THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH: **JOANNE STERN (JS)**

INTERVIEWER: **SHARON ZANE (SZ)**

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SZ: Joanne,...tell me where and when you were born and a little bit about your own background if you would....

JS: I was born in Bayonne, New Jersey, but I basically grew up in New York. I went to Smith, as did you, then I worked for Look magazine for seven years. When I got married and left Look, I decided I would like to be a volunteer at The Museum of Modern Art, which had always been my favorite institution. I'd spent a lot of time there as a student of Smith, where I did a great deal of art history.

SZ: Was that your major?

JS: No, I was an English major, but I took as much art history as was physically and legally possible because we had an absolutely outstanding department, and still do. In any case, when I retired from Look, I did know René [d'Harnoncourt] and I asked him if I could get in as a volunteer, because my field of expertise was film. He managed to get me into the film department as a volunteer.

SZ: Let me just back up a little bit so that I understand some of this. I assume that growing up in New York, these were the kinds of things that you were interested in and that you pursued in one way or another. Did you go to The Museum of Modern Art when you were young?

JS: Yes. Well, it didn't open until 1929, but I mean when it came to the new building; but it was certainly part of my college years. Before that I went to boarding school, so that I wasn't in New York that much; but it was part of the college experience.... It was the only museum in the world that had a film department, and since film was a big interest of mine and I had covered entertainment for Look, I just thought it would be a wonderful place to break in. I worked there as a volunteer for quite a while and then somehow I was invited to join the Junior Council, so I switched from being a volunteer.

SZ: When you asked René d'Harnoncourt to see where you could fit....

JS: I said the film department, and luckily there was some room for somebody to do some work.

SZ: What's kinds of things did you do there?

JS: I can't remember.

SZ: What about who was there at the time?

JS: Dick Griffith. And then after that I helped some other people doing research or running around work -- nothing important. I was married and then I had children, so it wasn't till I'd had three children that I came back as a person in the Junior Council. I worked in the Art Lending Service for a long, long time. That was a fascinating period...because people really came and borrowed and bought works of art which it's now extraordinary to think that they were able to have those. It was a very original and captivating idea, the Art Lending Service. It seems so routine now, but you have to cast yourself back to the '50s and realize that it filled a real need. For some reason, I think young people were afraid to go to galleries and ask for terms, and this was a situation where you had The Museum of Modern Art having culled

interesting works from the galleries around New York, of which there were probably 75, as opposed to 750 now. The price limit was a thousand dollars, everything was a thousand or under, and the lovely part was that they could rent something for two or three months and, if they didn't like it, bring it back, or if they did like it, they paid the rental fee, which was then applied to the purchase. It took the fear out of it for a lot of people. That was long before corporations were getting into...eventually, you know, we became a corporate advisory service. That's a very different thing.

SZ: But this really started out as....

JS: Individuals coming in. I bought several wonderful things that I treasure. I remember the first time that we exhibited and sold photographs. Arthur Bullowa...was a big photography person, and I remember somebody coming in and looking at a [Edward] Steichen, which I think was for sale for about a hundred dollars, and saying, "Why would I pay a hundred dollars for a photograph?" It was still a relatively amazing concept. Anyway, Mr. [Alfred] Barr and Dorothy Miller and Bill Lieberman particularly were the people who would judge the works that we on the Junior Council selected from the galleries.... There was a squad of people who went out and covered the gallery scene -- there was no downtown to speak of -- and brought the stuff in and there would be a viewing; I've forgotten whether it was once a month or how we did it. I remember those three people being the ones who looked over the stuff and said what we should keep. It was very exciting to see what they thought was interesting, and I think we all learned a lot.

SZ: I bet. That was a great way to do that. Then by "keeping" these things, you meant you would buy them?

JS: No, we wouldn't buy them. They would be on consignment from the galleries in our Art Lending space. If you remember the Museum, it was one of your perks that you could come and borrow and then buy a work of art. It was a very, very interesting place, that Art Lending Service. All kinds of people came through it. And you must

talk to Anne Jones.

SZ: I have already talked to Walter Bareiss.

JS: Yes, of course. He was extraordinarily involved, but Anne was there on a daily basis. You realize how exciting it was for young people on the Junior Council to have this contact with Alfred Barr and Dorothy Miller.

SZ: Being a young person on the Junior Council, tell me a little bit what that was like. How did he [Barr] appear?

JS: For any of us who had studied art history and were aware of his contribution, it was very exciting. Dorothy was doing exciting shows. It was a pretty big thrill, a great way to be involved in the Museum. The Junior Council did other things. It published a calendar, which meant that the people who worked on that became familiar with the collections because the calendar only contained works that were in the collection. We did Christmas cards the same way, from works in the collection. It meant that we got to know department heads, or whatever they were called then, and curators. I think it was the most wonderful way to engage young people into the life of an institution that I can imagine. They in turn did auxiliary things. They did programs for the public or for members. There's a history, you know about all of this. It was an extremely interesting concept and a wonderful idea, and it was copied eventually all over the country by other museums. The International Council is the same sort of story. It was something that was a brilliant idea on the part of the founders and has been copied since in various ways, but nothing can match that first thrust and what it meant in terms of international exchange. It's a very, very exciting concept. So much of what seems routine to you now was really very innovative. I guess what I'm trying to say is that the Museum was the kind of place where these sorts of things could happen. There was nothing stuffy about it, nothing stodgy about it. It was extremely democratic, open to all kinds of people. There was no sense of an entrenched hierarchy that would not allow new ideas or new people, even obviously given some

ups and downs. I think that's what characterized it as an institution. It made it different from a lot of other places.

SZ: Was your interest specifically modern art?

JS: Yes, and film. I was turned on to modern art by someone who had once worked at the Museum who taught at Smith called Jere Abbott. He may have been gone when you got there, but you have heard about him. He was an extraordinary teacher, and he talked about the collection all the time. This was in the '40s. Of course, Henry-Russell Hitchcock was at Smith and he of course had a big link to the Museum. Dorothy Miller went to Smith. Betsy Jones, who was Alfred's assistant, and became a curator, went to Smith. There was an enormous kind of link. All that I can contribute, because you can get details, is I feel the great beauty of the Museum is that exciting things could happen there.

SZ: For you it was also an exciting thing to be there?

JS: Yes, and the fact that it was open to every kind of new idea.

SZ: At the time you were involved with the Junior Council, if you can remember, what was the relationship, do you think, between the Junior Council and the rest of the Museum?

JS: I think that they were in the end...[INTERRUPTION]

SZ: I was asking you about what your perception was of the relationship between the Junior Council and the rest of the Museum.

JS: I think it was uneven. You had some curators who didn't quite understand why these people were nosing around their departments. There were others who immediately saw that this was a new sphere of influence, that these were young people who

would become important to the Museum, this was a constituency and also that they could be helpful, and helpful in ways where if funds were limited to a department, this was help. In general I think that most of the staff got the message and I think it was an extremely happy [relationship], and if it hadn't happened it would have had to be invented, that cliché, and also the fact that it was imitated. People were always coming to see us and asking, "How do you set up this kind of thing?" I look back on it with the most rosy of memories, and I remember all the wonderful people who were involved in the early days, very distinguished people who went on to do interesting things. That early roster is just amazing, and of course Beth [Straus] and Anne Jones are very good on this.

SZ: Who were you referring to when you say "went on to do interesting [things]"?

JS: I would need the list. My memory is that so many of our members were very distinguished or became so. They had a real feeling for the Museum and they felt that they were in on something important, and there was a pioneering aspect which of course cannot exist today because it's no longer that kind of crusade. But there was a crusading feeling.

SZ: One other thing before we go on. You said that you knew René d'Harnoncourt and that was how you [became involved with the Museum].

JS: I knew him because his wife (Sarah) and my mother-in-law had gone to college together -- I think Wellesley. They were friends from Chicago. So that's how I knew him.

SZ: Did you feel his presence at all during the time that you [were at the Museum]?

JS: Constantly. He was the most amazing presence. He was an enormous influence in terms of bringing people together. He was somebody who could make things work. He was very extroverted and easy with people. He certainly knew the value of the

Junior Council. A trustee who you'll get a lot on, I hope, and who seemed to me to have a great influence on all of us, was James Thrall Soby. I hope people talk about him a great deal.

SZ: You had contact with him?

JS: Yes, we did.

SZ: Beginning with the Junior Council?

JS: Yes. I don't know why, but I certainly knew him and he somehow was part of our scene. I can't tell you why.

SZ: What was he like?

JS: I think he was probably the last gentleman [LAUGHING], scholarly, kindly, not patronizing -- clichés come to my lips -- distinguished. Obviously, there's been a lot written about him. But you see, that sort of interaction with people like that was immensely valuable for us kids. I think those of us who were there have a love for the Museum and a feeling for it that I like to snobbishly think is ours.... Because we were small, we were treated with respect and we were made to feel part of it.

SZ: In my own mind I'm trying to figure out some approximate dates, because I think this must have been during the '60s.

JS: The '50s and then '60s.

SZ: Late '50s and '60s for the Junior Council and Art Lending. Two thing that come to mind about the '60s: up to a certain point, there was the expansion -- is there anything that you remember about that or you were involved in?

JS: No. I remember the fire. I went out to lunch. I was working in the Art Lending Service, or the Junior Council office, and went out to lunch in the neighborhood. When I came back, the street was all in commotion. I couldn't imagine what had happened. Then somebody said there was a fire. Well, can you imagine how we felt? Then I went to the building -- I had missed the actual outbreak -- and there was Nelson Rockefeller; by now I think he was wearing a fireman's hat. Now I may have made that up....

SZ: No, you didn't make that up [LAUGHING].

JS: My memory is that he had a fireman's hat on and was passing works of art out of the building; they were doing a hand-to-hand thing. That's all I remember. But of course the fire was just an enormous, amazing nightmare, all very well handled, of course. But can you imagine? No. I remember that Gertrud Mellon was, I believe, in her office at the time -- she had an office there -- and she probably has been quoted about the whole thing. I don't know, is that in Russell Lynes's book, about the fire?

SZ: Yes. I've talked to some people who have really described trying to get out of the building.

JS: That's where Gertrud was, she was in the building, so I remember all of that.

SZ: You were fortunate enough not to be.

JS: Absolutely. I don't know why.

SZ: It was lunchtime, as a matter of fact.

JS: Lots of times we ate lunch in, but that day...what was the year of the fire, Sharon?

SZ: It was '58, 1958. That was really, to some degree, an impetus for thinking about

expanding.

JS: Yes, of course. Obviously, that opened up the whole question. But I don't remember anything about the expansion. I just think we kept on doing our work. We probably all moved around to different and funny places.

SZ: Since you were there a lot, I was just going to ask whether you had a sense that Alfred was around and René was around and how that combination worked or didn't work.

JS: I had no sense of that. I just was aware of both of them. I had no idea of what was going on.

SZ: In any event, you did deal with Alfred Barr.

JS: And with René. They were very close to the Junior Council. They were. I knew nothing about the International Council until the very end of the '60s. I wasn't even aware of it.

SZ: Then René retired and died shortly thereafter.

JS: That summer, wasn't he run over?

SZ: In 1968.

JS: But by then he'd left his mark. He helped think up the Council and his influence was of course enormous. By then it had found its shape and direction, by '68 when he died. You'll get all that from Beth [Straus].

SZ: So you were involved with the Junior Council, and then my understanding is that you were elected a trustee in 1970.

JS: Having already been a part of the International Council. I think I joined that in '69, possibly?

SZ: And you joined that for what reasons?

JS: I think that I'd never thought about the International Council. I thought it was for grownups. I never thought about it. I was so totally caught up in the Junior Council and the Art Lending Service. I remember when Mrs. (Blanchette) Rockefeller spoke to me about it, I wasn't terribly interested because I didn't quite think it was anything I would be doing, but she spoke to Lily and me, I believe, and I think Lily and I and Robert Tobin all were asked to join at the same time. Our very first trip with the [International] Council, we all went together to London, and I think that was the first time the three of us traveled with the Council. It was during the trip to London, I believe, that there was a whole thing with Bates Lowry. I remember a lot of telegrams and carryings-on. That's pre-fax, isn't it? So a lot of telegrams.

SZ: So your first trip was to London. And how did that engage you?

JS: It was absolutely dazzling, and it brought home to me what a role this group played and could play, and the chance to see collectors from other places -- it was amazing. Nineteen-seventy was an amazing time for modern art in Europe because it's all before the explosion. It was so interesting to meet English collectors. The ones who are interested in modern art, I think, you could count on the fingers of one hand. We also visited Henry Moore. We did all the appropriate things. It was terribly exciting and you had a great feeling of what the Modern Museum meant to other museums who were interested in the twentieth century. We were the model. It always comes back to the institution.

SZ: Plus, at that time, what was really on the cutting edge was coming from the United States.

JS: No question.

SZ: So just tell me a little bit more about it, about that one or a typical International Council visit, the kinds of things you'd see....

JS: An International Council visit in its purest sense would include perhaps the opening or at least a viewing of an exhibition that we had sent to the particular country. So one would go to the museum where it was opening or being shown, and the interaction between whatever members we had, collectors from there, our collectors, trustees who traveled with the Council and their trustees, all of that was very interesting. Collectors in those days were thrilled to meet each other. There weren't as many of them. Then we would have all of these ancillary activities -- visits to artists, perhaps, but visits to other collectors, other museums. It was extremely interesting and underlying the fact that The Museum of Modern Art has an international aspect, which again makes it different from a lot of other places. My goodness, anybody who was anybody in Europe had been influenced by Alfred Barr. The Museum had great cachet when we visited. Most people were thrilled to meet anybody from The Museum of Modern Art.

SZ: So it was fun, too.

JS: It was great fun. And it was very interested to hear also what some of the countries in the way of exhibitions, what they hoped to see, what they had never seen that we had or that we could put together and then, of course, very interesting to us to see what they were doing. You have to remember, it wasn't all about collectors, but also about young people, students, who really depended on our exhibitions because they couldn't travel, and they depended on our exhibitions for so much. It meant a great deal to them.

SZ: That's a very interesting point.

JS: It is.

SZ: How would the decision be made where you would go each year?

JS: I believe that was always decided between the director of the International Program and his exhibition program, what he was doing, which, of course, was done in concert with the Museum's curatorial staff. Then he would decide with the International Council heads where would be an appropriate trip. Then we had members, you see, from all over the world. Let's say a member in Germany would say, "I think it would be wonderful if next year you came to Germany and maybe it will be at the time of an exhibition that you've sent or just time for you all to come to Germany." But the members play an enormous role in that. The Council has a program committee, which works with the head of the International Program, that's how all this evolves.

SZ: Part of the real origin, too, was this desire to...well, I'm thinking of Latin America.

JS: Right. That's the most interesting part, really, because Latin America really had had nothing. I think the role that the Council and the Program played in Latin America is just the best story.

SZ: That really came out of Nelson Rockefeller's interest and René's interest and knowledge of what was there.

JS: They both were passionate about Latin America. And then these wonderful members, these people who were pioneers in their countries and really felt that they wanted to bring modern art to their countries. They not only worked hard, they were very generous. They made it happen by their own personal generosity, lots of them. It's a wonderful story about people caring about something. It really is.

SZ: And you feel that that's continued to today?

JS: Yes, I do, but you've got to realize that the crusading aspect is different, so it's a different thing.

SZ: But then you really felt that.

JS: It will always be a crusade, it will always be hard to raise money for exhibitions, but the ideological crusade, I suppose, is over.

SZ: You think?

JS: I don't know. It's not as pressing. It's different. Of course I wasn't in on the beginning of the Latin American thing, but I was in on the beginning of Australia, and that was absolutely an amazing chapter also. They really had had nothing, and when Bill Lieberman did a show called Modern Masterpieces: Manet to Matisse [1975] there were several artists who had never been seen live in Australia in that show. I don't remember the figures, but there were outstanding figures about the number of people that visited it [more than 400,000] and how long they stood on line and all of that. You've got to realize that it was a real event for a whole country.

SZ: And you went?

JS: I didn't go, but the Council went. But we were very aware of what was happening; it was terribly exciting. I don't know what areas can be opened up the way Latin America and Australia were, but there's plenty to be done in Europe still. What else occurs to you?

SZ: About the International Council? I could ask you about personalities.

JS: Beth can tell you a lot about René in the early years -- he had an enormous

influence on shaping it -- and some of the early members who were awfully close to the beginning of collecting twentieth-century art. But you've get a lot of people to talk to you about Jim Soby; maybe they will or have.

SZ: I'm getting it as I go. You mean because of his collecting?

JS: His collecting and his influence on the board and this kind of gentleman-scholar trustee who may be a vanished breed. But I thought he brought a wonderful quality.

SZ: You were invited to become a trustee in 1970. That was a very, very volatile time.

JS: Yes. John Hightower was director.

SZ: Yes, Bates was gone. So that you sort of knew about but didn't really have any direct...?

JS: No.

SZ: Right after you became a trustee, there was that troika: there was Wilder Green and Walter Bareiss and Dick Koch who were running things....

JS: No, I remember nothing. Except I do remember Walter running some meetings, talking about the future of the Museum and the direction of the Museum. There was a committee.

SZ: In society those were very wild times, as well.

JS: Exactly, and, of course, John Hightower was in the thick of everything that was then beginning, which we now call politically correct but it was certainly the beginning of pressure groups of a certain kind.

SZ: As a trustee at that point, how was that for you? A lot of the staff were unhappy, there were strikes, there was pressure...I guess the staff wanted more power or say in what happened.

JS: I think because of my age, I was enormously connected and sympathetic to the staff. At the same time, I guess I was hip enough to realize that the trustees couldn't cave in; there were some realistic imponderables and givens. But all of that staff stuff was inevitable.

SZ: Because?

JS: Because it was a field in which people were underpaid and perhaps undervalued. It was inevitable that they would want more of a voice than they had. People were changing; they weren't as content to be underpaid just because it was the Museum.

SZ: It was also because I think that who became a staff member was changing as well.

JS: Yes, who became a staff member was changing, as it became less elitist. This happened after all in more than one field. I think in the end the Museum has been responsive, but I suppose it was very, very dicey in the beginning.

SZ: Was it difficult among the trustees to come up with a united position?

JS: I don't think so. I think in the end we had good leadership; certainly the trustees were always divided on certain things, but I think we had pretty good leadership. Eventually, Dickie O [Richard Oldenburg] was Acting Director and then he became Director, and that's more than twenty years, isn't it?

SZ: Yes, since '72.

JS: Yes, exactly. So it all worked out, but there were some certainly very troubled times.

I was pretty removed from it, but I'm sure it was very anxiety-making for the people who were running it; the president, the chairman and the executive committee must have had a lot of sleepless nights during this period. It must have been tough.

SZ: What about John Hightower as a leader?

JS: I don't think it was a good match somehow.... I believe he was a favorite and a candidate of Nelson's -- you know, New York State Council and so forth -- and somehow he was not a good chemical match with the trustees.

SZ: Which is important?

JS: I think -- very. That doesn't denigrate him in any way, it's just that that happens in life, I think, and it was just not a good idea, he was not a good choice.

SZ: Joanne, this brings me to something that I read, and what you just said reminded me of it -- and I think it's been written by more than one person -- that one of the things that's unusual about the Modern is that the trustees have greater influence on a lot of aspects of programming and everything than at other institutions.

JS: I think they have a great influence, but not on programming. I think you have to say that they've kept their hands off in a very responsible way. They stayed away from exhibition interference. I would say that really doesn't exist. [INTERRUPTION] Whatever influence we may have had, or do have, programming is not it in the mix.

SZ: Then it would be what?

JS: I think in acquisitions or policy shaping, and I think trustees have been allowed to be involved in all kinds of committees in a very meaningful way and it's been very productive. I don't know what the outside world thinks, but I think it's been marvelous.

SZ: How much do you think that has to do with the fact that it's a private museum.

JS: I don't know enough about it. It could be.

SZ: In terms of its financing.

JS: I just think there's always been a very nice feeling at the Modern that doesn't exist at many other places and perhaps that was shaped by René and the Rockefellers. I don't know who gets the credit, but there is a nice feeling, and the trustees are nice with each other and I hope that we never get so big that this is lost.

SZ: Does it feel different to you now since the '84 expansion?

JS: No, it doesn't. It doesn't really....

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BEGIN SIDE 2, TAPE 1

JS: When you go to the staff Christmas party, you realize that it is much bigger. There was a time when I really did know everybody; I certainly don't now. But the feeling is still very family and I would hate to see that go because I think you can be very efficient and very effective and still keep that. And of course I think Dick has been wonderful, as part of that.

SZ: The right choice.

JS: The right choice, and very well liked by the trustees. Well, Sharon, what else do I know? Not much....

SZ: I was just going to ask you about the expansion, the last expansion.

JS: I have no feeling about it. I don't even remember it. It just seems to me like it's always been there. I know that people worked terribly hard on it, I'm aware of that, and the tours and the hard hats and so forth.... It just seems to me it's always been there. Obviously, before that it was a homier place, but it had to happen.

SZ: And you're still very much involved.

JS: Yes, I hope to be. I think the future's going to be very exciting, because we are at a kind of crossroads, I suppose.

SZ: Financially?

JS: Just in the world. So we'll see what happens to these institutions.

SZ: How did you like the Matisse show [the 1992 retrospective]?

JS: I think you realized how exciting it was for anyone who was around the Museum at all. It's an unforgettable experience. I used to go all the time, especially on Wednesdays, when the invited types would come. It was great fun to see them in the galleries. It was fun to see people so turned on. You just hope that that feeling will carry over into some other more difficult exhibitions.

SZ: I guess there was the Cézanne show [Cézanne: The Late Work, 1977-78] and the Picasso show [Pablo Picasso: A Retrospective, 1980] that you could liken to the Matisse show in that way. So far, it's only grown, with maybe little dips. Do you think there's still that same sort of fervor?

JS: If you didn't think there was that kind of fervor, you certainly were reminded that it could be there during Matisse. Whatever the other factors are, what happens with

crowd psychology and so forth, never mind; it shows that pictures can have an amazing effect on people. I know so many people who went back and back. This was just not a one-shot thing.

SZ: And people who wanted to and couldn't.

JS: That's always sad, right? I think it was very, very illuminating. Really.

SZ: That's it, I guess. Thank you.

END SIDE 2, TAPE 1

END INTERVIEW