
INTERVIEWER:	**SHARON ZANE (SZ)**
LOCATION:	**THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART 11 WEST 53 STREET, NEW YORK CITY**
DATE:	**MARCH 26, 1991**

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE 1

SZ: Grace, I am going to start the way I always start with my victims [LAUGHTER], by asking you where and when you were born, and tell me a little bit about your family background, if you would.

GM: I was born on Fifty-eighth Street, so I haven't come very far.

SZ: Fifty-eighth on the East Side?

GM: No, on the West Side, just off Sixth Avenue, in a hotel. I've been a hotel brat all my life.

SZ: Which hotel?

GM: Well, it was the Hotel Sevilla, at that time.

SZ: Can you give me an approximate idea of when this event occurred?

GM: In the morning of the world. I'm the oldest living inhabitant. [LAUGHTER]

SZ: I don't think so. [LAUGHING] That's as far as we're going to get with your birthday?

GM: Yes.

SZ: Alright. And tell me a little bit about your family background.

GM: My grandfather on my mother's side came over from Germany when he was nine years old with two teenagers. And although he had six daughters and one son, they never found out why he went to Texas. So he was a pioneer in Texas, and when he left there, he owned the biggest department store there, and his name is still on one of the buildings. It was A. B. Frank. He thought that the girls should be well-educated, so he sent them up to New York and bought a house on 48 East 80th Street. And father's family I don't know much about, but they lived at 77 East 79th Street, and the two yards abutted, so Gramma Mayer said to Gramma Frank, "I have a lot of sons and you have a lot of daughters, so you better be nice to me." So Mother married one of the sons.

SZ: Just like that.

GM: Yes. [LAUGHING] He rang the doorbell, and she said, "I'll call Netta," who was her older sister, and he said, "I didn't come to see Netta, I came to see you." So she and Netta had a feud for the rest of their lives because she claims that Mother stole Father, who was very handsome.

SZ: What was his profession?

GM: He was in the tobacco business, then he left the tobacco business and went into Wall Street and had his own firm and was a very good broker, except that he wouldn't sell people out when they owed him money, so he lost a great deal of money because he had a heart and a soul. He said, "I have to shave myself in the morning." He used to say to Mother...Mother used to say to him, "You're so handsome," and he would say, "I can't put that in my loans." [LAUGHTER] He was really very charming.

SZ: And he was handsome?

GM: Very handsome.

SZ: And your mother?

GM: She was nice-looking, but not in his class as far as physical beauty was concerned.

SZ: So your father grew up in New York City.

GM: Yes.

SZ: But your mother....

GM: ...was born in Texas and grew up in New York.

SZ: And your grandfather, he came with the girls to New York when they....

GM: He commuted, which was quite a deal in those days...

SZ: I was going to say....

GM: ...commuting from San Antonio to New York. I knew him, but he died soon after I was conscious of him.... Grampa Mayer wasn't at all attractive. Gramma Mayer was very much under his domination.

SZ: But he was born in this country...?

GM: She was born in this country; I think he was. So that three of my grandparents were born here.

SZ: Were you an only child?

GM: No, I had a brother.

SZ: Older?

GM: Younger, five years younger.

SZ: Although we can't totally date it, what was it like growing up in New York at that time?

GM: It was wonderful. One could walk to school alone and one could go everywhere alone. And now, after all, you see all the children have to be escorted to school.

SZ: You lived in a house that had space?

GM: Yes.

SZ: Your father, was he formally educated?

GM: He went to Cornell.

SZ: And your mother?

GM: She went to a very snobbish finishing school, which one did in those days, and when she and Father were having their courtship, you went into a hansom cab and the girl sat down and the man walked across her to the other side. And Mother immediately--she was only seventeen--went to the other side, and Father thought, "Good heavens, shall I marry her? She doesn't know how to behave!" They were very happily married.

SZ: And for a long time?

GM: Until he died, thirty-something years. And after that, Mother wouldn't even allow a good friend to take her home from a dinner party, she thought she was being raped. Which was an entirely different world.

SZ: What kinds of things did you do, as a family, in that different world, when you were young?

GM: I don't know exactly how to explain it. One's parents belonged to a country club and one went to the country club and one associated with the children of their friends. I broke away from that atmosphere entirely when I went to work. Nobody was going to work at that time. All my friends were playing gin, going to matinees and so forth.

SZ: But you had something that you wanted to do.

GM: Yes, which was work in a hospital.

SZ: But, when you were younger.... I guess country club means that there was a summer residence that you....

GM: Yes, one had a cottage. [LAUGHING]

SZ: A cottage. So it sounds like it was an easy and nice childhood.

GM: It was very pleasant.

SZ: And what about school? Did you like school?

GM: Yes, I loved it.

SZ: And where did you go?

GM: Well, first I went, naturally, to pre-kindergarten and then to kindergarten, and so on, and then I went to the Ethical Culture School, which was where they were cruel to young children. For instance, they knew that I couldn't carry a tune, so they made me get up in front of nine hundred children in the auditorium, who all hooted and jeered. I mean, it was impossible in that way. And there were two lesbians in charge of the open-air department of Ethical Culture, and when they touched me, I instinctively shrank, and they were furious at me always.

SZ: That's the Ethical Culture School that's still there, on Central Park West.

GM: Yes. I wonder if they still torture young children. [LAUGHTER] It has a thing over the auditorium, a place where one meets to worship God is holy ground. Well, it wasn't holy ground to me. My parents had the sense to take me out, because these two lesbians claimed I was oversexed. [LAUGHTER]

SZ: When you were what age?

GM: Eight, I think. [LAUGHTER] We used to have rest periods when we would lay on cots, and the boy next to me, whom I knew for many years, used to pull my hair. He gave me the pieces that he pulled in a locket many years later.

SZ: Did Ethical Culture went up through high school at that time, right, in that building, I think?

GM: I'm not sure, because I was taken out before that, and went to a place called the Seabury School, which was in an apartment house on Central Park West. And that was the first time I had ever seen anything beautiful outside of my home.... You were taken to see things in museums that I hadn't been taken to see at all.

SZ: You mean at Ethical Culture?

GM: Yes.

SZ: And that was not something that you did with your family?

GM: No.

SZ: So they would take you around New York to the various--where? You went to the Met?

GM: Well, Grandfather lived right around the corner from the Met, and we all practically lived at the Met and grew up at the Met. And it was there that I wanted to work when I'd stopped hospital work, but they didn't have the sense to accept volunteers. At that time, the only way one broke into a museum was by volunteering. Of course, I would eventually go to salary.

SZ: But you said at the Seabury School they took you to see beautiful things.

GM: Yes. And they also showed us beautiful things.

SZ: So it was a special kind of school?

GM: Yes. There were four people in my class. [LAUGHING] It was all very individual. [TAPE INTERRUPTION]

SZ: You were telling me about the Seabury School having only four people to a class. So it was a school that was intended to give very individual kinds of....

GM: Attention.

SZ: Was it an established school?

GM: No, we were the first graduating class.

SZ: And how long after you graduated did it...?

GM: It folded pretty soon. I think there was one other graduating class.

SZ: But as an experience it was....

GM: It was a very worthwhile experience, a much better education than most people are privileged to get.

SZ: Tell me why you said it was unusual at that time for a person of your background to want to work? What was it about that that appealed to you, what was it about you....

GM: I wanted to work. My mother had wanted to work and she would have been very good at it. She was very good at math and all that sort of thing. She understood business, the stock exchange and so on.

SZ: Did she help your father in his work?

GM: No. Oh, no! [LAUGHTER] Good heavens, to think if he couldn't support her in the style to which she, quote and unquote, was accustomed....

SZ: How did they feel about your wanting to break out of your mold and do something different?

GM: Well, Father said, "I hope I'll always be able to support you, but you have to prove to me that you can support yourself," and I thought the old man is crazy. And I thought about it for two or three days and then I thought he isn't that crazy, and that was when

I went to work.

SZ: And your mother? How did she feel about it?

GM: Well, I think that she resented it that Father wouldn't allow her to work, to maintain his amateur standing.

SZ: So she encouraged you.

GM: Yes. But during the war, World War I, she ran an officers club and did it very efficiently.

SZ: In Manhattan.

GM: Well, in Long Branch [New Jersey], where we lived in the summer.

SZ: That's where the country club was.

GM: No, the country club was on Long Island. It was called the North Shore.

SZ: Well, now you've told me something interesting, which is that you remember World War I, or part of it.

GM: Hmmm.

SZ: You do.

GM: Yes.

SZ: Was your brother old enough to serve?

GM: No, he was five years younger.

SZ: Younger. And your father?

GM: He was just about to go when the war was over.

SZ: Do you remember anything else about it? Did it affect your life at all?

GM: Yes. We went dancing with the officers and all that sort of thing.

SZ: Do you remember anything about what the opinion of the war was?

GM: Oh, everyone was gung ho for it. I mean, it wasn't like now. For instance, I think most people are against Mr. [George Herbert] Bush's private war [the Persian Gulf War]. I can't bear Mr. Bush; he is one of my pet antipathies. I can't even look at his face.

SZ: Because?

GM: Because there was a very charming girl here, a Venetian, with whom I became very good friends, and she married Bush's uncle. One day they were having breakfast in Milan and he said he wanted to get a package of cigarettes, and he disappeared off the face of the earth. The Bush family, who knew where he was because they were sending him a check on the first of every month, wouldn't tell her. So for seven years the poor girl didn't know if she was maid, widow or wife. He finally died in Hawaii and she found out she was a widow. That prejudiced me against Bush in the beginning, and it got worse and worse and worse. I wouldn't vote for him for a dogcatcher.

SZ: Can I assume you're a Democrat?

GM: No, I was brought up as a Republican, but they made me a Democrat.

SZ: Bush did, or just over the years?

GM: Bush. Well, [Ronald] Reagan and Bush. He thought Reagan was pretty much the limit too. As for his bride, Nancy, she didn't even have the brains to return a dress she borrowed.

SZ: Well, that era is over.

GM: I like Mrs. [Barbara] Bush, and I like Millie, the dog. I think Millie should run the country [LAUGHING].

SZ: Millie's just written a book.

GM: Yes.

SZ: One other thing: the influenza epidemic right after the First World War, do you remember that at all?

GM: Mother had influenza, and the doctor said all one can do is pray. We had absolutely no ammunition against it. As a matter of fact, my father would not have died if he had been ill six months later with pneumonia, because the serum came in. And Mary Calderone, [Edward] Steichen's daughter, lost one of her children for the same reason.

SZ: You mean before penicillin.

GM: Yes. If the child had gotten it [pneumonia] six months later, he'd still be alive. You know, there's a lovely picture of an apple tree and two children undraped by Steichen, and one of them died of pneumonia. You have no idea what it was like working for

Steichen.

SZ: I'm hoping I'm going to find out.

GM: After all, here was possibly the greatest man that ever worked in this museum, certainly the man that was known on a world-wide scale. And of course the Museum doesn't think much of The Family of Man, but they're still buying pictures from the proceeds, because Steichen gave it to them. You knew you were in the presence of greatness.

SZ: Let's go back to when you graduated, to when you got out of Seabury School and knew that you were going to work. Did you have any clear idea of what you wanted to do? You said you had thought....

GM: Well, we were having dinner one night, and the family doctor, who was a gloriously handsome human being, put his watch on the table and said, "I give you fifteen minutes to decide whether or not you want to work for me."

SZ: What was his name?

GM: Dr. Leo Kessel of Mount Sinai. He was a great doctor in the present sense. I mean, he instinctively knew what was the matter with one. And I had a violent crush on him, of course.

SZ: So it was an appealing offer.

GM: Yes. [LAUGHING] It didn't take me fifteen minutes to decide. I did research for him. He was working on the pneumonia serum and on Graves Syndrome--have you ever heard of that?--and I used to take the histories of the patients for him.

SZ: His specialty was...?

GM: He was an internist. My present internist [Dr. Bry Benjamin] is the most amazing human being I've ever known.

SZ: Very much like Dr. Kessel?

GM: Not handsome. An absolutely marvelous human being. He's sixty-five and he has a five-year-old daughter.

SZ: Is he a Mt. Sinai doctor?

GM: No, he's at New York Hospital. He started at Lenox Hill and went to New York.

SZ: When you went to work for Dr. Kessel, did you have any secretarial skills?

GM: Yes. I had taken a secretarial course because they told me at secretarial school that that was the only way you could get in. I was taking about a hundred and fifty words a minute. [TELEPHONE INTERRUPTION]

SZ: You were telling me that at secretarial school they told you that you needed....

GM: That that opened the door. I was taking about a hundred and fifty words a minute.

SZ: And so those are the kinds of things you needed with Dr. Kessel?

GM: Partly.

SZ: But he also had you doing research.

GM: Yes. Looking at medical articles in the Academy of Medicine, 103rd Street, which was

a new building then. And Mt. Sinai was very interesting then because I was at the end of the corridor and under a palm tree and all the interns would come. I knew every intern in the place. I decided that I wanted to study medicine, and then Dr. Kessel said, "You'd make a helluva doctor," and I said, "Why do you say that?" And he said that it was because I remembered he prescribed bicarbonate of soda for Mrs. Hoenig, and I thought I had given her bichloride of mercury when I wrote out the prescription, being so stupid I didn't realize that they wouldn't have filled it for that. So I went up to her place in the Bronx--I remembered her address, and her husband opened the door--and I said, "How is Mrs. Hoenig?" and he said, "She's fine, thank you." I said, "Did she take her medicine?" and he said, "Oh yes, it agreed with her perfectly." So I knew I hadn't written bichloride of mercury. And that was when Dr. Kessel said I'd make a helluva doctor.

SZ: But you let that discourage you?

GM: Yes, because I felt that if I couldn't be a good doctor, I didn't want to be a doctor at all.

SZ: But you found all this very interesting.

GM: It was a fascinating experience. I think every girl...not so much now as then; after all, it was when I saw how the other half lived. I had never met people who were that poor. And I used to go into tenements and that sort of thing, and it was an entirely different world.

SZ: And you did that for how long?

GM: We went to Europe because my brother was ill; then we came back, and I still had a paid job at the hospital.... I don't know just when I started. Then one of the young

interns reminded me that I had always wanted to work in a museum. So I proceeded to call the Metropolitan Museum, and the telephone operator there said, "We don't accept volunteers." So I went to all the museums and finally landed at the Museum of the City of New York, which was just moving from the Gracie Mansion to its new building on Fifth Avenue, the present building. There was a wonderful director there by the name of Hardinge Scholle, whose father had been a diplomat, and he was really a marvelous person. Once I asked him a question, and he said, "If you can't decide that for yourself, I have no right to be here and you have no right to be here." Which is entirely different. And my relationship with René [d'Harnoncourt] was like that. For instance, once René and I put on a show together, and the morning of the opening arrived a large bunch of yellow roses, and the card said, "Hurrah and love, René." You see, it was entirely different.

SZ: Well, what was the Museum of the City of New York, what was the atmosphere like there then, and what did they feel their mission was?

GM: Well, their mission was everything that had to do with the City of New York. When I left, the new director there only knew that Fifth Avenue ran north and south. It was a two-way street.

SZ: So they had a way to go.

GM: Yes. I left there because the then-director, not Hardinge Scholle, was an alcoholic, and he used to fall on his face in public, and I didn't think that was terribly attractive.

SZ: What kinds of things did you do when you were there?

GM: Everything. I was in charge of all the pictorial material. I was called Curator of Iconography. When I came there they said read Stokes; well, Stokes was a six-volume work, each volume consisting of about a thousand pages. And finally, at the end of six months I came to them and said, "I've read Stokes," and they said, "Good

God, who told you to do that?" and I said, "You did." They said, "You and Stokes are the only people who've ever read it." And Stokes thought that the entire German Wehrmacht was located between the New York Public Library and the Museum of the City of New York. [LAUGHTER] It was quite a place. They were partly anti-Semitic, which was par for the course, and which fortunately in this museum is not, at least I haven't discovered it.

SZ: And that was reflected in, what, in the composition of the board of trustees.

GM: Yes. And I remember once there was a party for the new president and one attended in full evening dress and all that sort of thing, and I dropped a card which said "To the hired help on its outing," and I had to step on the card. They wore their pedigrees on their chest.

SZ: I assume from your comment that you are Jewish.

GM: Yes. Not religiously Jewish, but I stand up for Judaism anytime that anyone is anti-Semitic. That is really the only time that I'm conscious of being Jewish.

SZ: Did you ever have an experience up there that affected you personally in that way?

GM: Well, there was someone named Mrs. J. Insley Blair, and she went to Robert Fridenberg, the art dealer, and there was a wonderful man there named Harry Bland, and she said something about Jew dealers and he pointed to the sign on the window and said, "The door is this way, Mrs. Blair." And out went their best customer. His name was Harry Bland, Harry MacNeill Bland, and one never had to ask anything up, one just asked Harry. He knew everything. He formed all the great collections of New York Views, the one that is at the Met now, which is probably the greatest of them all, he formed.

SZ: But at the museum, you yourself...this was something that you knew about more than

actually experienced yourself, is what I'm asking.

GM: Well, for instance, Rodman Gilder, who was a very dear friend of mine--his father was the founder of the Century Club--said to me, "You know, Grace, I'm anti-Semitic." He was a marvelous person.

SZ: I guess what you're saying is that you felt in some way that you were working there and you felt that you belonged, and in another way you were conscious of the fact that you....

GM: Not really, because Hardinge Scholle was half-Jewish.

SZ: And what were some of the interesting projects that you worked on when you were there?

GM: I have a whole list of exhibitions that I put on.

SZ: Do you want that piece back there I gave you?

GM: Yes.

SZ: Maybe you can just tell me about some of them....

GM: Well, Currier & Ives and The New York Scene, and Philip Hane's New York. And We Cover The New Yorker, which was very interesting; it was the covers of The New Yorker with New York connotations, the original watercolors, so that I got to know all the best New Yorker artists, like [Constantin] Alajalov and Mary Petty and Alan Dunn and so on. Each exhibition, of course, one gets to know an entirely different set of people. For instance, I knew Harry Peters very well, and he was the great expert on Currier & Ives and American lithography, and that was quite an experience. Then there was Stranger in Manhattan, which was the foreigners who came here and their

impression of it. And there was Charles Dana Gibson's New York, which was fascinating. I remember going to the warehouse with Mrs. Gibson where the drawings were, and there was a black man who showed us around, and he did something stupid and she hit him in the face, and I thought, "Good Lord, this is the end of our tribe," instead of which he touched his cheek and said, "Oh, Mrs. Gibson." He felt that he had been knighted because she had slapped him. She was still beautiful. I only knew Charles Dana Gibson slightly. And then I gave individual photographic exhibitions of Berenice Abbott, Jacob Riis--that was really fascinating. Then there was a little tailor [John Alleck] on Madison Avenue and 96th Street, and he wrote me a letter and he said, "I am a tailor by day and at night I live for my art, and will you look at it?" and who could resist that? So I gave him a one-man show, which made one man happy, anyhow. I'm still very friendly with his daughter, who was an opera singer and who now lives in Texas.

SZ: You didn't know him, he just wrote to you because you were there?

GM: Yes, but I got to know him very well. He lived above the tailor shop, and if he was pressing a pair of pants and a wagon went down the street, and he thought if it looked attractive, he would chase after it with his camera, leaving the pair of pants to burn. So I got to very many different classes of people.

SZ: And you liked that.

GM: Yes.

SZ: What about the fact that all the material was different, too?

GM: Well, it was entirely different. After all, they've made a great deal of sense.... If there were a view of Madison Avenue and 96th Street, it was entirely different. It didn't have to be good, it just had to show the corner. Now, down here, it has to be good; you don't care whether it shows the corner or not.

SZ: A different philosophy.

GM: Yes.

SZ: What was 96th Street and Madison Avenue like then?

GM: Well, it wasn't farmland, but it was pretty far uptown.

SZ: The outskirts.

GM: Yes.

SZ: And not the greatest neighborhood either, I guess.

GM: Well, it was a museum that was in competition with the New-York Historical Society. I wanted to work at the New-York Historical Society simply because the director there said, "Curfew shall not ring tonight." He wouldn't have me. My name came up at the meeting and they said, "We can't have her because she's Jewish."

SZ: And you knew this.

GM: Yes, because Harry Bland was at the meeting, and he came and told me.

SZ: So what you're saying is is that for a professional person like you operating in this milieu it was...you didn't have free and open access, obviously, to what you wanted to do.

GM: Yes. I came from there down here.

SZ: The rest of those exhibitions from...did we go through all of them, from the Museum

of the City of New York that you wanted to mention?

GM: Well, there was New York's Part in the Gold Rush, which was sort of fun. In that there was one very lovely thing, a watercolor of the steamer Hartford sailing for the gold rush, and that was all I had for the show. Then I conceived the idea of writing to the New York Times, to the Book Review, that I was putting on this show, and I wound up with a hundred and fifty pieces, including a trunk a man had carried around the Horn. With each exhibition one learns an entirely different thing. I gave Todd Webb an exhibition, and it was Jacob A. Riis the discovery of his negatives, in which I worked with Alexander Alland, that I met Steichen, because he came up to see the show.

SZ: That's how you met him.

GM: Yes, which the Herald Tribune said was one of the best shows ever put on in New York. It was the discovery of Jacob Riis's work. I also gave Shirley Burden, who was an absolutely marvelous human being and a great photographer, his first show.

SZ: You found his work, or...?

GM: Well, I met him and I met his wife, and I told him I wanted to have a show and he said, "I can't give you a show," and I said, "Why not?" and he said, "Because I've given you money," and I said, "Why should we be penalized?" And his wife said to me, "You're the first person who ever stood up to him." And she thanked me many times over. She and I were very good friends. She died, and he married a most unpleasant lady, and then he died.

SZ: The show that you put on that Steichen came to see....

GM: That was by Jacob Riis.

SZ: Whose idea was that?

GM: Alexander Alland said to me, "Jacob Riis's negatives must be somewhere," and I said, "Maybe his family has them." We finally traced his son, who worked for The Reader's Digest, and that way came across the negatives. And Alexander Alland made the prints.

SZ: Did you do the installation?

GM: I installed many shows, about a hundred and fifty.

SZ: How did you learn to do that?

GM: Just by doing it. The assistant director had been to the Fogg [Art Museum], which was a museum school, but in those days one didn't have to be a Ph.D. As I say now, they're Ph.D's but they're not toilet trained. I think the ladies room is a shambles, as you probably know. [LAUGHING]

SZ: But by the time you left, you had had experience in all the aspects of mounting....

GM: Yes.

SZ: Did you do the publicity for the shows?

GM: Well, one gave the publicity to a perfectly dreadful woman who became a colleague of mine at the Cos Club.

SZ: At the what?

GM: The Cosmopolitan Club.

SZ: Oh, the Cos Club.

GM: Which is much nicer than the Colony Club.

SZ: Why is that?

GM: Because we're all professional women. You have to be either a professional woman or be interested in charity. And at the Colony Club all you have to have is family.

SZ: So she was someone that you hired from the outside.

GM: Who?

SZ: This woman who did the publicity.

GM: Well, the museum hired her. She worked as director of our publicity department.... Incidentally, she died a few weeks ago.

SZ: What was her name?

GM: Ruth McIninney Loud.

SZ: L-O-U-D.

GM: Yes. Don't ask me how to spell McIninney.

SZ: I'm not going to. [LAUGHTER] We'll call her Ruth Loud.

GM: That's a very interesting thing behind you, because...that book, the top one.

SZ: This?

GM: Yes, because you can hear Steichen's voice, and although it was his voice as an old man, it gave you a very good idea of what he was.

SZ: This was a television show that was done for...Camera III.

GM: Yes.

SZ: Which was that old television series. So now they're putting them out on video. I'd like to borrow this if I could.

GM: Certainly you may.

SZ: I would very much like it.

GM: I can always get another one if you....

SZ: I'll return it, I promise you.

GM: No, I mean if you're run over by a truck on the way home. [LAUGHTER]

SZ: I'm going to turn this off for a second. [TAPE INTERRUPTION] Tell me, then--I don't know, we'll see how we're going--tell me, as I think we've exhausted the Museum of the City of New York, about your first meeting with Steichen, what that was like.

GM: He came up with Wayne Miller, who was his associate in The Family of Man, and that

was around 1958. At that time I wrote a book called Once Upon a City and I asked him if he would write the foreword to it, so he did. Then I telephoned him and said what could I do for him, and he said, "You can come down and put on a show for me, with me." So I put on Seventy Photographers Look at New York, which was a great experience. And when that was over, they gave me a party at the Guest House, which was on 52nd Street, wasn't it, east, and I stood between my two directors....

SZ: Your two directors being?

GM: René d'Harnoncourt and Steichen, and Jack Meyer who was director of the Museum of the City of New York. René said to me, "Where are you going?," and like an idiot I said, "Uptown." And so I lost two years of working here. But I couldn't in front of Jack Meyer say, "I'm leaving you."

SZ: You asked him [Steichen] to write the foreword for Once Upon a City.

GM: Yes.

SZ: Why?

GM: Because I thought he was the greatest man I'd ever met, and it's a beautiful foreword.

SZ: You have that book somewhere here?

GM: Yes.

SZ: I'd like to see it.

GM: Do you want me to get it?

SZ: Well, we can just wait til we're done. We're almost done for today anyway, I think, so....

GM: It was photographs by a family named Byron, who had no relation to ...the poet.

SZ: I think the last question I'd like to ask you today is, you said it was such a wonderful experience, the exhibition Seventy Photographers Look at New York. Can you elaborate on that a little bit.

GM: It was the most extraordinary experience, and Steichen was incredible. For instance, one day I was lecturing down in Maryland and I came up and we started work early in the morning, and at five o'clock in the afternoon I said, "Don't you think it'd be nice if we had a cup of coffee?" He said, "We haven't time." And that was the way he worked. His daughters kept saying, "Don't let him kill you," and I thought, How can a man in his eighties kill me? I soon found out.

SZ: This was before you were working here, but what did you see when you came to help him with this exhibition, about the photography department, about the Museum, how things fit in.

GM: Well, he was the photography department. He was Photography. He was really a most amazing man, and of course he was a great horticulturist.

SZ: Yes, I figured next time we'd talk a little bit about that, too, because you must know something about, well, that great show.

GM: He did that beautiful show of Delphiniums here, which is one of the greatest shows we've ever had.

SZ: Did you actually see that show?

GM: Yes.

SZ: You did.

GM: I saw it, but I had nothing to do with it.

SZ: And you didn't know him at that point either.

GM: No. I didn't know him at the time of The Family of Man.

SZ: Well, I figure we'll save that for next time, alright? We can even start with Delphiniums. Alright. Thanks. We'll turn it off, and....

GM: Thank you.

END TAPE 1, SIDE 1

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH:	**GRACE MAYER (GM)**
INTERVIEWER:	**SHARON ZANE (SZ)**
LOCATION:	**THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART 11 WEST 53 STREET NEW YORK CITY**
DATE:	**APRIL 3, 1991**

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE 1

SZ: Grace, we were talking last time...about your arrival at the Museum, but I wanted to pick up, if we're going to do it chronologically, a little bit on two things. First, one was, you mentioned the Delphiniums show that Steichen did. You told me that while you were not associated with Steichen or the Museum at that time, that you did see it; and since it was such an unusual thing for the Museum, I was hoping that you would tell me a little bit about it.

GM: It was absolutely glorious. He brought them in every day from his place in Connecticut, and they were nine-foot stalks. It was really one of the most beautiful exhibitions I've ever seen. That wasn't the only thing that he did in horticulture. He did tuberoses, begonias, and he had many other things. He had trellised hot-bed delphiniums, from a small thing to a nine-foot stalk, and they ranged from white to deep purple. It was really an awesome sight.

SZ: And where were they in the Museum?

GM: On the ground floor, right next to the cafeteria, which was then situated there. Entirely different from now.

SZ: I know, but the cafeteria was then where the education wing is now?

GM: Yes.

SZ: In the garden or in the building?

GM: In the building.

SZ: Do you remember any discussion at that time of the fact that this was seemingly an unusual thing for the Museum to do?

GM: Well, everything the Museum did at that time was unusual. Other places have caught up with us, but at that time it was merely a near departure. They were always fresh because he brought them in every day. The first time he took me out to his place, which was years later, he said, "This is where the blue begins." And there were the acres of delphiniums surrounded by sunflowers; you can't imagine anything more beautiful. That was during his second wife's tenure, and she was what his daughters called his "real" wife. Joanna [Steichen] always claimed that they [Dana Desboro Glover and Steichen] were not married; he told me they were, but I was never able to find the exact location. I never met the second Mrs. Steichen because she was too ill when I came into the picture.

SZ: The second Mrs. Steichen being the "real" Mrs. Steichen.

GM: Yes. The first Mrs. Steichen was the mother of his two daughters, and he said, "My friends never should have allowed me to marry her." And I said, "You know perfectly well when you were twenty-one, they couldn't have prevented you from doing anything you wanted to do." So they weren't divorced in the early 1920s.

SZ: Was the Delphiniums show, as you remember, was it well-received?

GM: Oh, yes, it was mobbed. As a matter of fact, when he had shows, they were the first--

The Family of Man was the first blockbuster I ever saw. The line extended beyond the church [at the corner of Fifth Avenue and 53rd Street] every day. Every guard in the building received a bonus, because the attendance was so huge.

SZ: Okay, well, we'll get to that. I still want to go back to the Delphiniums show. That was 1936. Was it your habit to come to this museum often?

GM: Yes. Naturally, it had to be on weekends, because during the week I was...uptown at the Museum of the City of New York.

SZ: But there were things here that appealed to your sense of aesthetics and....

GM: Yes. It was really an entirely different place. It was so much a family affair. At that time, of course, I didn't know many people, but when I came down, I got to know them all. Now, I don't know half of them.

SZ: The Delphiniums show was 1936.

GM: Yes.

SZ: So the building was not built yet. The Museum was in that townhouse at that time.

GM: It was in the Museum. It was the first building of the Museum here. When I came to work with Steichen, we were in the townhouse next door.

SZ: That was one over.

GM: Yes, beyond 21 [West 53rd Street].

SZ: But in 1936 the core building had not been built yet, and there was this, I guess, townhouse, brownstone, that the Rockefellers had given.

GM: The townhouse that I remember was way over east on 52nd Street.

SZ: That was the Guest House. But anyway, you remember the Delphiniums [show] being on the ground floor....

GM: In this building, the first part of this building. It was...the Museum was terribly exciting then, almost better than it is now, because now we're accustomed to it. The other museums have caught up with us. At that time, it was unique. For instance, my parents thought it was crazy.

SZ: Did they ever come?

GM: Mother did; I don't think Father ever would have.

SZ: Do you remember some of the other shows from way back, before you became associated with the Museum?

GM: Yes. I came to see every show.

SZ: Anything stand out in your mind?

GM: Well, the one that stands out is, naturally, The Family of Man.

SZ: Well, photography was a particular interest of yours.

GM: No, it wasn't an interest of mine at all....

SZ: At that time it was not.

GM: ...until I saw The Family of Man. I think that brought many people into photography. I remember that he [Steichen] told me the prints were still wet with glue the night of the opening. And all his shows were wonderful. The "Diogenes [with a Camera]" shows introduced many of the young people to photography. When it came to the last Diogenes [show], which was [Harry] Callahan and Frank, Robert Frank said he wouldn't play if it was called "Diogenes." He was a very difficult man. I remember that the one I was working on, the morning of...the day before the opening, Mrs. Frank telephoned and asked if she could change the color of the wall, on a Sunday morning; it was to open on Monday. I said only René d'Harnoncourt could decide that, and of course René said no.

SZ: The Family of Man--the whole concept was Steichen's?

GM: Yes.

SZ: Anything else you can think of, any stories about his putting it together, or...?

GM: Well, I wasn't here then, I was uptown....

SZ: Yes, I know.

GM: But it really was a most remarkable feat. He had Wayne Miller, of course, as his first assistant, and Wayne hired Rolf Petersen, with Steichen. And Dorothea Lange had a great deal to do with it. It was probably the most remarkable photographic show ever assembled.

SZ: Because?

GM: Because it was an entirely new concept, and because many of the photographers resented it because they said their work was taken out of context. But a lot of the

photographers thought it was their pride and joy to have been in it. And people came from all over the world to see it. As a matter of fact, even today there is a young man who is doing his thesis and a book on it. The book will be very valuable, and very difficult to do. René was probably the most remarkable man I've ever met. He was six-seven and he was as big as he was big--spiritually, mentally, morally, physically. When I went around all day with an idiotic grin, people would say, "What's the matter with you?" and I'd say, "René kissed me this morning." I can't imagine Dick [Oldenburg] kissing me, can you? [LAUGHING]

SZ: Well, but you described the Museum as a different place then, and maybe you could talk a little bit about how it was.

GM: It was a family affair. Everybody knew everybody else. It was a very remarkable thing. I can remember sitting in the garden and just smiling to myself. No one smiles to oneself anymore. Or don't I? I think I was spoiled.

SZ: By what it was then?

GM: Yes. Everyone's relationship with the people. René knew when the carpenter's son had the measles, and did something about it.

SZ: Do you think that was as much a function of the fact that it was a smaller institution, or...?

GM: A little of both. Sarah [d'Harnoncourt] is a wonderful woman, and she and René used to meet under the Balzac when they got separated during the heat of an opening. When he became engaged to Sarah, he wrote his friends that he was marrying a girl who was thin as a knife and could look him in the eye [LAUGHING]. René used to dance a command polka in the garden with his little daughter, Anne. They were all giants--René and Monroe [Wheeler] and the whole business.

SZ: As an administrator, René was...?

GM: He was wonderful. When he wanted to fire someone he didn't know how to do it, and he would rub his fist in his eye and he would say, "We have decided that you are the person to do with" something absurd, and strong men wept and left [LAUGHING]. So he never said, "You're fired": people left.

SZ: But he was good at knowing when people had to leave?

GM: Yes. Now every day you see new faces here.

SZ: When you came, Alfred Barr was still here.

GM: Oh yes, and he was wonderful.

SZ: Tell me a little bit about him.

GM: Well, he knew more than anyone else has ever known since the world began, and he knew how to impart it. And they treated him very badly, as you know.

SZ: Was that something that you saw?

GM: I was here during some of it. But he just ignored absolutely everything and went about his business. His wife [Margaret Scolari Barr] was a very difficult lady but very knowledgeable and very charming and worked with him very well. I remember Wheeler was in charge of publications at that time.

SZ: What was he like?

GM: Very lovely. They were all gentlemen. It was a joy to see them. One came here in the morning with a song in one's heart; I don't anymore.

SZ: But fortunately, you still do come. [LAUGHTER] When you first came, Steichen was here. The photography department was Steichen, you told me last time. How much influence did, let's say, René or these committees that were set up have on what happened in the photography department in terms of selection of exhibitions or acquisitions?

GM: They all worked together. It was a spirit such as never existed, I don't think, in any other museum in the world.

SZ: Are you saying that it was an atmosphere that rarely...you're making it sound as if there was rare conflict.

GM: Conflict was mostly with the board and that sort of thing, but the board was known as "the Family." It consisted, of course, of the Rockefellers.

SZ: What about some of the board members who had particular interest in photography?

GM: They all did, because of Steichen. You see, he was entirely different than people are now, because he was possibly the one genius that has ever been at the Museum. He was a world figure. He was really awesome. He had a wonderful sense of humor. He was so entirely different, you can't imagine.

SZ: Well now, you said he had a wonderful sense of humor. I'd like you to give me an example of that.

GM: Well, the time that he called me to the window because there was a garage opposite,

as there still is, and there were signs, "In" and "Out," and he said, "Look, there's a pigeon going in on the 'out' side. The damn thing can't read" [LAUGHING].

SZ: There was another...I found in the Library a copy of a form that he filled out when he was in Russia. Tell me that story.

GM: That was absolutely lovely. Before he went, he and I evolved this form, which they still use to a certain extent.

SZ: And the form was for what purpose?

GM: When a photographer came into the collection, we wanted to know about him, so we would ask him to fill in this particular form. It hadn't been used when he went to Russia with Carl Sandburg, and I thought I saw in the middle of Red Square and saying, "Damn that woman," instead of which he thought it out and he returned it.

SZ: But it was tongue-in-cheek.

GM: Yes.

SZ: Did he have a temper?

GM: Only occasionally, and it was pretty awesome when it happened. Strong men ran away. He never was angry at me. I don't ever remember having any contretemps with him; we got along perfectly.

SZ: And how did you work together? What kinds of...how did you, in putting together an exhibition, how did you divide up duties and responsibilities?

GM: I did anything he asked me to do. [LAUGHTER] From the beginning of the exhibition to the end: research, and meeting the photographers, and bringing in work from

outside, seeing exhibitions and figuring out if there were things in them that he would like. And everybody came to see him from all over the world.

SZ: He was a world figure.

GM: Yes, in war and in peace.

SZ: And how do you think that affected the way the photography collection grew, and the direction of the department itself?

GM: I think he was the department, he was Mr. Photography. And he knew everything, in spite of the fact that he had very little formal education. [PAUSE] He had an abiding love of ice cream. He was a little boy in many ways. Dee Knapp, who worked with him at that time, is Harry Callahan's sister-in-law, and she is a person that you should possibly interview, because she was at the Museum at that time.

SZ: You were really here for, well, I guess it was three years that you were here that he was here, and then he retired?

GM: Yes, just about. I was here in '59, at the time of Seventy Photographers Look at New York, and I went back uptown, then I came down here, and of course he resigned in '62, when he picked John [Szarkowski]. John and I have had a hate affair practically ever since.

SZ: Why is that?

GM: We never have understood each other.

SZ: You remained for another, what, ten years as curator?

GM: Well, I didn't become curator right away.

SZ: When you say didn't understand each other, does that mean that you didn't think the same things about photography?

GM: About anything [LAUGHING].

SZ: Backing up a little bit, how do you think Steichen felt about the time he spent here.

GM: I think he felt it was very rewarding because it was a real departure in museum things, and he always wanted something new, something different, something entirely unforeseen. The "Diogenes" shows were really remarkable. And the shows got much more public attention than any shows get today.

SZ: How could you measure that? Do you mean by the number of people who came?

GM: Possibly by the number of people who came, and possibly also by the press coverage. Everything Steichen did was news. And you see, we were very small then; there were only two or three people in the department.

SZ: Until he left, I know that there have been some trustees since then who have really played a large part in building up the collection, but did he have a core of people whom he brought in?

GM: Well, he jumped in after the trustees meeting once and threw the doors wide open, and he said, "Gentlemen, I need money," and they gave it to him.

SZ: Just like that?

GM: Yes. [LAUGHTER] They all loved him.

SZ: This [the recorder] is really a pain.

GM: You can't hear me? No one ever can.

SZ: It's alright. So he had a good relationship with the trustees.

GM: Oh, it was an excellent relationship, [as were his relationships] with a great many other people.... He was wonderful with children. You see, he and his daughter did those two books, the First Picture Book and the Second Picture Book.

SZ: You would get that sense that he was wonderful with children from The Family of Man, that there was a certain feeling for....

GM: No, his children here. I remember once we were walking back and forth through the galleries and there was a man standing there, he was there all morning. And he said to Steichen, "You seem to work here: why don't I understand these pictures?" And Steichen said, "Because you're trying too hard."

SZ: That brings me to something you talked to me a little bit about last time off-tape, which was his view of photography and yours, too, what a picture is as opposed to views that have cropped up since then. Do you know what I'm referring to?

GM: I suppose it resolved itself down. You remember hearing about A. Hyatt Mayor at the Metropolitan. I once asked Hyatt how he bought pictures, and he said, "When the picture says hello." But what better description could there be?

SZ: I guess what I'm asking is, let's say the pictures that have been taken into the collection in the last ten years: would Steichen have taken those pictures into the collection?

GM: Some yes and some no. I don't think he would have liked people looking into Frigidaires. He handled them so beautifully. He used to look at them against his chest, sort of this way. And his personal relationship with the photographers was so beautiful. They would write him letters from all over the world. You see, he came in long after he retired, two or three times a week.

SZ: And did what, worked in the archive [the Edward Steichen Photography Center]?

GM: Yes.

SZ: Why did he retire at that time?

GM: Well, after all, he had reached a very advanced age, and he thought it was time. He believed that every ten years, as he put it, a man should give himself a good, swift kick in the pants. And he did that throughout his life.

SZ: Did that for himself.

GM: Yes.

SZ: What are some of the differences, do you think, in the art of photography today as opposed to forty years ago?

GM: As a matter of fact, Steichen and [Alfred] Stieglitz really made photography an art form in the early nineteen hundreds. Steichen was in Europe and he would with Stieglitz, "There's a man here named [Henri] Matisse and you ought to show him." He introduced all these people to America, in all media. His interests...he was a painter himself. Not very good.

SZ: No?

GM: No--at least I didn't think so. And when he had his retrospective, he wanted his paintings to be included, and René said no. He adored René. Everyone did.

SZ: There has to have been someone who didn't adore René [LAUGHING].

GM: I never met anyone who didn't. [LAUGHTER] He was titled and never worked at it. He knew everybody; he knew people like Tina Modotti and.... Wayne was the son who might have been. He was glad he never had a son, because he said he knew how to deal with women and it was more difficult dealing with men.

SZ: Was he particularly good at dealing with women?

GM: Yes. They all fell, hook, line and sinker. He had a way with him such as very few men have. He was completely beguiling.

SZ: When he left, you were here, how did things change? There was a difficult period, I think, before Dick Oldenburg was settled in.

GM: Yes, we changed directors two or three times.

SZ: Do you remember any of that?

GM: It was unpleasant. I'd been through the same thing up at the Museum of the City of New York. It's very difficult changing directors. His was a hard act to follow.

SZ: Do you think that was part of it?

GM: Yes. It was very interesting, because during the time that his second wife was alive, he was very dapper. And then later on he became very degagé, in his attire and that

sort of thing.

SZ: Who are you referring to now?

GM: Steichen.

SZ: Degagé.... You must have had some significant dealings with Monroe Wheeler, right, because....

GM: Oh, yes. They were very close.

SZ: They were close.

GM: Yes. And, of course, the book of The Family of Man was an extraordinary thing and still is; went through many editions.

SZ: What was Monroe's position in the hierarchy, as you perceived it?

GM: Well, everybody did his own thing and did everybody else's thing. [LAUGHTER] There was no such thing as a librarian. The librarian knew everybody--he [Bernard Karpel], incidentally, was a lovely person--and the relationship was all so indescribably beautiful. It was like a brotherhood; it was a religion. It isn't anymore.

SZ: How do you see it, the way it is now?

GM: It's cold.

SZ: What about in terms of the product, the kinds of shows that are being put together, and.....

GM: Everything was inventive then.

SZ: And you feel it's not now?

GM: Not very different than from other museums. Do you think so? Bill Lieberman was really a figure. We never should have let him go.

SZ: Because?

GM: Because he was one of the most remarkable people who has ever been in the museum field, and look at what he has done at the Met. He was very young when he came here, he came right out of college.

SZ: What do you feel his big contribution was in this place?

GM: Everything. He was everybody's right-hand man and then his own man besides. He's still possibly one of the great figures in the whole world museum field.

SZ: I want to back up a little bit. During the time you were Steichen's assistant here, I have three exhibitions--I'm just going to name them and see what you can remember and what you can tell me about them. The Sense of Abstraction....

GM: He was quite sick during most of that, and he had done another abstract show before. But he and Kathleen Haven, who subsequently married Douglas Newton...came with me--[he] met her and me--[and we] did the show mostly...single-handed. It occupied a whole floor. We would go to him every two or three days and tell him what we'd done, what we'd decided and so on.

SZ: He was ill and not even here.

GM: No. This was by telephone or by visit. It was a very good show, if I say so myself.

SZ: I was going to ask you. [LAUGHTER]

GM: Had tremendous press coverage.

SZ: Steichen the Photographer?

GM: That was a fascinating show to do. Kathleen and I worked on that, and Rolf Petersen did most of the prints. I remember there was a picture that Steichen had made of Mickey Mouse, and René didn't like it. And every day Steichen would go to lunch and René would move this picture out. And finally, René said to me, "For goodness sake, take it and put it in the office and hide it." I put it in the office and tried to hide it, and Steichen, when he moved out, I said, "Do you want to take Mickey Mouse to the country?" and he said, "No, I don't like it anymore."

SZ: Was that a show he was pleased with?

GM: What?

SZ: Was he pleased with it, that exhibition?

GM: Yes. Oh, if he wasn't, you would hear about it.

SZ: The Bitter Years?

GM: That was his swan song, and it was very interesting because all of the men in the FSA [Farm Security Administration], the men and women, all came to the opening. It was the first time that many of them had seen each other since the 1930s, and it was really a great reunion. It was a very powerful show. Monroe Wheeler was the one who selected the title. You see, there was that interplay.

SZ: That was sort of an informal interplay, would you say, or would it come up in formal

meetings?

GM: Oh, it was informal, everyday--at lunch, passing in the corridor. It was an entirely different relationship. For instance, I haven't even met [Kirk] Varnedoe, which is my loss, but nevertheless, that could not have happened in those days. We were very closely allied with the film department.

SZ: You were.

GM: Yes.

SZ: It is a much larger institution than it was.

GM: Yes. After all, hundreds of people, or a hundred and something, isn't it now?

SZ: Yes.

GM: Everything was new. For instance, that first room divider, the restaurant was entirely different. Dottie--you know, the telephone operator now--ran the restaurant upstairs.

SZ: She did?

GM: Yes. Why, don't you like her?

SZ: No, I do. I was just trying to remember. She was on the phone when I was here, so she's been on the phone a long time, I think.

GM: Yes.

SZ: You mean the old members' restaurant, on the sixth floor.

GM: Yes, on the sixth floor.

END SIDE 2, TAPE 1

BEGIN SIDE 2, TAPE 2

SZ: I'm interested in what you're saying about how there was a lot of creative interplay among people with various skills and titles, and that that didn't mean a lot....

GM: We didn't really care about titles.

SZ: What were some of the social habits of the Museum back then? Did you have Christmas parties the way they are today?

GM: Yes, but they were much more intimate....

SZ: Was staff included frequently in trustee events, social events?

GM: Yes. It was all one gang.

SZ: So you were happy to get here, weren't you?

GM: I was thrilled. The Met was really my first museum, but I couldn't get there because they wouldn't take volunteers, and at that time you had to be a volunteer. Also, you didn't have to be a Ph.D. And Steichen, after all, had had no training in exhibitions, and yet he put on some of the really great shows. And it was the sort of thing, for instance, he wanted a picture of Sev Guardiú. I brought in a hundred. He said, "Is that all?" And he said, "Bring in some more." And it wasn't until I had brought in over a thousand until he picked one for an exhibition. He knew exactly what he wanted, and it was up to me to go and get it. At that time, Helen Gee had Limelight, and she

was one of the first...everything was an interview, it was an examination. He gave all his staff examinations; you didn't know it was an examination, but it was. He wanted to see how I got how along with Blacks; for instance, he sent me to see Roy DeCarava, and we got along perfectly. It was that sort of thing. He sent me to see Weegee [Arthur Fellig]. He said, "He's the only photographer that you may not go out with." [LAUGHING]

SZ: And why was that?

GM: He thought that he was a pretty rough character. [LAUGHTER]

SZ: Who were some of the photographers you liked in particular?

GM: Well, some of them are still constant, like Callahan. Wayne, of course, has stopped photographing, and he was very much a figure in those days. [PAUSE]

SZ: You have mentioned several times that there was a lot of press attention [paid] to those shows in those days. What do you remember about Elizabeth Shaw, since she....

GM: She was a very good friend of Steichen's, and a very interesting woman, and, I thought, didn't handle the publicity very well. Of course, I was so used to the amateur spirit of handling the publicity at the Museum of the City of New York at that time, that her professionalism was something quite new to me. And for instance, Steichen would send for her before we had a show, and he explained the whole process of the show, what he was driving at and what he hoped it would be, and she wrote the releases, which he corrected.

SZ: And then she would do what she did on her end.

GM: Yes. She was very good.

SZ: What kind of a person was she?

GM: Well, sort of difficult. [LAUGHING] We were all difficult. Everyone was a prima donna.

SZ: That's been the reputation, right?

GM: Yes, we were really a bunch of prima donnas.

SZ: You said, half-jokingly I suspect, that when John Szarkowski came in it was difficult, but you stayed for ten years and you did shows, right, for those ten years.

GM: Yes, but he's never let me do a show since, and after all, I put on a hundred and something shows, and I did know how to do it.

SZ: He hasn't let you do them since--since you retired, you mean.

GM: Yes.

SZ: And before you retired, it was difficult for you to do them?

GM: Yes. I should have left

SZ: But you didn't want to.

GM: Well, I had no place to go. Now if I left I think that I could go with one of the Venice outfits, two of which are based in New York.

SZ: Now tell me about the Steichen archive, because that's really been your work for the

last....

GM: Well, it's one row of cabinets, and they're arranged more-or-less chronologically and sometimes when the chronology isn't distinct--for instance, boxes devoted to the family and boxes devoted to horticulture. They start in Luxembourg, which he said was a beautiful country; he went back there a few times.

SZ: But you really organized it.

GM: Yes.... Of course, there are some very valuable things that come from other institutions, like the Stieglitz Archive at Yale; there are all the letters that Steichen wrote to Stieglitz, but Stieglitz's replies Steichen left with his mother, and when she died, they disappeared, so that you only have half of the correspondence. But that tells how modern art was introduced to this country. You see, Steichen introduced modern art before the Museum was even thought of. And there were very touching things, like his life with Picasso; he didn't see Picasso from the time he introduced him to this country til he went to visit him fifty years later. He had a wonderful interview. Steichen thought Picasso was the greatest artist of all time, not only of our time, and he may be right. You see, he was so far ahead of things, and other people were thinking somebody was crazy. He said, "Picasso's a crazy galoot. If he keeps on, he'll be a millionaire." It worked out.

SZ: I should say.

GM: He would have adored Paloma [Picasso], because he adored beauty in women. Thanksgiving was his favorite holiday, much more so than Christmas or Easter.

SZ: Did you ever spend a Thanksgiving with him?

GM: Yes.

SZ: What was that like?

GM: It was family.

SZ: He liked that especially, why? Do you have any idea?

GM: No, but he did. [LAUGHTER]

SZ: He was an immigrant.

GM: Yes, but a very early one. He thought Luxembourg was one of the most beautiful places in the world, and he went back two or three times. But even after living in Paris and all that, he didn't speak much French, or much German.

SZ: Just English.

GM: Yes, which he spoke very beautifully. He could attach meaning to a word that was far beyond what the average person thought.

SZ: I just have a few more.... [PAUSE] Could you tell me about your first day at the Museum here?

GM: Well, I remember when René was interviewing me--this was when I came down here permanently--he asked me what salary I expected, and I said, "What are you offering?" and he offered me exactly what I had been getting, so I said I thought I could manage on that. I went down to Steichen and said, "I've been hired, when do I start?" He said, "You've started," and plunged me right into it. He explained that one also spoke of it as The Museum of Modern Art.

SZ: Yes, that's an important bit of knowledge. [LAUGHTER]

GM: Yes, he gave me that the first day.

SZ: You weren't here during the fire, were you?

GM: No, I had just left. It was after Seventy Photographers Look at New York, and I had just gone back uptown. And that day, Pete--Rolf Petersen--came uptown, and he said, "Let's telephone Steichen, tell him the fire is out," because he had undoubtedly heard it over the radio. So we called Steichen, and he said to Pete, "Why aren't you at the Museum, Kathleen's down there." He always said we never would have lost the Monets if he had been here that day.

SZ: Why?

GM: He would have taken them into the garden. You see, the pictures were taken into the garden and into the Whitney [Museum of American Art]. It was a very terrifying thing to hear it over the radio. And they were all wonderful. I mean, Alfred Barr broke a window to let people out. Nobody ever knew how it happened. It was probably one of the workmen, they think, on the second floor. And René came around the corner--he had been at a meeting--and saw the fire engines and nearly died. It was a horrifying day.

SZ: I'm jumping around a little bit. The Steichen archive: whose idea was that to establish it?

GM: I have no idea. Actually, René's, probably.

SZ: And is it used a lot by scholars.

GM: More now than in many years. Lots of them are getting Ph.D's on various phases of

Steichen's career. This morning I had a call from the man who did the horticultural thing. This is his...it's the horticultural thing. And he telephoned me this morning because he's doing a book on it. All on Steichen and horticulture.

SZ: Are you going to read it?

GM: I've read it. There's another man who's doing The Family of Man, which will be very valuable.

SZ: Is this good?

GM: I haven't got The Family of Man [manuscript] yet. He's still doing it.

SZ: But this one. You've read this one already.

GM: Yes. It's very good.

SZ: He was very attached to the natural world.

GM: To all phases of it. Elizabeth Shaw said he always knew when a woman was pregnant, that he could tell by this space between their eyes, which apparently widens when you're pregnant. [LAUGHTER]

SZ: I'll have to remember that. I guess the last thing I wanted to ask you is, were you surprised when, after he died, or it was after that, when basically his stuff went to Rochester?

GM: That was Joanna's, really.

SZ: Yes, but I'm just asking, had you expected that?

GM: No.

SZ: You thought it would come here?

GM: I'd hoped so. Well, of course, there are always many surprises. Look at the Annenberg thing [the bequest of the Walter Annenberg collection to the Metropolitan]. I don't know whether we angled for it, but I guess it was possibly Bill Lieberman that got it for the Met.

SZ: Well, we weren't even mentioned in any of these articles as being contenders for that anyhow.

GM: It's awful when you lose a collection like that. When I was uptown we lost the Edward W.C. Arnold Collection because he didn't think the museum had enough money. He was right, but I was devastated.

SZ: And what about our losing the Steichen collection, or not getting it?

GM: Well, after all, I was used to Joanna.

SZ: The Museum has many fine Steichens in its collection, anyway, does it not?

GM: Yes, some very good ones.

SZ: You told me a little story that you have some nice Steichens in your collection.

GM: Yes.

SZ: And how did that happen?

GM: Well, he threw an envelope at me, and he said, "Catch it," and of course I caught it.

He said, "Open it," and I opened it and there were all these vintage prints. I said, "What do I do now, where do you want them to go?" He said, "Those are for you," like a small boy. I nearly fainted.

SZ: And you still have them?

GM: Yes. Well, I gave some to Shirley Burden. I'm willing to give them away but I'm not willing to sell them. I've never sold a print of Steichen's or anyone else's. I guess if I were hungry I might come to it, but what I do occasionally is give them for income-tax deduction, because I think that's fair enough.

SZ: But you have some of them hanging, you look at them?

GM: Oh, every day. I have about twenty-five hanging.

SZ: And you're a bit of a collector beyond the Steichens that you have, right?

GM: I've never bought anything, but I have about a thousand.

SZ: Photographs?

GM: Yes.

SZ: That have been given to you.

GM: Yes.

SZ: By photographers?

GM: Yes, usually.

SZ: Any particular favorites?

GM: Well, Eric Hartman is one of my favorites.

SZ: Anybody else?

GM: Charles Strand. I only have two Strands. One is the view of Toledo, a photograph that he made from the exact vantage point at which the painting was made. I look at that every day. Steichen said, "Do you really look at them," and I said yes. He was crazy about David Douglas Duncan. And incidentally, David Douglas Duncan's books on Picasso I looked at before I started to read the new Picasso.

SZ: The [book by John] Richardson.

GM: Yes. Have you read that? Don't you think it's wonderful?

SZ: Yes.

GM: It's very interesting to read David Douglas Duncan at the same time, [his] book called Picasso's Picasso, the ones that Picasso himself kept. Very interesting. Steichen said that there was only one of his own photographs that never gave him a pain in the neck, and that was Three Pears and an Apple. He specified it never gave him a pain in the neck. I have one of Rodin that is one of two known copies--the one by Steichen of Rodin, I mean, not by Rodin. He and Rodin were very, very close. He and Matisse were very close. That was the cause of the Matisse affair here, which I call the Matisse mess.

SZ: And what was that?

GM: When Steichen left them to his daughter and she left them to Mary's [Mary Calderone] granddaughter, and the Museum has said it was promised the painting, it

was promised here. And that was a great mistake. No matter where you go, people talk about it.

SZ: They shouldn't have done it.

GM: Never.

END SIDE 2, TAPE 2

END INTERVIEW