DAVID HOFFMAN MOMA HISTORY INTERVIEWS

INTERVIEW WITH:	**PIERRE MATISSE (PM)**
INTERVIEWERS:	**RUTH CUMMIMGS (RC); CARL COLBY (CC)**
DATE:	**1983**
TRANSCRIBER:	**JANET CROWLEY, TRANSCRIPTION COMPLETED NOVEMBER 8, 2018**

PM: [Pablo] Picasso, Picasso, Picasso. Alors. That's not so good.

RC: And do you think now people—? Do you mind then, if I just [points to tape recorder], as we're talking? This is just to remember some of the things.

CC: This is a casting session. [Laughter]

RC: You're going to get out of the art business, we're going to take you to Hollywood.

CC: Were you also instrumental in helping bring certain artists like [Max] Ernst or [André] Masson here to the United States at the time of the War? Or, were you very involved in that or not? To some extent, or—? Because the Museum had some hand in that.

PM: The first—but the Museum was—Alfred Barr was the head of the [INAUDIBLE: 0:00:47] by picking up the things in Paris and so on. While *we* could not do the same thing, because there was no market, there was no; see?

CC: Ah, I see. So this is a very interesting thing you mention. No one has said this to us before.

RC: That's right.

CC: No one has said that the Museum, because of its unique status—

RC: Because it was a Museum.

CC: The Trustees and all could afford to go.

PM: Barr's confidence; the confidence that the Trustees had in Barr, and gave him, I suppose—I don't know the details of his position—but he had a certain amount of money when he went to Europe to buy.

RC: Right.

PM: And buy things that were—

RC: For nothing then.

CC: And Mrs. [Abby Aldrich] Rockefeller would give him $500 and he would come back—

PM: I don't know how much, I don't know.

CC: And he would come back with treasures.

PM: And she would accept, with the idea that she would accept [that] whatever he brought was—

CC: If you could describe his eye, would you—? Was it like—? I mean did he do as much for modern art as [Bernard] Berenson did for appreciation of Italian Renaissance? Or more?

PM: Berenson's business and [Joseph] Duveen's business is something very different, entirely. Because it wasn't done on the same—Berenson kept discovering Italian primitives, giving them name[s], and then after a certain time, changed his mind and said, no, it's not by him it's by somebody else.

RC: It's very close to—

PM: Alors, I don't know if [INAUDIBLE: 0:02:30].

RC: Yes. Barr really made it public. Really was interested—

PM: Yes, it was different. It was definite, and I think that's a great mark that he—there was no confusion whatsoever. But naturally, it was easier because when he discovered a primitive from a church or something, you are tempted to put a name to it, and the better worth. Then after that you have to think, oh maybe not.

RC: [Laughs]

CC: What was the reaction of the French artists and the French public, let's say, in 1930 or so, to what was going on here in New York? Were they curious or envious that so much was being bought?

PM: They did not realize—I don't think they realized the importance of the impact of this Museum of Modern Art, which is Alfred Barr.

CC: Were they amused? The artists themselves, for instance.

PM: Oh, the artists are always interested in what goes on in the art world. If they buy or [if] they don't buy, and this and that, and so on, because they have to make a living. And then, of course, The Museum of Modern Art was—Alfred Barr was, rather discriminating, [he] had his likes and dislikes, which is natural, which is normal.

CC: Do you think that his vision and the Museum of course following him, did they narrow the focus of what to you was a great flowering of art in France, let's say, at the beginning of the 20th century, or did they expand the focus? Were you upset many, many times that they kept narrowing and championing only a few, or do you think they really gave full range at [Juan] Gris and [Georges] Braque and [Fernand] Léger? I mean, does America really know? Are we suffering now [do] you think from a myopic view of what really went on there? Or do you think that we really have a full appreciation? I mean, do we only see a small edited version?

PM: Full appreciation. It's like, I used to dislike so and so. I didn't understand [Joan] Miró in 1927 because I was involved with older artists of the School of Paris. And, I was given by Pierre Loeb [INAUDIBLE: 0:05:04] a *Painting* by Miró; obviously he wanted me to get into it, so he gave it to me. So I couldn't; it was, on the Miró canvas, [a] white background, and then some stucco like this, and then a blue star. So that wasn't enough for me. So I put it into the closet. Then in 1928 or '29 there was this flowering of 40,000 painters in Paris. There was a mecca of painting. And the Salon d'Automne was one of the great general exhibitions, and the Salon d'Independants. It was so full of paintings that had meant nothing. No nudes, landscapes, still lifes, and so on. [INAUDIBLE: 0:06:07] and I put everything down that I had in my small apartment in Paris and I

found a Miró in the first [INAUDIBLE: 0:06:18]. It was [laughter]—it was a painting without words. But it was painting, composition, and it made me feel very relaxed. And it took me away from that feeling of depression. Because the worst part was that in the Salon d'Automne, Salon d'Independants, [Pierre] Bonnard, [Henri] Matisse, Braque, I suppose and so on, they exhibited. And they were completely submerged by this thing that they didn't come out. See? They weren't part of that reaction, I guess.

CC: I guess I asked that question because the Americans, I don't know about anymore, but they always feel perhaps a bit of an inferiority complex in terms of the appreciation of art, because really even though [Winslow] Homer, [Thomas] Eakins and [Albert Pinkham] Ryder were there, it's really not until the early 1950s that Americans created their own artists in a sense of champions.

PM: Well, I would challenge that nevertheless, that they were known.

CC: So that's why I asked that question.

PM: They were not publicized and they were part of the "Modern Art" [which] was an exposure of something new. But the others were like the impressionists [that] were in France: at home, and home didn't take much attention to that.

CC: So Paris wasn't paying too much attention really?

PM: To the—oh, goodness, there was only one collection, the type of collection of impressionists that was given to the state, was refused. Can you imagine? And what pictures!

CC: So this was a great relief then for The Museum of Modern Art to come at that time. And Miró and all the artists.

PM: It's a thing that was brewing, you know, since the 1913—

RC: Armory?

PM: Armory.

CC: You could see it, you could feel it.

PM: And I was told by Michael Stein that at the time, they had hats a la Picasso and ice cream Matisse. [Laughter] You know, the merchants immediately—it was so much a, such an effervescence that they—

CC: So right away it was a real—so they—

PM: So it was a scandal—an exhibition that scandalized the people, [and] that shook them at that time, and the impression—

CC: So that's what brought you over, the atmosphere was conducive here, people saw like you saw. There was like-mindedness here?

PM: But you see already, in 1921 there was a fanatic dealer, [Dikran] Kelekian. It was mostly Middle East and so on, and Egyptian. But he had a flair for modern artists. So he had an exhibition, a setting up of [Paul] Cezanne, [Pierre-Auguste] Renoir, Matisse, and so on and so forth, you know, this early part of 19th century, 20th century painting. At—Parke-Bernet, [was] across the street—it was a flop. And [Georges] Seurat and so on.

RC: Until early on.

PM: And that's where Miss—one of the Trustees of The Museum of Modern Art bought several paintings. They had already—

RC: Stephen Clark, was it?

PM: Not Stephen Clark, no. Miss [Lillie P.] Bliss.

RC: Bliss.

PM: Founder of the Museum.

CC: We're going to be seeing Eliza Parkinson next week.

PM: Yes, and they bought, whatever they had, consoles and so on, things like that. But they bought these things that were supposed to be great art works, but with an instinct of their own, you see, with feeling. And that's where the Cezannes and the other things came from. Then after that I think Stephen Clark came.

CC: As you look back on Barr and the early Museum, and then, now you've seen it grow through the fifties, sixties, seventies, and now a new building and all that; do you feel still some affection? Do you still feel—? What is the direction of the place now? I mean what—? Is it okay?

PM: Yes. It's a—it's unrolling, you know, the years.

CC: What's its mission now?

PM: Oh, it's not for me to decide what The Museum of Modern Art's mission should be. You know? But I think it's fine.

CC: With a terrific collection.

RC: But do you think they should be trying to represent the current art?

CC: Be more experimental or anything?

PM: That you have to ask the other dealers. I'm not that experimental. I'm outdone by other people that, [laughter] as you will probably will find out, or you have found out already.

CC: Are there any European—? Someone mentioned besides yourself being able to speak on the subject, someone like Sir Roland Penrose might be interesting from a European perspective, an English perspective, to look upon. Can you recommend any museum director, or European personality, critic, author, or someone like—people have mentioned to us maybe Pontus Hultén or maybe these two new—

PM: Pontus Hultén is—

CC: Anybody who you can think of.

RC: We'd love it if [André] Malraux was still alive.

PM: He's a fine, very fine man. But he being all those years made some—although he had much means to do it, some very good acquisitions. But, because you see, for instance, the Beaubourg, before Beaubourg, the Trocadéro, The Museum of Modern Art, have no money. They had one typist for six curators, that type of thing. And suddenly, it was opened up by [Georges] Pompidou to

provide a new museum and some acquisition funds. And which Pontus Hultén used and now, they really—the director of the Pompidou, [Dominique] Bozo, must know. He did the Picasso show with [William] Rubin at the Museum. So he knows what the collection here is, and he has been very, very active in using his funds to acquire some kind of things.

CC: So he can give us—?

RC: So Monsieur Bozo would be—?

PM: So then he can give an opinion as a museum director in Paris of—

RC: The American.

CC: That would be good, Monsieur Boz; what's his name?

RC: Monsieur Bozo.

PM: Bozo, B - O - Zed - O.

CC: Bozo.

PM: He's the director of that and also the director of the forthcoming Picasso museum, which is not ready yet.

RC: Oh, yes, and who is—?

CC: But that's Bozo also.

PM: Yes.

CC: So, he would be very welcome.

PM: So that's why he came, to do the Picasso show with Rubin.

CC: Because this is an international project. We plan to have the film play in England and through France and Italy, and Germany and Switzerland; everywhere. And we wanted it to be not just an inside political story of the Museum, but we wanted some people to speak.

RC: Well it really isn't. I mean those international people have always been involved from the very start. The artists—

PM: I've come to New York for that; [to] go to see The Museum of Modern Art and the zoo. [Laughter]

RC: Do European tourists here—? Is that one of the most visited places?

CC: It's a must-see on the list?

RC: That you know of? I mean, do you assume that Europeans come to see it?

CC: Very much so.

PM: Unless the others prefer to go to the zoo. [Laughter]

CC: People have said, the shift—New York became the center of the art world. But, did this happen, and when did it occur?

PM: I think that the impact of The Museum of Modern Art suddenly was felt in Paris. You know, the French never liked artworks, they never encouraged—never. When my father came here, in the thirties, he was astounded to see the collections that collectors gave to the museums. And he said, 'Aha! We must do the same thing in Paris,' you know. But, nothing doing. Not the same attitude. More personal, more secretive, more...

CC: We had some great champions here too. [Albert C.] Barnes and the Cone sisters. Incredible. Right?

PM: Aah.

CC: I mean, have you ever been to Baltimore to see the Cone collection? It's incredible. Yes, it's very good stuff.

RC: I haven't seen it.

CC: And then the Barnes, well that's incredible. Hundreds of works of—

PM: And the—Miss Cone, Etta Cone, who, as young girls with Claribel used to go and visit their cousins of those time, and they went to see Picasso, and once she told me herself, Claribel; no, Etta Cone, she picked up a drawing on the floor in Picasso's studio. She said, "Oh, I think that's very nice," but he gave it to her, you know. And many, many years later, she wanted to have it signed. She

never thought about it, but she thought well, perhaps he'd better do it. And Picasso didn't want to do it. He said, "No that's not mine." And she got absolutely violently angry. [Laughter]

CC: That's not mine.

PM: "I picked it off of the floor of your studio, and you tell me that!?" [Laughter]

RC: Those are great stories. But then the relationship of the European artists who came here in the American community was very good. Did those artists then go back and represent the change that had occurred in America? Was there an effect?

PM: The European artists that came, they came on account of the War.

RC: Right.

PM: Very exiled refugees and so on, so forth. They had a tremendous impact on the young American artists who sort of wanted to get away from the New York School of the twenties—

RC: Right, the Ash Can.

PM: —and thirties. And [they] were woken up by this contact with these people during the War. And then—because no European artist used to come to America to look for work [laughter] except sell their own paintings, you know, but not to have contacts in art.

CC: Sure. It's like going to Australia or something.

PM: Yes. But then afterwards, after the War, these young artists, you know—I'm thinking of the names, that the old people—

CC: [Mark] Rothko and—

PM: Yes. They started going on their own and accomplishing their directions and so on. And then it was the French artists that came to America to investigate this foyer of which is called the New York School, which Alfred Barr said that no one, pretty much after the sixites, are in New York.

CC: Do the French feel deprived now? I mean they look back and they think my god, I mean we've been raped, I mean all of our—violated that all of our good things are here? No? It's not that way? If anything now, someone like [Leo] Castelli told us that he thinks now, in his time, the sixties and all, American artists were very, very strong. And now he says it's returning to the European for his market; he's beginning to see French and Italian and German pictures.

PM: Yes, I think that being Italian, German and French painting, and the invasion of the French festival last February, which is a sort of a mixed up bag—

CC: So that's a very nice little tour of—

RC: A good foray into this.

CC: What we wanted to do was not to come with a camera, and we didn't ask you for that, because you have much that you can talk about. But this way, if you give us this perspective, and prepare maybe some things to think about and talk about Barr—

PM: Oh, the early days; the beginning.

CC: The beginning feeling and of Barr, that, I think would be very good. And we won't shoot until the end of March probably.

RC: Late Spring.

PM: Shoot what?

RC: The film, when we would film it.

CC: To document, to shoot the—we wanted to do an interview on film, because we want people to tell the story.

PM: Oh! Don't count on me.

CC: No.

PM: I'm not photogenic. [Laughter] I don't articulate well.

END OF INTERVIEW at 0:21:52