DAVID HOFFMAN MOMA HISTORY INTERVIEWS

INTERVIEW WITH:	**SIDNEY JANIS (SJ)**
INTERVIEWERS:	**CARL COLBY (CC); HARVEY ARDMAN (HA); RUTH CUMMINGS (RC)**
LOCATION:	**SIDNEY JANIS GALLERY**
DATE:	**1983**
TRANSCRIBER:	**JANET CROWLEY, TRANSCRIPTION COMPLETED AUGUST 9, 2018**

SJ: Have you conversed with Mrs. Alfred Barr [Margaret Scolari Barr]?

CC: We'll be speaking to her very soon.

HA: Very soon. We've talked to Monroe Wheeler. We've talked to Dorothy Miller. We've talked to lots of people; Eddie Warburg.

CC: Even Lincoln Kirstein, if you can imagine.

SJ: He goes way back.

RC: Yes, yes.

HA: Your association with the Museum goes way back, too.

SJ: Well, I was an enthusiast of the Museum as a—what should I say—a viewer or as a spectator when MoMA had opened in the Heckscher Building. It's no longer the Heckscher Building; now it's the Crown something.

CC: Is it the one they light up?

SJ: They've got it all lighted up. It's beautiful at night.

CC: It's extraordinary.

SJ: [INAUDIBLE: 0:00:52]. It gives East 57th Street and Fifth Avenue a bit of color at night. Yes, Alfred Barr did all of those wonderful exhibitions when he was a very young man.

HA: Were you close to Alfred Barr?

SJ: Yes. We saw each other about once a week. He came in to all the shows, he and Dorothy Miller would drop in on a Saturday and visit for half an hour or so. I guess you could get quite a bit from Dorothy because after all, she was "His Girl Friday" for many years.

HA: Yes, indeed.

SJ: And she's still active. She does things for corporations.

CC: One of the things that we wanted to do is, initially, when we see people we're just trying to feel it out and see how big the subject is and try to distill it down to some more directed questions, and then when we return with cameras, we'd go after those very questions. But...

HA: This is kind of a preliminary interview before we bring a camera.

CC: A couple of things that intrigued us about you and the Museum. Number one would be, people might say, on the very outside, that looking in to New York and looking at Barr, and Miller and you, and [Frank] Stella, and various people, how much did you think that you were on a mission? I mean, were you really all together in the sense of your vision of what art should be and what art should be championed in terms of taste and selection?

SJ: I don't think so. I think that you arrive at that through trial and error, whatever method you have, and each man has his own sense of aesthetics and his love for [INAUDIBLE: 0:02:49]. I found that The Museum of Modern Art—I was very much involved [tape break] in spite of that, very instinctively by what they did. Not that I was that much involved with 19th century art, as the first couple of exhibitions that they did, but I thought that The Museum of Modern Art, number one, they made modern art respectable. They had good names behind it like Rockefeller and people like that, Mrs. John D. II. And that was a shot in the arm for modern art. Because, it was, as my friends used to say, "Are you interested in that crazy modern art?" And that was the general opinion. I think The Museum of Modern Art almost single-handedly has changed that attitude, very much. By the exhibitions and the publications and the people behind it, [INAUDIBLE: 0:04:00] respect from those people like [INAUDIBLE: 0:04:02] and Bill Burden and people like that to, and the Rockefellers.

CC: So it's an institution that you have a great deal of affection for because you almost grew up together?

SJ: Yes. It was the Museum as I had once mentioned [INAUDIBLE: 0:04:22] the infamous book that they did [tape break at 0:04:25] whether you've seen it or not, the tribute [*The Sidney and Harriet Janis Collection*] The Museum of Modern Art did at the time I gave the gift.

HA: Ah yes.

SJ: That was the museum of my first love. Although I come from Buffalo, and I was very much inspired by the Albright Art Gallery at that time, which became Albright-Knox later—not that they did a big job of modern art. There was a beautiful building left over from the Pan-American of 1901, and they had a good sculpture collection. Then Seymour Knox came on the scene and he made it one of the most important museums in the country for 20th century art. [INAUDIBLE: 0:05:10]. As a matter of fact, Seymour Knox over the years bought perhaps 50 masterpieces from us. He's still active. Not as active as he was, but he gets around to the exhibitions.

CC: So places like Buffalo and all were pretty active in their own hubs for contemporary arts at one particular time? Or—?

SJ: Only at the Museum. He [Knox] was the only one collecting for them. All of those beautiful homes and art galleries they had, they had been built years ago. People—as Sam Salz used to say, rich millionaires. [Laughter]

HA: Unlike all the others.

SJ: And not one painting was bought on all these walls. There were no collectors in Buffalo. My brother Martin was about the only collector there. And best of all, I mean, for me.

HA: So that's how you came to it all originally?

SJ: Well, my—I came to it originally—I became acquainted with the art through the Albright Art Gallery.

HA: Mm-hm.

SJ: My brother Martin became interested later on after I moved to New York, and he was in the art world, and he would come on buying trips on 57th Street. And after a while, he began collecting. It was a very interesting thing that this family had; they were oriented to luxurious things like fur coats and what have you, and so I would come here to New York and I'd pitch to buy a mink coat and end up with a painting instead. [Laughter] And it happened again and again; and you've reminded of it. For 10 years this had been going on.

RC: What about the idea of museums and the galleries becoming tastemakers for the public? At one point it seems like there might have been a shift; at one point the Museum was out in front, and then they kept that respectable distance that Barr was always talking about which museums should have.

SJ: Yes.

RC: Then what about the galleries who may have established, or the art market...

CC: Would you see yourself maybe as an outpost for the museums?

SJ: No. Museum directors have commented on the fact that we've done exhibitions that museums should have done, but I don't think there's ever been any kind of actual competition. Bill Rubin came to see our [Constantin] Brancusi [Piet] Mondrian exhibition which just closed; it was the most important show that we have done to date of the [INAUDIBLE: 0:08:03]. And he was very excited about the show. It was a show that a Museum should have done, on a greater scale, if you could do it [INAUDIBLE: 0:08:14]. But we've been doing that, and I think that Bill has mentioned in here [Sidney Janis Gallery] that we've done exhibitions like the Futurist show or the first Futurist show that was done in America was [INAUDIBLE: 0:08:28] more or less consistently over the years. And he commented that these were things that museums should do, and that Janis did kind of a thumbnail representation of what museums should be, and by doing, as a follower. I don't think that the galleries have really been vying with museums; I think that they have a different thing in mind. And remember that there are 600 galleries today, and perhaps 50 very important ones that do exhibitions that interest museums.

CC: That's a pretty extraordinary figure, to think that in—people have told us that in the early 1930s, Monroe Wheeler for instance, said that in the mid-thirties, you'd go to—walk around New York and in two hours you pretty much cover what's what and then go home until next weekend.

SJ: My wife and I used to go to everything that happened in New York by way of art exhibitions, lectures, or what have you, and we did it every week, in our spare time. An afternoon a week, or a weekend, or something of that sort. There were two or three galleries on 57th Street and one or two in the Village. Period.

CC: How is it, do you think, that the public got so caught up? Does modern art just happen to be suited to them? Or how did it all flash up like that?

SJ: It's difficult to say. Of course, one reason may be that there's more money around in the hands of many people. And the museums over the years have made a big issue of art. The critics have been covering it in the *Times* and other papers at one time, the *Tribune* and others. And of course, the magazines. I don't know how many readers go in for the magazines, except to look at the pictures, but that's all [INAUDIBLE: 0:10:38]. There's been a big burst of interest that's fantastic, that we see it. We put on a new exhibition of a new artist maybe 28 or 30 years old. We got an army of new faces at this Duane Michals show. We only knew five percent of the people who came in here, the photographers—our opening was damn full, you couldn't see the pictures, and everyone had a camera over his shoulder. So they wanted to see what the other fella was doing. That used to happen a little bit when we put on art exhibitions of the modern masters, [Pablo] Picasso generation. People from the Art Students League and Cooper Union would basically come to see what they could learn. But today there are more art schools and also the public schools and high schools and colleges want to have a big art curriculum. For example, I gave a talk the other day at New York University in Washington Square, and there was a student body there of people who were, postgraduates who worked in folk art. The only university in the country that has a semester on folk art. And it was very—I'd never heard of it, the Folk Art Society would probably do it. And here were these graduate students, about 20 of them there, men and women, very much interested in what was happening in four centuries of folk art. The curriculum has

added a lot of different things. It used to be the humanities—it was arts and humanities and [INAUDIBLE: 0:12:30].

HA: The Museum was responsible for a lot of that.

SJ: I would say The Museum of Modern Art was almost at one time single handedly responsible.

HA: So there is a kind of symbiosis between the galleries and the museum.

SJ: I think so. I think that the galleries had primarily been influenced by The Museum of Modern Art, rather than the Metropolitan Museum. You know, at one time, the Metropolitan Museum made an agreement with The Museum of Modern Art to swap, so that the Museum and the Met wouldn't conflict with each other, and they got rid of their 20th century paintings.[1] The Museum of Modern Art gave them some 19th century paintings for them. They're getting back at the 20th century. [Laughter]

HA: Bill Lieberman, yes.

SJ: That was before Bill Lieberman.

CC: Did it just happen to be like a meeting of the minds between you and Barr? How did you get along? Did you see alike? And you were very interested in Brancusi, let's say, and Mondrian, people like that?

SJ: Yes, well, I learned from Alfred Barr and he might have learned something from the gallery, too. But...

CC: How about something like Abstract Expressionist, though; he didn't take too quickly to that, as you did.

SJ: Not as quickly, probably, but I think that he was impressed by the exhibitions and he bought—and he managed to buy from Mrs. John D. Rockefeller and other people at the Museum, out of the first shows that we did of [Willem] de Kooning and [Jackson] Pollock.

[1] The Inter-Museum Agreement among MoMA, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1947, intended to allow the Met to acquire a number of older works of painting and sculpture from the collections of the two modern museums, freeing them to concentrate on more contemporary acquisitions. This agreement, by which such works as Picasso's *Woman in White* entered the collection of the Met, was terminated in 1953.

CC: So he had his eye behind—

SJ: Yes.

RC: One of the things we're trying to do is get an evocation of him because obviously, he's not around anymore.

CC: How would you characterize him?

RC: Any memories of him that would bring his character to life? We've heard he was such a big man; we've heard also that he was dispassionate in his collecting.

HA: Scholarly as opposed to emotional.

CC: More of an aesthete, or, how would you say it in your own words?

SJ: I think that he was probably ruled more by the head than the heart, but Alfred listened, like all intelligent people you know, wisely, and probably learned something from them. I remember one time I spent about two hours with Alfred Barr, and Dorothy was there, too. And I was talking about Mondrian very enthusiastically, and there was one Mondrian there I liked very, very much, and he felt that I had a particular sympathetic feeling toward that particular picture, and at one point he said to me, "What do you like about that picture?" And I felt that he didn't understand it, you know. And I wasn't going to go into details [INAUDIBLE: 0:15:33]. It was a painting that I used to call 'Below the Horizon' because there was a horizon; everything happened below it and above the two white areas. And I spoke about the asymmetry in the picture; how although everything happened at the bottom of the picture, the equilibrium was there, it wasn't lost. That's all I said about the picture. And at that time, the thought passed in my mind that he was not as sympathetic toward Mondrian; there wasn't that same empathy that I had toward Mondrian, but eventually he *did* have that. But, well, a museum director who is responsible for all of the mistakes and the correct decisions that a museum director makes, and you know you have to give and take here and there. Like now, the Museum of Modern Art, counting the 14 Mondrians I gave them, has a collection of about 20 Mondrians, which is more than any museum in the world, except for one in the Hague.

HA: You gave them twice as many as they had collected on their own.

SJ: Just about, yes. He was very pleased to have them, Alfred Barr.

HA: I'm sure of that. [Laughing]

CC: Why did you entrust your collection to the Museum?

HA: Yes, what was your thinking? I would really like to know.

CC: Because I remember somebody say in one book that you could have gotten an awful lot more play in another place, but that your heart was in the Museum.

SJ: That's right. That's about right. As I said before, the Museum was my first love. And I learned a great deal at the Museum and I had thousands of hours of gratification at the Museum, and I worked there at the Library.

CC: Really? I didn't know that.

RC: Studied there, or actually worked there?

SJ: Studied there. And I remember when—what's the name of the—?

CC: Bernard Karpel?

SJ: Before Karpel. The tall fellow who's now in Albuquerque.

HA: Beaumont Newhall.

SJ: Beaumont Newhall. He came in to see our exhibition, I think, of, I forget, I think Walker Evans. And he came in. He had two or three people, proteges, and he said to me, out of the clear, "I remember you at The Museum of Modern Art; you came every day to research, you and your wife." And that goes back to, I guess, the thirties. I found that The Museum of Modern Art was a convenient place for me to do my research, and also, they had a collection of books on surrealism and Dalism [Salvador Dalí] that you couldn't find at any other library. So they were very helpful.

CC: That was a real second home for you. It had all of the appeal, I mean, you were having a Walker Evans show and they're having Walker Evans; and you're collecting surrealism and Mondrian; you must have felt pretty happy that that came along.

RC: Do you have a nostalgia for those times? Because it really seemed like an extended family, and now, the explosion of the art scene and the galleries, you've mentioned, and the staff is so much larger.

CC: Do you feel that the fire has kind of gone out of it? Or, how do you feel?

RC: What's it like to you, in your own estimation?

SJ: Well, I miss Barr very, very much as a lovable person, [he was] a very quiet and introspective person, but when you met him, I wouldn't say socially, but really, he used to be now and then embarrassed. And he was—he'd be free then. Nature lover, and full of humor, and we had a lot of fun together. Well, we couldn't have that at The Museum of Modern Art because that was strictly business.

HA: So in other words, when you weren't there, you could be friends, but you couldn't really be friends in the social sense when you were at the Museum.

SJ: Well I suppose that he kept himself to protect himself.

RC: He took his job so seriously; this was a religion for him.

CC: But for you and your wife, and for him, though, it must have been—you must have felt kind of like blood brothers in the sense that you all loved the same things, really.

SJ: And he was very fond of my wife. And he asked her to do one or two critical analyses of paintings that the Museum had. But Alfred lived very modestly, worked for a pittance. We left the Museum one noon time to have lunch together on Sixth Avenue, we passed by an antique shop, and there were a couple of little nice things in the window, eight and 10 and 12 dollars. And Alfred [said], "Oh, I wish I could have them." You know? He didn't have that, you know, he just didn't have that.

CC: And here he is buying major pictures for Mrs. Rockefeller.

SJ: Not too much; he didn't pay too much. Alfred was a very shrewd trader; I want to be quoted on that; he was.

CC: That's interesting, coming from you. I love those early stories of him getting like $500 from Mrs. Rockefeller and being told to go to Europe, and he comes back two months later and he's got—

SJ: A string of pictures.

HA: And change.

CC: A string of pearls. He had to be, didn't he? He was buying for them, too, wasn't he?

SJ: Yes. He bought this picture from me. I just saw it today. It's ready for the basket. [Laughter]

HA: I threw mine in the wastebasket, too; I know what that is.

SJ: [Unfolding paper] This is it.

CC: Oh my god.

HA: Oh yes.

CC: He bought that picture from you?

SJ: Yes.

RC: Oh my!

HA: That's one of the very best.

SJ: I couldn't get it in the gallery; it didn't go—

CC: Too big?

SJ: It was—yes, I think, 12 feet high. It was 12 feet high.

CC: You saw it where, in Paris? Or in Nice or somewhere?

SJ: No, I bought it from Walter Chrysler. Walter Chrysler never hung it; it was in a warehouse.

RC: Oh my.

CC: It's one of the great masterpieces.

HA: What's the title of that picture? The *Dance* [*Dance (I)*], yes, [Henri] Matisse.

SJ: This is the one here, and there's one in Russia. This is the second version, which is a little brighter than the other one.

CC: Did you ever get to Leningrad or Moscow to see it?

SJ: No. Alfred did. [Laughter] Very early. You know, I was looking at these, one masterpiece after another.

HA: Yes, yes.

SJ: And suddenly, this one is in there. [Laughter] How do you follow that gig? These are all masterpieces. In fact, I was visiting Eddie Robinson in the thirties.

HA: Edward G.?

SJ: Edward G. He had a nice little collection. And Clive Newhouse's father was in charge of the business at that time; this was in the thirties. And he had this picture, and the three posers, about that size. And he offered them to Eddie Robinson for $7,000 which is $80,000 today.

RC: Well, at that time, that was; but now.

SJ: I remember that was one of them, and the three posers, same size, studies for the big—and [Georges] Seurat studies of [INAUDIBLE: 0:23:30].

CC: Did you use to run into Alfred and Margo [Marga Scolari Barr] over in Paris at all?

SJ: Alfred, yes. I don't remember meeting Margo in Paris.

RC: Did you ever accompany him or did he ever consult you when buying some things?

CC: He had his own eye, I guess.

SJ: Yes, and The Museum of Modern Art had their own contacts, even if he knew that. But he would be open to it, if there was an analytical cubist picture in such and such a place and its worth looking at.

CC: People sometimes say that he would turn down a picture because it was too pretty.

SJ: Too easy.

HA: Too easy; yes.

SJ: You mean [if] something—if it wasn't tough enough. I can believe that. I've felt the same.

HA: I don't know quite what that means. What do you think he meant by that?

SJ: Well, the pictures that you saw there now, that Mary Cassatt picture is a nice and easy pleasant picture.

HA: You can look at it and like it instantly.

SJ: The governess or whoever it is. And you can like it. And it gets boring as hell after a few years of visual experience with it. And the *Dance* of Matisse is a rough, you know, like outlined—a little drip here and there, and, is it art? You know, of course it comes up, at first. And as you get to know it, it becomes greater and greater. I was thinking of that about a lot of painters, for example, [Fernand] Léger. Every time we do a Léger show, I have a higher opinion of him; you know? And there are some times we do an exhibition of a younger artist, of a younger generation, by the time the exhibition is over, you don't even see the pictures on the wall; they just fade from view. And I say that to collectors. If you have a picture hanging on your wall and you no longer look at it, take it off; get rid of it.

CC: Because it'll start to fail you?

HA: Well, it has no interest; you have no rapport with that picture.

SJ: It's worn out its original prettiness.

RC: How would you extend that philosophy, or would you to the Museum? What about deaccessioning? Do you have any feelings about that?

SJ: Well, I can answer that by quoting Alfred Barr. One time he said, "If a museum director is right 10 percent of the time, he has a very good average." My response to that was that I expect to be right 90 percent of the time; I consider that a good average. But he felt that 10 percent of the Museum's collection is underground.

HA: Was it that his standards were higher or that yours were more commercial, or what? Why is there that difference?

SJ: I was never really commercial because I was a collector for 20-odd years.

HA: Ah yes, the collection is different from the business, of course.

C/S: [INAUDIBLE: 0:26:26] [CC and SJ simultaneously] [laughter]

CC: You had a collection for years before you started the gallery.

SJ: Alfred Barr was the first visitor in my new gallery, when I opened at 50 East 57th Street.

CC: When did you open your first gallery?

SJ: In June of 1948.

CC: You were already collecting and looking at pictures

SJ: I began in '26.

RC: That was a very adventuresome posture, I think, to take because of the nudes.

SJ: Oh, I was. In the eyes of my friends, I'd gone crazy.

RC: This is interesting. I was saying that it was a really adventuresome posture to take. Nobody was collecting this stuff. Not even the Museum was with lots of the money behind it.

SJ: We were absolutely dizzy in the eyes of our friends. My wife, the second year we were married, all of her friends fell away when they saw what we were putting on our walls. [Laughter]

HA: Scared them out of the house!

CC: What kinds of things were you putting on the walls?

SJ: They were literary, I mean, they were reading [Marcel] Proust, and—

HA: And listening to [Igor] Stravinsky?

SJ: And [INAUDIBLE: 0:27:26].

CC: What kind of things were going up on the walls?

HA: What was scaring them?

SJ: The first picture we bought was a Matisse. That was enough to scare them. My friends, I left in Buffalo, so... [laughter]

CC: You were a free man.

SJ: I didn't have a chance to lose them. But when they visited in New York a few years later, they thought I was absolutely nuts.

RC: Oh, really? Even those friends who had first turned you; [at the] Albright?

SJ: It was still pretty early. And at that time, I remember we had a Dalí [*Illumined Pleasures*]; it's at The Museum of Modern Art now. [A] small and wonderful 1929 Dalí. And they—these two or three people who were visiting our apartment at the Century—we had just moved in there, and we didn't have any rugs on the floor but we had pictures on the wall. Where are your curtains and where are your rugs? What do you have these things on the wall for? What is that Dalí supposed to mean? And they went away mystified. Today people don't react that way because, as I said before, art has become respectable, and they don't want to be singled out as being—

CC: Does that disturb you?

HA: They assume that they don't know—if they don't appreciate, it's *their* fault, not the painting's fault.

CC: Does that disturb you now?

SJ: That wasn't the case 34 years ago.

CC: Does that disturb you now, though? Would you rather there be a little bit more of a—?

SJ: I think that yes.

CC: What the hell are you looking at, or, what the hell is this picture?

SJ: I think it's very nice to have a difference of opinion.

CC: A feisty atmosphere?

RC: Eddie Warburg was saying that, too. Because everybody is just "Oh, it's great! It's marvelous!" And he remembers the days when people were saying, like you said, "What does *that* mean?"

SJ: Today, I'll tell you, they don't want to be among the few who are—

RC: Questioning.

SJ: Yes.

CC: Did you know Eddie Warburg?

SJ: Yes, I met him a couple of times. He's been out of it for some time, hasn't he?

CC: He seems to be in pretty good shape. He said, instead of giving his money to the American Hospitals Fund or whatever, he decided to have open heart surgery. [Laughter]

HA: He's a very funny man.

CC: Extremely funny.

SJ: He gave interesting talks.

CC: I bet.

RC: Oh yes.

SJ: Ed Warburg?

HA: Yes.

CC: He's so funny; he's such a character.

SJ: He belongs to the Lincoln Kirstein generation?

HA: Yes.

SJ: Lincoln Kirstein was doing very interesting things as a student in Harvard. [INAUDIBLE: 0:29:55] in the Harvard Coop. I used to go to see those exhibitions.

HA: Did you really?

SJ: My wife and I saw every [show], we would travel all over the country to see, one lousy show in San Francisco, something like that. It didn't happen, you know.

HA: What year did you really become interested enough to be able to travel to an exhibition? I mean, it must have been in the mid-twenties.

CC: Weren't you traveling anyways?

SJ: I opened up a shirt factory in New York and made enough money in a couple of years before the Florida crash and then the Wall Street crash, to be able to buy art and travel. And even in the Wall Street crash we didn't lose anything because we were too busy in business to have invested in Wall Street, or maybe we invested in 57th Street rather than Wall Street. [Laughter]

HA: That street didn't crash.

CC: I remember in the Russell Lynes's book [*Good Old Modern: An Intimate Portrait of The Museum of Modern Art*] it said that for some strange reason, your shirts were really popular when they came out, and then when the crash came, they seemed to be continually popular and if anything they got more popular. It really had nothing to do with—people still wanted a nice shirt, and that didn't affect it at all. It was very funny; it was well put. So you were at Harvard; you actually saw Lincoln's shows up at the Coop.

SJ: At the Coop, yes.

RC: Eddie was describing ladies with lorgnettes looking and saying, "Oh my dear!" It must have been very funny. You must have been a lone wolf, one of the only people to appreciate it.

SJ: When I bought this picture, I mean frankly this guy. [Laughter]

CC: It's so funny to me. First of all, you pulled it out of the trash can, and then secondly, of course it would be that picture.

HA: I love—we may bring this as a prop when we come with our cameras.

SJ: This one here.

HA: Yes.

RC: Oh my.

CC: You bought that picture?

SJ: Yes.

RC: You bought that picture?

SJ: I bought it in 1932. [*The Dream*]

HA: What's the title of that?

SJ: [Ambroise] Vollard brought it over from Paris.

CC: [Henri] Rousseau.

RC: And sold it where?

SJ: He didn't sell it, it was shown at Knoedler. And I imagined that before something that was just said, a couple of very beautifully dressed women in black, in their seventies, with lorgnettes, were looking at this picture and wondering what the hell it was all about, and being shocked by the idea the incongruency of a nude in the jungle on the velvet couch.

HA: Uh-huh.

SJ: And I was the owner of that picture at that time that they were fighting forward.

CC: So most of the art at that time was very realistic then, right? Very representational and quite realistic? What would have been on the walls of the person with the lorgnette?

SJ: If they had 20th century, it would be The Eight; [George] Luks and [Robert] Henri, and the Ashcan [School].

CC: And if they didn't have that, they would have what? Late 19th century oils?

SJ: Monet, Claude Monet.

CC: That would be acceptable though, to have a Monet was acceptable?

SJ: Yes, but they weren't very expensive. Or they might have had [Alexandre] Cabanel and [Jean-Léon] Gérôme and [William-Adolphe] Bougereau. Academically from very big places at that time.

RC: And in those days, what would those pictures have gone for? I mean that would have been a big price.

SJ: Cabanel and Gérôme would have been sellers in France; $100,000 gold.

CC: It's funny, because now those are backed up. Isn't that amazing?

SJ: Sometimes when I see, for example, [a] David Smith sell for $450,000, I'm wondering what's going to happen in 20 years.

RC: What do you think about it?

SJ: I don't have anything against the expense. The idea of four—almost half a million dollars for a piece of sculpture. Abstract sculpture has never [INAUDIBLE: 0:34:14].

CC: Do you think it's gotten grossly inflated?

SJ: I think that a lot of the prices are way out of hand.

CC: [INAUDIBLE: 0:34:22]?

SJ: I don't think that would be the case with Pollock and the producers who—the painters who had a limited production and had [INAUDIBLE: 0:34:36] new image to be painting all the time. So I think he will remain one of the greats of the 20th century. We have so many greats of the 20th century; I mean, some of them have to be sifted out.

HA: There has to be a shakedown and some of them have to be eliminated.

SJ: Of course. At the end of the 19th century, there were 120 very important painters in France, and they've been sifted out to about 15 or 20, and that's a hell of a lot for one generation or one epoch. And so painting was at its height, at that time. I don't think we're going to have 20 in *our* time.

RC: People often ask that.

SJ: I'm not going to worry about it. [Laughing]

CC: Do you worry that if people were to see you in the role of a pacesetter or that the galleries are to be out there scrounging and finding the newest this, the newest that; do you hold back? Are you a little bit like Alfred Barr in terms of stepping a

couple of places back, or how do you see your role? In other words, when you championed [Franz] Kline, for instance, and nobody else—[Charles] Egan had a show but it didn't go anywhere and he wasn't in any gallery, and you had him first and you had a first of a number of those.

SJ: I like the expression you used, to step back, and took notice. And I've acted that way. I haven't really jumped in, with a few exceptions, like primitive Morris Hirshfield. I waited until I was pretty sure that de Kooning was doing something. I knew de Kooning for years; I met him in [Arshile] Gorky's studio in 1929.

CC: You knew of him, you knew he was working.

SJ: And also I remember that at that meeting with Gorky, when I met de Kooning, and my wife was there, Gorky held us all, all evening, talking about his artwork, but when he left—de Kooning, he'd been quiet in the corner—when he left Gorky said, "You watch this man; he's a good artist." 1929 he said that about de Kooning. But I didn't recognize de Kooning as a good artist at that time. I did later on. So I would say that my attitude might have been a little bit conservative rather than the pacemaker, that I took a couple of steps backward before I accepted him. And I think Alfred Barr did that. He might not have done it with [Jasper] Johns and a few of the painters who were doing a kind of a neo-Dada thing in the forties. But he certainly did it in relation to the Abstract Expressionists, and also the Cubists, his attitude toward Mondrian and so forth. But I think he was trying to better that 10 percent average.

CC: Are you pretty happy with what [Richard] Oldenburg, Bill Rubin, and Kynaston McShine [are doing]? Are you pretty happy with the direction of the Museum now?

SJ: I think that Bill Rubin is very good. And he has an excellent eye, and he is a good man for the Museum as a director of collections. That was Alfred Barr's forte, and I think Bill is his equal in part. I don't know too much about Kynaston McShine.

CC: Or just the whole group, not as personalities but just the people all together, do you feel the Museum is slipping? Do you look for the imperfection still?

SJ: Oh, think of the [Girogio] de Chirico show [*Giorgio de Chirico*] that Bill Rubin put on; it's as great as any show that Alfred Barr ever did. I think The Museum of Modern Art is doing—it can't possibly keep up what it did in that little building on 53rd Street before they built it, because, you know, there was a list this long of things to be done, and Alfred Barr was doing them.

HA: Things that had never been done before.

CC: Well, once you do the things that have never been done before, then it's more [INAUDIBLE: 0:39:03].

HA: Then you repeat yourself to some degree.

SJ: Sure; you have to. When I started my gallery in '48, I showed my wife a long list like that. I said, "These are the things that have to be done." I'm not through with that list. [Laughter]

HA: You had a longer list, maybe, than Alfred Barr.

SJ: Mondrian, Brancusi was on that list.

RC: Oh my!

SJ: So I mean, we're still doing the things that have to be done. They can be more and more difficult to do [tape break] collectors [tape break] don't lend a million dollar piece. When it was $5,000, they were only too happy to have it [INAUDIBLE: 0:39:36].

HA: Lend a $5,000 piece, it comes back as a $10,000 piece. [Laughter]

CC: We saw the old footage of them moving out of the original building, or into the concourse at Rockefeller [Center]. And Dorothy Miller's got a painting under her arm, and Jere Abbott's got a painting under his arm; you know, pretty casual stuff. It's like a club out for the afternoon.

SJ: What might have been wonderful for you is the time that the Museum had the fire, and they were rescuing the [Juan] Gris paintings, they were in jeopardy more than the Seurats, Seurat and Gris shows. And the staff going through the dripping water with the paintings, it would have been terrific for you.

RC: Too bad nobody was there with a camera.

SJ: There might be some—

CC: There are some still shots.

SJ: Well there's a very nice story about that and something that actually happened. The fire department got to the Museum and they made all this noise in the street and Nelson Rockefeller lived right next door, and he heard this noise and he came running along 53rd Street. And there was a fireman on the outside of the building with the pick-axe ready to crash the wall, and Nelson yelled up to him, "Stop that! There's a painting on the other side of that wall!" And it was the—

CC: The *Grande Jatte* [*A Sunday on La Grande Jatte*] of Seurat. That's another one of these.

SJ: That's [Sam A.] Lewisohn's study.

CC: It's a different one than this but it's the same—

SJ: This was the picture on that wall. He said, "For god's sake, don't chop through that wall!"

CC: If they had chopped through that, conceivably, it's considered probably one of the greatest pictures ever painted.

HA: This is a study of the picture?

SJ: He did a number of studies, one is at the Metropolitan; Lewisohn gave it to the Museum.

RC: What's the one in Chicago?

C/H: In Chicago is the original, the big one. [CC and HA simultaneously]

HA: Oh yes, that's a fabulous picture.

SJ: Chicago never lent that picture. But they let the bars down for The Museum of Modern Art for that one show [*Seurat Paintings and Drawings*].

HA: Oh, so it had never been out of Chicago?

SJ: And it hasn't been out of Chicago since then.

HA: [Laughing] I can understand. And if Nelson hadn't walked out of his apartment, it never would have gotten back to Chicago.

CC: I think that was the first telegram that was sent. [Laughter]

SJ: It took ages for them to do that, to bust in from the outside. But the firemen; it seemed the most expedient to them at the moment.

HA: Sure; they want to stop the fire.

RC: I bet if that same thing happened now, that wouldn't be the case. It's different.

SJ: Incidentally Alfred Barr was a hero in that fire. Have you heard about that?

CC: No.

SJ: A lot of people [were] at the Museum, and he escorted them up to his office and out of the window onto the balcony where they were rescued from smoke and all that sort of thing; very quietly, he did that.

RC: He did keep his head on then, he always—that's him. Right?

SJ: I wasn't there but I heard about it.

CC: Well this has really been terrific. Thank you for giving—it's really, much more than we—

SJ: Bargained for?

HA: Much more than we expected because you remembered Barr so well.

CC: You're giving a terrific evocation of Barr and also of—

RC: Just of that time. You were really out there at the beginning.

CC: You were one of the people there. It's possible to always get somebody to talk about something; they might know a little bit about it but they weren't there. And you speak well about it and you were there.

SJ: Well, yes—'Vas you dere, Charlie?'

CC: What?

HA: 'Vas you dere,' it's vaudeville, Joe Penner, right? No. Who was it that said that? It was Joe Penner who said, "Wanna buy a duck?" I can't remember 'Vas you dere, Charlie?'

SJ: He recently died, and I can't think of his name. 'Vas you dere, Charlie?'[2]

HA: I can't think of it either.

SJ: That was his by-line, his one-liner.

HA: Just a vaudeville character, I can't think of his name either.

CC: Can you think of any other people?

HA: We have a long list.

CC: We have a long list, about as long as yours, of people that we're talking to.

SJ: Bill Rubin was very close to him; he's away now.

RC: He'll be back; we're speaking to him.

HA: Well, the obvious people we have, but we're hoping that you might know some of the people who wouldn't occur to us.

SJ: Dorothy Miller could be helpful there.

RC: We've already spoken to her and she's thinking.

SJ: She'll come up with somebody. Her husband was close to Alfred Barr.

CC: We're seeing Lieberman.

SJ: Bill has some good stories, very good stories.

CC: Any particular critics? We're seeing Robert Hughes, actually; he's a *Time* magazine person now.

SJ: I don't know how close he was.

CC: No, he didn't really know anything but...

RC: He gave the outside perspective; it's very nice, what it means to somebody from another place.

[2] Jack Pearl as Baron Munchausen.

SJ: Speaking of critics, you could have gotten some wonderful information from Henry McBride.

CC: He was a great one.

SJ: And a friend of [Marcel] Duchamp. And of course Duchamp was very close to Alfred. But, you know, you'd have to talk to their ghosts. [Laughter] It may be possible.

HA: We're working on that.

SJ: I think he's around.

HA: He'd come back for this maybe. [Laughter]

SJ: Teeny Matisse; she's in New York now. She's not very well.

CC: We were thinking of seeing Pierre Matisse.

SJ: Teeny Matisse Duchamp.

RC: She comes back to New York, then, sometimes?

SJ: I think she has a pied-a-terre in New York, but she's been living in Paris for some time. And I heard she wasn't well. But Pierre Matisse knew Alfred very well.

CC: Was he very influential, from your standpoint, when you were here in New York during and just before the War? Was Pierre Matisse very influential in helping bring people over?

SJ: The most influential art dealer was Valentine Dudensing. No one talks about him. Valentine Dudensing put on the first exhibitions of Picasso and the Picasso generation in his small gallery. And his father had a gallery on Fifth Avenue of old masters, and he branched out into 57th Street and put on 20th century French exhibits. And I learned a great deal from Valentine Dudensing.

HA: Dorothy Miller mentioned a German, I can't think of his name.

CC: She mentioned another Valentine.

SJ: Yes, that's Kurt Valentin, and that came 25 years later. Valentine Dudensing was in the twenties when I met him. And he closed his gallery in 1946. And

when I opened my gallery, I had in mind to carry on what Valentine Dudensing had begun. That was my idea.

HA: First on the list? [Laughter]

SJ: To fill the gap that he had opened [tape break at 0:47:15].

HA: Just for our notes, rather than scribbling like crazy.

SJ: Some people came to me and said, "You don't expect to do [INAUDIBLE: 0:47:22] this gallery." And I said, "Well, [INAUDIBLE: 0:47:27]." [Laughter]

RC: [INAUDIBLE: 0:47:32]. History speaks for itself.

SJ: [INAUDIBLE: 0:47:34].

HA: Well we plan to digest a lot of this material and see a lot more people, and then come back in March or April and—

SJ: If you come in with questions, I'll probably be able to answer them.

CC: That's really our whole idea, that we come back. Now what we do is listen to everything and come in with [tape break]

HA: In front of the cameras we'll just ask you a few specific questions.

CC: Very specific—so, thank you.

HA: That's very helpful, and it's fun talking [tape break]

SJ: It was a shoe shine box service [*Joe Milone's Shoe Shine Stand*].

HA: In the Hirshfield exhibition [*The Paintings of Morris Hirshfield*], I guess nobody—

CC: You're right, because that precipitated the whole blowout. That was the last straw for [Stephen C.] Clark?

SJ: Some of the women trustees and also the clerks or whatever you want to call them, associated with the Museum, were very much insulted by Hirshfield's representation of the nude. And they took it personally. I remember Alfred Barr came to me as I hung the show. He said, "Sidney, this is your baby and I don't want to interfere, but don't you think that we ought to move that nude from that most important wall to this one?" I said, "Sure; go ahead."

RC: [Laughing] It still didn't do anything, did it?

SJ: [Laughing] It would have made it worse. [Laughter]

RC: When you walked in, you were hit by the—that's how you originally wanted to install it?

HA: You mean he was trying to reduce the impact a little bit? [Laughter]

RC: Even Alfred, who never seemed [INAUDIBLE: 0:49:02]

SJ: "I don't want to interfere, but don't you think?" [Laughter]

RC: That's a great story. You'll have to repeat that.

END OF INTERVIEW at 0:49:10