THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH: **GILBERT ROBINSON, SR. (GR)**

INTERVIEWER: **SHARON ZANE (SZ)**

LOCATION: **HACKENSACK, NEW JERSEY**

DATE: **17 JUNE 2002**

TAPE 1, SIDE 1

SZ: Gilbert Robinson, Sr., known to many or all as "Robbie."

GR: "Robbie." Correct.

SZ: Robbie, this is going to be fun. You can smile.

GR: I hope so.

SZ: Here's how we'll do it. Let me ask you to tell me where and when you were born, and something about your family background.

GR: Well, I was born December 27, 1934, in Munroe, North Carolina. I'm one of five, the oldest son. I have four sisters.

SZ: That must have been an interesting setup.

GR: I've been a leader all the time. I'm the official diaper-changer, you see.

SZ: Was that a city, or a town?

GR: It's a town. I was there until I was about two years old. Then my mother moved to New York, and we've been in New York since 1937.

SZ: So you don't remember North Carolina.

GR: No, I don't -- not explicitly. I recall going back to see my grandfather. Every summer, that was where they would send me off. Instead of going to camp I'd go back to the farm, and it was quite rewarding to be with my grandfather during those years.

SZ: So they had a farm?

GR: Yes.

SZ: That was in the middle of the Depression.

GR: Right in the center of the Depression.

SZ: Was it terrible?

GR: Well, no. We were fortunate -- the family was fortunate. We had a large farm, all our food was supplied through the farm, so it wasn't a matter of finding things to eat. There was always plenty.

SZ: If you could grow it, you could have it.

GR: Yes. You had it. You had it. It was wonderful.

SZ: And did they actually raise stuff to sell?

GR: You know, I was too young to really remember. I just know there was always a bounty of food to eat, and we had all the animals. I had my own little horse when I would come down for the summer months. I'd go, say, from June 1st through the early part of September, when we started school, and I'd spend the whole time with my grandfather. He was getting on, up in age, at that time. As I recall, when he died he was 116.

SZ: He was 116?

GR: One-hundred-sixteen. So his longevity was good.

SZ: So you knew him for a long time, then.

GR: All my life. All my life. But after, oh, I guess 1950, I didn't go back as much as I had earlier, because I was in high school. I went into the service in 1953 --

SZ: I'm going to ask you about that. Did your mother ever tell you why she came North?

GR: Well, life was better. My father was in the service, and he wanted her to come to New York, so that's where we came.

SZ: "In the service" means what?

GR: In the Army during World War II. So she came up here. We lived in Washington Heights, from my early recollections -- I'd say when I was about five – and then we moved to the Lower East Side, to Alphabet City, in the Jacob Riis housing. As most of the veterans were coming home, there was housing for them in the Riis Houses.

SZ: There was a housing shortage after the war. Right.

GR: So we got a place at 809 East Sixth Street, actually, on the corner of Avenue D.

SZ: Do you recall anything about Washington Heights? You must have gone to public school there.

GR: I went to Public School #164, in Washington Heights. It was very fine. In fact -- you've probably heard of Diahann Carroll?

SZ: Oh, yes.

GR: She and I were in the same class -- that was the era. Sugar Hill was the place to be in. All the people were coming up at that time. It was very nice.

SZ: Was Washington Heights segregated?

GR: No, it wasn't. It was very open.

SZ: That's what I thought. I know they had a lot of immigrants coming in; Henry Kissinger came and lived there.

GR: That's true. In fact, his mother lived at the George Washington Bridge and 178th Street. She lived there until she died. But that whole area was quite influential, with everyone. We never had any problem up there. It was always nice.

SZ: So you went to P.S. #164.

GR: Then, when we moved down to the Lower East Side, when I was nine or ten, I went to P.S. #64 on Ninth Street and Avenue B, which is now the Cristadoro House. You probably know where that is? Across from Tompkins Park, there. Now it's the Cristadoro House. They turned the school into condominiums. There used to be this big building. It's now condominiums. The school was just around the corner. We used to go swimming there, in the summer months.

SZ: When you were younger, maybe when you were still in Washington Heights, what do you remember about the city? The war? Or were you just not that aware of it? Your father was away?

GR: He was away then. There was so much going on in New York. We were busy in school -- school activities, going to the Y, going to the boxing club. My uncles (who were his brothers) always tried to keep me active, to keep me out of trouble. School was the most important thing. No, the war really didn't affect my lifestyle, because my uncles all worked for the Penn Central Railroad. They were quite busy, and they

kept me going. "You want to take a trip this weekend? We're going out to Chicago." And I would go.

SZ: Did you do that? Oh, that is so great.

GR: It was fun. It was fun. In fact, my grandfather was the first black locomotive driver in that time. So everyone seemed to follow. It was like a family tradition, to get in the railroad. My last uncle, who just recently passed away, was the last of the brothers, who worked for New York Central.

SZ: That was considered to be a really great job.

GR: It was like working for the city, today -- you had that security.

SZ: So you visited Chicago.

GR: I visited Chicago. Wherever they were going, I was there, with them. I always had somewhere to sleep and something to eat. It was a fun weekend; then we'd come back. "We're going for three days. You want to go?" Especially in the summer months. You had nothing to do, and you'd just ride along on the train, and see the world. It was quite extensive, it was quite nice. I enjoyed every bit of it.

Then, my sisters -- I was always the big brother. I think it was a very happy household. We had no problem, we never were without anything. There was always plenty of everything. Food, clothing, a place to sleep. I hear many guys say, coming from my time, that they were sleeping three and four in a room. We didn't have that. Everyone had their own room. Of course, up in Washington Heights, all the apartments were very big. They still are. Well, they've converted them all now, into little apartments, making all the money they can make.

SZ: They were those big --

GR: -- big, sprawling houses. Really nice. Really nice. I don't have any bad vibes about New York City. New York City has been quite kind. It's been a good place.

SZ: And down in the Jacob Riis houses. You went to high school down there?

GR: Yes.

SZ: You went to where?

GR: I went to High School on 13th Street and Sixth Avenue, the Food Trade Vocational High School.

SZ: It's not there anymore?

GR: No. It's now the New School. They moved out to Queens Boulevard.

SZ: So you went there to study.

GR: Well, as you know, then trades were the most important thing. So I went as a baker. I studied baking during that time. Famous Amos and I were in the same class.

SZ: Did you select baking because you liked to do it, or did you just like to eat it?

GR: I selected the school because I felt I could have a job. Back in the '50s, for blacks, you had to have a trade, something that was serviceable. So I went for that, and it worked out very well, because when you became a senior, in your senior class you'd be working somewhere in the industry -- in a butchery or a bakery.

SZ: You mean, they gave you an internship?

GR: Right. It was automatic that you'd get it. Then along came Korea, and I went off to war. I was in the war for four and a half years.

SZ: You were over in Korea?

GR: Well, I flew out of Anchorage, Alaska. I was in supplies. Anchorage, Alaska.

SZ: What does that mean? What did you do?

GR: We flew supplies from Anchorage, Alaska into Korea, dropped them off and came back. In those days, we were using C-119s. Those were double-winged planes. You probably don't recall seeing them. They were two-tails, called the C-119. We dropped the supplies off, turned around and came back. Anchorage was our home base. I was in Anchorage, Alaska from 1955 to '57, almost two and a half years.

SZ: Well, the Korean war was over at that point.

GR: Yes. But there was still clean-up.

SZ: And there were plenty of troops there? That's what you're saying. So you would take them the supplies. So you didn't see combat.

GR: No.

SZ: And being in the military -- ?

GR: It was exciting. It was exciting. You know, it's funny how, in my time, you were brought up for duty. This was the thing that was instilled in you. If you went into the service you got trained, and if you followed the rules, your life would be better. Which I think is the best thing any young child can do, because there's a regimentation you have to follow. If you don't, you're going to jail. Once you follow those rules, there's never a problem with you. I think it helped my life. It was good for me. It's been rich. Today, a child would say, "You don't have to go to war to get your education," but it's an incentive for them to go into the service, because the government pays for his, so you don't have to.

I know my two kids -- it wasn't an actual struggle for me -- they both graduated. My three granddaughters are now graduating. So it's according to what you want to do for your children. But when I was coming up, with the five of us, Dad was only making a dime and a quarter, so it was difficult. So I went into the service to help out the family, and it worked out very well.

SZ: You had to think about those things. Which, I guess, as things progressed, generation to generation, you didn't have to.

GR: I didn't have to worry about it.

SZ: Your father came back and he did what for the city?

GR: He worked for the Fulton Fish Market.

SZ: You were living in the right place.

GR: Right. Yes, he worked there for years. That's why I say we always had something to eat. There was always fish in the house. I promised, when I first left home, that I would never have fish in the house.

SZ: I was going to ask if you still eat fish?

GR: For twenty years I wouldn't have fish in my home. Because I'd come home, and I knew it was fish night. But we had the best, from lobster, shrimp, whatever. But I said to myself, "If I get married, we're not -- " and I think for about twenty years, I didn't have any fish.

SZ: I can understand that.

GR: My wife says now that she won't eat any mashed potatoes. Certain things that were always on the table, and people try to stay away from it.

SZ: Anyway, you came back from the service, and you had this trade. So what did you do?

GR: Well, when I came back, I worked at Macy's, and I went back to school. I went to the New York City School of Design, which was on 14th Street and Seventh Avenue at the time. I went for architecture. I got out of the service -- we're now getting into 1957-58 -- and I was working at Macy's part-time, and going to school. I was working at Bed-Stuy Restoration in Brooklyn, because I had a wife and two kids by that time.

SZ: So you were working a lot of jobs?

GR: Yes, to keep it all together, and it was working out very well. Then one day I decided -- I had gone around with my resumé, trying to get jobs as an architect. "Well, we have a draftsman, but the jobs only last --" and being black, I found it very difficult to get in. Everyone was saying, "Well, how much experience have you had?" "I haven't had any experience. I just got out of school." I was getting very discouraged about it, and one day I said, "Let me go by the Museum. Maybe --" This was 1959. I took a guard's job first.

SZ: Had you been to the Museum?

GR: No, I hadn't. But I knew about it, and I figured, "Let me get some culture."

SZ: Tell me a little bit about studying architecture, or parts of it.

GR: Well, we had always built around the house, and I felt I had that in me -- that I could create and do something. I thought, "Well, let me try. If I get a certificate in this, maybe -- " Then you had to have a trade to get any job. Back in the '50s you had to be in a trade union or have some kind of work experience. So I figured if you went to school for it, you'd have it. So that's what I did.

SZ: You didn't want to be a baker.

GR: No, I didn't want to be a baker. I had gotten enough of that. I wanted to upscale myself, if I could, and it worked out very well.

SZ: So you just thought, "I'll go to one museum," or a few museums?

GR: I went to one museum. Again, my daughter was four, my son was three, my wife wasn't working, and I was working odd jobs, working at Macy's -- I worked in the decorating department at Macy's, in the evenings. You could only work from 11:00 to 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning. Then, after giving that up, I worked in the furniture department. They had what called a distribution department. That was from 12:00 a.m. to 8:00 a.m. Then I would leave that, come to the Museum and work eight hours, go home and sleep, and go back to work again. Because I committed to myself that I would never let my wife work; someone had to take care of the children. And it seemed to work out very well for me.

SZ: What a hard day.

GR: It was a full day. It was a full day. As you know, back in those days, you were only making $18-20 a week. Well, life was good, because carfare was a nickel, and we got by.

SZ: And where were you living?

GR: We were living at Avenue D and Eighth Street at that time. When I got out of the service, I came back and I was stationed at Mitchell Field, which was in Long Island City. It's in Hempstead, Long Island, actually. My wife did not want to stay on base. I had applied for an apartment at Jacob Riis housing, and it came through. We had a two-bedroom, with the two kids. It was wonderful. Wonderful. I used to commute every morning from the Lower East Side. We had a carpool. One week I would drive, the next week the next guy would drive, and it worked out. So it wasn't bad at all. It wasn't bad at all. So, like I said, in 1957 --

SZ: That was the year you went to the Museum?

GR: No. I didn't get to the Museum until 1959. I had been talking with people at Macy's, and they were saying, "Have you thought about going to a museum? Since you have an interest in art?" What could I lose? So one day I did. Mrs. Althea Borden was the personnel director at that time. Once I got with security -- remember Joe Chapman? Well, he was the administrator at that time. I approached him, saying I had gone to school for this, gone to school for that, and he said, "You know, I'm going to see if there's something open for you in Operations. As you know, the Museum was always just two persons per department. One of the fellows retired, or got fired, and there was an opening. He said, "Look, there's a custodial job." A custodial job, at that time, consisted of doing all the installations, and doing all the maintenance work within the office administration -- fixing desks, locks -- so that was our job. There was myself, and Mike [Emilio] Poppo -- two persons -- from that point, the two of us, until 1984, when the Museum expanded. Then I left Operations, and went to work for the Registrar department.

SZ: So let's go back to the Operations department. It was a two-person department for all those years. What would a typical day be like for you?

GR: If there was an exhibition going up, all work within the Museum, all maintenance work, had to be put on hold. We did the Picasso, the *Guernica* -- whatever it was, just the two of us. He and I would install all those shows.

SZ: So what would that be?

GR: Let's say Chagall was coming up.

SZ: Do you remember that show?

GR: Do I?!

SZ: Nineteen-sixty-two.

GR: Right. Chagall was in process. The Registrar would bring all the work to the floor. They would receive it, bring it to us, and our job would be to install it, just Mike and I. We'd work ten-twelve hours, to get the show completed.

SZ: Did that include, let's say, building vitrines?

GR: No. Again, as you know, the Museum has always had a department where the carpenters take care of the vitrines, the painters, the framers -- we were just the installers. In those years, we worked as a team. If someone needed help, we helped each other, because there was a limited amount of people working. The carpenters, I think, had four people, the painters had three or four. The framers always had three or four people in each department. So whatever it entailed -- if they needed assistance, everyone would fall in to make it work. Do you remember Danny Clark?

SZ: Yes.

GR: Danny Clark was head of the carpenter shop. You had the framer, Bruce Collins.

SZ: Did you like the work?

GR: I loved it. I loved it. See, in those days, each person was responsible -- The Museum was growing, and it was raw. There was nothing in concrete; we had to make everything work. When an artist came in with something, he just brought it in rolled-up, in a bucket, in a pan, and we had to make it work. The most interesting part of the Museum is making it work. What happens, I've found, is when you get a bunch of guys who are doing a show -- say, we're putting this together, a kitchen. "What do you think about these cabinets? What do you think about so-and-so?" Before you know it, the project's completed, because everyone worked together.

We were trying to build a Museum. The Museum was very young, we were all inexperienced at doing what we were doing, but it worked out very well. They've had a gracious crew of people working at the Museum, and I'm surprised that so many people have gone on, and not gotten the benefit of what's going on today. Because

when I came, that one little door, coming in the front -- the printer's house was to the right, next to the church. We tore that down, and went up. We tore the next one down, and went up. I've been there since the inception. It's been great.

SZ: You were there since the first expansion, that '64 expansion.

GR: Yes.

SZ: So let's go back. You just mentioned the Chagall show. Do you have any specific memories of that?

GR: It was a great, great show. I'd never seen so many people come in to see a show. They were lined up around the block. The way it was put together -- and being a major part of installing it -- I thought it was wonderful. Just a wonderful, wonderful show. I've forgotten who was the curator on that show.

SZ: That I can't help you with.

GR: I don't recall. But it was marvelous, with all the lighting, the panel, the boxes. And this was early -- 1962 -- when things were happening that you never thought would happen -- the look toward the future. It was just a great undertaking. It's been a lot of years to give you any specifics about what happened, but it was wonderful. Wonderful.

SZ: So in '59, they had just had the fire.

GR: Yes. That's when I just came on. I came on about six months after the fire.

SZ: Then, I guess, they started planning for that expansion in the '60s. So tell me a little bit about what the atmosphere was like when you came.

GR: For me?

SZ: Yes. For you.

GR: To be honest with you, it was strange in some aspects. But living in New York, I accepted it. I'll say this: I was going into an elitist group of people.

SZ: You knew that going in.

GR: I knew that, going in. Most people at the Museum at that time were very well off, and they had never encountered a black person in my capacity. Say your desk wasn't working. I would go in, and the ladies would be quite hostile, because, like, "What are you -- ?" Then I realized they weren't accustomed to being around black folk, and I learned to adapt to that. I got along fine. I learned, over the forty-two years, that that was one of the things I had to accept; that people weren't accustomed to me. Because they were used to "get this done, get that done," because they were very elitist folk, and they were used to servants. But I wasn't that, I was a working person.

SZ: Did that change, over the course of the year?

GR: It's changing. It hasn't completely changed yet. It's changing.

SZ: Is that just because it's changed in society?

GR: I think it's changed in society.

SZ: Or because the people they hire are different?

GR: Yes, yes. They've had exposure. See, in order to live with a group of people you have to have exposure to those people. Without that, you can't fathom how they live. Now the same people who come to the Museum today live where I was brought up and raised -- the Lower East Side. I was paying $33 a month for two bedrooms; they're paying $1,800 a month for the same thing. But nothing has changed, and they're fighting to get down there!

SZ: It must be amusing to you.

GR: I laugh every time we drive through. I say to my wife, "Honey, you know what they're paying for that place?" It's strange. But it was coming to America, and once you can adapt yourself to that --But, you see, the people I worked with, at the museum, they were all immigrants. They were there to do a job. They had trades, and that's how I learned all the things I know, through these guys. I've always been the only black guy with any movement within the Museum, and it worked out very well for me because I didn't go in with a hostile attitude. I went in to learn, and better my position. So I don't recall ever having an instance where I was indifferent to anyone. "We're here to do a job. Do you have a problem about the [recording inaudible]? Fine." That's how I saw it, the whole time.

SZ: But there must have been something you really liked about it, too.

GR: It was creativity. Yes. To me it's like -- did you ever make a movie?

SZ: No.

GR: Have you ever thought about making a movie?

SZ: Yes.

GR: And the end results? Once we go to the floor to do a show, all this stuff is laying all over the place, nothing is in order. The curator comes in, he wants this, we try that. But when you begin to make the pie, and it forms a shape -- that was the exciting part. When opening morning came, and on opening night you see the press reviews, you were a part of all this, and it made you feel so good.

Again, I was supposed to be the lead preparator, I was the lead guy doing all this, and it made me feel good, knowing that I had accomplished what we were assigned to do for that particular show. One of the fellows in architecture -- his name was

[Ludwig] Glaeser -- told me when I first got there, about 1966, he said, "Robbie, always follow the master plans, and you'll never have a problem." And I did that.

SZ: Meaning?

GR: Whatever plan is set up for the day, don't deviate from that; follow the plan. Because the person who set down all that -- You have a show, you've planned for this show, and if I try to add my thing, that's not what it's all about. You are the one in charge. If I follow your rules, we'll get it accomplished, and once we do that, we may realize, "Hey, let's check --" But if you create an interference with something, you distort the thought that other people are having. So if I allow you to just follow your rules -- and that's what I've done the whole time I've been at the Museum -- follow the master plan, it worked out well. It worked out well. But then, after 1984 --

SZ: Let’s stay with the early days. Maybe we could talk a little bit about some of the personalities. You had to deal with all these curators, right? And staff people.

GR: Yes. Yes. There was Bill Seitz and Peter Selz; there was Dorothy Miller -- you name them.

SZ: What about Alfred Barr?

GR: Barr was a studious man. He was a grand fellow. Again, you learned, when you walked into a gallery with Alfred, you didn't disturb him. He was a thinker. He would walk around, contemplating what he wanted to do. That's one of the things that the guys today can't understand. "Why can't we have any input?" Well, that's not what we were there for. Our input was --

SZ: -- to help them do what they wanted to do.

GR: -- and if you did that, you survived. That's why Mike and I were the only two guys in the gallery for twenty-five years, and we worked very well together.

SZ: Tell me a little bit about Mike.

GR: Mike Poppo retired at the same time. He had forty-two years there. He was a very astute gentleman. He knew his job. He was conscientious about the job and his family; that was the whole thing he worked for. We had no problems. He would say, "Robbie, we've got so and so," in the morning. "Hey, if it takes us all night, we do it." He was a grand fellow. I think of all the persons I worked with (and he was the first one) he was the greatest. The greatest guy.

SZ: Did he love modern art? Did he grow to love it?

GR: You know, his thing was always, "You know, you and I could put this show together better than the curator." We'd laugh. I'd say, "You know, before you go, we're going to ask him, 'Can we just put a show together, one time?'" But it never came about. But no, he never -- he was a tradesman. He was a tradesman.

SZ: Were you union? Were you protected by the union?

GR: Yes.

SZ: So that means you were paid union scale wages? You didn't have to deal with the administration about low wages and all that stuff?

GR: We came in at that rate, believing every day I got there that I was going to go to work for the civil service. Before you knew it, we were making more than the civil service was making. I had two kids, so why should I leave? The benefits were good, the medical benefits. So, like you said, forty-two years later --

SZ: Amazing. Anything else about the early days? Who was there? I asked you about Alfred. René d'Harnoncourt?

GR: The greatest gentleman. We did a Matisse sculpture show. Mike and I built all the pedestals. They were made out of blocks of brick. We worked night and day to make

all these pedestals, throughout the garden. There was just the two of us, Mike and I -- and d'Harnoncourt. He was a gentleman who had foresight. He was just a pleasurable man to be around. He was big. Even his daughter -- do you know Anne? Of course, at that time she was there with my children. They were all growing up together. Alfred Barr's daughter [Vicky], my daughter, and [recording inaudible] Koch. That whole crew was there, on board, at that time.

SZ: So he was an interesting man.

GR: Very interesting, and I thought he was very fair. But, see, in those days, administration was administration. He was the director of the Museum, and I don't think he got involved with "downstairs." I think they had management take care of that, and it worked out very well. But when you saw him in the gallery, if we were doing a show -- again, I had more presence with the curators and the directors than most people, because we were doing the art, and in those days it was strictly a museum. It was an art museum, and that's what it was all about. It wasn't politics. Today it's gone political.

SZ: Let's see. Who else? I think Beaumont Newhall was there when you first got there?

GR: Yes.

SZ: But John Szarkowski came in soon thereafter?

GR: Yes. Steichen was there, an excellent gentleman. That's when we had the little photography gallery on the second floor, overlooking 53rd Street. It was only about this big. That's as big as it was. [Arthur] Drexler was there.

SZ: How was he to work with?

GR: Drexler was a fine fellow. Again, if you followed the rules, there was no problem. You didn't get into people's personal issues. "Mr. Drexler, good morning. How are you? Yes, I'll meet you on the floor in fifteen minutes." You did that, and you got on. That's

how I survived. Today, everyone wants to get into everyone else's stuff, and you've got a problem. Then, you knew the person by name, that he was department head, and you were assigned to him. Then, with the five departments -- sculpture, painting, drawings, etc. -- Mike and I were in all of them, because we were the only two doing all the exhibitions. So we had a good rapport with most everybody.

SZ: Did you deal with film, too?

GR: Yes. Yes. Yes. I always remember -- I forget who was the director for the films, but I know Mary Corliss --

SZ: There was Willard Van Dyke.

GR: Van Dyke. Excellent gentleman. Excellent. Yes, indeed.

SZ: And Mary Corliss.

GR: And Mary Corliss. Yes.

SZ: I guess they put stuff up on walls and everything. Who else? Bill Lieberman?

GR: Another gentleman. Fine fellow. Bill and I had a very good rapport. That's how I got to know Mr. Paley. I used to do all his collections, also, out in the Hamptons, in the house. Bill Lieberman would set it up. "We've got this trustee. We want you to go and -- " Again, there were only two of us, Mike and I. Either he would do it or I would do it, and that's how we got to know all the trustees -- we'd go to the Burdens, you name it. We'd go to their homes. If they needed to borrow something, or bring something back to the Museum, or we'd go hang something that they needed for a party. It worked out very well. Very well.

But Bill Lieberman, I was sorry to see him go. But then along came Bill Rubin -- I remember when he first came in from Vassar. He used to do the lectures, on either Wednesday night or Thursday night, in the auditorium. I thought he was the

talkingest fellow in the world, but he was very studious. When he came on as curator, he just took the Museum by surprise. He had a lot of gifts and a lot of gab, but he knew his art. He knew his business.

SZ: What about his temper? Did it ever interfere with you?

GR: Again, it didn't interfere with us. The problem they had with Bill -- everybody was afraid to say, "Sir, that's not the way it is." He would shout at all the ladies. They were all petrified to come on the floor, they were just shaking. But if Bill would say, "[Feigns spluttering]," we would say, "Well, we have to go to lunch now." And he'd say, "Oh, yes. I forgot." Because he'd get on a train of thought and forget he wasn't the only person in existence. For the twenty-two years I worked with Bill, we never had a problem. Never. Again, there was only Mike and I, working with him. It was just the two of us. Many times, in the evenings, there would just be the three of us in the gallery. The way Mike was, he just stood there -- "Fine. No problem." The next morning, we'd start again. And Bill would say, "I'm going home. I have a dinner engagement." So I'd ask Mike, "Mike, do you want to work until 9:00 or 10:00, and get this done?" And we'd hang the show.

SZ: That was it.

GR: No problem.

SZ: You mentioned Seitz and Selz. They were not there for that long.

GR: Right. Dorothy Miller was a grand lady. I remember when Mark Rothko used to come in; I'd be in the gallery and try to get a retrospective for the Museum. She'd be talking, and just pass him. Because, again, I was always in the gallery when they were in the gallery, and you'd see all the artists coming in, trying -- like, what's the photographer with John Szarkowski? I can't think of his name. Anyway, we'd be in the gallery, and all these artists would call from the reception desk, come up and talk, and you got to meet all these people, just by being there with the curator, because they spent more time in the gallery than they did in the offices, in those days.

SZ: Did you have any favorite artists? Were you there when Tinguely did his thing in the garden?

GR: I did that with him.

SZ: You did that. You set it up?

GR: Yes.

SZ: Anything about that?

GR: It was creativity. I loved it. See, again, my hands and my mind were both geared for this. That's why my theme has always been, "Well, we don't have any problems here. We work it out. The artists come in, we know we've got all this -- It's not a problem. What do you want done?" Between the electricians, the carpenters and the installers, we always found a way to get it done. I don't recall ever missing a deadline of a show, because there were some very keen guys working for the Museum, and they took the Museum seriously, because it was their job. We were all trying to keep our families afloat, and they were very conscious of what they were doing. Very fine. But I don't think they have the caliber of people coming in, today, that they had back in those days. It's a different group.

TAPE 1, SIDE 2

SZ: Did you go watch the destruction of that Tinguely sculpture, in the garden? After you set it up?

GR: Yes.

SZ: What did you think of that?

GR: It was part of the makeup. We knew, when we put it up, it would not be there anymore. If you had some way to keep all this stuff, you'd have a museum within yourself -- the stuff we destroyed over the years. But for a lot of it, there just wasn't storage space. The concept was to put it on view, let people see it, and then maybe you'd keep it in your mind, because we had no place to store it.

SZ: What about the beginning of the big shows -- you know, these blockbuster shows? That must have put a lot more pressure on you guys.

GR: Well, not really. The pressure started upstairs, with the Registrar. See, once the carpenters -- say, Jerry Neuner, who was the designer at that time, for the last twelve years (there were so many guys before him) -- once they designed the gallery, it wasn't a problem.

How can I analyze this? We knew two or three months in advance, once this show comes down, so and so is coming in. Now, there's 200 pieces, there's a lot of sculpture, we need to get turnbuckles, we need to get all these supplies. We have a general idea what we're going to do, so that when we start on this we don't have to say, "Look, I have to run to the store." Everything was there. We kept a supply of everything we'd need.

So when you got to the floor, it was not a problem. Not a problem. Because once you build one kitchen, basically all the other kitchens are the same; you may just change the orientation of it. It's the same with an exhibition. Like, Bernice Rose would come in, she'd want one color. We'd come in from the right, with her show, but with the next curator, she made it the other way around. But it was all the same. It was all the same. We'd establish the height the picture would be. We'd establish the height for the pedestals for the sculpture, and the carpenters would make it. If it was too high, we'd cut it down, and the painters would come in and paint it again. So it was a unit, working together, on an exhibition, and, basically, it was always the same people, because their job was to get the exhibitions out. So I can't recall a problem of anything we had, of any exhibition.

SZ: What did you have to do to get ready to pack up *Guernica*? Some people remember that as nobody really wanting to tell anybody what was going on. They just said, "Make a huge crate."

GR: Come, I'll show you. I have a picture here of it. *Guernica* was tedious, in a sense, because everyone was afraid -- Who was the curator in the restoration department?

SZ: Jean Volkmer. Is that who you mean?

GR: Here we are, packing the *Guernica*, to go back.

SZ: Who took those? I haven't seen those.

GR: There wasn't a problem. We had the space on the landing, as you come out of the thing. We sat the box up there. We rolled it that night, in the gallery, because that was the only thing in the front gallery. We rolled it up. Anna -- Anna, you know, is still in conservation. She was young then. But these two ladies -- Jean Volkmer and her assistant -- it just worked out well. It went off fine.

SZ: That was sort of an exciting night, wasn't it?

GR: It was, indeed. [Laughs]

SZ: So, Robbie, how much of your job had to do with doing stuff for trustees? You said you got to know Mr. Paley.

GR: I did his entire collection, at the Hamptons, at the house.

SZ: That must have been exciting.

GR: I brought the *Boy Leading a Horse* to the Museum. Every time Bill Rubin would do a show, that would be his centerpiece. I would have to go to Paley's house. The elevator in his house was so small I'd have to ride on top of the elevator, to bring the

picture down and take it back. I was the only person he would allow to do this, and when I got to the house, it was that much from the ceiling. If he had to light it, all the guys from CBS would come over. He'd call me to come up, and his whole thing was, "Robbie, when I retire, you and I are going to install all the art for these rich people, and make some money." He would call me, like on a Thursday -- after his wife died, when he lived on Long Island there (on the Gold Coast, they called it) -- I used to go out and do his house in Southampton. I would spend, say, Friday, Saturday and Sunday out there, just he and I, changing the whole collection. The next week he'd have some friends over, and he'd call me again, "You know, we have to change it," because some lady would be coming for dinner, and she didn't like this or that, and I'd change it all over again. I did it the week before he died. I went out and changed the whole house around. A week later, I was out taking the house down -- apart -- because it was his eighty-first birthday. I'd known him for like twenty, twenty-five years, that we'd had a personal relationship. His house on Fifth Avenue -- I was there about every other day. He was always changing something there. The major trustees in those days, I got to know them all.

SZ: Mrs. Rockefeller?

GR: Oh, yes. And David Rockefeller, I did his house, the one on 61st Street, up until recently. Then he started doing more up in Tarrytown. I did that also. But we don't borrow as much from him as we used to. And I would do the office at Rockefeller Center, that collection. The son doesn't change as much as his father did. They used to lend, and switch and lend, and there was always something to do. It's not as much as it was in those early days. Because in the early days they were buying new pieces and making acquisitions, and they were loaning, but they don't do it as much now. Once the collection got established, they stopped doing it as much. But you name a trustee, from Aggie Gund -- I do all her collection. We've known each other for twenty-five, thirty years, ever since she's been on the board at the Museum. Now she's gone.

SZ: Marron? Don Marron?

GR: His wife and I used to work together, when she was at the Museum, before they got married. I didn't do much for him. I did a few things. But he had his own curator, you see. Ronald Lauder, I did his. But, again, his collection got so large that he got his own, in-house curator, and his own installer. So I don't do much of that anymore.

Who else can I think of that you would know. Mrs. [Beth] Straus. I used to go do the country house, do a few things. These are the original trustees. Who else can I think of? You name them, and I'll reflect on them.

SZ: What about Mrs. Cobb?

GR: Yes. By all means, I did work for her, too.

SZ: These are just some of the long-time --

GR: Yes. The originals. Mrs. "Dundee." She lived on Madison Avenue and -- I'll think of the name in a moment -- but she was one of the bigger benefactors at the time.

SZ: Mrs. Louise Smith?

GR: Mrs. Smith, yes, she and I were, for twenty years -- I've decorated her house. Do you know Green?

SZ: Oh, yes. Wilder.

GR: Wilder Green. Bill Lieberman and myself, we sat one night -- because it was one bedroom, so we devised cases in the wall so you could slide the paintings out, like we have at the Museum. Her entire collection, for the next fifteen years, no one could touch it but me. And every time Bill Rubin would want to borrow from her, I would have to go up and get it, bring it back, exchange it. She was quite a lady. Oh, she was a lady. A lady. [Laughs]

SZ: How would you do that? Would you put these things in cabs? Did you get a truck?

GR: Most of her things were small. But then the bigger things, the Museum would send a truck, to bring them back.

SZ: But if you had a small thing, you would just --

GR: I would get a cab and get it, yes. Small Matisses, like she had in her bedroom -- little, small Matisses -- I could take a cab and do that. But then what happened, the insurance got so heavy they stopped doing that. You'd have to get a truck, it would have to be bonded and all that nonsense. That happened in the late '90s. There was no more hand carrying. Because we used to just jump in a cab, like you said, and run up to the Rockefellers house. But they stopped that. Yes.

SZ: Any stories about the big Picasso retrospective? Well, Bill had two big shows. One was that late Cézanne show in '77, and then there was the big Picasso retrospective. Can you remember anything special about that?

GR: Well, I remember Kirk Varnedoe came on for the second one.

SZ: He was a little later than that. He was with the big Matisse show. I'll tell you. He did Vienna --

GR: But when Bill started grooming him for the job --

SZ: Oh, he did the "Primitivism" show. That's the one you mean.

GR: Right. But on the whole, as far as the Picasso is concerned, I was there. I met Picasso when he came to see Bill. People, if you're not inside, think it's a very big deal, but it's just a normal day.

SZ: They think it's all very glamorous.

GR: It's just a normal day. It's like getting up in the morning. You know, you've got to put your shoes and pants on and get out of here, and that's the way it is at the Museum. You know what you have to do. We had to wait until a curator came, or a registrar, before we could open a box. We'd wait until Bill came and looked at it. There was nothing exciting about it. People ask you, "How did you feel -- ?" It really didn't mean anything. It was just all part of a day's work. I enjoyed doing it. I knew the value of what we were doing, the importance of the piece of work for the day. It was part of the job, and I had no problem with it. It was nothing exciting. I'd sit here and tell the wife in the evening -- when we lived in the other house -- "You know, I've got to do the Picasso in the morning." She'd say, "Well, you know your job. Just do it." That's all there was to it.

SZ: I forgot to ask you about Mr. Oldenburg.

GR: Oh, Dick and I go back. We're still the closest of friends. Yes. I remember when he was director of Publications. He was twenty-seven at that time. So we go way back. And Ethel Schein. No, he was a great fellow.

SZ: So why did your job change in '84? Did you want that change?

GR: No. What happened was, in '84, they came to me and said, "Look, Robbie, we have no one to teach the new people. We have to get a larger crew, to accommodate the expansion of the Museum. We would like for you to leave Operations and go into the Registrar's department. You'll be separate, now, from Operations. You'll be under the Registrar."

SZ: But basically doing the same thing?

GR: There were two things. I wasn't doing the maintenance now. I wasn't fixing the locks, no windows --

SZ: That remained in Operations.

GR: They stayed with Operations. My job now was to work with the art, and that's why I went over. I taught everyone -- I used to have classes, teaching everyone the tools, how to handle the works, how to put the "D" rings on, the procedures for hanging, etc. I used to teach a class once a week. Because everyone who came there -- they were all artists, they'd never worked around art before, and there was a procedure for handling. That's how I went over. I enjoyed every bit of it. It was good.

SZ: You liked the teaching?

GR: I liked sharing my experience, because all the museums within New York City have copied our style of work. Because no one was doing it before.

SZ: Which was what? Could you describe it? What you mean by that?

GR: Well, there's always that home remedy for hanging, and there's the Museum procedure for hanging. You know -- the old finger, you put the nail there, and how the picture hangs with the wire -- it's always leaning forward. So my thing was, put "D" rings on the back of the picture, so when you move the picture it stays that way, it doesn't lean forward. You have to measure down a certain [distance] from the top of the picture, according to the height of the picture -- it's a quarter or three-quarters -- in order for it to hang, or balance, evenly. When you look down the corridor, you never see behind the picture.

SZ: Yes, I see that.

GR: So this is the formula I set up throughout the Museum. We set up specific heights. Photography is fifty-five or fifty-six; Museum height standard is fifty-seven, centered, because it's a gallery space. Once you learned all this, that was the formula.

SZ: And that was something other museums picked up?

GR: Yes, indeed. Now John Szarkowski -- his theory was you were supposed to look "into" a photograph, not "at" it. That's why his height was at fifty-five -- always so you

could look down at a photograph. But a picture, it was two inches higher. That's the formula we established.

So if you come into a gallery, you see something -- after doing it for so many years -- and you say, "Well, gee, that's strange. That's much higher." Well, the curator wanted it at sixty. You could always tell the difference, because the line in the Museum is not the same. It's up and down, up and down.

SZ: And what about the change in the Museum after the expansion? From your point of view.

GR: Well, in the beginning, there was Assistant to the Curator, or Assistant to the Department Head, and that was the extent of it. There were only fifty-five people. Then the departments ballooned out, so you had to have Assistant to the Assistant and Assistant Curator, you had ten people doing the same job, and that was a change. There was no chain of command; no one knew what the next person was doing. Before, it was all coming from one thing, and everyone knew what was going on during the course of the day. I didn't have to call upstairs and find out, did so and so do so and so? Because if that person was out the day we made a correction on, say, a report that was coming in, she failed to give it to you. So when you came to me, you were reading her notes, but you weren't familiar with what was going on. That was the problem we had, because the Museum has grown so large.

Again, I think it's a matter of persons at the Museum now -- everyone wants to get ahead of the next person ("I can do it better than you"). Before, there was no room for that. There was a ceiling, that was as far as you could go. You had to wait for someone to die before you could move into that spot. But today, if that person leaves, that means you move up, and that's what everyone's trying to do, I find. Like when I first came into Security, they only had the Security Supervisor, and he had an assistant. Now you have an assistant to the assistant to the assistant. Same thing with the Registrar. You only had Eloise Ricciardelli, she had an assistant, and that was it. But now, you have one in charge of loans, you've got one in charge of returns, and it goes on and on and on. And there's quite a bit of paperwork. I don't

think it's run as efficiently as it was in the old days. That's my contention. I might be wrong. But there's a lot of confusion.

SZ: You talked about the politics of the place.

GR: Yes.

SZ: What do you feel about that?

GR: I'll leave that alone. I'll leave politics alone.

SZ: I forgot to ask you about the strikes, what position you took.

GR: Well, I had feelings for the staff, but our union -- we were forbidden to react to their strike-- we had to go to work. I always believed that the administration staff was underpaid for the work they do, and they still are. But, again, we have a staff of 750 people there now, and everyone can't make $40-50,000 a year. I guess that's why the turnover is so rapid. People come into the Museum now just to get it on their resumé that they worked at the Museum, and they can go on and get a better job. If they stay there six months, they have carte blanche and can leave. But there's only been four museum staff strikes since I've been there. Maybe three. There may be only three. I'm trying to think if it was three or four.

SZ: I think there was one threatened --

GR: -- that never materialized. Yes. Because I remember when Pierre Apraxine was there. Remember him?

SZ: I know the name.

GR: Well, he made a slanderous remark to one of the trustees, while they were on strike, out there. He worked at the Art Advisory Service then, in those days. I recall that.

SZ: Then he was out?

GR: Yes.

SZ: Well, there was that famous incident with Mrs. Rockefeller?

GR: That was it. Derogatory remarks being made [chuckles]. You just don't say certain things to certain people.

SZ: Do you have any favorite shows?

GR: They were all good shows.

SZ: You're a politician.

GR: They were all good shows. They were for the benefit of the Museum and our expansion. There were things I knew people would like -- which is like going to a movie. But presenting it was the most important thing for me; to get it up and see what could be accomplished. Like I said, I miss not being at the Museum, but I knew my time had come. It was just time to go.

SZ: When did you retire?

GR: Three months ago.

SZ: Just three months ago!

GR: Yes. February 28th.

SZ: I'm trying to figure out your age. He's tapping his foot. You're "of that age."

GR: You mean to retire?

SZ: Yes.

GR: Yes. I'll be sixty-nine.

SZ: That's amazing. You look like a young man, Robbie.

GR: Well, I try hard. And that's why I didn't want to get -- there was too much turmoil, and I sensed it. You know, it's like having an old car, and once it begins to give you trouble -- you hear the pinging -- it's time to have some security in your life, or some serenity, it's time to move on. I had done my thing. I had traveled the route I wanted to go. I thought I had accomplished what I wanted to, and I got to the point where I was being fought on everything I wanted to do; all the things I thought had been the procedure previously were countermanded. I wasn't getting the respect I'd always had. So it was just time to go.

SZ: Well, the thought of having to travel out to Long Island City probably wasn't that appealing, also.

GR: If I'd come this far -- it was a new route. It didn't matter.

SZ: You would have done it.

GR: No problem at all.

SZ: What's it like to be unemployed, after how many years?

GR: [Chuckles] I've been out three months now, and I've been busier than I was when I was working. I used to do all my free-lance work at night. Now that people know I'm free during the day -- See, I can go out now, stay out for two hours, and accomplish what would take me three or four hours in the evenings. Because if you call me and say, "I have something for you to do, Mr. Robinson," I can ask, "What time would you like it done? When would you like it done." Fine. So I've been working mostly three days a week, two hours a day. I just came back from an interview with Barnard

College. They want me to do the faculty room, which I have a date for. "When do you want this done?" And they said, "Well, you have time to do this, because we don't have our next annual meeting until September. This is the down time, because of graduation." "Fine. How's the week of July 8th?" Fine.

SZ: So you just set it up and --

GR: -- it's done.

SZ: So you really have work. It's not like you're just --

GR: No. I'm not idle. I couldn't be idle. There's always something to do. I have many clients that I've had over the years. I just finished doing the Museum of TV and Radio. I did three shows for them last week.

SZ: I have a friend who's the second in command there.

GR: What's her name?

SZ: Michelle Stoneburn. She's right under him.

GR: I did his home. Yes, I have clients. So I'm very busy. He told me, "If you ever need a recommendation, I'll recommend you." I said, "Thanks." No, I set up the museum under Paley. Paley gave me the job.

SZ: At that museum [Museum of Television and Radio].

GR: At that museum. He said, "As long as I'm alive, you have a job." I think that's why I continue with the job, because I do five shows a year for them.

SZ: So they don't have anybody on staff, they just use you as a contractor.

GR: Right.

SZ: That's great. Well, what other interesting things?

GR: I could tell you stories for days, I guess.

SZ: I just mean in terms of what you're doing now.

GR: Oh, now? Paul Weiss is one of my clients. I've had them for twenty years. I've got twelve floors there, where I take care of all their collections. I set up all of Goldman, Sachs; I set up American Express; I set up Pitney Bowes. So, periodically, I get a call to come back and do something. I'm not idle. I'm not totally idle. I like the down time I have, and I can almost command the hours I want to work, or when I want to do it. It makes it work out real well. I just finished doing Aggie's house in the country. I do her office, I do the townhouse. When you have four or five good clients, you're busy enough. They're still lending works. They're taking things out of storage that I have to restore. She was having a party for Kirk the other night, so she called me up, I went by the house and --

SZ: Kirk Varnedoe.

GR: Varnedoe. She gave a big dinner for him.

SZ: What? Retirement?

GR: Yes. Well, she's good that way. She always helps the people who help her. And I hear that Rob Storr is leaving.

SZ: I didn't know that. Well, he's not exactly old.

GR: No. I don't think he fits the motif. But, again, politics.

SZ: I got it.

GR: But on the whole, it's been an exciting career. As I said before, when you know your job -- or when people allow you to do your job -- it doesn't become a headache. Because our work was after all the decisions were made. We'd just implement those decisions, and it was done. It was finished.

SZ: Did you accomplish what you hoped to, when you took that job, in 1959?

GR: Yes, I did. Well, I had wanted to become the director for designing, but, again, politics played a part there, so I never got that job. But I was happy doing what I did. No problem at all. I was happy.

SZ: You made a life and a career for yourself. A very distinguished one.

GR: Yes, I did. When Chapman (he was an ex-FBI agent) came in, he groomed me to become the director for design department. Then with the change in the directors of the Museum, curators kept going and coming -- then it became a political situation. I was quite happy, because I know that had I taken those jobs, I wouldn't have been at the Museum.

SZ: Because -- ?

GR: I wouldn't have fit into the political scene. So I'm glad I stayed on the middle ground, and everything worked out fine. It worked out fine.

SZ: So, listen. I'm going to turn this off. Unless there's something else you want to say.

GR: No, I'm fine.

SZ: Are you talked out?

GR: I'm fine. I've gone as far as you'd like me to go. If that's what you need, I'm finished. You can ask another question, and I'll try to find an answer for you.

SZ: It's just that -- if there are any other stories.

GR: No, there's no stories I have. Again, what we've undertaken so far is the groundwork of getting to the point we are at the Museum. I would have liked to be there for the new opening, to see how that's going to pan out. But, again, there'll be a new group, doing new things, and it'll probably be fine. It'll probably be fine. I hope to go back and see -- In fact, yesterday we drove by, to see how much they had accomplished in the last three months, and they're doing great. Have you seen the exterior?

SZ: Yes.

GR: They're really doing great. They're doing great. So we're coming back from New Orleans (we leave the end of this week), and they have the MoMA opening in Queens, so we're going to go out there on the first, to see how they come out with that.

SZ: It'll be interesting to see that.

GR: Yes. Well, when you've been a part of it, and you see what everyone else is doing, you say, "Hmmn. It's not bad at all. Not bad at all. Not bad at all." But they're doing it a different way. There's a whole new crew of people there, doing it. I'm sure it'll turn out well, though. It'll turn out well.

END INTERVIEW