DAVID HOFFMAN MOMA HISTORY INTERVIEWS

INTERVIEW WITH:	**JOHN ELDERFIELD (JE)**
INTERVIEWERS:	**RUTH CUMMINGS (RC); CARL COLBY (CC)**
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RC: The next interview is with John Elderfield, Department of Drawings at the Modern. [tape break]

CC: Now, as you say, not simply a museum but in your curatorial vision, what are you headed towards? And secondly, how does that compare with the original mandate of the Museum? Do you see yourself as consolidating something or being experimental with new things?

RC: That's for starters; we have lots of [INAUDIBLE: 0:00:29] questions; you'll kick it off.

CC: Let's say, with that comparison, to begin with.

JE: Well, the first part, in a way, is easy. The second part is harder because it's difficult to be precise about what the original mandate was, in that, at any moment in the early years of the Museum, the mandate seems to have been different. Because obviously then it was actually trying to define what it was as a museum. And in the area which I am responsible to—in the early years there simply wasn't a drawings department. Although the first acquisitions of the Museum were in fact drawings. The notion of an independent drawing collection which somehow plotted the history of the medium and tried to include representative examples and great examples, just didn't exist then. Drawings began gradually to be collected principally, I think, as an adjunct to paintings and sculptures; both as studies for those works when the works could be obtained, and also to fill in gaps in the collection where there weren't actually paintings and sculptures. So that at one time the Museum was, in fact, a curious imbalance

between the painting and sculpture collection and the drawing collection, where the drawing collection was strong, and in areas where the paintings collection was weak, and vice versa.

RC: When was that, would you say?

JE: This was really right through the early years. There wasn't, in fact, a totally independent Drawings Department until about 1970. Previous to that, drawings and prints were being collected together. Previous to that, everything was collected in one unit and seen as in the collection. Drawings and prints once was off and then drawings were separated from prints. Even in those years, however, that very initial idea of drawing purely being collected in a supporting way, it gradually ended, more through a process of development rather than, one suspects, by a very definite policy decision. But certainly, over the past seven or 10 years, it's been collected autonomously. And the idea had been really to provide a synoptic drawing collection.

CC: Was it simply tracking the drawings by—? Or was it simply representative or was it quite deep in certain artists, let's say, [Henri] Matisse or—?

JE: It began—well, after that sort of curious beginning, there developed certain kinds of concentrations, more, one suspects, by accident of circumstance in terms of the character of the collections which came to the Museum than by specific initiatives to collect certain artists in depth. Although—but obviously it's probably just as well—but I'm thinking, for example, of the fact that there's a very strong [Paul] Klee representation, a very strong [Kurt] Schwitters representation, both of which are attributable to Katherine Dreier, whose collection came to us. The fact that there's a very important group of [Paul] Cezanne watercolors is due principally to Lillie Bliss who started the whole thing. The fact that there are lots of works in the collection by artists who seem at first surprising, like [František] Kupka; there's nearly 400 sheets by Kupka in the collection. These came because the artist's widow gave them to the Museum [INAUDIBLE:0:04:37] for that reason. Other areas seem to have been developed more because people here felt that certain artists [INAUDIBLE: 0:04:45] who should be collected in depth like [Pablo] Picasso and Matisse. But one finds a curious mixture of some artists extremely well represented [and] other artists not represented at the

strength that they should be. So obviously one of the continuing goals is really to try and correct that sort of imbalance.

RC: To make it parallel, then with the painting and sculpture?

JE: No, not necessarily, but within the history of works on paper.

CC: To fill in.

JE: Yes. So that, for example, if we have, as we do, great works on paper by [Umberto] Boccioni, but we don't have them by [Giacomo] Balla, obviously we would like to [do] right to Balla. And this generally has been at least the policy since I've been responsible for the Department, to try and sort of look for things which we didn't previously have which are important enough to match against the things in the collection. For example, we didn't until recently have a drawing by Cezanne, although we have watercolors. So obviously that became a priority. Certain aspects of Matisse weren't properly represented, so that's one area which we're still in fact working on.

CC: Universally, people acknowledge that the Painting and Sculpture Department at the Museum is unparalleled in 20th century, not simply masterpieces, but in art. Would you say for your department that that would also be true in comparison with other institutions, or is it shadier?

JE: I think generally it is true. Certainly in terms of depth it's true. I mean, there's more than about 6,000 drawings in the collection. So in terms of the depth of the collection, it certainly is. There are certain artists who are better represented elsewhere obviously, but I think on balance, it probably is the most comprehensive modern drawings collection. And what I'd like to see is both the areas where it isn't comprehensive enough that there's a [INAUDIBLE: 0:07:06], and then also those areas where the quality isn't sufficiently strong [INAUDIBLE: 0:07:11]. Sometimes that works out actually meaning the same thing—that the things which are historically important often turn up because of the way in which historical relativeness seem to go along with quality sometimes. But it's the very same work which fulfills both of those demands.

CC: Is your method of operation a combination of, let's say, an annual budget to be spent, plus simply the luck of the draw in terms of what people may be donating

to the Museum? Or is it—? If you could tell us what's the makeup of how you've been operating every year, plus, what is the—? If you had your druthers then, say, last year or the year before, do you spend 70 percent of your energies to fill in these gaps, and then a little bit to do things like your [Francesco] Clemente and that sort of thing? Or how is your tilt, really?

JE: Well the first, in terms of the funding, as really with all of the other departments, we don't have an established budget. So that we actually—we don't know exactly how much we can count on. I mean, in terms of ready cash, the things we get are really contributions from members of the Drawings Committee, [which are] our own people who are interested in our activities. Those together are rarely sufficient to buy really important works. So for the historical works, we are forced either to decide whether there's something within the collection we can actually give up, or to go to individuals and say, 'We badly need this; will you help us buy it?'

CC: Right.

JE: So that in that sense we operate on a sort of hand-to-mouth basis all the time. And clearly it means that there are certain works which we just don't get because we can't afford them. Generally, it seems to work reasonably well. I mean, obviously, I would love to see some sort of endowment by which we could be guaranteed an income.

CC: But you can't.

RC: But because of The Museum of Modern Art, aren't you hopefully in the position where people who do have good collections—where else would they turn?

JE: Well, it certainly does help us in that way, and every year, we do get offered and do accept good things. And not every year, but periodically, we do get offered groups of works, even collections, which we do like to have. And we know that we are offered them because of the status of the collection which is already here. At times, this works against us, however, because since we are not allowed to accept works in perpetuity, there are some people who would rather see their collection as a whole go to a smaller museum where perhaps a room or a wing could be devoted to it and it would be there always, than to see it absorbed into a

collection like this. In that sense, the people who give things to us have to be extremely disinterested, and almost be willing to—

CC: Almost be more interested in the future of your collection.

JE: Yes.

CC: Rather than the future of their own. Do you find yourself having to wear two hats and be a master scholar and curator on one hand, and at the same time be flexible enough to attract people? I mean, do you have to be a fundraiser literally yourself?

JE: Oh, surely, yes.

CC: You yourself. You can't simply be here and catalogue and work and—?

JE: No, no. In one sense, it would be a wonderfully simple existence if it was like that, but if indeed we want something, we really have to go out and find the means to get it. And it seems awkward on what I've heard being described around here as a kind of institutional avarice. And that that's strong enough that you really do try and find the wherewithal to get these things.

CC: Is that then the color of what your attraction can be in terms of acquiring things and what you do with your energies? In other words, that you may have a show of drawings by Schwitters or someone like that rather than devote your attention to some new—?

RC: Clemente or the new—?

JE: Not necessarily, because both of these things are inevitably part of our interest. You know, that we are really trying to work on two fronts at once. One is—and this [INAUDIBLE: 0:12:11]—one of these is, as it were, filling in gaps in the collection, and the other is sort of pushing on into the future. That part, of course, being a far more uncertain part.

CC: Would you decide yourself one or the other?

RC: Does that force you to make a choice?

CC: Or is that too easy? Could you say that—?

RC: Would you choose to be in one area? Obviously, you have to do both. But is there an area?

CC: Are you a proselytizer? We don't know you very well.

JE: It's hard to say.

CC: Because you see, on one side, people have told us—and they've been very complimentary about your drawing show, the Projects; and at the same time others have said, well, maybe it could have gone further. You know? But then others are saying why bother at all; fill in the gaps that are there, and let's see some of the great—

RC: Do you have a position on the new and the old Modern?

CC: Or is it very difficult?

JE: It's difficult to answer because clearly, if one is principally involved in works of quality, it would seem to mean therefore that one would want to spend more time on the older rather than the newer.

RC: Meaning established, what's already established as great.

JE: Because somehow the norms have been fixed. And also, I'm not really quite sure how best to put this, but, well, since the norms have been fixed, it's—if you buy a work by Matisse or [Jackson] Pollock, say, the issue becomes more purely one of quality, quality cum historical importance, at least those two things together. In terms of the contemporary field, clearly part of the issue is almost reportorial. You know, do you feel that you feel obliged to cover a broad range. And partly I think because the consensus takes a little while to be established on these things—and I know there was this sort of famous [Alfred] Barr insistence that, if out of every 10 contemporary works you buy, if in 10 years you're still showing one of them, you're doing quite well. Which, [sigh] can seem a bit disheartening to think that if in fact it works like that, then obviously you'd like to feel that you're doing better than one in 10. But obviously, you don't know. So in that sense—that the whole contemporary acquisition both has less to do with established quality—but all that said, I would want to turn the whole thing around and disagree with myself and say that it has more to do with it because that's all you've got to go on.

RC: People really look to museums.

JE: You've just got to go on instinct.

RC: As being a tastemaker, being standards, and now that's shifted; right? To more historical work or rather kind of cementing the permanent—making the collection permanent.

CC: Do you think your mission is any easier than Alfred Barr's? In a sense, perhaps Alfred Barr had it quite simple in that first of all he wanted to very much champion something that was struggling at that time in terms of acceptance.

JE: Yes, in one sense, it was simpler because the Modern was an oasis within a climate which really wasn't that sympathetic towards modern art. And now modern art is both victorious and also democratized to such an extent that back-handed pioneering, proselytizing mission seems somehow unnecessary. In one sense it seems unnecessary because of [the fact that] there are so many galleries in the city and so many other museums which have almost the same thing. At the same time, the very success of the Modern and the very extent to which it's been democratized, it could certainly be argued, that that's just had a curious effect on everything, namely that anything which is modern gets accepted. So that in that sense the requirement to the Museum to be discriminating is increased to an extent which perhaps it didn't have before. I mean, you know, Barr always did insist upon the importance of making value judgments and separating good from bad. That was only possible to a certain extent for him as indeed it is for us because the demands of the Museum have necessarily to be different than for a private collection. That it would be possible for—if any curator here were simply buying work for his or her own private collection it would be possible to say, well, I'm just going on what I perceive to be quality. Now clearly, with the collection of an institution, you can't do that because you've got to feel in certain areas, even if I don't particularly like that kind of work, I recognize that it has its place and therefore it should be represented, which is really why you spread it.

CC: As an indication perhaps to us as to new work, somewhat versed in some of the artists who I've mentioned, what would you say, projecting for two years now—? I know you have to plan ahead—what is your schedule for the next two to three

years? What things are you going to be doing in every which—and not just major but minor?

JE: In terms of exhibitions?

CC: Yes. Maybe you can give us an insight into what—

JE: Well, in terms of historical exhibitions, we're doing a Schwitters show [*Kurt Schwitters*] in '84, and then we're collaborating with—

CC: Including collages and things?

JE: Yes. And then we're collaborating with the Arts Council in London to do a Matisse drawings show [*The Drawings of Henri Matisse*]. We're also continuing this series of new paper work [*New Work on Paper 3* and *New Work on Paper 3: Spatial Relationships in Video*], of which there's been two already [*New Work on Paper 1* and *New Work on Paper 2: Borofsky, Clemente, Merz, Penck, Penone*]. In terms of the collection, we are publishing a book on a hundred of the sort of master drawings in the collection from [Georges] Seurat through roughly to Jasper Johns, and beginning a companion book which will really start from Johns and go up to the present. And one of those is, we—heinous sorts of questions quite honestly—in a sense it's a way of making detailed studies of the collection and finding out really just how it holds up on the very highest level, you know if you have to choose anything.

CC: Almost a reappraisal of what?

JE: And it makes you realize that maybe your Balla isn't good enough to go in a volume which has really very good Matisse and a very good [INAUDIBLE: 0:19:41].

CC: It's almost a constant reappraisal of your—

JE: And we do—we're beginning the same thing for a complementary volume on the more recent work. And clearly, part of the collection is formed both by what [INAUDIBLE: 0:19:55] gifts. Also though that's the sum totality of the tastes of the people who have been here, and it does make for certain areas which are less well represented than I would like to see them represented.

CC: Do you see your influence as continued, strong, among other museums in the United States and abroad? The exhibitions that you foster here or that originate here, or that you do in tandem with let's say the Arts Council, are these looked upon with—in your eyes, it's difficult to ask, because you're doing it, but I mean, is your show of a certain very high quality that others then look upon?

JE: Well, obviously one hopes that.

CC: I'm just wondering whether the influence might be similar to when the Continuing Education department and Circulating Exhibitions was really very widespread. Will your show be looked upon by museums in Vancouver or Hartford or L.A—?

JE: As somehow seminal?

CC: As quite—yes.

JE: Well, one hopes so. And that curious way of things—because the Museum has a certain reputation, a certain high reputation, and because the collection is of the strength it has, it makes it perhaps easier for us than for any other modern museum to be able to present shows like this, both because lenders are willing to look at our record and say well, look; they've done this and they've done this and I'm going to lend my work to them. Also because we do have the strength in the collection to immediately, from our own resources, produce a core of such [INAUDIBLE: 0:21:43]. And for example, for this Schwitters show which I'm working on, which will include assemblages and sculpture as well as collages and drawings, there are extant about a dozen of the very early assemblages of 1919 to '21. But there is precisely the work that are the most difficult to buy because they're the most fragile; this Museum has three of them. You know, so it's immediately one has you know, an exhibition.

RC: Right.

JE: There is enough there to know that even if you can add another five to them, which, you know, that there is a sufficient breadth there in matter of the work so that it's representative.

CC: When did you first become influenced by the Museum? Where did you study?

JE: I grew up in the north of England and my education, in a sense, in modern art, was very much affected by MoMA catalogues. And I think it's true of many people of my age, invariably, that that was their first awareness that people were looking seriously at modern art, and that it wasn't just some diverse area which really wasn't seriously being considered. But the sequence of catalogues which Barr and his colleagues did, I think had an enormous educative importance upon people who often had never actually seen these works or ever been to the Museum.

CC: Do you think there was more acceptance in London and Paris and other cities in the time of the early thirties, for art? Was America really a stone fortress that had to be batted down to even take a good look at it? There's one article that I keep remembering from the *New York World* the day the Museum opened, very simply written, and an editorial that said Americans regard art, at that time, as—well, they buy pictures from department stores, and they have photographs of their family, and then the women buy it. The men don't know anything of it. When art does travel though a town, it's like theater in Scandinavia. The same old plays come every other year; [Henrik] Ibsen, [George Bernard] Shaw, and [Eugene] O'Neill, or whatever, and they see the same old things, and as far as they're concerned, great art is great art, and great art is dead art, and nothing new ever circulated. So it was a tremendous sense of relief, I think, when the Museum opened here, to at least feel that new wind was coming through with. Do you think it was always more acceptable, it was much more complicated, in London and Paris? There was always more of an environment of acceptance there?

JE: For modern art?

CC: Yes. Or was it also very elitist there, and the general population wasn't all that? Where were you from the north of England, for instance?

JE: Well, by the time I was growing up, modern art was indeed accepted in England. But thinking back to what I understand of the thirties, both in Paris and London as in America, that curiously enough, when the Museum here was founded, its principle thrust was not so much towards contemporary art, namely the art of the thirties, either in America or Europe, but more in bringing the Museum's public up

to date with earlier modernism, and that they began showing Cezanne, Seurat, and [Vincent] van Gogh—

CC: Which was a 50-year-old art.

JE: Yes, the thrust of it was really bringing its public up to date with the background.

CC: They weren't obviously showing revolutionary art in any which way.

JE: No. And in fact, when one looks at the history of the Museum, one finds that this was the Museum which the American Abstract Artists Association complained to that they weren't showing American abstract art, but merely European abstract art. And it was thought to be unsupportive of its [INAUDIBLE: 0:26:09] constituents. And I think the Museum has always had this feeling that, in a sense, there are two constituencies there, you know, both the kind of preservation and clarification of the traditionally modern, and also—I mean, not only the Modern museum but the modern tradition itself, and also sort of pushing slowly ahead and following at a discreet distance from the new.

CC: Do you find yourself at an advantage in a museum of modernist art in the sense that it has perhaps a beginning and not an end, or it may have an end, but at least you can find some beginnings, rather than say at the Met or the British Museum where you then would be able to draw on masters of four centuries or something like that? Is it an advantage, or do you see it as a disadvantage?

JE: I think in practical terms, it would in fact be the same at any museum, because clearly, you would be working in a department which had boundaries prescribed administratively within the museum.

CC: I'm just wondering whether it bothers you ever that you can have a Matisse show or whoever but that you can't have, let's say, Matisse and Mannerist of various centuries or have Hogarth and someone else. You could have Franz Kline, Hogarth, just to show brilliant line, or whatever, and be able to do things through the centuries?

JE: Well, clearly, it's a tradeoff. Clearly, we can't easily do that, although at times the Museum has done things which have included things other than modern. And this Primitivism show [*"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern"*] which Bill [Rubin] is doing, although it clearly focuses on the

modern, will include things which simply relate to it rather than [INAUDIBLE: 0:28:16].

CC: What show is this?

JE: He's doing a show which will deal with the relationship of modern art to so called primitive art, i.e. non-western cultures.

CC: Was that a loan sort of thing? African?

JE: Yes, it will have African—

RC: From the Met, the new—

JE: Yes, and it will deal with things that—

RC: [The] Rockefeller collection at the Met?

JE: Yes.

RC: Sure. Let me ask you about—we've been talking about the institution and the Department and the drawings, and when it all started, we've been fascinated—and part of our film, obviously is going to deal with the club, the group that started it, the people, the feelings, and really, if it was a cause célèbre, and, how do you feel being part of the staff now? It's a huge staff. I don't know how many assistants you have or how many people [are] in your department, but, do you feel the ghost of Barr? Do you feel you're still doing a mission, or is it totally different? Are there still some ghosts around? How do you feel personally about working here?

JE: I still think that it is a sort of missionary activity, if only because there are still plenty of things to do on two levels. One, that there are some things which simply have not been done in this field which still need to be done. And this sort of thing is one of them. There's never been a major Schwitters show in this country. And the same is true of the late Cezanne show [*Cezanne: The Late Work*]. There are a lot of shows which the Museum have done which really are still doing the same work, that still have the same sort of function which the early modern shows did, [when they were] mainly showing kinds of material to its public which had never been seen before. Also there were things which have been done in terms of the collections which while having indeed precedent for

them, simply are better understood now with the passage of time. The first show I did when I came to the Museum was the Fauves exhibition [*The "Wild Beasts:" Fauvism and its Affinities*]. This was in '75. There had been a Fauves show [*Les Fauves*] in the early fifties, which John Rewald had organized. This was when many of the artists were still [being] learned; when less work had been done on that whole movement, and when its boundaries seemed to be somewhat vaguer than they appeared in the middle of the 1970s. And this isn't to suggest that the show which happened was necessarily better than what Rewald's was, but it was something very different. It was presenting material which in fact had not been seen in New York for a long time, in a way which was extremely different to that in which it had been presented when it was first shown. So that practically—this sort of fortune process does take place. And one could imagine shows being done over the next decade which treat of the same subjects which the Museum has already done.

CC: Were the works very, very different then, in the catalogue?

JE: Yes, there were a lot of works which simply were not known about then, and the connections between those works and contemporary realist movements had not been explored then. So that necessarily one's perception of what those artists were about was different.

CC: But what about the early proselytizing field? Is it at this point sometimes best to let others perhaps do that one in 10 work for you now?

RC: Like, the galleries, are they the ones who are making decisions like that?

CC: Let others be the vanguard, and you, in a sense—

RC: Pick up the rear, closely follow yet not be the first one to take a position?

JE: In fact, that has always been—

CC: Because when Barr said one in 10, he never really did much of that, did he? It's very difficult to say.

JE: Well, that's what I was going to say, that he did, but he did it at a distance. And his viewpoint, which I think is in fact a very reasonable one for the Museum, is that it shouldn't be a museum's function to want to preserve the new while it's

fresh off the drawing board, the canvas, but rather to let things settle enough to get some perspective on it, while still being committed and brave enough to say, well, we feel this is important and we should show it. I mean, clearly, if you wait too long, you're really not helping anybody. Clearly, you have to wait a certain amount of time, otherwise you're simply following a test, and I think it's a curious thing that actually by waiting a certain distance—and I don't know quite what that distance is—you may actually seem to be following because you're waiting; but in fact you turn out not to be, because what you're doing is, you're just waiting a little bit for the dust to settle, and then you're saying, okay, well, we've been told for the past year but these are really the greatest artists since Rembrandt. But maybe we don't think so, and we don't actually need these.

CC: So why jump on it.

JE: Yes, so why follow it. We may also find that—you know, they all say, well, none of us here particularly feel strongly about it, but now we've waited this amount of time, we see it has become recognized as a sort of established historical fact and part of the art of our time, so we should get the best representation that we can.

RC: Are you in this department pretty much in accord with your—? As the decisions about this pacing and so forth—because, for instance, in the beginning, in Barr's circle, Barr's people ceded to him, he was it, but I think they genuinely said, well, he is right, he absolutely has the right answer. Now the staff is so large and there's a lot of different points of view.

JE: Oh sure; yes.

CC: Is there a lot of skirmishing going on?

RC: What is that like? How do you find your direction with a lot of different inputs? Or is there a consensus in your department, you being the head?

JE: In some areas there is a consensus; in others there isn't. And if any one of my colleagues who has a curatorial position wants to present things and feels strongly about them, I'm only delighted actually if it's a viewpoint which I don't hold. Because I think that that has the advantage of covering a broader area with the conviction which should be there. Although I've said that we do feel that there are certain things which should be represented even if we don't ourselves

feel that strongly about them. Obviously, that is a second best way of proceeding. It has happened at times. It happened with photorealism, for instance, within the Painting and Sculpture Department in which I still have a—I'm still a curator there as well, because I began in that department. And none of us felt particularly strongly about photorealism. Eventually, we realized that it should belong in the collection. And there is, in fact, I think, a way, even if you don't like something particularly, it's possible to know that so-and-so...

END OF INTERVIEW at 0:36:01