THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH: **MRS. BERTRAM (LOUISE REINHARDT) SMITH (LS)**

INTERVIEWER: **SHARON ZANE (SZ)**

LOCATION: **NEW YORK, NEW YORK**

DATE: **JANUARY 13, 1992**

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE 1

LS: This is what I started to say, that my pictures are known to museum people and scholars, professors. They're reproduced in books; for instance, Woman Dressing Her Hair--in practically every first-rate book written about [Pablo] Picasso it's reproduced. I have books all 'round; they keep coming in. It's the most-reproduced of any of his pictures, I think. Riva Castleman, in the show she had of the forties, had it outside.

SZ: Art of the Forties.

LS: Yes. I think this is interesting: she showed it as a painting promised to the Museum. Well, it isn't a painting promised to the Museum. It's going to the Museum because I couldn't bear for the Museum not to have it, and I know that Bill Rubin and Jim Soby, Bob Rosenblum, everyone who's seen it thinks it's the most important [of Picasso's paintings]. So I want the Museum to have it, and they will. The point of telling you this is that every one of my paintings, large or small--and I don't have very many small ones--these are very, very big paintings for the time they were painted. Now they are making paintings as big as that wall. That would be fine if they had any content, but in my opinion they don't have any content, and I think in every period of art there are always some great painters, and there are even some in this period of art. The painters of day before yesterday, tomorrow and today, some of the painters don't know how to put paint on canvas. It's the message, and they don't get the message across well because... to get a message across well, if it's in print, it has

to be written well; to get a message across well if it's a painting, it has to be painted well. In any event, the reason I said that I'm known at the Museum and listed on the board as Mrs. Bertram Smith, but you're perfectly right to be confused by it, because when they named the gallery, they named it Louise Reinhardt Smith, because Bill Rubin and Dick Oldenburg and I were in Venice for the opening of the museum that the Agnellis gave to the city. The Absinthe Glass [Glass of Absinthe] was in that show, so I was invited to the opening, and I went because Dick Oldenburg and Lisa [Oldenburg] and Bill Rubin were going to be there and I was interested in seeing the show. Bill kept calling me up, three or four times: "Don't forget, the only free night we have when we're in Venice is Thursday, and you're going to have dinner with us." Then Dick called me and said the same thing. I said, "For goodness sake, have I ever forgotten a date with either of you?" "No, but this is something special." I said, "What?" "It's a surprise." I said, "Stop playing games. It's okay, I'm going to have dinner with you because I want to be with you." Then, when we had dinner, I didn't say a word. I didn't have any idea what it was, but I have had a couple of surprise parties given for me in my lifetime. Have you ever had them?

SZ: One.

LS: Isn't it disgusting?

SZ: Yes, it's terrible. [LAUGHTER]

LS: See, we agree. I knew we would. Anyway, anytime anybody says they have anything like that, I've been happily surprised by a lot of things, but with all this mystery, I knew I wouldn't like it. To this day, I'm not so crazy about the idea, because there are very few rooms left--there are none left now in our present quarters--to name after anyone else, and I told them that. Anyway, we went all through dinner, I didn't say a word, they didn't say a word. We had coffee. We were sitting on the terrace of the Gritti

[Palace Hotel], which is one of the great places to dine as far as atmosphere, ambiance, food and everything is concerned. We're finally through coffee, I still didn't say anything, and I really wasn't curious particularly; I just didn't like the whole bit about it. Then they said they wanted to name a room after me. I said, "But Dick, the Museum always needs money, it always needs paintings given. There are plenty of people that might--would--be much more interested in the Museum, generous with money and pictures, than I." No, they both wanted me. I don't think it had much to do with me. I mean, it had a lot to do with me, because we're fond of one another, but it had to do with the fact that they're all key pictures that are important, and they wanted to show their appreciation of the Museum getting them. So then, after much discussion, which I don't have to waste your time going into, they said, "How would you like it mentioned?"

SZ: You mean how you would like the gallery named.

LS: Yes. So I said the Collection of Mrs. Bertram Smith. Uh-uh, they couldn't do that, because when Abby Rockefeller and Lizzie Bliss and all the people that started it, it was always first names, and [that continues] up to now, with Sidney Janis and Philip Johnson--it's always first names. So I thought fast, which is unusual for me. I don't usually think. If I think, I think fast, but I don't do much thinking. My pen name is Louise Reinhardt Smith. Reinhardt is my maiden name, so it's definitely my real name, and if it was just Louise Smith, it wouldn't mean anything, but as Louise Reinhardt Smith I've published dozens of short stories. I don't think anybody would remember it; some people might. Anyway, they know I'm a writer and they know my pen name is Louise Reinhardt Smith. Anybody coming to the Museum would say, "Who is Louise Reinhardt Smith?" I'm talking now about collectors from Europe and collectors of museums to which I've lent paintings. That's why I said, "I don't care how you do it. You can say Louise Reinhardt Smith or you can say Mrs. Bertram Smith," because that's still the way they're listed in all the catalogues.

SZ: As the collection of Mrs. Bertram Smith.

LS: Yes. It's just like Eliza [Elizabeth Bliss Parkinson Cobb] is listed as Mrs. Cobb. But the founders of the Museum...I wasn't a founder by any manner or means, but I was an early member. Whenever I bought a painting, which wasn't very often because I haven't bought very many, Alfred Barr and James Thrall Soby would always come up together to see what I'd bought, and they nearly swooned over the Woman Dressing Her Hair. Sally and Victor Ganz had a wonderful collection of Picassos. Sally still has; you know, he [Victor] died. If they'd wanted to buy it, they could have bought it, but it's a very tough picture. So I said to Jim Soby, "This will interest you." They were so excited about the painting itself. We'd had it in a show at the Museum, but it hadn't been for sale. I'm sure someone will tell you this story. There was a dealer... can't think his name [Samuel Kootz], but anybody at the Museum will tell you his name. I've forgotten his name; I knew him very well, but I know too many people. He gave an American car--I think it was a Buick--to Picasso. This was when you couldn't get anything in France; I think it was during the war. Picasso was so thrilled with it that he made this dealer his agent in New York. The dealer has since died, but we all knew him very well, and anybody except me would remember his name--anybody at the Museum, including Wilder [Green] or Dick, can tell you. The chauffeur or Picasso smashed up the car shortly afterwards. Meanwhile, he'd given paintings [to the dealer in New York]; Sally and Victor Ganz bought several. One they sold. All of them were in the Picasso show. Paloma was in the show, too. Paloma is a very tender, touching picture, and that's why I try, whenever I can, to hang one very tough painting, because I like tough paintings, but next to a tender one. It doesn't compare with the Woman Dressing Her Hair. I said to Jim Soby, "All of my friends are going to hate it." He said, "Probably, but you just tell them that ugly can be beautiful, the merely pretty, never." I've never forgotten that. He was Alfred Barr's closest friend, and when Alfred couldn't preside at the acquisition committee meeting, he did. Once or twice, when

Jim Soby was unable to preside, Alfred asked me to. This was about thirty-five, forty years ago. In those days, we had an acquisition committee for the Museum--one committee for everything: painting and sculpture, drawings, architecture and design, photographs, everything. The meetings would start very early and sometimes last until seven at night. Now I'm on the acquisition committee for painting and sculpture, I'm on the acquisition committee for drawings. I resigned from the print committee because Bill Lieberman thought that one person shouldn't be on more than two acquisition committees, and I think he was right. Anyway, I resigned, and I know much more about drawings than I do about prints. I have drawings that the Museum will be very happy to have and shows frequently--for instance, a Seurat which was in the big Seurat show [at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1991]. Did you get a chance to see it?

SZ: Yes.

LS: Wasn't it wonderful?

SZ: Yes, it was.

LS: They phoned me today. They're sending [the drawing] back tomorrow or the next day. A beautiful show; I went six, seven times. I happen to like his black-and-white drawings more than any of the paintings. I learned something from Alfred Barr: if you're interested in a painting, have it sent home. If you're a serious collector, they'll send it home, then nobody else can come in and buy it. I've done it with several pictures--and I've kept them, incidentally. I learned that from Alfred. I learned a great deal from René d'Harnoncourt. René really taught one how to look, how to see. He had that magic. Also, while he was director of the Museum--he was a great friend of Nelson Rockefeller and was very much interested in primitive art--and they started the collection which is now at the Metropolitan. Nelson gave it to the Met, because

after Michael Rockefeller...they don't know yet how he died, whether he was killed by natives who resented his accumulating some of his treasures, which had religious significance, whether he was killed by alligators or whether he jumped off the boat and swam ashore. Nobody knows. Nelson and the twin sister of Michael went to try and find out. I don't think they found out anything significant, but if they did, they've never divulged it. Anyway, Nelson then gave the whole thing to the Metropolitan. It's now called the Michael Rockefeller Wing, as you know. Do you know Douglas Newton? He was the director of the Michael Rockefeller wing from the time it was given to the Metropolitan. Before it went to the Metropolitan, it was called the Museum of Primitive Art. Now you don't say primitive, you say tribal art, simply because it's not really primitive; it's very sophisticated, not civilized. In any event, Jim Soby's written some wonderful books, and you can learn an awful lot about him from reading his books. Alfred's books are wonderful. Toward the end of his life, he couldn't complete the book he was writing; I guess he had Alzheimer's. It doesn't come on all at once, it comes on gradually.

SZ: You could see it, or you felt something?

LS: You could feel it. It's age-related. With anybody, they remember things of their youth much better. They remember things visually but they may not remember names. Alfred could remember every picture, but he wouldn't be able to remember the name of the person he was talking to. I was in Paris when Marga and Alfred Barr were there for the opening of the big [Henri] Matisse show at the Grand Palais, the greatest Matisse show that's ever been held. The one that John Elderfield is putting on is going to be even greater. I'm sure it will, because they have all the pictures from the U.S.S.R. It's going to be wonderful, fantastic, actually. I didn't ask their advice until the picture was here. When they came up, I asked after I had found it, by good luck.

SZ: Which picture are you talking about now?

LS: All of them, or more-or-less all of them. Alfred helped me a great deal. For instance, anything that I sent up I asked Alfred--and Jim, because Jim was usually with him when he came.... I visited Jim at his place in the country and he had a delightful wife, and he was an absolutely wonderful man and a very great writer. So was Alfred. They were very, very great friends, and it is a great privilege to have known both of them. I would ask them before I actually bought the picture or said I would take it if they wanted it for the Museum. Actually, as far as I remember, anything I asked them to look at they did want for the Museum. It helped me to that extent; I didn't send anything that wasn't quite top-drawer to ask them to look at because I didn't think it would be something that the Museum would want. As a result, which I'm glad about, for my sake and for the Museum--I don't have anything that the Museum doesn't want. I've given two paintings to the Metropolitan: one is a [Georges] Braque....

SZ: And this is...?

LS: Picasso.... We're looking at a Picasso that was done at the height of the Cubist moment, because he always went back to these classic things. It's called Young Man of Barcelona. Nobody knows who it is. It's painted on wood, unsized wood, that's why I have to have glass over it.

SZ: You were talking about the Braque.

LS: I had the Braque sent home. I was going out West skiing, so I got it from Knoedler in the days when Knoedler was Knoedler. I'm not being critical of the present Knoedler, but it's not the same Knoedler. Before I left, I told them--and they were very good friends of mine--that I was going away for a couple of weeks skiing and I'd like to wait and make up my mind when I get home, that I'd like to have it reserved for me. They said, "If you don't mind, send it back to us so we can show it, and if anybody wants it,

we can say it's reserved." David and Peggy Rockefeller came in, and they wanted it, but when I got back, I called them right away and said I wanted it. I always was a little embarrassed and also a little amused that I got a picture that David wanted, when all he had to do was just say he wanted it and write out a check, and all I had to do was somehow collect the money and pay for it. One very funny story about me, I think, and it's absolutely not true that it happened, but Gene Thaw told several people, friends of mine, that "the thing about Louise Smith is that she doesn't have any money at all"--and compared to the big collectors, I certainly didn't; I'm very happy with where I live, but I live very simply, and that's the way I want to live--"but she's managed to get a great collection." He told everybody I didn't have any money at all but somehow managed to get a great collection, and you can quote him if you want. I will tell you this, I knew that when they would want me to make a speech. I had been secretary of the International Council very early on. Blanchette Rockefeller started it with René and Eliza Bliss [Parkinson Cobb], who is Lizzie Bliss's niece. There were very few people. Philip Johnson was on it.... First, I was secretary. René and Sarah d'Harnoncourt had a party, and I was introduced as secretary--these were all members of the Council--and they said, "Mrs. Parkinson is very lucky to have such a good secretary." They thought I was her private secretary. I was secretary when she was president of the International Council, then Beth Straus became president and she asked me to stay on as secretary, and then I wanted to resign because I agreed with what Bill Lieberman said, that one person shouldn't....

SZ: ...do all those things.

LS: It wasn't that the person couldn't do it, but that there were other people who wanted the opportunity of doing it. So I wanted to resign, and by that time, Joanne Stern and Lily [Auchincloss] were secretary and treasurer, and they asked me if I'd be chairman of the membership committee. They knew all of the...there's some popular expression for the privileged people that's very amusing, and I can't think what it is.

You know, the smart set. There's a contemporary name for it. Anyway, Lily, certainly, knew them, but I knew a lot of people they didn't know, and I suggested His Serene Royal Highness Prince Franz von Bayern because I knew him. I'll tell you a funny story about Prince Franz. I wrote him a letter, a formal letter, and I wrote a personal note with it and asked if he'd be interested in joining the Council. He answered with a cable that he would. He was a tremendous asset for years. He's a real charmer and a wonderful human being, and he became chairman of the Council for many years; he retired recently. This had nothing to do with the smart set, it had to do with wonderful people. Then I asked Margaret McDermott from Dallas, and she's been a great person on the Council because she's been very, very generous, both with her time, with entertaining, and giving very generous contributions. So when Lily and Joanne asked me if I'd be chairman of the committee, I said yes, for a year. At the end of year, I wanted to resign; they wouldn't let me. At the end of the next year, I wanted to resign, and they wouldn't let me resign until they resigned. They both did a wonderful job and we have wonderful people now. Jeanne Thayer is president now. Mrs. Ronald [Jo Carole] Lauder will be the next president; it isn't official, but we all know it. I said there was a funny story I wanted to tell you about something....

SZ: You said you were going to tell me a funny story about Prince Franz.

LS: Oh, yes. He couldn't speak any English. When I first met him, he could speak a few words, but.... He called up all the nobility--not the people who were knighted by the Queen, but the ones that come from noble families. He was a cousin of René's or in some way related, and he telephoned the Museum and asked to speak to René. René was Count René d'Harnoncourt but he dropped his title; he felt it would be better for him and for the Museum, and he didn't use it. I've met all of his family; we were very great friends, as I told you last time. René had a secretary, a wonderful, wonderful person, who tried to protect him from too many people wanting to meet him, wanting to talk to him. When Prince Franz called and wanted to speak to Mr.

d'Harnoncourt, she said, "Who wants to speak to Mr. d'Harnoncourt?" He said, "Franz from Bavaria," instead of saying "Franz of Bavaria." That's the story. I'll tell you stories about him, which might be more useful than stories about me. I had invited Bill Lieberman and Franz to go to the Guggenheim to see a ballet that was [being performed] in the costumes of the artist and I'd gotten tickets for them. A friend of mine, a ski pal of mine, Ruth Rogers, who is Viennese but is married to an American, had invited Bill to the party and she'd invited me, so I called her up and asked if she'd mind if I brought a friend, and I told her that--and this isn't a joke, it's his real title--His Serene Royal Highness Prince Franz von Bayern--so of course she said she'd be glad to have him. They have an apartment in the Murray Hill district and it's very pleasant. She's now married to somebody else, but it's very gemeutlicht. So I asked Franz if he'd like to go to a gemeutlicht party and he said he'd be delighted to. So he went, and indeed it was--wonderful food. Bill Lieberman and Franz, who always stays at this club that's on Fifth Avenue whenever he's here, took me home and I said, "Well, how did you like the gemeutlicht party?" He said, "Well, I enjoyed it. It was very interesting, but it was very embarrassing." I said, "Franz, what was embarrassing about it?" He said, "Everybody said to me, What do you do?" All Americans do. You may not say it in those words, but I always ask people. People like to be asked. He does so much, but it isn't something he can talk about, that's why he said it was embarrassing. That was the story I wanted to tell you about that. To go back to naming this gallery, they wanted to give a dinner for me, and I said, "No. Why should the Museum spend all that money for a dinner when they always need money." Then they wanted to give a cocktail party, and I said that's alright. So Dick and Bill and Lisa and Phyllis Hattis took me out for dinner. It was a quiet dinner in a noisy place, because we're all very, very good friends. I know why I started about the Council. When I was secretary of the International Council and when I was chairman of the membership committee, I always had to make a report at the meeting, and I always made people laugh with what I said, so they thought I was a great speaker. After I resigned as secretary, they'd come up and say, "Oh, we miss your talks." They didn't

say they missed me. I knew why they'd asked me to give a brief talk [at the dedication of the gallery] and I thought I'd think of what I wanted to say, but I was so busy that day, with all kinds of darling people and good friends sending flowers--it was one of the periods I had "bad housekeeperitis," and I had to receive and place all the flowers myself, so I didn't have any time to do any thinking whatsoever. I'll tell you after this, if you remind me, about two jobs that I did that are significant, instead of my wandering on with personalities. So I didn't have any idea what I was going to say, so I just talked off the top of my head. I told them about Jim and Alfred coming up with me and everything else. Then I told them that I'd come in once from skiing in Utah, for lunch in the middle of the day--I like to ski in a storm, because the snow is so much better; a lot of people won't go out in a blizzard, but I always did--and I came in covered in snow from head to foot, and the phone was ringing. It was Alfred calling me from New York, and he said, "Louise, I want to ask a great favor of you. Instead of giving us The Absinthe Glass by Picasso, would you be willing to give us The Pregnant Woman?" I said no. The reason that they said that, we had an angel then, a Mrs. [Simon] Guggenheim, and she would pay for it. She was very generous, but Alfred had wanted The Pregnant Woman and he had bought it--he'd agreed to take it--and she said she wouldn't pay for it. Do you want me to show it to you, or did you see it when you were here before?

SZ: I saw it.

LS: In any event, I said, "I won't do that, but I'll give them both to you." I could hear him sigh. He said, "Are you sure?" I said, "Alfred, I wouldn't say it if I wasn't." Those were the days when neither The Absinthe Glass or The Pregnant Woman...things were expensive, but I thought everything I bought was at the top of the market, and I couldn't have been more wrong. Even today, when prices make a little bit more sense, any painting that's really an "important" painting, what we would call in a vulgar fashion, a master work, won't fetch what it might have year before last, but it

will fetch a very, very high price today, as long as it hasn't been in a previous auction and rejected--that tarnishes it. So I told them that Alfred had called me and that I would give them both. He said, "Are you sure?," and I said, "Alfred, don't waste your time in a long-distance call asking me if I'm sure. I wouldn't have said so if I wasn't sure." He said, "Well, may I call you tomorrow?" I said, "Please don't, Alfred. I want to get up early and ski, the snow is wonderful." He said, "Will you send me a telegram?" So I called up, and I wanted to send it in French, but I couldn't, because the Kansas City operator couldn't get it, so I gave up. So the telegram I sent is, "Seldom in the history of modern art has a glass of absinthe led directly to a pregnant woman." I told stories like that, and everybody roared with laughter. Dick and Eliza said, "If we'd known you were going to give such a good speech, we would have had it taped." They didn't have it taped, but that telegram is in the Archives.

SZ: It's a wonderful telegram.

LS: That room is going to be [Wassily] Kandinsky. We have The Four Seasons. I have another great Kandinsky in the hall. It's a small room, but there are not very many that are as large as that. So that will be in the room, and the one in the hall will be in the room. There will be as many Kandinskys as they can get in in that room; they may change the room, I don't know. But that's the room that will be called Louise Reinhardt Smith, which is my pen name, and my collection is known as that.

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END INTERVIEW